
SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 11
Side Colors II
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 11

Side Colors II

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"Now I'll never forget your smile."
Holo's tail puffed up, and she gripped
his hand a bit more tightly.

The Wolf and the Golden Promise




But when he looked at her sleeping face, Lawrence could only sigh softly and stand from the bed.


It began with a map.
The Wolf and the Verdant Detour


"I know it myself. My feet aren't on the ground. It feels like if I were to jump from the windowsill there, I could just fly away,"
Fleur said, narrowing her eyes at the bright sunlight that shone down onto the courtyard garden.

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Volume XI

Side Colors II

Isuna Hasekura

YEN ON
New York



The Wolf And The Golden Promise

THE WOLF AND THE GOLDEN PROMISE

Plop a soft lump of bread dough down on the table.

Carve a winding groove through it with your finger, and then let water flow through the groove. Let a few trees grow here and there.

Doing all that would result in the scene that lay before him, he was sure.

Such thoughts ran through Lawrence's mind as he sat in the driver's seat of the wagon, musing on the taste of baked bread—a taste he had not enjoyed in several days. He could not help but swallow hungrily.

They'd left town some three days earlier, so it was too soon to be thinking so fondly of hot food. In the past, he had crossed entire mountains on nothing but a moldy crust of oat bread and a bit of salt. When he thought of that, these travels with bread, wine, and even a side dish of some kind seemed disturbingly luxurious.

And while he often told himself as much, his purse strings had been rather loose on this journey, with his mood similarly so.

In his seven years' travel since starting out at the age of eighteen, this was easily the most luxurious trip he had taken.

"Poultry legs." Perhaps having heard his gulp, Lawrence's traveling companion spoke up as she sat next to him in the driver's seat.

Her face was buried in her fox fur muffler, and she busied herself by combing more fur in her lap—but this was not the pelt of a dog nor a fox, but the unmistakable fur of a wolf.

Normally a wolf's fur would be a bit shorter, scruffier, and generally shabbier. But the fur that his companion now tended to was without exaggeration of the finest quality, its warmth at night nearly miraculous. It was neatly combed, thanks to her periodic nibbling of its roots.

Lawrence wondered how much it would cost to buy it were the fur for sale—but soon thought better of the notion. Far more relevant than how much it would take to buy was the question of how much it could be sold for.

Because after all, the fur in question was no pelt, but rather was still attached to the flesh-and-blood tail of its wolf owner.

"I assume that's something you'd like to eat?" said Lawrence, to which his traveling companion Holo flicked her ears—her proudly pointed ears, their fur the same color as that of her tail. They sat regally atop the flowing chestnut brown of her hair and were unquestionably not human.

The seemingly teenaged girl sitting next to him in the driver's seat of the wagon was not simply a human with wolf ears and a tail, but in fact, a great wolf who dwelled within wheat and ensured good harvests.

"And a hen would be best rather than a cock," she said.

"A hen gives eggs, too."

Lawrence thought of eggs beaten until fluffy and perfectly fried. Conversations with this particular wolf always turned to food. Though she proclaimed herself the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, her interest in worldly pleasures was greater than that of any human.

“Poultry…I tell you, the peculiar spring of raw chicken meat is truly irresistible. Though the feathers can be a bit of a bother…”

If she had been joking she would have had a strained smile, but unfortunately Holo was quite serious. Her lips concealed very sharp fangs.

“I’ve never eaten one raw, but they’re worth the trouble of cooking, that’s for sure.”

“Oh?”

“Pluck the feathers, remove the organs, debone the meat, then steam it with seasoning, boil the meat with vegetables, fill the bird with stuffing, then crisp the skin with hot oil, then roast it one more time with fragrant spices…Hey, you’re drooling.”

“Muh…mmph.”

Lawrence had heard of this particular luxury dish, though he had never actually eaten it. But for Holo’s active imagination, a secondhand description was more than enough. These were the only times she forgot her wisewolf’s pride and stared up at him, her eyes imploring.

He had managed to become accustomed to this, having traveled with her long enough. And no amount of her begging on the road truly frightened him—because one could not buy what was not being sold.

Given his overwhelming advantage, Lawrence cleared his throat and answered, “Wait a moment. Cooking is all well and good, but there are other places where a special effort results in a more delicious meat.”

“…Other places?” Holo looked up at him with her red-tinged amber eyes.

“There are fowl that are neither cock nor hen, you know.”

“Oh?” Despite her centuries of life, it seemed there were subjects not covered by the wisewolf’s memory. But rather than finding this frustrating, she merely urged him on out of pure, simple curiosity. “Go on, go on!”

Lawrence cleared his throat again, this time for a rather different reason than before, and continued. “They take the males and castrate them.”

“Ho. And that…”

“It yields an even tastier meat than a hen’s. It’s not tough like a cock’s, but their energy doesn’t go into making eggs like a hen’s does.”

“Mm…” Holo’s gaze moved purposefully, and she grinned a bare-fanged grin. “That does indeed sound tasty.”

Her true form was as a huge wolf that could swallow Lawrence in a single bite. But more importantly, he got the feeling that she was making sport of his most important parts—as a man, that is.

He cleared his throat, and then again more loudly, and lightly flicked the cart horse’s reins.

Holo chuckled, amused, and didn’t press her attack any further. Her tail swished to and fro.

“Do not worry. I’m well aware you’re a capable male when there’s need of it.” She smiled, flashing white fangs, and if he didn’t laugh her jest off, he’d have been no man at all. She had him dancing in the palm of her hand and he knew it, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“Still…”

“Ouch—!”

She grabbed his ear and pulled, and he leaned in response,

tugging on the reins, which in turn prompted a neigh from the horse.

"...You're hardly fit to be called a male, exaggerating your tales because you're unconcerned whether I'll beg you for poultry!"

She seemed to have seen right through him.

Holo let go of his ear as though tossing it aside, then folded her arms across her chest, looking displeased.

"Hmph. Consider my teasing your punishment for that. Speaking of such delicious things, when on our journey all we have to eat are these plain rations—why, I could just die."

Even if that did leave them even, this last part was too much for Lawrence to let pass unanswered. "Look here, our food may be plain, but the bread's a mix of wheat and rye, and the wine is fine and clear, and we'd get along perfectly well without it. And then we have cheese and jerky, and we also have fruits and raisins, which is quite luxurious enough. In the past I used to travel on nothing but raw garlic and onions. Compared with that, what we have is unbelievable luxury."

Though Holo sometimes acted strangely childish or animalistic, her fundamental intelligence was enough to cause even Lawrence to quail. She was not someone who couldn't understand reason.

And yet she still had no trouble saying things like, "I shall die, surely."

She turned away with a sniff.

Could such purposeful acting truly exist?

Lawrence made a face as he bit his tongue and glared at Holo.

If he took the bait, he would lose. But if he ignored her, it

would obviously become a test of wills, and he knew for a certainty that he would be the one to finally surrender. This was what it meant to be perfectly seen through.

To put it politely, all Lawrence wanted was to have pleasant journeys with Holo. And Holo was perfectly willing to take that desire hostage.

"Fine, fine."

"…What is fine?" she replied coldly, her back still turned.

"I'm sorry. If we can find some poultry, I'll buy it for you. But that offer is only good while we're on the road."

That was as far as Lawrence was willing to compromise. When it came to buying her such things in a town, even if his mouth opened to make the offer, as long as his coin purse was unable to open to back up that offer, he would never actually make it.

Holo still did not deign to turn around; her ears merely twitched.

No doubt that clever mind of hers was thinking things through—deciding whether or not he had really been pushed as far as he could be pushed.

"I seem to recall that I told you earlier—I can tell a man's lies from truth."

"Certainly. I remember quite well."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"Mm…"

Holo again fell silent for a time.

Meanwhile Lawrence felt like a criminal awaiting his sentencing as he waited for her next words, though when he thought carefully about it, he knew perfectly well he had committed no crime.

Yet there was no escaping this unreasonable situation.

Finally Holo appeared to realize that Lawrence's proposal was as far as he could go and still conclude the discussion as jokingly as it had started, so she turned back to him and smiled pleasantly.

Unfair! he shouted inwardly. Holo's ever-changing smiles would be able to deceive any man, not just one weary from years of lonely traveling.

"Hmph. Still, you—"

"Hmm?"

The horse walked lazily on for a little while before Holo spoke.

"What you said earlier—it was no lie, was it?"

"What I said earlier? Oh, about the castrated fowl…?"

"Fool. No, about buying one for me should we encounter one."

Why was she going to such lengths to confirm this? Lawrence had an ill premonition for a moment, but then Holo tugged at his sleeve, and he realized it was no mere premonition.

In an instant, his heart and mind were those of a merchant's.

"Did I say that…?"

"You did, did you not?" Holo leaned in close and growled a low growl.

Now, finally, Lawrence saw what she meant. Far up along the sloping road, there was a person. And though Lawrence's eyes could not make it out, he knew that Holo could see a chicken there, too.

"Surely you don't intend to quibble over whether or not you were speaking to me, do you?"

Nothing was as terrifying as Holo's unfriendly smile. But it seemed likely that he was going to have to kneel down and explain to her just how much a single chicken would cost.

But that would work only if she was willing to listen. And at the moment, that seemed very unlikely. Lawrence looked at Holo next to him and sighed. If he failed to tread lightly, his life could be in danger.

"Fine. I'm sorry. I'll keep my promise. However—"

"However?" she shot back, her retort nearly overlapping with his words and her gaze very serious.

Lawrence had to choose his words very carefully. "Just one."

Holo looked him steadily in the eye and did not move. After a suffocating silence, she faced forward with a huge smile.

Lawrence was sure he knew how a bird too terrified by a wild dog's gaze to fly away must have felt. He thought about it as he looked ahead, whereupon the figure up the road noticed their approach and stood.

The figure waved, and as they drew near enough that Lawrence could tell he was smiling, he saw the chicken tied up at the figure's feet.

"Just one," he repeated, just to be clear.

"How about something to liven up your travels, sir?"

Travelers were few in this expanse of wilderness, and the strange peddler who had waited for a sole customer out under the midwinter sky was a lanky man of about Lawrence's age. He had the particular wiry build of a farmer. When they were close enough to shake hands, Lawrence was surprised at how thick the young man's skin was.

"Besides the chicken, I've got some excellent ale. How about it?"

His body was far sturdier than any traveling merchant's. He was clothed in plain, simple clothing, and despite the mist puffing whitely from his mouth, he didn't appear cold at all. Far from it, he wore a merry smile, and beside the chicken pecking at the roadside grass sat a waist-high barrel.

The young man seemed in fine condition, but the iron bands holding the barrel staves together were rusted and seemed likely to give way at any moment. Nevertheless, the chicken seemed fat and happy—it was a strange combination.

Lawrence stroked his beard thoughtfully.

Holo wasn't urging him to quickly finish the purchase, either—she was probably just as preoccupied as Lawrence was with wondering just how this man came to be on this desolate road in the first place.

"Might we taste the ale?" Lawrence finally asked since silence wasn't going to accomplish anything.

The man nodded grandly. "But of course!" he said, chest thrust out, and then produced a largish measuring cup. He removed the barrel's lid and drew a cupful of ale. "It's just been brewed. Look, it's even still bubbling!"

When Lawrence put it to his lips, he found that it was surprisingly tasty—either the water was good or the wheat had been

good.

Holo wanted some, too, so he gave her a sip, and her eyes immediately turned imploring.

"So, how about it?"

At the man's repeated question, Lawrence nodded, and his eyes returned to the chicken.

He could tell that beneath Holo's robe, she was trying very hard to keep her tail from swishing to and fro.

Roast chicken and ale. No wonder she was so happy.

"I suppose we'll take some ale with the chicken."

The only reason the man didn't notice the flicker of movement underneath Holo's hood was because he himself nearly jumped for joy.

But Lawrence was not just Holo's traveling companion. He was something of a traveling merchant, and so these were the next words out of his mouth: "But I think I'd like several chickens. Not just the one."

"Huh?" the man replied, and Holo, too, looked at Lawrence in surprise.

She had recently started to understand how the market worked and thus had a faint notion of just how costly even a single chicken could be—hence her surprise at Lawrence's saying he wanted more than one.

"There's a village nearby, is there not? We're not in a terrible hurry, so perhaps you'd take us there to buy more."

It was obvious that the man wasn't a merchant hauling his goods down the road, which meant he must have come from a vil-

lage in order to make some coin or trade for goods he had a pressing need of.

Just as Lawrence suspected, the man nodded at first dazedly, then again with greater strength. “Truly? Of course, of course!” His face full of happiness, he immediately secured the barrel with rope and hoisted it to his back. His smaller items were quickly put in a burlap sack and fixed to the lid of the barrel, and then he took hold of the rope the chicken was tied to. “Well, then, follow me!”

And then he strode energetically right off the road.

The direction he was heading in was wild land, but Lawrence decided it was not so rough that the wagon could not traverse it. He pulled on the reins to turn the horse in the proper direction.

It was none other than Holo who chose that moment to tug at his sleeve. “Come now, if you’re angry, you might say as much,” she said, a worried expression on her face.

She must have thought Lawrence saying he wanted to buy more than one chicken was meant as a kind of snide remark on her behavior.

Lawrence laughed in spite of himself, at which point it was Holo who seemed angry, and she glared at him.

“Sorry, sorry. No, I just had an idea, you see.”

“…An idea?” Holo’s head tilted quizzically as she faced him.

“Call it a merchant’s intuition.”

Holo regarded him with extreme skepticism, but Lawrence was not worried. She might confound him with her acting and her snares, but that was because she had confidence in his merchant’s eye.

“If this goes well, I really *will* buy you more than one.”

Holo’s expression did not change. “We’ll see, but I shan’t expect much.”

Lawrence, however, expected quite a lot.



There would be business to do once they arrived where the young man was so spiritedly taking them.

The young man finally led them to a small village, from which could be seen far-off forests and springs. It looked all the poorer for the slapdash construction and placement of the dwellings with fields that seemed haphazardly plowed.

Towns and villages without good government either overflowed with chaos or fell into poverty. This seemed to be one of the latter.

"Quite a remote place," said Holo bluntly, and Lawrence couldn't claim he didn't understand.

It was said that roads existed to connect towns to other towns and to connect villages to landlords' estates.

And yet, if this place's poor condition wasn't enough, it was no exaggeration to say that it seemed completely isolated from the outside world. The words *landlocked island* were perfectly appropriate.

"Well, we're here! Welcome to Jisahz!"

Small though it was, a wooden fence stood marking the territory that belonged to the village. Once he'd passed it, their guide turned and shouted his pronouncement.

It was a village; little else could be said.

The villagers had been watching Lawrence and Holo for some time, and they now drew nearer to get a better look.

"W-well, then, this way! You can wash the dust from your feet at my home!" The man did not bother to introduce Lawrence or Holo to the villagers, instead walking proudly ahead of the horse

and wagon.

It was enough to make Lawrence laugh, to say nothing of Holo. The man could not help how proud he was to be leading travelers into his village.

However, from the words “wash the dust from your feet,” Lawrence guessed this was a village of the Church. And seeing his guess had been correct, he smiled faintly.

The man pounded loudly on the door of his home, then immediately threw it open and went inside. Next, a verbal exchange could be heard, after which a stout woman emerged from within, looking flustered.

Lawrence found her resemblance to the man rather amusing. “Goodness, welcome, welcome! Go on, dear. Call the village elder!”

The smile remained fixed to Lawrence’s face, though not because he found this treatment particularly pleasant. Holo, too, seemed to have realized something, perhaps having noticed Lawrence’s smile.

“Er, I’m very grateful for the warm welcome, but we’re mere traveling merchants, so…”

“Yes, yes, and honored merchants are most welcome! Please do come in! I’m sorry we can’t offer much, but…”

Still sitting in the driver’s seat of the wagon, Lawrence smiled an appreciative smile and then turned to Holo. She was quite perceptive, and once Holo nodded her agreement, he turned back to the woman.

Not having to explain every detail to Holo was awfully convenient. Lawrence was perfectly able to continue their little act.

“Well, thank you. We’re sorry to impose on your generosity.”

“Not at all. Come in! You can leave your wagon right there. Dear! Go fetch some hay and a bucket of water!” cried the woman to a man in the crowd with a hoe over his shoulder. No doubt he was the master of the household. With a look on his face as though wondering what was happening, he nonetheless ran off to do as he was told.

Lawrence descended from the wagon and Holo followed.

Just before they were welcomed into the house, Lawrence caught a glimpse of the young man from earlier leading a much older man by the hand.

The floor of the house had neither wooden planks nor stone tiles and was simply made of hard-packed earth. A hole dug in the earth served as a hearth, around which were arranged a wooden table and chairs. The farming implements that leaned against the walls were likewise entirely wooden.

Onions and garlic dangled from strings, and on a shelf high against one wall there was a milky white-colored substance—yeast, probably.

Despite its dinginess, the building was spacious, and Lawrence suspected that several families might live here given the number of chairs, pots, and bowls.

Lawrence did not particularly dislike town inns, but as he himself was from a tiny village, he felt very comfortable in surroundings like these. It was Holo who seemed less at ease here.

“Ah, so you’re heading north, are you?”

“Yes, to a town called Lenos.”

“I see…Well, you can see what sort of village this is. We’re very grateful to be able to welcome a traveling merchant like yourself.” While it was said that titles make the man, village elders all

seemed to look somehow similar. The thin, aged village elder of Jisahz bowed deeply.

"No doubt it was God's will that I be led to this town and to be welcomed so warmly. If I can help you in any way, please ask."

"We thank you for that."

Lawrence's smile was a genuine one. He truly did believe that this was the result of divine guidance.

"Let us give thanks to God for this encounter, then." As the village elder spoke, Lawrence and Holo both raised their wooden cups and drank a toast.

"...Aah, that is fine ale, indeed."

"It is shameful—thanks given to God call for wine, but we cannot raise grapevines here."

"God determines the flavor of wine, but it's the skill of humans that give ale its taste. And you surely possess fine brewing methods to make this ale."

The elder shook his head humbly, but he could not hide his pleasure at hearing this. Holo stared down at the table, but Lawrence knew it was not because she found this conversation tiresome, nor because the food was too poor for her taste.

Just what are you planning? her quick glance to Lawrence said.

"In truth, our brewing uses a secret technique," said the elder, only too pleased to have the village's ale praised.

To earn the high regard of an elder, the key was to listen closely to everything he or she said. Lawrence was just giving the old man his full attention when he heard a commotion from outside.

“So, yes…oh?” said the elder, looking over his shoulder.

“Elder! Drey and the others, they’re at it again!” shouted a man, pointing outside after he burst into the room, his hands black with soil.

The elder stood, looking pained, then turned back to Lawrence and bowed his head. “My apologies. I must tend to this.”

“Not at all. You’ve welcomed us quite warmly enough. Your duties to the village are more important.”

The elder bowed again before being hurried out the door by the other man.

The village custom seemed to be that only the elder welcomed guests, so once he left, Lawrence and Holo were alone.

There still seemed to be people outside, so if they called, no doubt someone would come, but Holo seemed to welcome the solitude.

“So then—”

“I imagine you’d like an explanation, eh?”

Holo plucked a bean off the table, popped it into her mouth, and nodded.

“This is a colony village,” said Lawrence.

“Colony?” Holo repeated back to him.

“There are many reasons, but it happens when people move into undeveloped land and found a new town or village there. And sometimes, once in a while, villages get founded in isolated places like this one.”

Holo’s eyes glanced curiously to and fro as she drank her beer.

“Why would they do such a thing?” she asked almost childishly.

“This is just a guess, but do you recall the rocks and logs we saw piled next to the spring when we entered the village? I’ll bet they plan on building an abbey.”

“An…abbey?”

“Yes. It’s a place where a chosen few devout believers can conduct their worship. Undisturbed by worldly temptations, they can live simply, humbly, and purely, which is why they would choose a desolate place like this.”

It would be a silent fortress, dedicated to rules that Holo would no doubt have trouble following for even a single day.

But such a place would not be built by robed, scripture-carrying lambs of God. The people of this village were probably related to criminals or had been connected to pagans.

Building an abbey in such a remote location was not merely a question of erecting the buildings—to ensure the monks could sustain their lives, fields and drinking water had to be secured. By engaging in this grueling work, the villagers could atone for their sins.

“Hmm…If it’s as you say, then…,” Holo began and then suddenly seemed to recall just what sort of people made up the Church. Having done that, she arrived at the answer on her own.

“So then, you’re going to take advantage of their weak position.” Her choice of words was quite intentional.

“I’m merely going to help some people who are in trouble.”

“Oh, indeed. You want to be the first to mark this village as your territory and make it into grist for your business.”

Lawrence’s constant, easy smile was thanks to this village. It

was like discovering a lake brimming with fish.

Farm tools, craft equipment, livestock, and looms for textiles and clothing—the era when a village could be truly self-sustaining was now long past. When a village was created, supply and demand followed soon after.

Finding a village where the people led plump chickens around on ropes and sold delicious ale from barrels by the roadside was, to a traveling merchant, like discovering a mountain of treasure.

In exchange for its poultry and ale, Lawrence would provide the village with its necessities. If he could become the sole provider for the village, the profit would be tastier than any ale could ever be.

Holo made an exasperated face, sipping her drink as she looked at Lawrence out of the corner of her eye.

He thought he saw her ears flick rapidly beneath her hood, but then she grinned and faced him. “Hmm. Well, do enjoy playing the savior.”

“…?”

Before Lawrence could ask what she meant, there was a hasty-sounding knock at the door. Behind it was the man who’d called for the village elder earlier.

Lawrence could guess at what he wanted.

“My apologies, honored travelers. If either of you can read, we have need of your assistance, if you would be so kind.”

Here in this remote village where no merchant ever visited, he was being asked if he could read.

Lawrence bounded to his feet at his unbelievable luck.

“Enough! Would you break the agreement we’ve already made? My field is six *chiechen* in size!”

“That is a plain lie! It’s *mine* that was clearly stated to be six *chiechens*! Yours is five! So why is mine now smaller? And now you’ve the nerve to build this fence—”

Lawrence did not need to have the situation explained to him. From the angry shouting that was audible some distance away, it was clear enough.

From the use of the *chiechen* unit, he could even make a guess as to where the men were from. There was a land of forests and springs known as Rivaria, where a wise king named Chiechen the Second had once ruled.

In his kingdom’s land surveys, the span between the king’s outstretched arms was used as a unit of measurement: one *chiechen*.

Of course, even with the measurement the wise king had decreed, there was no end to land disputes.

Before the two arguing men stood the village elder, at a complete loss for words. As the village did not have the benefit of a long tradition, there was no authority to settle the fight. Resolving this sort of baseless dispute was very difficult without the authority to transcend reason and decide by fiat.

“Elder, I’ve brought them.”

“Aah, yes.” The elder appeared at his wits’ end and he looked at Lawrence imploringly. “It is very difficult to ask you this, but…”

“A fight over land division, is it?” Anyone doing business with small villages like this would find that such disputes were very common.

Yet the elder seemed to find Lawrence's statement evidence of some deep wisdom. "Yes, that is it exactly," he said, bowing very deeply. "In truth, this village was built on the orders of a certain nobleman, and there are often fights over the size of the lands as they were decided at that time. Normally we resolve them calmly, but those two have nursed a grudge for a very long time, it seems..."

The shouting had moved from an argument over land size to simple exchanges of contempt. The villagers surrounded them in a large circle, seemingly irritated, with only Holo finding the scene amusing.

"So then, is there a written deed for the land?" Lawrence asked. That had to be the reason he'd been asked if he could read.

The village elder nodded and produced a sheet of parchment from his breast pocket. "This is the same, but none of us can read what's written upon it."

A village where the whole of the population was illiterate was like an unlocked treasure chest.

Merchants converted agreements into written words.

So how long could one remain honest in a place where none could read those words?

"If I might have a look at it, then."

Such villages were not common, and merchants with the good fortune to be the first to visit them were still fewer in number.

Lawrence solemnly regarded the parchment, his heart pounding with excitement.

"...Ah, I see."

The moment he looked at the parchment, he realized that such

good fortune did not exist after all and quirked a small smile.

The village elder blinked, and Lawrence's smile became a wry one.

It was no surprise none could read the parchment—the land deed had been written in the holy characters of the Church.

"There are a few among us who can read, but none of them can understand this parchment. We believe it must be in the letters of some foreign land."

"No, this is the special writing of the Church. I myself can only read numbers and a few set phrases in it."

Lawrence had seen land deeds and certificates of privilege written with the letters of the Church before.

From beside him Holo peered at the parchment, but she, too, appeared unable to read it. She soon lost interest in it and returned to watching the two men shout.

"Hmm, yes. I believe I see where the trouble is." Lawrence read through the parchment again and delivered his pronouncement. "Did those two men happen to be craftsmen before?"

As the argument turned into a physical brawl, Holo snickered beneath her hood, and the villagers finally moved to separate the men.

The elder seemed to be debating whether to go in himself, but hearing Lawrence's question, he looked up in surprise. "Th-that's right. But how did you know?"

"The land is divided such that they both should receive six *chiechen*. There's no mistake about that. But here…," said Lawrence, pointing out a single word.

The elder narrowed his eyes and looked, but since the word

was written in letters he could not read, no understanding came to him.

"'Sheepfold,' it says. One of the sheepfolds is six *chiechen*, the other five."

The elder stared at the parchment blankly for a while and then finally seemed to arrive at the conclusion. He squeezed his eyes closed and smacked his own balding head. "I see…," he murmured. "So they didn't realize they were meant to be sheepfolds…"

Land division was very important to villagers. Before they'd set out for the new colony, there was no doubt these illiterate villagers had the particulars of that division explained to them. But how were people who'd never so much as tended a garden meant to understand such specialized terminology?

The only parts that would linger in their minds would be the numbers.

And that would lead to fights like this.

"It seems that Chai Barton donated just a bit more to the abbey, so Barton was given the six-*chiechen* sheepfold."

"Barton's the one on the left there. Goodness, to think that's what they've been fighting over…"

"Without any experience with such matters, it's hard to understand the importance of a mere sheep pen."

Just as the name suggested, a sheepfold was a fenced area for keeping sheep—but the goal was not generally to raise them within such a pen, but rather to bring them there at night so that their droppings could fertilize the area.

Since it was obvious that more sheep went into a larger pen,

just as a smaller one would hold fewer, pens were measured not by their capacity but rather their area. Some farmers would fill their pens to capacity, while others wouldn't even cover half the area with sheep.

The elder bowed politely to Lawrence, then trotted off toward the two arguing men. He spread the parchment out in front of the two men, who were forcibly pulled apart by other villagers. As Lawrence looked on with an indulgent smile, the two men finally exchanged a grudging handshake.

"That was settled rather too quickly," said Holo, sounding disappointed.

"Memories are all too often mistaken. Not so with the written word." Those words had been well drilled into Lawrence by his master. One of the reasons traveling merchants were always losing out to city merchants was that they had to remember each purchase and sale without writing it down in a ledger.

Whenever there was a dispute, the written word would always triumph.

"You can't expand your business if you're having fights like this every day. It's why contracts are so important."

Holo listened to Lawrence, seemingly uninterested. "Important enough that you were thinking to back out of your promise of chicken."

"Quite so," said Lawrence, just as the village elder turned to face him, then bowed slowly.

Lawrence gave the man a slight wave. It was nice to be useful to someone else once in a while, he thought.

That evening, the villagers celebrated the end of the two men's conflict by slaughtering a chicken and roasting it whole. There

was also as much liquor as one could drink—as long as they wanted ale.

This would satisfy even Holo surely.

Or so Lawrence thought, but after partaking of only a small amount, Holo retired like the pious nun she appeared to be.

Evidently an entire building had been set aside for them to stay in, and upon excusing herself, she was led there. Perhaps she was weary from traveling, and the meat and ale were proving heavier than expected.

He couldn't discount the possibility, so after participating in the feast a bit longer so as not to offend his hosts, Lawrence, too, returned to their accommodations.

The third day of a winter's journey often decided whether one's body would accustom itself to the rigors of travel, and even veteran travelers could find their strength failing if they weren't careful.

And Holo had already felt poorly several times.

Even the wisewolf who dwelled in the wheat was not immune to exhaustion.

Lawrence quietly opened the door to the building he was led to; inside it was dark and quiet.

He took a tallow lamp and slowly entered, and found that storage boxes had been arranged to form a makeshift bed in the center of the room on the earthen floor. The villagers themselves slept on straw spread upon the floor, so this was special treatment for honored guests.

What he could not guess at was why they had prepared only a single bed. Did they suppose they were being considerate?

In any case, Lawrence regarded Holo, who was already curled up in a blanket. “Are you all right?”

If she was asleep, that was fine.

After a few moments without a reply, Lawrence concluded that she was.

If she awoke the next day and was still feeling unwell, Lawrence would offer the villagers some money and stay a bit longer.

Having decided as much, Lawrence extinguished the lamp and curled up on the straw of the bed, pulling the thin linen blanket over himself.

He was careful not to wake Holo and seemed to have been successful.

Though merely straw, this bed was far more comfortable than the bed of his wagon. All he could see was the ceiling and its joists and what moonlight streamed through the small hole in the roof that was there to let smoke out from the hearth.

Lawrence closed his eyes and considered the village’s situation.

It held thirty or forty people. Nearby there were forests and springs, and fruit, fish, and wild honey were all surely abundant. It sported fine pasturing, too. Excepting the relative rockiness of the land, it seemed quite fertile.

If the abbey were completed, it would easily support a hundred people.

As long as no other merchant had already marked the place as his own, it seemed possible that Lawrence would be able to monopolize its trade. During the feast, he had spoken with the villagers; he had talked to them about trading for iron tools, cattle,

and horses.

When a nobleman donated a remote parcel of land for the construction of an abbey, it often happened that they or someone close to them was nearing death. The plans were rushed, construction proceeding without important details having first been decided. And it was not necessarily true that the nobleman even lived near the land being donated.

Since deeds to lands were recorded on paper, they traveled like so many dandelion seeds blown on the wind. It was not unusual for land to be turned over to someone the nobleman had never met and barely knew of. The beggar's patchwork of land division that resulted from such situations was the seed of many a dispute.

Thus it was common for neighboring communities to avoid contact with newly settled occupants, fearing they'd be drawn into such conflict. This village seemed to be typical of such situations, and evidently the merchants of nearby towns and villages were reluctant to do business with it. The village elder had said the young man taking the beer and chicken to the side of the lonely road where Lawrence had found them had been a last-ditch effort.

For Lawrence, the timing could not have been more fortunate. For the village, he was like a messenger from God.

It was only understandable that his face would redden with pleasure despite not having too much to drink. An opportunity he'd often dreamt of during his lonely travels was now right before his eyes.

So just how much profit would it bring him?

As the night grew darker, his mind brightened. The notion of his prospects here was a stronger liquor than any ale he'd been served, and—

He felt Holo shift in the bed, and then she spoke up with a sigh. “Honestly, you are a hopeless male.”

“Hmm, so you were awake, eh?”

“How could I sleep with the sound of you grinning away like that?”

Lawrence couldn’t help but touch his face to check.

“I left the feast in such a state, and you just kept grinning away, not a care in the world…”

Now that she had said as much herself, it was clear she had intentionally left early.

But Lawrence sensed that if he pointed it out he’d only earn her ire, so he chose his words carefully. “Your voice seems so cheerful now—I can’t tell you how relieved that makes me.”

Holo’s tail shifted beneath the blanket they shared. But Holo herself, who could tell when a person was lying, grabbed Lawrence’s cheek and bared her fangs. “Fool.”

She would’ve been angry no matter what his answer had been, but he could have done worse, it seemed.

Holo sulkily rolled over so that she was facing away from Lawrence. Given the obviousness of her actions, she was probably not so very furious.

“Why did you leave so early? The chicken and ale were both delicious.”

The villagers had brought out special ale, and it had been just as splendid as their claims suggested it would be. When Lawrence asked about it, they said that spices had been dried, ground, and added to the brew.

The chicken was so well fed that fat fairly dripped from it, so what could she be so unsatisfied with?

Holo did not immediately respond. Only after a fair span of time did she finally speak in a low moan. “Did you truly find that ale delicious?”

“Huh?” Lawrence responded, but not because Holo was speaking quietly.

“I could not drink it. I cannot believe anything so foul smelling would be called ‘delicious.’”

People had differing tastes, of course, so it was not hard to imagine that she would not find the heady scent of the ale to her liking. But why it would make her so angry, so sad—Lawrence could not guess at that.

His gaze wandered for a moment before he spoke very carefully, as though Holo were a bubble beside him that might pop at any moment.

“They put the spices of their homelands into it. It’s a very peculiar scent. For people who like that scent, it’s wonderful, but for those who don’t—”

“Fool.”

She kicked him under the blanket and then faced him.

Her features were distorted, but not by the moonlight that streamed in from the hole in the ceiling.

When she looked like this, Holo was holding back whatever it was that she truly wanted to say. And Lawrence never knew the reason why.

“Enough!” she finally said, then rolled back over and curled up tightly.

When they slept on the wagon bed, she would lay her tail on his legs—but not only did she snatch it away, she also took the blanket they had been sharing.

Her ears were turned away, making it all too clear she was in no mood to listen to him. It was evident enough from her turned back that she wanted him to take notice of something.

"..."

Surely she was not this displeased merely because the ale was not to her liking. She had broached this only as an excuse for her anger.

Lawrence reflected on how obsessed he'd been with gaining the village's business ever since they had encountered the young man by the roadside.

He had heard that a hunter's faithful hound would often become jealous when that hunter took a wife.

He wondered whether his reluctance to believe that Holo would feel similarly was the "foolish male" thinking that she'd accused him of.

Lawrence stole a glance at Holo's back and then scratched his head.

In any case, he would have to pay more attention to her tomorrow.

This wolf's mood changed just as often as the weather in the mountain forests from which she came.

In the winter drizzle, Lawrence would put his blanket over his goods, shivering with his arms clasped around him as he passed the night. Compared with that experience, sleeping under a roof on a bed of straw was vastly preferable.

When morning came, he awoke with his usual sneeze, reflecting on such notions to avoid cursing the situation in which he'd found himself.

Next to him was Holo, curled up in her blanket asleep, snoring soundly.

He couldn't claim not to have felt a twinge of anger.

But when he looked at her sleeping face, Lawrence could only sigh softly and stand from the bed.

While technically a house, it was still a roughly hewn dwelling dug into the earth.

His breath was white, and when he moved his body, his cold-stiffened joints creaked.

It was lucky that the floor was hard-packed earth rather than wood. He went outside without waking Holo and looked up at the sky—the weather would be fine, it seemed—and he yawned.

People were already gathering around the well to draw water, and in the distance the cries of oxen, pigs, and sheep could be heard.

It was the very picture of an industrious little village.

Lawrence couldn't help but anticipate the coming morning. He smiled a rueful smile to himself.

It was near noontime when Holo finally awoke, and normally such sloth would be regarded with hard stares in villages like this.

But here everyone smiled, perhaps because they were all settlers. Nearly all of them had packed up their households and moved them, livestock and all, along a long and difficult road. They knew well that travelers had their own special sense of time.

Lawrence had been right that there wouldn't be any breakfast, though.

It was considered a luxury even in the most prosperous towns, so of course it would be absent here in this simple, hardscrabble village.

"So, what are you doing?"

Lawrence wondered if Holo had slept in because she had known that there would be no breakfast.

In Holo's hand were thin slices of boiled rye bread, between which were sausages made from pork slaughtered to preserve it over the winter.

It was a lunch that Lawrence would have felt guilty to receive for free, but unfortunately that had not been a problem.

As she chewed away on the food, Holo's eyes followed Lawrence's hands, which busied themselves with the task to which they'd been set.

Lawrence had a variety of things he wanted to tell Holo as she devoured her food and washed it down with ale, but given that her ire from the previous night had subsided, there seemed to be little reason to rouse it again.

Such thinking would probably result in spoiling her, but instead of saying any number of things, Lawrence answered her question.

"Translation."

"Trans…lafuh?" she said.

It would have been absurd to warn her not to talk with her mouth full. Lawrence plucked a bread crumb from the corner of her mouth and nodded. "Yes. They asked me to translate this

troublesome Church document into the language they're familiar with, so that scuffles like yesterday's won't happen."

It was work that would cost them a goodly amount if they had to go to a town to have it done.

Of course, while he was not charging them for the service, Lawrence was unable to guarantee the accuracy of his translation.

"Huh..." Her eyes half-lidded, Holo gazed at the parchment on the desk and the wooden slate Lawrence was using for his translation, but she finally seemed to lose interest and took a drink of ale. "Well, so long as you're working I can keep eating and drinking without any hesitation."

After tossing off this smile-freezing line, Holo popped the last remnant of lunch into her mouth and then moved away from Lawrence's side.

"I wish you'd hesitate a little for my sake, at least," Lawrence murmured to Holo's back with a long-suffering sigh. He started to return to his work when he realized something. "Hey, that's mine—"

No sooner had Lawrence said this than Holo was already chewing on her second piece of bread.

"Come, don't make such a nasty face. 'Twas only a bit of a joke."

"If it's only a joke, why is there so little bread left?"

"I ought to be allowed to beg from you a little at least."

"Such honor you do me," said Lawrence sarcastically, which made a displeased Holo sit upon the table at which he was working.

He wondered whether she was about to flirt with him in her

usual way when she suddenly looked down at him with a malicious smile. “Perhaps I’ll go beg from the villagers next time, then, eh? ‘Sir, sir, please, might I have some bread?’”

It hardly needed to be said whom such an act would harm. But if he gave in here, he really *would* be spoiling her.

“Just how many servings do you plan to eat, then?” he shot back, snatching the bread away from Holo’s clutches and returning to his work.

Holo drew her chin in irritably and sighed. It occurred to Lawrence that he was the one who should be sighing, but then—

“I suppose when the villagers ask me that question, I’ll put a hand to my belly and answer thus…”

Lawrence knew if he went along with this, he would lose. He picked up his quill as though refusing to listen.

“‘Well…I’m eating for two now, so…,’ I’ll say,” said Holo, leaning over and murmuring in Lawrence’s ear.

Lawrence spit the bread right out of his mouth, which was in no way a deliberate overreaction.

Holo smirked viciously. “What, is this the first time you’ve realized I eat enough for two?” she asked deliberately.

In negotiations, the winner was whoever used all the weapons at their disposal. Still, Holo used her weapons too well.

Just as Lawrence had decided not to listen further to a single word she said and was brushing the table free of crumbs, Holo’s hand shot out and plucked the link of sausage contained within the piece of bread.

“Heh. Come now, you’ve been working there since morning—you’ll get wrinkles on your forehead if you keep it up. Go outside

and take in some of the cold air, eh?"

If Lawrence had been inclined to take her at her word, the way he had been when they'd first started their journey together, he would've told her to mind her own business—and thereby invited her ire.

Lawrence was silent for a moment, then closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. He then raised a hand to about shoulder height to indicate his surrender and spoke. "I can't let seed grain fall on a field that's already been harvested."

"Mm. I can't promise I won't take a liking to the wheat here."

It was a joke only Holo-who-lived-in-wheat could tell.

She put her robe's hood over her head, hid her swishing tail, and made for the door, putting out her hand to open it.

"It's true that your taking a liking to the wheat here would be troublesome. I couldn't stand to watch you eating food off the ground," said Lawrence.

At this, Holo puffed out her cheeks in irritation and bit another piece off the bread that Lawrence held.

Taking a leisurely look around the village was not such a bad way to pass the time, and Holo hadn't visited a normal village like this one since leaving Pasloe.

And while she might not have left Pasloe with much fondness, the atmosphere of the small farming village was still a comfortingly familiar one. She gazed at the hay, bundled and set aside as compost, and the tools leaning here and there, still dirty from use, all common sights back in Pasloe.

"They don't have much trade with towns, so evidently they sow beans even during this season."

Normally farming work was finished by this time of year, replaced by spinning and weaving or wood carving—indoor jobs all—but this village was apparently different.

The nearest town was three days away by horse cart, and worse, that town refused to do business with the village out of fear of accident.

Securing a food supply was the villagers' first priority; everything else came after that.

"Beans are good for when the soil's been exhausted. Of course, the earth here is good enough that they should be able to get good harvests for a while without worrying over such details."

It didn't take long for them to reach the edge of the village, and from there the fields continued for as far as they could see—an impressive feat given the village's population.

Given that the fields lacked fences or trenches, the land was probably communally worked.

The forms of a few villagers could be seen in the direction of the spring, perhaps digging irrigation ditches.

The usefulness of a lie was suddenly clear, since just as Holo had said, the lines had disappeared from Lawrence's forehead thanks to their excursion.

"So, how much do you suppose you'll be able to wring from this village?"

The fence that enclosed the village was sturdier than its rickety appearance suggested. Holo sat on it, so Lawrence did likewise, waving to the villagers in the field who'd finally noticed them before he looked at Holo. "That's not a very nice way to put it."

"You were putting things much more nastily yesterday."

For a moment Lawrence wondered if Holo's ill temper the night before had been because he'd seemed too greedy. But no, given how amused she seemed now, that was surely not so.

"Profit is generated whenever goods are exchanged. If it's going to come bubbling up without my having to do any work, I have only to drink my fill."

"Hmm…As though 'twere wine, eh?"

She was talking about the wine made from drippings collected from skin or cloth bags of grapes hung from eaves. The grapes crushed themselves under their own weight, and the flavor was incomparable.

As usual, the wolf's knowledge of food and drink was quite thorough.

"This time I ought to be able to turn a profit without relying on you. For an opportunity met through happenstance by the wayside, it's quite large. Even if you do stuff yourself with chicken."

A gentle breeze blew, and the mooing calls of cattle could be heard in the distance. He barely had enough time to notice how quiet it was before the piercing clucking of chickens sounded behind them.

"I have depended on your abilities quite a bit, after all. It's nice this way, even just as a change of pace, isn't it?"

He was counting his chickens before they hatched a bit, but surely he'd be forgiven this much. Plus, if he weighed what Holo's drink and food cost against how much her help had earned him, the latter was by far the greater. In all honesty, sometimes he wanted her to eat and drink without any care.

"So you—"

"Hmm?"

“You truly imagine I could eat and drink without worry?”

Lawrence realized something, and in that moment it felt as though time stopped. “Is *that* why you were angry last night…?”

She might beg him for this or that, but it wasn’t as though that was all Holo did. She always repaid her debts and was a constant help to him at every turn during their travels.

Wasn’t it because she hated being singled out as special that Holo so detested being called a god? If so, Lawrence’s concern might have had the opposite of its intended effect.

“It’s not something you need agonize over…that’s what I think anyway. You’re honorable to a fault, after all.”

At these words Holo shot him a resentful glance, as though angry at having been made to explain something she didn’t want to. “Hmph. I’m only an ignorant wolf, after all. I can’t even read those words.”

Already anxious about not contributing, Holo would have awoken to see Lawrence toiling away at the desk. From her perspective it would’ve seemed like he was deliberately spiting her.

“Ah, if that’s the problem, then I have an idea.”

“…?” Holo’s expression softened, and she looked at him.

Lawrence smiled. “Why don’t you just give them some wheat-growing advice?”

The joke was sharp enough that Holo seemed to have difficulty knowing whether to be angry or not. A complicated expression passed over her face before she puffed her cheeks out and turned away.

“I’m sure they’d be happy to get even a bit of wisdom. They’ve gotten into farming without even knowing what a sheepfold is.

Isn't there something you could tell them?" Lawrence then added, "The happier they are, the easier my work will be."

Holo looked at him, her eyes brimming with tears—"such cunning tricks you use," they seemed to say. "Hn…"

"Come, you needn't agonize so. Surely there's some small thing you could teach them," Lawrence said with a smile, which made Holo close her eyes in thought.

Her brow wrinkled, and her ears flicked back and forth beneath her hood.

She really was too honorable for her own good.

Still smiling, Lawrence turned his gaze away from Holo, directing it lazily upward at a bird flying overhead. Just then—

"Mr. Lawrence!"

Hearing the sound of his name being called, Lawrence looked back at the village.

"Mr. Lawrence!"

The voice coming from behind him was the village elder's.

"Ah, sorry, my translation isn't yet…"

"No, no—I know we've already burdened you with work, and it pains me to admit it, but there's another matter I'd like to ask you about…"

"Another matter?" Lawrence made an effort to hide his excitement, given the village's current difficulty in obtaining goods. He stole a glance at Holo, whose face was sulky and uninterested. "Well, if there's anything I can do, I'll be happy to."

It would have been a lie for him not to smile here.

The village elder seemed enormously relieved at Lawrence's open smile. "Oh, thank goodness. I'm so grateful. Truth be told, the village has recently had more and more problems like the one you saw yesterday. I was hoping we could borrow your wisdom…"

"…My wisdom?" asked Lawrence, still smiling.

At this the elder explained the problem, a look of utter desperation on his face.

Lawrence hung his head, agonizing over the amount of parchment on the desk before him that had yet to be translated.

The problem that the elder had brought to him was, in fairness, something common to all villages. But older communities had long-established ways to resolve such problems—be it divine decree, the authority of the village elder, a certificate from a nearby lord, or a village assembly whose decisions were absolute.

But this village had none of those.

When a newly established community collapsed, the cause was often a lack of a strong force bringing people together. Those were the difficult circumstances this village found itself in, and it was amid such circumstances that they presented Lawrence with their problem. Unsurprisingly, it concerned land divisions.

Evidently the lord had only vaguely defined the village territory and then left it up to individuals to decide how to divide it up into the amounts they had each been allotted.

And that was the problem.

They had been allotted a certain size, but nothing about the physical arrangement of those parcels had been written down.

"So everyone just chose bits of land here and there, and we didn't realize we needed a common point of reference until dis-

putes started happening."

"Right. When the village was just starting out, there was enough land that there wouldn't be problems right away. But without a starting reference, you end up with small slivers of land where nobody knows who they belong to—if I drew a map it'd be plain as day."

"I should think tearing a piece of flatbread into pieces would make a better example than any map," said an amused Holo as she sat on the desk.

"Oat bread, you mean? I doubt they'd find such tough stuff tasty."

"I suppose I wouldn't claim it's delicious if you asked me, but that texture is addictive. My fangs do itch for it from time to time...," said Holo with a grin, flashing her sharp fangs.

Lawrence couldn't help but flinch a bit.

"What? I should think your fangs are keener than mine by far."

"Huh?" replied Lawrence innocently.

Holo poked him in the chest with her finger. "Their poison's already working on me."

After a chicken walking around outside clucked three times, Lawrence looked back down at his work, whereupon Holo gave his leg an irritable kick.

"Are you saying your work's more important than I am?"

"Of course."

"Wha—" Holo let slip in spite of herself, and when Lawrence saw her wide eyes and pricked-up ears, he realized he'd misspo-

ken.

"No, what I mean is that if I can't help the villagers, they won't be indebted to me. Our profit depends on that, but I can talk with you later..."

"You'd best hope my good graces aren't so limited!" spat Holo, then turned away.

Lawrence was quite confident in his ability to charm those he'd deal with for only a short time, but such superficial treatment wouldn't work on Holo.

And yet the village elder had given Lawrence the authority to solve the village's most important problem. If he couldn't rise to the challenge, the despairing village would surely never trust him with all their trade.

Money couldn't buy love, it was true, but obligation could purchase money.

"..." Lawrence couldn't find the words to reply to Holo, even as he couldn't very well afford to dismiss the problem before him. Sitting at the desk, he was very literally at a loss for words.

He had never encountered a problem like this during his time alone as a traveling merchant. He doubted his old master would have been able to tell him how to solve it, either.

After weighing everything, the key would be to understand which was the weightiest. Having determined that much, Lawrence was about to speak when—

"You truly are a fool. 'Tis enough to make me wonder whether you have any aptitude for study at all."

Sitting as she was upon the desk, Holo's head was naturally higher than Lawrence's, so it was no surprise that he found her high-handedness a bit irritating. But something about the color of

Holo's red-tinged amber irises said she would brook no argument.

Reason did not enter into it. He had learned this from hard experience during his travels with her.

"What did I just tell you? What did I just endure such embarrassment to tell you? I am right here, and yet you toil away there, alone…"

"Ah…"

She was right—they had just discussed that.

Holo had felt hesitant because she'd had nothing to do, and yet here again Lawrence was working alone.

She glared at him resentfully. What she needed from Lawrence was not an apology, but a request.

"Might I…er…borrow your wisdom?" He stumbled slightly over the words as Holo watched him through half-lidded, stoic eyes.

Her tail flicked back and forth as though weighing rejection against agreement. Finally she heaved a sigh. "I suppose I might be the biggest fool of all," she said.

Lawrence was about to ask what she meant, but Holo kept talking, so he straightened up and listened.

"Hmph. Truth be told, all my wisdom amounts to is what I learned in that vexing village of Pasloe."

"…Stone or wood markers can be moved, so we can't use those. Even if we put the boundaries in writing, verifying the position of those boundaries is just another thing to argue about."

Of course only God could create a perfect solution, but what

Lawrence needed was something that everyone could acknowledge as being fair. And since they'd gone to the trouble of asking him for help, if all he could propose were obvious solutions, it would invite their despair rather than their trust.

Lawrence then wondered if Holo was going to show her true form, but just as the thought occurred to him, she punched him lightly. "Fool. Did you forget what it was that brought me to tears in Pasloe?"

So she wouldn't be providing divine intervention.

Which meant that the only option that remained would be to gather all the villagers together and show them where the reference point was, such that everyone would remember.

"So what should we do, then? Without an astronomer we can't accurately determine direction or position. We could use the mountains and springs as landmarks, like a sailor would, but recording that in writing is impossible. A map based only on landmarks is too vague."

An imprecise map indicating landmarks was good enough for a traveler, but what they needed now was a far more accurate depiction of land divisions within the village.

"Yesterday during that scuffle, you said that people's memories were too vague, did you not?"

"Huh? Er, yes, that's why this needs to be in writing."

"Hmm. I understand that people trust writing because once something's written, it won't change. But are people's memories really so untrustworthy?"

Lawrence didn't understand what Holo was getting at. He had no choice but to answer. "At the very least, when there's a dispute between two people, it's not objective to rely on anyone's mem-

ory. And when it comes to land, records must last years, even decades."

Holo listened to Lawrence's argument. "I suppose that's true," she said. Then she added, "But suppose you did something like this?" She smiled an amused smile, leaned close to Lawrence's ear, and whispered her solution.

Surprised, Lawrence looked up at her, and the wisewolf shook her head happily.

"As you say," she continued, "great landmarks like mountains, springs, or hills are too broad, but if you combine several, you can determine locations quite accurately. When I was in the mountains, I could tell where I was by what I could see from the ridge."

Even the villagers would be able to understand that—but with no good way to write it down, it would be another source of conflict. People could be especially emotional when it came to verifying borders, which made things doubly frustrating.

"However, it so happens that there *are* memories that everyone can agree upon."

Lawrence had to admit that with Holo's method, everyone would agree. And in any case, he didn't have any better ideas.

He stood from his chair and took Holo's hand.

Record keeping was always a difficult task. Stories of Holo's homeland of Yoitsu existed only because they had been written down and then kept within stone walls or basements. And only a small number of people could do that, so God only knew whether such records would survive the centuries.

And when it came to just how unreliable verbal records were, the endless vicious arguments surrounding them ought to have made that quite clear.

Lacking a good solution, would people simply abandon a conflict? Nay, such was not the way of the world.

Somehow, solutions would be found, and after decades of fighting, people would put forth great mental effort to find compromises that all involved could agree to.

And it was just such a solution that Holo had chanced to hear of during her time in the wheat fields.

"Mr. Lawrence, the villagers have all been assembled."

"Good work. Where's the representative?"

"By God's grace, there seems to be just one suitable person." The village elder had heard the plan from Lawrence, and his reaction had been just the same as Lawrence's when it had been conveyed to him by Holo. First, "Is that possible?" And then, "It just might be."

It required no special technique, nor tools, nor funds. And yet the resulting record would remain clear for decades, and all around would be able to agree on its meaning.

The elder quickly gathered the villagers around the village well, which had evidently been nominated as a reference point in the past.

Next, they had to pick who among them would be responsible for making the record.

After much deliberation, the executor chosen was Holo.

She had the distinction of being a neutral outsider, which, it was reasoned, would make her decision that much more effective.

The villagers had been told only they were assembling to decide their property lines, and as such, they showed faces filled with doubt. This was hardly a surprise given how hard they them-

selves had been working to find a solution that all would accept.

The village elder placed his hand on the chosen representative's shoulder and cleared his throat. "In the name of myself and the name of the village, I swear to almighty God to settle here and now the problem of land division that has plagued us for so long."

His hoarse voice nonetheless carried well, as he had once been a cowherd who worked cattle on wide-open plains.

"You have all been gathered here to bear witness to this and to remember the events of today should we be so unfortunate as to again quarrel over this matter."

Lawrence and Holo both kept their gazes downcast, and in Holo's case at least this made her look all the more demure and lovely.

She'd eaten and drunk only in moderation the previous night, so as far as the villagers were aware, she was every bit the pious nun she appeared to be, which made her the perfect person to execute the agreement.

The village elder coughed again and spoke. "The ceremony we are about to witness was delivered to us by these two wise travelers and has long been used to settle property. As elder of this village, I recommend this boy as the representative for the ceremony."

The elder then nudged forward a boy whose years could still be counted on one hand. His eyes were round and wide and his beautiful fair hair angelic.

Though he had not yet been told what he was to do, or perhaps what was to be done to him, he was surrounded by serious-faced adults. He was still with nervousness as the elder continued. "Are there any objections?"

While several villagers looked at one another, none raised a hand. This was not surprising given that none of them had been told the nature of the ceremony. Lawrence had explained that once it was complete, there would still be opportunity to hear from anyone who might feel it had been insufficient.

Lawrence and the elder agreed, though, that there would be no such complaints.

“Very well, then. Let us begin.”

No one said a word.

The elder leaned down and whispered something into the boy’s ear, then nudged him toward Lawrence and Holo.

The boy hesitated, looking back at the elder, then to Lawrence and Holo. The elder gestured for him to go, and the boy tremulously approached.

In a village like this that had so little contact with nearby towns, even an adult would be nervous around an outsider. As the boy came nearer, his nervous gaze alit on a particular spot in the assembled crowd.

It was clear who he had found, Lawrence thought. It was his mother.

“We thank you,” said Lawrence with a smile and an outstretched hand as the boy walked up.

The boy hesitantly took the hand and mumbled a reply.

Lawrence then indicated Holo next to him.

Holo was relatively small framed, but the boy was even smaller. While Holo wore her hood and continued to look down, the boy could see her face as he approached.

The boy suddenly straightened and gave a shy little grin, and Lawrence could tell this was because Holo smiled at him.

When he shook hands with her, his expression turned suddenly friendly—perhaps there were no young girls in this village.

"My name's Holo. What's yours?"

"Ah—it's Clorri."

"Clorri, eh? 'Tis a good name."

The boy shied away ticklishly at the compliment and hair ruffle he received. The ceremony was probably the last thing on his mind at that moment, so happy he appeared.

"Now, then, Clorri, we're going to play a bit of a game. Don't worry, all will be well. 'Tis not difficult."

Holo's words brought him back to reality, and his face suddenly stiffened. But Holo gave him a gentle hug, which seemed to help him summon some courage. It seemed all men were alike, regardless of age.

"First, we face north and pray."

"Pray?"

"Aye. Any prayer will do. You pray every day in this village, do you not?" Holo had some small knowledge of the Church.

The boy nodded and brought his still-shaky hands together in preparation for prayer.

"The north has its own special angels and so does the south. If you pray for tasty food, you might just receive it," said Holo with a mischievous smile. "Try it," she encouraged him, and the boy began to pray.

“When the angels and spirits hear your prayers, there are omens. You need to remember very carefully the lay of the land, so you don’t miss them.”

The boy nodded as Holo spoke, then with eyes as wide as saucers carefully memorized the scene before him, then gulped and began to pray.

North, east, south, west.

By the time he had prayed in each of the four directions, he’d no doubt thought of every tasty thing he could remember.

“Mm. Well done. Now then, Clorri.”

It was time.

“The angels and sprits love smiles. Give them your biggest smile!”



The boy obediently grinned a huge, toothy smile.

There was the sound of something whistling through the air, then—a terrific *smack* rang out.

"—!"

The assembled villagers all gasped audibly in unison as they looked on. To a one their gazes were nailed to the unfolding scene.

Holo shook her stinging hand and smiled sheepishly. She must not have held back at all.

She had bade the boy smile so he would not bite his tongue.

The boy's eyes were wide in shock at having been slapped across the face with such force, and he neither moved nor wiped the blood at his nose as he stared up at Holo, who until that moment had seemed so angelic.

"Though human memory is vague, there are moments that none of us can forget. This brave boy, Clorri, will surely remember the scenery he memorized today for years and decades to come," said Holo, smiling as she faced the villagers, whereupon a murmur finally rippled through the crowd.

They'd finally come back to the moment after being stunned so, and the murmur soon became a commotion, which then turned to laughter.

When they came to this village, the villagers had left behind their familiar former lands. Before setting out on the journey to their new home, surely each of them had stood at the edge of their former village or town, hearts full of worry and anticipation. There they would carve the sights in every direction into their memories before beginning their journey.

If later asked about it, they would be completely able to answer with perfect precision exactly where they had been that day, the day they turned back and looked at their homeland for the final time.

"If there be anyone who objects to this ceremony, raise your hand!" shouted the village elder, and the villagers fell silent and then shouted, "No!" in unison.

Villager after villager came up to offer words of thanks to Holo and to God, and some even danced.

Holo, the elder, and—quite naturally—the boy's mother all came up to him, and when he was given a hand and helped to his feet, he finally seemed to understand what had happened. He burst into tears like tinder set aflame, bawling away as he clung to his mother's generous bosom.

"In my old village, we didn't use slaps—we threw stones."

The mother—who was the only one who'd been told ahead of time what was to happen—half smiled, but seemed to feel genuine pride that her son had been chosen for such an important role. She thanked Lawrence and Holo both in God's name.

"Mm. Well, this should settle things," Holo said proudly, standing a little taller.

Villages everywhere commemorated the days of events important to them, most commonly with feasts. Jisahz was no different, and that night there was a grand celebration.

The village elder shook their hands so frequently in thanks that Holo's and Lawrence's palms began to swell, claiming that their names would go down in history as being of great importance to the village's development.

Given that, it was certain that maintaining a long-term rela-

tionship with the village would be no difficulty at all.

Lawrence was unable to keep his delight at this from reaching his face as they waited for evening to arrive and the villagers to complete their feast preparations.

When he raised both arms to stretch, he looked at Holo and saw her sprawled out on the bed, tending to her tail.

"Finished, are you?"

"Yes, somehow."

"Well, then, we can drink and carouse to our hearts' content."

"I still have to complete my business negotiations, though. Of course…" Lawrence paused and brought his hand deliberately to his breast, then continued in a courteous tone. "This is all thanks to my wise traveling companion."

Holo replied to this artificially exaggerated thanks by puffing her chest out with equal exaggeration.

Of course, while this was only half-serious, the truth was she had been of great help to him. He owed her more than just a few chickens—a wagonload of ale would probably be about right.

"It seems I've wound up owing you the greater part yet again. How would you like your payment?" he asked jokingly, his heart dancing at the thought of the next day's negotiations. The village had great potential for further development, and if the abbey was completed, it might even become a true town.

"Mm…I can have anything?"

"'Anything' is a frightening promise to make, but let's say a hundred silver pieces. That would certainly get you another set of fine clothes like what you're wearing now."

Holo looked over her clothes carefully, then closed her eyes. What was she dreaming of? Apples? Honeyed peach preserves?

Holo's tail wagged, and then she seemed to hit upon something. But her face was hesitant, so whatever she was thinking of had to be something of significant value.

"If it's impossible, I'll give up on it, but…"

"That's surprisingly magnanimous of you," teased Lawrence, at which she smiled, then pointed at him.

"The work you were just now doing."

"Work? You mean this?"

"Yes, that writing work. You said if they'd asked someone in a town to do it, it would've cost a goodly amount."

Reading and writing were considered specialized skills in their own right. Writing a letter was itself a service, but creating an official document carried a commensurate price.

"Oh, you want me to write something for you?"

"Hmm? Er…well, aye…"

"If that's all, that's a small favor indeed. You want nothing else—no apples, no honeyed peach preserves?"

It was unusual for Holo to prize anything above food. After all the talk of record keeping, did she wish to record tales of her own homeland?

"Such things are surely tempting, but food once eaten is gone. You said it yourself—the written word does not change and endures for ages," she said, and her bashfulness as she did so made Lawrence realize he'd guessed correctly.

Lawrence nodded. “I can’t write you a thick volume, though.”

“Nay, ’twill not be such a long thing to write.” Holo stood from the bed and lightly sat down on the table.

If it wouldn’t be lengthy, did she want him to write it right now, this instant?

“So, what shall I write?” Lawrence asked.

Holo gazed into the distance and did not answer immediately.

Whatever it was, Lawrence realized it was very important, so he waited for her to answer.

Seemingly coming to a conclusion after long thought, Holo finally took a deep breath, a sound like a quiet wind.

“The title is this: the Wisewolf Holo’s…” Lawrence hastily reached for his pen and spread an unused sheet of parchment out in front of him. Meanwhile, Holo continued speaking. “…Homecoming Guide Contract.”

Lawrence’s hand stopped, and his eyes fixed upon Holo, followed by his face as he slowly turned his head toward her.

“Human memories are unreliable, after all. I cannot have you forgetting your promise.”

Holo’s face was serious, and if anything it was her gaze that accused *him*.

Lawrence had no words. In his mind he saw a rapid succession of all the moments Holo had been displeased since their arrival in the village. She said she was being reluctant because she’d had nothing to do—but that was nothing more than a convenient excuse.

This was the truth.

His promise to take Holo back to her homelands was a mere verbal contract.

And yet here he was, busily doing work for the village and all the while talking about how fallible human memory was.

“N-no, that…but…,” Lawrence finally said.

He could not put it easily into words, but Lawrence was confident that he prized his travels with Holo above any business he might do, and he had been certain that Holo knew that.

So while he could admit he had been insensitive, he found it hard to accept that that was why Holo was angry.

“But?” Holo shot back coldly.

Lawrence had to admit that Holo’s side was the reasonable one and that he’d been inconsiderate. He was just about to apologize when Holo continued. “Hmph. So many times you’ve shocked me thus! For my part, I’ll not soon forget our contract.”

Holo suddenly smiled and chuckled. “But you seem penitent enough, so I’ll forgive you.”

Truth be told, he could have refuted her if he’d wanted to—and Holo surely knew that as well.

But instead he said this, just as she wanted him to: “…I’m sorry.”

“Mm.” Holo’s ears twitched in satisfaction. “Still,” she continued, her expression hardening again as she looked down at him.

Lawrence straightened and wondered what was coming next, and Holo leaned over him, her face drawing near to his.

“If a contract is no longer needed, then I can ask for some other reward for my services, can I not?”

Leaning away slightly, Lawrence nodded. That was only fair, he reasoned—but then he realized what Holo was thinking and raised his voice in spite of himself. “No, wait, you’re not—”

“I wonder what one could buy with the fee to have such a travel contract written. Can I even eat that much…?” She grinned, delighted, her wagging tail nearly sweeping off everything on the desk.

There was no telling how long she might be waiting with one of her traps. Lawrence was utterly cornered by all the promises he’d made. There was no getting out of them now.

“Heh. You look just like poor Clorri did not long ago,” Holo said, poking his nose. He didn’t even have the strength to deflect her.

Holo hopped off the table, spun around, then leaned on Lawrence from behind the chair in which he sat.

“Will you now start to cry, eh?”

He had to smile. Lawrence stood up out of the chair and spoke. “That might not be such a bad idea. At least I’ve got someone who’ll let me bawl at them.”

Holo grinned.

Lawrence prepared himself for the consequences of what he was about to say next. “Assuming that small chest of yours can stand up to—”

A fine sound rang out.

Holo smiled as she shook out her stinging palm. Lawrence took her outstretched hand and straightened his reeling body.

All the while, Holo smiled—it was an obviously false smile, but Lawrence knew the magic that would turn it real. Her continuing

smile was her way of urging him to cast the spell.

Slowly and deliberately, he began to chant the magic words.

“Now I’ll never forget your smile.”

Holo’s tail puffed up, and she gripped his hand a bit more tightly.

After centuries in her old village, Holo had only her name left and was forgotten. No written words would suffice to record her smiling face. Outside, preparations for the feast continued. Surely the night would be a drunken one.

Holo nodded and smiled a faint, shy smile.

End.



The Wolf and the Verdant Detour

THE WOLF AND THE VERDANT DETOUR

In the depths of the coldest season, there were sometimes warm days that made one think that spring had arrived—days without wind, when standing still in the sun's rays could feel almost hot.

Such days made even merchants—for whom time was money—stop in their tracks or pull their wagons to the side of the road; find a field free of grazing cattle or sheep; and just lie in the grass, a bit of wine and rye bread at their side.

Gazing up at the blue sky, they'd wet their mouths with wine and take a bit of the bread—or perhaps even chewing was too much trouble, so they would fall asleep, mouths pathetically full of rye.

The blanket would soak up the sun's rays and feel as warm as though the merchants were by a roaring fireplace, and the only sounds that reached one's ears were birdsong and somehow the sound of the sunlight itself.

Only those who lived a life of travel could enjoy such moments.

And they were more than enough to inspire temptation.

It began with a map.

It was midmorning, the sun high enough to have burned away the urge to yawn, and Lawrence the traveling merchant, having grown weary of constant travel upon his horse-drawn wagon, opened up a map he rarely looked at.

He had bought the map dirt cheap some years previous, along with another map, which rather dubiously claimed to show the location of treasure. The treasure map was just as flimsy as its contents, its tattered paper ready to fall apart at any moment. The other map was sturdier, having been more practically inscribed on good parchment.

It was that map he held in his hand, casting his gaze eastward.

The road Lawrence and Holo were on ran alongside a forest for quite a long distance. Despite the road adjacent to it passing through mostly vegetation-free and featureless wilderness, the forest itself was thick and dark with trees year-round.

And yet even that thick forest had been cleared long ago to make room for the construction of a new town, Lawrence had heard, and now covered only half its original area. The map Lawrence held had been drawn when the forest was larger and showed just how great its former extent truly was.

“What is the matter?” asked Lawrence’s traveling companion, Holo, noticing Lawrence’s gaze as it traveled afield from her spot relaxing in the wagon bed.

Lawrence turned to see Holo dressed as a nun and reclining atop his cargo, her head tilted lazily in his direction.

“There’s a lumber mill here.”

“A lumber mill?”

“Or at least there used to be. A place where trees are cut down and their trunks made into lumber for building.”

But Lawrence’s interest wasn’t in the forest’s former grandeur. His gaze was on a road that led into the forest because at the end of that road, there was supposedly a grassy field.

“I see…and the lumber mill’s down that road?”

Lawrence looked back down at the map in his hands and explained, “On this side of the forest is a busy trade route that connects many towns and villages, and thanks to the constant sheep and cattle traffic, the land is totally barren, as you can see. But on the other side of the forest is a lush, fertile plain.”

“A lush plain, eh?” Holo didn’t bother sitting up and merely directed her voice at Lawrence.

“Apparently its face is thick with green grass even this time of year.”

Holo did not immediately reply.

Concerned, Lawrence looked back at her, whereupon he was met by her irritated expression.

“I am no sheep. Green grass is hardly cause for me to celebrate,” she said flatly.

Anyone happening to pass by the wagon would not have understood the true meaning of Holo’s words. But she was not merely being difficult for no reason.

Atop Holo’s head sat a pair of magnificent wolf ears that could never have belonged to any human, and from the base of her lower back grew a thickly furred tail that swished to and fro.

While she appeared to be a girl in her teens, her true form was that of a giant wolf that could swallow a man in a single bite.

Any who might have puzzled over her complaint would surely understand its full meaning once they saw her true nature.

“My apologies. But grass isn’t merely for eating, you know.”

“Mm?”

“With weather such as this, doesn’t the idea of basking in the

sun on a grassy knoll hold a bit of appeal?”

Just then, Holo looked away. Immediately thereafter, her tail started to squirm in her hands. Given her abundant imagination, she could certainly reckon the ways a grassy field could be put to use.

So when she finally opened her mouth, the question Holo asked skipped over that matter entirely. “Were you not in a hurry?”

Merchants knew that time was money, and so a leisurely detour to bask in a sunny clearing was like a rope around the neck. But Holo was genuinely concerned with the possibility of holding their travels up, and her flattering gaze was enough to send any legendary emperor-seducing beauty running barefoot for the hills.

This treatment alone was quite refreshing. And Holo’s tail was even more honest than her lips.

As far as Lawrence was concerned, if the detour would make her this happy, then he cared little about the slight delay. Far from it—if some sun napping gave her this much pleasure, it was worth it and more.

The road had offered few pleasures, so a bit of good cheer was certainly called for.

“We need some rest to keep making efficient progress. Still, I don’t want to get your hopes too high…”

“What do you mean?”

Lawrence shook the map out and continued. “I don’t know how trustworthy the map is. If crossing the forest looks to be too much trouble, we’ll just give up.”

These would have been difficult words to deliver to a child, but

fortunately he was addressing Holo the Wisewolf. She knew exactly what he was considering when he made a proposal like this one.

Holo had been lying on her back while grooming her tail, but she now rolled over and looked at Lawrence, her eyes upturned. "'Tis no concern at all—we'll just have a nice nap in the shade."

Just as Holo had imagined the grassy plain Lawrence described to her, Lawrence now pictured Holo's words. It was certainly true that the idea of the two of them napping beneath the trees, leaved year-round and disturbed only by the softest murmur of a wind, was far from a bad one.

Lawrence pulled himself out of his imaginings and turned his attention back to Holo, who regarded him with a silent expression that said, "So, what say you?"

"Not bad."

"Not bad at all!"

Lawrence put the map aside and took up the reins; Holo rolled over onto her back.

The wagon rolled steadily into the forest. It was a clear midmorning, now completely free of any yawning.

It appeared that someone was still using the road that led into the forest. Hunters, fruit gatherers, or possibly people hunting for wild honey or firewood. In any case, the road was well maintained, and the wagon traversed it easily.

The forest was just quiet enough and just noisy enough to feel just right for a pleasant detour.

Until they entered the forest, Holo kept her hands off of the wine, but soon she was enjoying it fully, the echoing birdsong a

fine accompaniment.

Lawrence had of course long since surrendered to the spirit of the detour and was not at all angry. He'd occasionally look back to the wagon bed and warn Holo not to drink it all, but she would thrust the wineskin at him as though to bribe him—and it was a bribe he always took.

According to the map in his hand, the road they were on cut a thin line sideways through the forest. It was, in fact, the narrowest part of the forest that the road crossed, which made this the quickest way to cross through.

However, it often happened that roads deviated from what maps might claim, and after a stretch of steady progress, the road began to arc to the right.

This deviated from the map, but it didn't seem like a newly built road that avoided a recently fallen tree blocking the old route. The road seemed to have always been this way. But since there was no fork or intersection, Lawrence saw no reason to hesitate.

He continued to guide the horse along the road.

"Aye, winter forests…," said Holo suddenly from the wagon bed. "'Tis better to come in the early morning rather than midday."

The road's visibility was not good, and there was no telling when a wagon wheel might be stuck in a tree root or small stream, so Lawrence couldn't spare a look back—but going by her tone, Holo was reasonably drunk.

"Why's that?"

"Mm. Even a forest like this has some leaves that fall to the ground, does it not? Over the night they'll become soaked with

dew, which turns to mist in the morning sunlight. If we'd been able to get a breath of that…"

"…The misty air would be a delicious balm to our winter-parched lungs," Lawrence finished, which Holo gave a satisfied nod at.

"For afternoon visits, summer is best. Rays of sunlight stream through the leaves and tickle one's cheeks like the feathers of a songbird."

"Too many flies in summer, though."

Lawrence was a seasoned traveler himself and knew perfectly well the good and bad parts of forests in any season. He heard Holo's ticklish laugh just as he had expected to. Unbidden, a vision of a sun-dappled Holo, flicking her tail to and fro to chase insects off her, rose in his mind.

"Still, forests are lovely places. We've been traveling across plains so much of late that…aah…aaahhh…so, aye…" Holo yawned. No doubt it would be time for her midday nap soon. Lawrence heard her rummage around for something—perhaps searching for a blanket.

The field they were seeking was still far away, so Lawrence had some choice words for his traveling companion, who was venturing to take an early nap.

"It's not just forests, you know. There's pleasure to be had on the plains, too."

"…Oh, aye?"

"Long chats with one's traveling companion, for one."

Simply traveling across a plain when the weather was good could turn into a sort of test of endurance. And even if it weren't, sitting in the driver's seat, holding the reins while Holo napped in

the wagon bed, wasn't any fun for Lawrence.

Once he had finally ventured to speak his mind, the clever Holo seemed to realize what Lawrence was trying to say.

She popped up and rested her chin on the back of the driver's seat and looked up at Lawrence with mischief in her eyes. "I'm a wolf, after all. Sadly I've no interest in conversation without any meat to it."

It was a light jab, so Lawrence mildly returned it. "So you're saying you want furious debate for dinner, then?"

Holo curled her lip up. "Furious, nay. I would hope for something more passionate." Her eyes were half-closed, and she rubbed the base of her ear against Lawrence's arm. It was often her way of tricking him into letting his guard down by making him wonder if she was drunk.

Lawrence decided to assume her ear was merely itchy.

"Passionate? Oh, you mean the sort of talk that makes one's face blush?"

"Heh. Aye."

If Holo had been a simple cat or dog, a thorough head rubbing and a piece of jerky would placate her, but unfortunately she was a wolf, who would easily devour him if he gave her the chance.

Lawrence raised his arm and slowly rested his elbow on Holo's head. Holo soon growled her irritation and shot him a sharp glare.

"Just thinking about how much wine you've drunk is enough to make my face turn red."

"...I haven't had *that* much."

Holo's face would remain unaffected by wine for quite a while, so her appearance was largely unchanged. But she still didn't enjoy being made roundabout fun of, so she slid out from under Lawrence's elbow and rubbed her head.

"Make sure you save a bit for enjoying on the sunny field, eh?"

"I said I did not drink that much," said Holo sulkily, withdrawing to the wagon bed and flopping roughly over to the side.

Lawrence got the feeling she was starting to become genuinely angry, so perhaps Holo really had been careful to spare Lawrence his share of the wine.

He did trust her, but perhaps she didn't enjoy being doubted even in jest. Lawrence turned around to apologize and was immediately met by her ready gaze.

She'd been ready and waiting for him to turn around out of concern for her.

"'Tis true, though I do enjoy idle conversation. And my very favorite sort is..."

"...When you get to tease a poor traveling merchant?"

"Hmm? Oh, aye, that's nice as well."

The road continued to run through the forest, and Lawrence squinted ahead to see whether the field was approaching. He noticed that there seemed to be another road running alongside theirs, and a short distance ahead the two seemed to intersect.



Lawrence shrugged off Holo's words and reached for the map, looking down at it intently. "So what *is* your favorite sort of conversation?" he asked, looking back and forth between the map and the road and trying to see past the trees.

Evidently the road Lawrence and Holo were currently on wasn't the only one that crossed the forest—there were several others. And worse, they intersected each other in complicated ways.

Given that, Lawrence wondered if it might not be prudent to turn around and leave.

As he mulled it over, Lawrence felt eyes staring hard at the back of his neck, so he turned around.

"...At the very least, I have no great love for *this* sort of conversation," said an irritated Holo, her tail switching in agitation.

For just a moment, Lawrence's mind went white. Trifling conversations were similar to, albeit different from, perfunctory ones. Having gotten used to traveling alone, Lawrence had been careless.

"I'm sorry," he said, apologizing sincerely. "So, what *is* your favorite sort of conversation?" he asked again, which made Holo's face turn instantly disbelieving.

"Am I a child?"

"Huh?"

"A conversation has a certain flow, does it not? Do you suppose that by simply asking me again, I'll just happily answer you and that will be that?"

Immediately following Holo's words, the wagon swayed dramatically as one of its wheels hit a tree root.

Lawrence hastily looked ahead, then turned back around to see Holo. She lay prone atop the cargo, as though about to sleep. She was not facing him.

"..."

Awkwardly, Lawrence faced forward, putting his hand to his forehead. This situation was unlike anything he'd dealt with back when his only conversation partner had been his horse. He considered how best to apologize, but was certain that no matter what he said, he'd only dig himself deeper into the mud.

Finally, he braced himself and spoke.

"I'm sorry."

The same words he'd said a moment earlier. Yet—conversation did have a flow.

"Hmph." Her irritated snort was proof that she'd forgiven him. "So...when will we finally clear this forest?" The space between her words had probably been to put the wineskin to her lips. After all that, she still hadn't revealed just what sort of idle conversation she preferred.

"They say the forest spirits can create new paths through the woods—I don't suppose Holo the Wisewolf has any such abilities?"

"If this were a wheat field, it would not be impossible."

"Oh, really? Now, that I'd like to see."

"Perhaps if there's an opportunity." Holo's tone was chilly, but if he was to object, it would only be cause for more retribution. Lawrence managed to choke back his retort.

"Still, this forest is strange." The wagon swayed as they crossed an intersecting path.

“Strange in what way?”

“There are a lot of paths. Too many even for lumber harvesting.” Lawrence wondered if they ought to turn back before they got lost.

It was nearly midday, and once the sun passed its zenith, the shadows would shift.

He remembered the path so far, more or less, but the shifting shadows would change the landmarks, making it that much easier to become lost.

“…”

“What’s the matter?” Holo interrupted Lawrence’s musings. “Are we about to be lost?” She smirked a malicious smirk.

As a traveling merchant, Lawrence found himself irritated, even if this was a joke meant more as a friendly warning than anything else.

“We’ve come all this way and I remember our route, so it’s fine.” Lawrence knew he was being obstinate.

Whether or not Holo also knew that, she fell silent for a while, her tail swishing to and fro before she threw herself back atop the cargo.

“Aye, well, you’re the lifelong traveler, so.” She retracted her opinion—it was almost as though she was apologizing for her unsolicited question.

The wagon rattled along the road.

They continued to intersect paths, which wove this way and that but never opened to the clearing.

Time lazily passed by, and finally they found themselves at an intersection radiating paths in many directions.

Lawrence stopped the horse and cast his gaze skyward. It was just past noon—the perfect time for the hoped-for nap on the grass. Which of course meant that the longer it took to find the meadow, the less pleasant the nap would be.

Given the time necessary for the return trip, they would need to find the meadow very soon to make it worthwhile at all.

But having come so far on this detour, turning back now without even a glimpse of the meadow would be the height of foolishness. More than anything, he was feeling foolish for having ignored Holo's warning.

"…"

Lawrence sat in silent contemplation in the driver's seat. The horse was stopped, and having him start walking again was the furthest thing from Lawrence's mind.

It was clear that the rational thing to do would be to turn around rather than continuing on. And yet if he suggested turning back here, there was no telling what Holo would say. He knew it was his pride talking, but some part of him resisted simply choking it down.

Whether or not she was aware of Lawrence's conflict, Holo's tail wagged back and forth. It was an obvious provocation.

Lawrence gripped the reins as though to continue onward, but then the realization hit him. What if he forged ahead only to become truly lost?

"…"

They would have to turn back. Then immediately after Lawrence came to his decision—

“Hmm. Goodness, but you’re adorable,” said Holo from behind him, chin propped on the back of the driver’s seat. “I wonder how much worse ’twould be if you had ears and a tail like mine.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve never seen a male quite so transparent as you.”

“What?” Lawrence retorted, a hint of irritation mixed into his voice, which made Holo sit up and bring her face closer. The quality of her smile changed as Lawrence couldn’t help but flinch away.

“After kicking aside my warning, you can’t very well suggest we turn back, and yet continuing on could be dangerous. So, what to do?”

Bull’s-eye.

Lawrence looked away, which brought Holo’s still-grinning face even closer. “Your tiresome stubbornness is only too obvious.”

Holo, the self-proclaimed wisewolf, had lived for centuries. Her face was so close that he could feel her breath on his cheek, which only heightened Lawrence’s desire to escape.

But the driver’s seat was cramped.

He faced Holo’s amber eyes, keen and penetrating like a fortune-teller’s.

“And yet…” Holo then continued, her tone almost disappointingly gentle. She’d been close enough to devour him headfirst but suddenly pulled back.

Unable to follow her rapidly changing demeanor, Lawrence could only stare vaguely at her as she sat atop the back of the driver’s seat.

“And yet when I wonder why you’re so stubborn, I can hardly find it within myself to be angry.”

From her perch atop the seat back, she was in a position to look down at Lawrence. It was the reverse of the usual situation, and Holo’s attitude was frustratingly high-and-mighty.

“You’re trying to get the advantage of me, even if it’s a reach, aren’t you? You’re like a child. How can I be mad at a child?”

If she’d been mocking him, then he might have had some recourse.

But in trying to refute Holo, Lawrence had failed like a little boy. And she simply smiled down at him without rancor or excitement, like a benevolent elder sister.

In a situation like this, he didn’t have a leg to stand on. And she’d been dead-on accurate, so there was nowhere to run.

“Your problem is this,” Holo said conversationally as she hopped down to sit properly in the seat. Having done so, the difference in their heights meant that she now looked up at him. “You decide everything on a set of scales.”

“...Scales?”

“Aye. Which side is heavier, which is higher or lower. It’s no good, looking to that to the exclusion of all else. It might be right for a merchant, but...”

A rustling sound arose as Holo reached back to take hold of the blanket in the wagon bed, then pulled it forward. Once she finished wrapping herself in it, she then lightly smacked Lawrence’s hand, which still held the reins.

“Just how long do you plan on holding those reins for?”

“...Huh? I mean, we’ll have to turn back here, so...,” said

Lawrence guardedly, since he didn't understand what Holo was getting at.

Holo's face turned immediately incredulous. "Honestly…It's just as I said, is it not? What you need is a better instinct for a conversation's flow."

It was true that she'd said as much. But what did that have to do with him taking up the reins? Lawrence started to wonder if she had again cast him into some elaborate trap—but then he realized his misapprehension. "Ah!"

"Huh. So you've finally hit upon it, have you?"

He had no retort. He had only to follow the thread of their conversation up until a moment ago, and it was simple. Considering the exchange he'd had with Holo just before they entered the forest, it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"If you'd only done as much from the start—but no, you just had to work your way in deeper. It's not my cleverness that makes it so simple for me to trip you up, but rather your foolishness."

Lawrence dropped the reins at her insistence, opening and closing his now-empty hands. Having had it pointed out to him, it was obvious, and yet he had never realized it.

"So you've understood that there's no need to seek this meadow in order to cheer me up, aye?" She flicked the blanket open with a flourish and adroitly wrapped it around both herself and Lawrence.

That, too, had been a misunderstanding. What had Holo said she enjoyed about travel?

"You mean your favorite sort of idle chatter?"

"Aye. If you'd only thought to confirm that, not only would you not have need to make a meadow detour, you'd have been able to

quite thoroughly cheer me up." Holo's tone was very amused.

No doubt *she* was very amused. She had bested him, after all.

"So, what *is* your favorite way to converse?" asked Lawrence. Immediately thereafter, his eye widened in surprise—Holo seemed neither angry nor exasperated. She neither scorned him nor mocked him. At Lawrence's question, she seemed actually embarrassed.

"Heh-heh…to be quite honest, I'd never be able to admit it if the conversation had not come to this place," she said, looking down bashfully, her voice ticklish as she giggled to herself.

If her favorite sort of conversation was indeed something so embarrassing, then this was surely the best time to admit it—she had the overwhelming advantage now.

No matter what she said, it could be forgiven.

"What I like best is…falling asleep while talking like this. Just drifting off to the sound of idle conversation…"

She was so self-conscious at this last part that she looked away when she finished speaking. And it was true, falling asleep to conversation was not so very different from falling asleep to a lullaby.

And now that Lawrence thought about it, this had happened before. Holo often drifted to sleep while they talked.

Lawrence had always attributed that to her selfishness, never dreaming that this was the truth.

He peered at Holo's turned-away face, imagining that if this was no joke, then she would be blushing red.

"So—rather foolish, eh?"

"…Unfortunately, yes."

Holo looked back at him, eyes resentful as she bumped her head into his shoulder. “Yet who is it that holds the advantage here?”

It hardly needed to be said who was the greater fool. If he’d asked this of her before, Lawrence would have the advantage over Holo.

There would have been no need to fixate on the meadow nor to be so pointlessly stubborn. Indeed, it might have been Holo who turned stubborn. But Holo had discerned the conversational flow more clearly, and so she was the victor.

“I just can’t win with you, can I?”

“I should say not.” Holo shifted under the blanket. Her ears twitched, and Lawrence heard her yawn. “Come now…I told you what sort of conversation I like—so will you not speak?”

She wheedled like a child, despite still holding the reins. Though Lawrence found this rather frustrating, he knew there was no cause for him to resent her. With nothing else to say, he turned the conversation to their dinner menu.

As usual, they were limited to bland bread and jerky, along with some dried fruit. If they foraged in the forest, it was possible they might catch a quail or rabbit, though, and Lawrence had to laugh at the way Holo’s ears perked up at the mention of this.

They continued to share idle conversation, and eventually Lawrence heard the sound of Holo’s sleeping breath. It was as though having toyed so thoroughly with him, the wolf had grown tired from play. When he looked at her, Lawrence wondered if he would ever become clever enough to gain the conversational advantage from Holo.

It wasn’t as warm as the meadow might have been, but nothing was so comfortable as being under the blanket, as long as two

people were there together. And all the more so when the other person was Holo, whose body temperature was slightly warmer than his, like a child's would be.

Yet he could scarcely believe how blameless she looked while sleeping. It was as though he could pinch her nose without her awakening or stick his finger into the downy fur inside her ears. Having suffered at her hands so much, Lawrence toyed with the notion of revenge as he regarded her innocent face.

And then it was as though God had heard his plea.

She seemed about to fall over, so as Lawrence moved to support her, he made his gentle counterattack.

He wrapped an arm around her slender shoulders, as if to say, "I am your guardian, you know." Then the moment he closed his own eyes—

"You pass."

Upon hearing Holo's quiet voice, he froze. This was where the whole conversation had been leading all along.

Holo looked up slightly and smiled a devilish smile, her fangs glinting beneath her lips.

"'Tis best to leave your snare at the base of a waterfall."

Lawrence couldn't help but finish the statement. "And the foolish fish will swim right into it."

Holo nodded and snickered.

Lawrence rolled his eyes upward, taking his arm from around her shoulders and wrapping it gently around her neck out of sheer frustration. Holo's tail wagged happily.

He was such a fool. Truly a fool.

For a merchant, taking an indulgent detour like this was like tying a noose around his own neck. The victor had been decided the moment he'd taken this rash course of action.

And who was it that held the other end of the rope he'd so happily tied around his neck? The answer was obvious.

Exhausted, Lawrence slumped over, resting his own head on Holo's, as though to say, "This particular conversation should end here."

End.



THE BLACK WOLF'S CRADLE

THE BLACK WOLF'S CRADLE

Having finished unloading the hay bales, she could finally take a short rest.

There were still patches of snow here and there, but Fleur found herself perspiring nonetheless, owing to the early spring sun to which she was yet unaccustomed.

"That's good hay. The livestock will grow well this year," said the man from the Jones Company as he counted up the bales.

Fleur brushed away the hay that clung to her clothes, and with some effort, she beamed a cheerful smile at the man, who was roughly old enough to be her father. "In truth they'll grow too much, and come winter you'll have nothing but meat."

"Oh? Perhaps I should buy up more than usual, then. Hmm."

"For how much?"

The merchant scratched his chin with his quill pen, seemingly only remembering the payment at Fleur's words. He counted up the hay bales again and answered only after a lengthy interval. "Seventeen *ligot*."

"I was promised at least twenty," she replied immediately, at which the man only twirled his quill pen. It was the sort of pause that merchants used when they didn't take the other party seriously.



As the last trace of the pleasant expression on Fleur's face drained away, she heard another voice, this one from behind her.

"You're supposed to push for more—twenty-five, say."

"Olar!" Fleur looked back and saw an older merchant.

The man with the pen scratched his temple, then chuckled through his nose while cocking his head. "All right. Given your nerve, let's call it twenty *ligot*."

"And of course that'll include the rental for the wagon." Though little of Olar's fine silver hair remained, he still treated it with egg whites every day. The other merchant was not particularly young, but compared with Olar he looked like a child.

"Certainly. The finder's fee is also included."

"Thanks be to God."

The conversation was taking place entirely over Fleur's head, and she said nothing to interrupt. It was only when Olar finally began unloading the hay from the wagon's bed that she hit upon something she could do.

"We'll be going," was all Olar said after returning the wagon and confirming the figure the other merchant wrote in his ledger. He then began to walk away.

Olar was sturdier than he looked, and even with a heavy load on his back, he could move quickly and lightly.

Despite the port's cargo docks being crowded with men, horses, and wagons moving this way and that, Olar moved through them almost magically, never once bumping into anyone else.

Fleur was still unused to hiding the fact that she was a young

woman behind a scarf and found it difficult just to travel in a straight line. She only managed to come alongside Olar when he turned down a narrow alley that was barely wide enough to admit the two of them side by side.

From above them came the sound of a crying child, and from below, the squeaking of a rat; a cat meowed from a head-high windowsill—that was the sort of place this was. Until recently, Fleur would never have imagined she would set foot in such a place.

Yet, Fleur reflected, people can adapt to almost anything.

As they passed, she stroked the throat of a cat napping next to a potted plant on a windowsill.

The life of a commoner wasn't so bad.

"Milady."

At the sudden sound of Olar's stern voice, the cat dashed back into the house.

She shot the insensitive source of that voice a harsh glare but was met with eyes that were still harsher.

"Are you not regretful of your actions?"

Fleur tended to laugh in the face of criticism from those older and more experienced than her, but this was not because she was particularly fearless. Rather, she had become used to it, since from a young age her tutors had often scolded her.

"Ah. Sorry. I am a bit," she said. In truth, she had been perfectly useless during bargaining. "I was hoping you'd appreciate how I held my temper when that merchant tried to break his promise, but it seems that ship has sailed."

"Milady!" Olar's mostly bald forehead wrinkled in consterna-

tion at the little joke. While he was stone-faced during negotiations, he had a surprising abundance of expressions other times, which Fleur always found impressive.

"Come, don't be angry. And I thought I told you to stop calling me 'milady.'"

"Then I'd ask you to try and think a bit more like a merchant." Olar's gaze remained so even and steady that Fleur found herself looking away.

She was constantly aware of the necessity of thinking like a merchant. After all, she was no longer one of the nobility.

Fleur von Eiterzental Mariel Bolan, eleventh generation scion of the house of Bolan.

These days she almost felt nostalgic for the long name.

"Of course I think like a merchant. I moved so much herring my hands smell of it, and coming back I brought great loads of hay."

"And that's quite wonderful. I'm sure no one would suspect that until recently you were terrified to ride a horse."

It didn't sound much like a compliment, as Olar was still angry. Fleur knew why, too, but it seemed as though the strict Olar wouldn't be satisfied until she said the words with her own mouth.

"Twelve *ligot* to buy the herring. Four *ligot* for taxes. Provisions including bread, mutton jerky, and pickled pork, cheese, and wine, half a *ligot*. Two for the horse feed and wagon rental. Add it all up and what does it come to?"

Fleur sighed beneath her scarf at Olar's question.

Adding everything up, they'd spent eighteen and a half *ligot* on the load of herring. If she'd been foolish enough to accept the merchant's offer of seventeen, they'd be in the red.

The nobility lived in a world of giving and receiving, but merchants could not afford to naively count gifts received and given against one another. When giving something to someone else, they always had to receive something of greater utility in return.

Otherwise, they could not survive.

"I had no intention of taking that offer."

"Is that so?" said Olar, looking straight ahead as he continued to walk without so much as glancing in Fleur's direction. She was beginning to find his attitude irritating.

"Are you saying I'm such a coward I won't argue at all?"

At these words, he immediately looked in her direction. "No. But, milady, while you might insist that you were promised twenty, you have nothing to prove that."

"I know I heard him strike the bargain at that price. Do you doubt me?"

"It is not that I doubt you. But nothing is so terrible to witness as a pointless argument, and normally both sides give a little and strike a bargain somewhere in the middle."

"So that's why you said twenty-five *ligot*?"

Olar nodded a tired nod that said yes, but that it was such basic common knowledge among merchants that he was reluctant to explain it.

And it was true—Olar had been born into the mercantile life and had once kept the ledger for a large trading company.

The reason he called Fleur “milady” was because the onetime house merchant who worked with the former head of the Bolan family was none other than Olar’s master, and so Olar was a frequent visitor to the house. However, around the time when Fleur was turning of marriageable age, the head of the house died of illness, and the house’s already precarious situation turned to ruin, ending its association with the company Olar worked for.

The next time Olar and Fleur met was the day Olar’s master came to make fast the contract that would make Fleur his bride.

It wasn’t so very long ago, but the memories of the event were already starting to fade.

“So, milady—how much did you buy that hay for?”

She’d been lost in thought for only a moment. Reality was constantly moving and always before her very eyes. Her house had been bought up by a wealthy merchant, and now that wealthy merchant had gone utterly bankrupt.

And now he wanted to know how much she’d paid for hay?

“Two *ligot*.” Fleur had been raised as a noblewoman—able to hide her true feelings in social situations. She named the figure matter-of-factly, which made the still-expressionless Olar raise his hands exaggeratedly and quicken his step.

Evidently she’d made him angry now.

The merchant had paid both to have the herring transported to an inland village and for the hay they’d brought back as return cargo. And if the herring plus expenses came to eighteen and a half *ligot*, with two *ligot* for hay added on top of that, then even payment of twenty *ligot* would leave them with a loss.

Fleur was certainly aware of that. She caught up with the angrily quick-striding Olar and drew alongside him. “The villagers

were in dire straits. Their sickles were chipped and dull and had to be repaired. They swore they couldn't survive unless they got two *ligot*."

"Is that so?" came the flat reply.

While Olar was a commoner, Fleur was still nobility—fallen nobility, but still. And when she became frustrated, her lineage made itself known.

"Do you suppose I'm lying?"

Olar stopped for a moment but then began walking again without looking at Fleur. He strode even more quickly than before. It was obvious who was at fault. Fleur was no longer a noblewoman who'd hired Olar—she was his student, learning how to be a merchant so that she might survive.

Running through the narrow alley, she again caught up with Olar. "I'm sorry, Olar. But you called me 'milady.' You know how that irritates me."

At this, Olar truly did stop walking. Fleur was unable to halt quickly enough and stumbled a few more steps ahead before looking back. When she did, she saw a rueful grin on Olar's face.

"A proper merchant needs a proper excuse."

Fleur slumped, then relieved Olar of some of the load he carried.

When they finally exited the alley, they were in view of their home, nestled in a row of houses that all looked very much the same.

"So, milady, after all that work you still took a loss?" Bertra the maid was an honest woman and always said just what she was thinking.

“It wasn’t a loss.”

“Then what was it?” She was shorter than Fleur and a year younger. The difference in their social status was like night and day.

Yet when it came to her ability at managing the affairs of the house, Fleur could do nothing but defer to her.

Without money they wouldn’t be able to afford tomorrow’s bread. When she’d been among the nobility, she could fall back on her family name, but now that was of no great comfort. Fleur made as though she were putting her scarf and mantle away and attempted to flee.

“Milady, I may be an uneducated woman, but I know well enough to understand what Mr. Oura said.”

“Stop calling me ‘milady.’”

“I will not stop. Milady!”

Fleur extracted herself from Bertra’s obstruction and escaped into the next room. From the other side of the door, she could hear Bertra’s exasperated sigh, but Fleur passed through the room and into the hallway, bypassing the washroom and climbing to the second floor.

Through a window situated halfway up the staircase, she could see the garden that Bertra tended. It supplied them with all the vegetables, spices, and medicinal herbs they could use, with enough left over that they could be taken to the marketplace and exchanged for meat.

And what did Fleur bring to the household?

Not much, she knew, so when Bertra, the mistress of the household, scolded her, she had nothing to say in her own defense.

Even a child could do simple arithmetic. But she just couldn't beat the price down past two *ligot*. She knew she had to—she just couldn't do it. She couldn't harm the livelihood of the same people who lived on land that had once belonged to her family.

"Milady." There was a knock on the door. It was Olar's voice.

In the old days, the door might have been flimsy, but it would've taken her twenty paces to walk to it from her desk. These days, all it took was three long strides.

"Bertra's in tears. She said you wouldn't listen to her."

"…"

Olar was totally merciless. He had a knack for understanding a person's reluctance or delight better than they did themselves. Olar said this was a crucial skill in business, but the ability seemed very useful in education as well. When it came to making Fleur understand just how great a sin it was to willfully sustain a loss, there was no better way than using Bertra.

Fleur nodded in defeat, then nodded again more forcefully and took a deep breath. "I know. I know."

"And?"

"I'll apologize to Bertra. And I promise I'll listen to what she says."

"…"

"And I promise I'll eat all my dinner."

Olar smiled. "Please just rest a while," he said, then closed the door and left her to her thoughts.

Fleur sighed a tired sigh, then smiled to herself as she sat in her shabby little chair.

Her family's great house had been taken and all their various special privileges sold off. Their servants had been scattered to the winds. She'd found herself living in lodging meant for craftsmen or low-ranking town officials, and her poverty was such that she could barely afford to raise a pig, let alone feed fine horses.

She was the very image of an impoverished noblewoman, and yet Fleur did not think of her daily life as being a particular burden. It was true that dealing with merchants did not come easily for someone with her noble sensibilities and was frequently difficult. Sometimes it was vexing, but it was hardly impossible.

After all, Olar had said he would spend his remaining years tending to her education, as well as her ledger, and her closest servant, Bertra, had stayed on to continue to take care of her, which allowed Fleur to continue to live as comfortably as she did. Between the two of them, they reminded Fleur that the entire world was not her enemy and that her family name was not the only thing others might value in her.

That was enough for one to keep on living.

But Fleur was well aware that it would take money to sustain such a life, which meant that she could not go on taking losses like this.

"I'm a merchant, after all," she said aloud to remind herself, then went downstairs to apologize to Bertra.

Midday, the following day.

After Fleur had finished the gruel she'd finally become used to eating, Olar slowly spoke up.

"If that hay is as good as it is, the horse trade might be a good one."

"Horses?"

“It seems that war may break out in the far south of the continent across the sea. If it does come to war, then the price of horses will soar, as though they themselves had wings.”

Fleur didn’t doubt Olar’s information-gathering abilities, but she still responded dubiously. “If it’s such a good opportunity, won’t others already be doing it?”

“There’s no particular need to be first. If there’s truly profit to be had, it should be good enough to be second or third.” As he spoke, Olar picked the mold off the piece of bread he was eating, then brought it to his mouth.

Fleur had once furrowed her brow at the prospect of eating moldy bread, but now having been on more than one trading journey, such minor details no longer concerned her. And indeed, she had eventually been told that even in her own manor, the servants had frequently eaten such bread while she had been none the wiser.

When Bertra had first told her of this, Fleur had been at once surprised and strangely accepting of the fact.

“So. Horses, eh?”

Horses were always considered a luxury, and as such were reliably expensive.

Back when the Bolan family name had been worth something, the greatest part of the family’s modest income had come from the usage fees the family levied on the collection of feed from the family forests, which the farmers needed to raise their horses and pigs.

If the demand for hay was such that the price was rising, there might be farmers unable to continue to feed them and thus motivated to sell.

“I’ll talk to the company merchants when I go to collect our payment tomorrow,” said Fleur as she dipped bread Bertra had carefully scraped free of mold into her gruel.

“Please do your best to avoid losing money, milady.”

Fleur nodded at Bertra’s words, smiling sheepishly. Then her gaze was drawn elsewhere, but not because of anything Bertra had said.

“Oh, again? How’s it getting in, I wonder.” Bertra followed Fleur’s gaze to its object, standing out of her chair as she did so.

In the doorway that led to the kitchen and washroom sat a puppy, small enough to be picked up under one arm.

“Do you suppose this dog’s the one who tore the wheat sacks?”

Towns were full of animals to an extent Fleur could never have imagined when she had lived in a manor surrounded by fields and forests. They seemed to cause Bertra no end of headache, but for Fleur it was just the opposite.

“Here, boy.”

The puppy slunk away from Bertra as she’d tried to approach it, but when it spied the bread Fleur held in her outstretched hand, it seemed to regain its courage. It sprang to its feet and ran between Bertra’s legs toward Fleur.

“Milady!” cried the long-suffering Bertra, who warred daily with kitchen invaders like mice, cats, and dogs.

Fleur looked up only once the puppy had finished eating the bread. “My husband only stole from others. I have no mind to follow his example.”

Even the puppy seemed to understand the ways of the world and was happy to pledge temporary loyalty to the source of its

food.

It held still while Fleur patted its head, even wagging its tail. But unfortunately a dog was not a knight, and Fleur was no longer a noblewoman.

Bertra approached and picked up the puppy, shooing it out through an open window. “You are much too kind, milady.”

“Too kind to live among the common folk?”

Fleur knew perfectly well that it was a malicious question to ask, and unsurprisingly Bertra was stunned into silence—but Olar then stepped in.

“We’re all perfectly aware of how things were when you were a wife, and while I have no praise to give my former master, we must still earn our living via trade. Unless milady has discovered some other way of making a livelihood?”

Fleur was not so naive as to be unaware of the fates that awaited fallen nobility. And for a young woman, the possibilities were even more limited.

“You can’t give away what you haven’t first earned. Anyone of quality would cry to hear one of their own say such things.”

“And the bookkeepers of any kind landlord are always in tears.”

“Quite so. And I hate to see Bertra’s crying face so.” Fleur popped the remainder of the bread into her mouth and stood. “Now then, I’m off to do business. I won’t lose money this time.”

Bertra looked at her steadily, still wearing an apron that had faded somewhat since the times when she had worn it in the old manor. Finally she smiled a relieved smile and spoke. “Off you go, then, milady.”

This was no longer the fine, beautiful manor of the old days, but Fleur's smile was just as genuine.

When a river froze, it was not just the water that ceased moving. During winter in the north, boats were stuck—entire ports froze. So come spring, shipping traffic was especially heavy, as though releasing pent-up demand.

At least that had been the explanation given to her by Olar, and it seemed to be true. The weather was fine, and the port fairly bustled with activity.

"Right, here's your payment."

Given that it had tried to push the price from twenty down to seventeen, the company did not hesitate to pay what it owed.

As a rule, merchants were an eccentric bunch. Fleur mused on the fact as she broached the topic Olar had discussed with her over lunch.

"Horses?"

"Yes. We've heard there may be war and thus a need for horses."

"Mm, well, yes…Horses, you say." The merchant scratched his chin with his quill pen and closed his eyes.

"You've got to pay usage fees in order to get hay to feed them, do you not? If hay is expensive, it takes money just to keep them."

"And you're saying people will be looking to sell. That's it, is it?"

In order to avoid being swindled, one had to grasp what one's opponent was saying even as they spoke and formulate a response by the time they had finished. Olar was always saying so,

and he seemed to have quite mastered the devilish trick of it.

Fleur nodded.

"Mm," the man murmured, looking around before continuing. "And do you suppose that you're the first person to think of that?" His tone was a condescending one; perhaps he'd noticed that beneath her scarf Fleur was a young girl.

"Not at all. But there's profit enough to be had for even the second or third." Olar had said so, and Fleur repeated his words.

The man put his finger to his mouth, as though trying to mask the smile that rose unbidden there—but if Fleur let her own triumph show on her face, the loss would be hers.

"Apologies. You're getting better at this every day. It's as you say. But as you can see, we have our hands quite full with business here, so we've no time to go out and buy horses. So if you were to obtain them for us—well, I won't say we wouldn't buy them."

Merchants always left things a bit vague.

"So would you or wouldn't you?" she pressed, at which the man frowned.

"Well, we can't buy a starving, stubborn nag, now, can we? I won't make any promises."

It would be just like a noblewoman to ask if he did not trust her. Fleur realized his point and apologized.

"Of course, even if we couldn't buy them, there would be plenty of people who would want to. If you gauge the market and buy them for the right price, you won't have trouble selling them."

"I see."

“Still…”

“?”

The man closed his ledger and tucked it under an arm before continuing. “I do think it could be difficult. Horses are living creatures, after all. It’s not uncommon for a prize horse to turn into a wagon nag while you’re transporting it.”

“I suppose that’s true…” When she lived in the manor, Fleur remembered hearing that caring for the horses was a difficult job. And having rented horse-drawn wagons, she knew from experience that a capricious horse was trouble.

If she made the effort of buying a horse and wound up having to sell it cheaply, Bertra wouldn’t be the only one weeping.

“But consider this.”

“Hmm?”

“If you’ve got enough money on hand to be buying horses, there are other lines of business.”

“Other lines of business?”

The man smiled and pulled his ledger back out from under his arm, opening it and licking his finger. “No fuss, no risk of illness, no need to worry about feed or care. With an opportunity like this, even an inexperienced merchant won’t fail too badly. A horse may sell dear, but in exchange they’re quite a bit of trouble.”

Everything the man said was true. And even though she was aware he was an unsavory fellow, she could not help but be taken off guard by his generous explanations of everything. Somehow she found herself completely absorbed in what he was saying.

“And what is this other business?”

“Clothing, my dear!”

“…Clothing?” she repeated.

The man seemed to find what he was looking for in his ledger and tilted it toward her. “This figure is how much I paid when buying it up. And here’s what I sold it for. The margin isn’t so great as a horse might have, but…as you can see, every single item from top to bottom turned a profit.”

Assuming this had not been entirely fabricated to convince her, it was indeed as the man said. And he had not had time to manufacture all these figures in the short time they had been talking. Having decided that much, Fleur nodded politely.

“It’s a reliable trade,” said the man as he closed the ledger.

What opened next was Fleur’s mouth. “But what sort of clothing would I buy?”

“That would be your decision to make.”

Fleur had to admit that was obvious enough, but having left decisions about what to wear entirely up to others throughout her life, she knew very little about clothing. As she was agonizing over whether to first consult with Olar, the man clapped his hands together and spoke.

“Ah yes, as it happens, one of the people my company does business with has quite the eye for fashion.”

“Quite the eye?”

“Yes. We’ve had him sell clothing we’ve bought up in the past, and he’s quite talented at it. The pieces just fly out of our hands left and right. He’s been saying he wants to move from buying to managing and has been looking for someone with capital.”

Fleur was well aware that her own mind was not especially

sharp, yet the meaning of what the merchant was saying proved difficult for her to grasp. Perhaps there was something about it that gave her a strange feeling.

"So…I would supply the capital, and the profit would be shared?"

"Even so. And in addition to the profit, you'd gain knowledge of the clothing business. And your partner would handle everything from purchase onward, so you'd maximize your profit."

"Well…" It seemed like quite an opportunity. Perhaps the world wasn't filled with only bad people after all, Fleur thought.

The man flipped through a few more pages in his ledger, then gave her a name. "The man's name is Milton Post."

It sounded like the name of a nobleman.

Whenever she had coin in her pocket, Fleur could not help but do some shopping. On her way home, she bought some of the cheese she knew Bertra liked and the wine of a particular village that Olar had praised very highly.

Their budget was not such that there was room for wasteful expenditures, but Bertra and Olar had not become so unsympathetic as to furrow their brows at gifts bought especially for them. And besides, Fleur had also gotten a lead on a new business opportunity.

"The clothing business, eh?" murmured Olar several times, his eyes closed as he inhaled the scent of the wine. He seemed to be enjoying it very much, though there was only a small amount, enough to fill a hand-sized cask.

Fleur had related what the man at the trading company had told her, but she could not tell whether Olar was really listening to her.

“Yes. So, perhaps we should take the opportunity to…Olar?”

At the sound of his name, Olar finally looked at Fleur. “Apologies. This rich scent is terribly nostalgic. But yes, the clothing business. You would—”

“The company has a man whom they entrust with the sale of the clothing they buy up, and this man is looking to do the buying himself this time, it seems.”

“I see…”

Olar again inhaled the wine’s scent through his hooked nose and then held his breath.

Fleur could not help but laugh at the way he acted like a former man-about-town and quite forgot to be angry with him. “His name’s Milton Post.”

The instant she spoke the name, Olar’s eyes snapped open, their sharp gaze lancing out from between his deeply wrinkled eyelids. “Of the Post family?”

“You know him?”

“…Mm. Of course I do.”

Olar breathed in the wine’s scent one last time, then pushed the stopper back in the cask and set it on the table. The house was quiet, as Bertra was out doing her afternoon shopping at the market.

“The head of the house was a knight renowned as much for his courtly elegance as for his bravery. The tales of his romances are many, but he was also an honorable, family-minded man. It is said that he left no less than thirty descendants behind.”

Families with many siblings in a single generation were not uncommon, nor was keeping a mistress or two within one’s

home. Once children from different mothers were added into the mix, just listing their names was like reciting scripture, or so the jokes went—but in reality there were not very many families like that.

Fleur could see why the name would be a famous one.

"Since it would've been impossible for all of his children to inherit land, he's probably one of them. You said he helps the trading company sell clothing?"

"Mm, yes…huh?" Fleur's reply was vague and distracted, as her gaze was stolen by a goat that stood by the windowsill, chewing away on the potted plant there; perhaps it had escaped from somewhere or else someone had bought it and forgotten to tie it up. Her attention was briefly captured by the strange sight, but Fleur hastily composed herself and replied again, "Y-yes."

"Well, I imagine he mostly sells to the nobility. We ourselves once did something similar—hiring the impoverished second or third sons of noble families. The idea being that when you go to introduce yourself, if you say you're from the cobblers or the smiths, you'll be turned away at the door, but if you have a name of quality…and the fashion of the nobility changes quickly. We needed people with both names and know-how to do our selling."

"I see…"

"So you met this Post fellow, did you?"

The goat finally seemed to have decided the plants' leaves were inedible and gave an irritated *baa* before wandering away.

"Not yet. I thought it would be better not to rush and check with you first."

"Is that so? Perhaps milady is finally beginning to open her eyes."

“I’ve already made terrible mistakes twice over by trusting my own judgment.”

Olar smiled, then deliberately cleared his throat. He pointed to what was left of the twenty *ligot* that remained after Fleur’s shopping.

“…?” Fleur cocked her head, which elicited a small sigh from Olar.

“But you still have much to learn, and the road will be hard. The coins they paid milady with…”

“The coins? Are they the wrong amount?” *That can’t possibly be*, she was about to say, but was interrupted by Olar’s small head shake.

“With coins that have this much shaved from their edges, I doubt a money changer would give us their face value for them. We might lose as much as ten percent in the transaction.”

Fleur hastily looked down at the coins on the table, and it was true—some of them were quite misshapen from how deeply their edges had been ground down.

“Still, you couldn’t remember every single lesson even if I could give it all to you at once. One step at a time. Of course…”

“Of course?”

“If you were an apprentice that I might whip and beat into shape, things might be different.” Olar didn’t often make jokes. He must have been genuinely enjoying the wine she had bought for him.

“I was slapped once during a banquet. I cried for a week.”

Olar smiled amusedly, collecting the coins in a box, then clos-

ing its lid. “Now then, on to this new opportunity.”

“I’d like that.”

“So, as far as this notion of selling clothing goes, what are your thoughts?”

Fleur was caught off guard by the sudden change in topic. Unable to switch her mind over to the new topic in time, she said the first thing that came to her. “I thought it seemed good.”

“Is that so?” replied Olar casually, writing a figure in the ledger that was spread open on the table. Given the amount of coin Fleur had returned with, there was sadly a loss recorded in the right-most column.

“Is it…not?”

“Not at all. If milady decides it is, then I think it is fine. Just as the company fellow said—horses can be sick, injured, or even die, but clothing can last for years if properly cared for. There was once a time when dealing in clothes meant it would be three years or more before you could record the profit or loss in a ledger like this. It’s a business where it’s hard to sustain heavy losses, so for training purposes I think it’s quite suitable.”

“So—” Fleur said, and Olar nodded decisively.

“This will be milady’s third time making a trade as a merchant.”

When she had lived in the manor, her duties amounted to wearing the clothing presented to her and eating her meals. She had no influence over the prosperity or downfall of the house, no choice in whom to marry—she had but to exist and do as she was told.

She had still not become accustomed to the life of a merchant. It was difficult for her to see through the lies of other traders, and

often she wished she didn't have to converse at all.

And yet being able to do work with her own hands was deeply appealing.

Fleur took a quiet breath, then nodded definitively.

"But you've got to listen to my advice. Is that understood?"

He'd boosted his spirits and made her happy only to drive the nail down. But if she turned displeased here, it would mean failure for her.

Fleur took to heart what she had learned. "But of course!" she said.

"Then God's blessing be upon you," said Olar quietly as he closed the ledger. And then, as though having waited for just the right moment, Bertra returned from the marketplace.

Former nobility. The noble in name only. The true nobility.

Whatever their nature, those who strode grandly about, ready to give their famous names at any moment, were less uncommon than one might think.

Most of them clung to the past or used their name to eke out a living. Of course for those like Fleur, whose failing houses were bought up by wealthy merchants, name and all, only to have those merchants fail in turn—their names wound up being only a burden.

So Fleur hid her face behind a scarf and rarely gave her name. She relied on Olar's old connections for work, and while she was occasionally recognized, most people spared her some measure of sympathy and kept quiet.

This time, however, Fleur had received an introduction to Mil-

ton thanks to her own hard work, so the fact of her former nobility had presumably remained a secret.

And yet.

"Haven't we met? At a banquet, I think," said Milton Post, immediately after shaking her hand upon receiving her for their meeting.

The young man's blond hair was neatly combed, with clothes that were none too fine. But it was clear that some effort had gone into their arrangement, and had he not walked two steps forward to take her hand, no one would have had any trouble believing him to be from a good family.

It occurred to Fleur that her hands no longer had the pure white softness of someone who wore only silken gloves. Compared with Bertra, of course, they still obviously belonged to a maiden who only ever picked flowers, so surely her hands alone had not given her away.

Fleur was flustered and at a loss for words, so Milton continued. "Ah, that's right. At Lord Milton's banquet."

"Ah—" she blurted, since that was the name of the nobleman who had hosted one of the few banquets she'd attended.

"We only met the once, though. It seems you don't remember."

Young girls of marriageable age who attended banquets shook hands more often than they reached for bread. Even if the touches were light ones, their hands were red and swollen by the time they returned home in the evening.

"I suppose it's no surprise, though. Your attention was always so hoped for."

This had all happened when her family still held the manor, before their fortunes had declined too far. Back when she was just

the sort of girl whose hand in marriage might be sought.

"As I recall, your name is—"

"Fleur Bolan." She hadn't given her name in so long, the sound of it was at once nostalgic and tinged with shame. The shame was less from the name itself as it was having spoken it here, in a tavern facing the docks.

"That's right. The daughter of the Bolan family—the one who that famously nasty Lady Duan slapped."

"Ah!" She gave clear voice to her surprise, but fortunately this was not a formal dining hall. Her voice was immediately swallowed by the bustle around them, and all that remained was Milton's smile.

"I seem to recall many an apprentice knight seeking your favor after that. Perhaps you didn't know?" Milton brought some roast beans to his mouth, perhaps to disguise the smile there that just wouldn't disappear.

This consideration on his part only served to intensify her embarrassment, and even with the scarf around her head, Fleur wanted to slink off into a corner somewhere and hide.

"Still, what happened after that…I can't help but be sympathetic. Though there were some who spoke ill."

Fleur could tell he was not talking about her holing up and crying for a week. Underneath her scarf, she composed herself, took a deep breath, and nodded.

"After all, we can't decide our own fates. The only ones who can do that are the ones sitting in far more fortunate positions than we have."

Fleur looked at Milton's hand as he poured wine into her cup; the hand was too rough for a nobleman. And yet it wasn't the

rugged hand of a knight who spent his days jousting. They were more like the hands of a mischievous nephew.

"My entire house—" Fleur began.

"Hmm?" Milton replied, his cup raised to his lips.

"My entire house fell from such a position. And yet against all odds, it seems there's a place for me in this world, though I would never have imagined it would be working as a merchant."

Milton nodded, looking out toward the port and squinting from the brightness. "I was the third son of the second mistress, so as you might expect, when I left the house I received nothing but a tiny scrap of land, a bit of coin, and the Post name. I don't have the horse and armor I'd need to spend my days jousting and make some noble girl my own, nor the wit to make my way reciting ballads. But I expected as much, so this was not any great shock to me."

"And then you went into trading?" Even if his house hadn't fallen, he could easily have been one of the many who were cast out and not welcome back.

Milton brought another bite to his mouth, perhaps to hide the pained smile. "Fortunately, the Post name opened many doors for me. And I loved good food, good wine, and idle chatter, so I turned up at many a table around the land. As I wandered around, I would hear talk of where a man like me might be needed, so it's true—you can find surprising places for yourself."

When the man who had bought Fleur to be his wife died, her house falling to ruin and the manor sold off, Fleur had earned the servants' respect by remaining calm. But that was not because she was a particularly strong girl. Life had simply washed her away, so she gave herself up to the flood.

She sensed a similarly defeatist strength from Milton, the man

in front of her.

"I hear tell your business is going well."

"Ha-ha. It's a bit embarrassing hearing someone say as much to my face, but I do have a certain amount of confidence."

There were many who used their family influence as a shield, claiming the achievements of their underlings as their own. The man before her, Milton, even having left his home to sell goods for a trading company, seemed to be of a very reliable disposition. He could not very well stay away from the common people, especially not when his wings had been clipped this way, sending him tumbling to earth.

Fleur honestly envied how firmly Milton's feet were planted on the ground, which is why the words that came out of her mouth next did so mostly unbidden.

"What's your secret?"

Olar had once said that anyone who gave away their methods was unfit to be called a merchant. Fleur remembered this the moment she asked the question, and regretfully wondered if it had been a stupid one.

Milton actually looked down, a forced-looking smile on his face. But the moment Fleur was about to take the question back, Milton looked back up and spoke. "It's stubbornness."

For a moment she didn't understand and simply stared into his clear blue eyes.

"Stubbornness. There are lots of people in the same business as me, but once they've sold something to someone they know, they stop there and can't sell any more. That's because they are in the same place as the people buying the clothes. The first sale they make is because the buyer feels sympathy for them. But

that's not how I work. I remind them that the Post name will open doors for them, that it's nothing more than the first foothold in making the most of a business opportunity. Having done so, they may laugh at me, they may scorn me. I praise their taste and recommend my wares' finer points, and make the sale. And of course, I never move poor clothing. So it sells."

The flood of words from Milton's mouth suddenly stopped, and he smiled pleasantly.

"Enough that my business partners find me useful, anyway," finished Milton, drinking his wine, then ordering another cup.

Fleur had not interrupted him, but not because she was overwhelmed by his monologue. Her chest had simply tightened upon seeing his stubborn resolve, and she had been unable to speak.

"Ha-ha, was that a bit too pretentious?"

"N-not at all..."

"Still," Milton continued, giving a silver coin to the innkeeper who brought his wine, "that was all because I have a goal."

Hearing this, Fleur could practically see the image of a fetching town girl standing behind Milton. But that was not at all what he was getting at.

"I want to rub my family's face in it." Again he ate the beans to hide his smile.

Fleur watched him do so with a steady gaze.

"It's a bit different from proving I'm not some shame upon the Post name. It's more like showing that even though I've been cast out, I can still succeed. It's about pride. If I can keep that, I don't care how many times my knees hit the floor when I bow my head —I'll be doing it as a merchant."

His determination was unwavering.

Fleur rested her hand upon the plain wooden table, and she found it hard to keep it still. If this had not been a noisy tavern, and if the rough table had been covered by a fine white tablecloth, she might very well have extended her hand out to cover his.

The only thing that stopped her was the fact that this was not a noble ball or dance floor.

The person before her had decided upon his goal and was moving straight toward it, and he had embraced his role as a merchant, which meant that what Fleur needed to do was not to take his hand in hers, but rather speak these words.

"So, you are…"

"Yes?"

The words caught in her throat, and she drew her chin in, bracing herself. "…Looking for capital, I hear."

It was a matter of course for merchants to be able to change their attitude in response to circumstances. Fleur considered Milton as a merchant and chose her words accordingly.

Milton smiled thinly—Fleur was sure it wasn't her imagination. "That's right."

She took a breath. "How much?"

Milton named a figure that for Fleur, at that moment, was not an impossible amount.

The soup had plenty of bread in it, along with beans, onion, and the leftover meat from the previous night—two big bowls of it and one would be able to skip meals for two days. On top of such hearty fare had been laid a generous amount of roasted cheese.

Such a dish would not have been out of place coming from the large kitchen of a fine manor somewhere, but it was very like Bertra to manage the feat shorthanded and with a much smaller kitchen.

And since the house of Bolan operated on such a meager budget, she had become quite adept at making do with cheap ingredients. Even the seasoned merchant Olar had been stunned into silence when told how much they had cost, which was no mean feat.

When it came to cooking, none wielded a ladle the way Bertra did.

"The bread was rejected by the town inspector, so I got them to sell it cheap. It was stale and hard and couldn't have been eaten the way it was, but look what happens when you put it in soup. I got the onions from the lady of the house three doors down—traded her some herbs I grew for them. The meat came from a chicken I found wandering about the garden."

As a child, Fleur had always been forbidden from wandering into the yard behind the manor, and when she had learned that this was because of the traps set to catch ingredients for dinner, she was quite impressed.

Of course, those traps had been set by the elderly gardener, but Bertra had evidently been watching and had imitated him, so both Fleur and Olar were perfectly aware that the chicken had not been simply "wandering about the garden."

But in a town thick with edible animals like pigs, sheep, goats, and rabbits, no one was going to complain about a missing chicken or two.

Olar's constant admiration of Bertra's craft was not unusual.

What was unusual was the way Fleur failed to praise or com-

pliment the dinner's flavor in any way as she ate it.

"Milady?"

Fleur nearly dropped her spoon at the unexpected address. All their silver had long since been sold, so it was a cheap tin utensil. Bertra would occasionally complain that she missed polishing the silver, but for Fleur's part she found the tinware easier to use and much preferred it.

"O-oh yes. It's delicious," she said hastily, which made Olar and Bertra both regard her dubiously. "Very," she added. Olar and Bertra shared a look.

Fleur picked up a piece of bread and put it in her mouth. It was hard to chew, but that meant it would be that much longer before she was expected to speak.

"So what did the Post lad have to say?"

Fleur heard the quiet hammering of her heart. She was sure they could hear it, too, but averted her eyes and took another bite of bread before she had finished chewing the first one.

"Oh, have you started working on another trade?" Bertra was preternaturally sharp when it came to housework but could still be rather insensitive.

Or perhaps she *did* know and was asking on purpose, Fleur wondered as she took a sip of ale.

"A fundamental principle of trading," Olar said, giving Fleur an appraising look as she stood from her chair, "is to keep your distance from your partners."

Fleur's heart was now very quiet. She shot Olar a cold glance, which he did not flinch at.

"For trading to go smoothly, you must deal with many differ-

ent partners, as it's impossible to predict when difficulties may arise. You must above all avoid any situation wherein a delivery failing to arrive would mean your ruin."

Their cold staring contest continued. But Fleur could not match Olar's ability in hiding any emotion from his face, eyes, and mouth. She finally looked away, picking up her bowl and thrusting it at Bertra. "Another."

"Chasing profit is a dangerous business. If you dream of great gains, you also expose yourself to great risks. Trading is a long-term enterprise. You must avoid risk," said Olar, but Fleur could tell his words lacked real conviction.

No doubt he'd already concluded what was to blame for Fleur's strange mood.

"He's a trustworthy man."

"Merchants can wear many masks."

"He *seems* a trustworthy man."

Olar nodded and indicated that Fleur could continue.

"The profit is reliable. I supply the money, and he chooses and sells the clothing. The profit comes to thirty or forty percent, which we split."

"What of the clothing? Where does it come from and via whom?"

"A famous town across the sea, he said. He'll use the trading company for the purchase, so there's nothing to worry about."

She cut a piece of chicken in two with her spoon and brought the smaller piece to her mouth. The bones had been carefully removed, which made it easy to eat.

“And to whom will they be sold?”

“The same customers he’s sold to before, so there’s no problem there, either.”

The canny old merchant stopped asking questions. Fleur’s face was downcast, and she stole a glance at him with upturned eyes, like a student seeking her tutor’s approval.

Olar put his hand to his forehead, sighing as he rubbed his head, which he often did when he was thinking something over.

Fleur thought back over her conversation with Milton. Her impression was that everything had been planned very carefully, from purchase all the way to sale. After all, they were only continuing with a business that had been conducted successfully all along. The only difference was that the money to buy the clothes would come from Fleur instead of from the company. And doing business at the company’s whims meant they kept most of the profit.

By joining up with Fleur, Milton could make more money for himself in exchange for his expertise with clothing and customers.

He had explained his expectations and goals very clearly, and Fleur did not think there would be any problems.

“I see…”

“Is there a problem?” she shot back, stronger than she had intended.

“Well, if you truly wish to know…”

“If there is, spit it out,” she said, then realized how high-handed she was being and looked away. “I’m sorry. If you believe there to be a problem, please tell me.”

Olar sighed, brushing some ale foam off of his beard before speaking. “Can this individual truly be trusted?”

Fleur was not angry at the question, but not because of any particular generosity on her part. For Olar to ask that question meant that there was something that bothered him. And he had said that a top-class merchant could discern surprising facts from only the smallest pieces of information.

“…Is there something suspicious?”

“‘Suspicious’ might be going too far, but it is strange.”

“What’s strange?” she asked, which made Olar look down at his hands, before looking up at her out of the corner of his eye. He made this face whenever he was hesitating over whether to tell her what he was really thinking. He gazed at her like that for a while, mulling something over behind his glassy gray eyes.

He sighed, the signal that he’d come to his conclusion. “Milady, if I may…”

“What?”

“Trade is like that bowl.” He indicated the bowl that was still half full with Bertra’s soup. “Profit is like its contents. Someone skillful like Bertra can extract greater profit than others. But no matter how hard she might try, the bowl can only be filled so much before it overflows, just as every trade has a limit to the amount of profit that can be made from it.”

Opposite Olar, Bertra broke her bread and began to eat. It was very difficult to divert her attention away from anything outside of the house.

“Fundamentally, the amount of profit to be gained in a trade is always balanced between its participants.”

“I know that. That’s why Milton doesn’t want to deal with the

trading company anymore and was looking for someone like me."

Olar nodded but continued. "Which means that the company that normally does business with the Post house will see substantially less profit. Do you think they will look kindly upon this? Trading companies are cunning and sly."

"Huh?" Fleur retorted, but soon smiled. "Oh. Don't worry about that. It's the opposite."

Now it was Olar's turn to retort. "The opposite?"

"Yes. The Jones Company that introduced me to Milton did so in order to increase their own profit. Milton was buying clothes from another company and selling them on, but the Jones Company wants his sales expertise for themselves. In exchange for switching sides, Milton had a condition: Find him a different source of funding."

Olar's unwavering eyes were slowly hidden behind his eyelids. A few moments later they opened again, and his gaze moved away from Fleur. "So the procurement comes via the Jones Company."

"That's right. Milton buys from the Jones Company, which helps them break into the clothing business. They establish a relationship with Milton. There's no downside for them at all. Of course"—Fleur paused, briefly proud of herself for speaking so eloquently in front of Olar like this; she got the feeling that he was smiling a bit at her dramatics—"for Milton and me, there's nothing *but* upsides."

She thought it was perfect.

Milton would be free from the company that had used him and sucked up most of his profits thus far, and in exchange for sharing profit with Milton, the Jones Company would guarantee their own share. And Fleur would receive a tidy fee in exchange for shouldering the risk of the money outlay.

Not only that, but she would gain knowledge of the workings of the clothing trade. Milton could save up, and in the end he might even open his own shop.

In any case, it seemed to Fleur like a magnificent plan, where no one stood to lose.

"Mm." Contrary to Fleur's expectations, Olar did not reply right away. The wrinkles high on his bald head only deepened as he stared down at his soup.

Fleur patiently waited for his reply, but it did not come. Finally, unable to stand the silence, she slowly reached for her soup, bringing it to her mouth. It had mostly cooled, but that made its flavors easier to discern. "It's delicious," Fleur said to Bertra, which finally elicited a smile from her—she had been silent all throughout dinner.

It was only after Fleur asked Bertra for some hot water to cleanse her palate with that Olar finally spoke up.

"Well, if milady concludes as much, then…"

Fleur was at a loss, wondering what he was thinking, which prompted Olar to repeat himself.

"If milady has come to said conclusion, then…"

Fleur was not so brimming with confidence that she could immediately reply with, *Well, that's what I'm doing, then.* She set her spoon down and regarded Olar with upturned eyes. "If you have something to say, I wish you'd say it."

"Not at all. There's little to be accomplished even if I did. I'm probably overthinking all this. After all, I'm not young anymore. It makes it all too easy for me to reflect on the things that went wrong for me in the past. And"—Olar took a drink of soup, cocking his head slightly and glancing at Bertra as though to compli-

ment her on it, and his still-handsome features and what remained of his fine, egg white–treated hair was more than enough to invite a smile from her—"you must be given a chance to grow up in your own way, milady. Or the legs you've worked so hard to acquire will weaken."

It was unclear whether or not he was exactly complimenting her, but at the very least he was telling her to work hard and take steps on her own, which was progress—since up until recently he seemed to trust neighborhood errand boys more than he did Fleur.

"A true merchant is one who can learn from her failures."

Fleur smiled. "You're assuming I'm going to fail."

"I did not say that," said Olar, smiling faintly.

Then, noticing that there was no more ale in the cups held in their outstretched hands, Bertra stood and made ready to pour another round. "I'm not an educated woman so such talk is beyond me, but I know my own work," she said sagely.

Nothing was so heartening as being surrounded by family one could trust.

The next day, Fleur woke up early. Well—early by the standards of the nobility, which she knew differed quite a bit from the habits of the common folk. Lately, when Fleur had been woken by Bertra, the latter had already finished a round of housework. As far as Olar was concerned, it went without saying that this day of all days he'd risen early.

Fleur climbed out of bed and quickly combed her hair with a comb Bertra had made for her in what time she could find between housework. Her hair had been cut above the shoulders and offered hardly any resistance at all, so the combing was quickly accomplished. The day after she had cut the long, beautiful hair

that was the surest sign of nobility, she had let out a whistle at how much more quickly her morning dressing went.

Long hair could not be properly washed at the sort of water well that would be shared by a large number of townspeople. On top of that, there was no time to spend on daily grooming when there were so many other things to accomplish during the day.

Moreover, it was hardly in her best interest to reveal the fact of her gender while doing business.

Given all that, she had not hesitated to cut it.

The strange thing was that when she actually went through with it, she herself was not the most disturbed by the change. Olar's face had been deeply pained when he had informed her she would have to cut it, and Bertra had flatly opposed it. Fleur had let her hair down and wrapped herself in a large blanket in preparation for the cutting, and while Olar and Bertra argued endlessly about it, she had finally just done it herself.

She still vividly remembered Bertra's cry and had never seen Olar go wide-eyed in exactly that way either before or since.

Fleur did not dislike the image of herself that was reflected in the polished copper plate she used for a mirror. In fact, the first time she had smiled at herself there was after the haircutting. The person she saw was not some noblewoman whose job was simply to exist.

From then on, she would live by her own hands and feet as Fleur Bolan the merchant.

"Right."

There was always a line in front of the well in the morning, so Fleur washed her face with water she had brought in the previous night, rinsing her mouth and sprinkling the rest on the garden,

then finally bracing herself for the day.

Shortly thereafter she heard the sound of someone climbing the steps, which was probably Bertra, having heard the sound of the water splashing down.

“Milady?” came the question after a hesitant knock at the door. And no wonder she was surprised. Normally Fleur would not wake up even when her shoulders were shaken.

Fleur opened the door with a smile. “Good morning!”

“Ah, good morning, milady.”

“Where’s Olar?”

“Er…I believe he’s on his usual walk through the marketplace.”

She had woken early enough that Olar the watchdog was not here to bark at her. Fleur knew what she would say.

“Well, then, I’d like some breakfast. Bread with a bit of cheese. And just a bit of wine.”

Breakfast was a privilege reserved for the noble and the wealthy. It was proof of prosperity. One of the hardest things about leaving the manor was the immediate loss of breakfast.

Bertra’s eyes widened. “Well…,” she said, and after thinking a moment with her eyes downcast, she slowly looked around, then smiled a small smile. “If you’ll give me just a moment.”

No doubt this was her way of rewarding Fleur for waking up so promptly.

In return for this, Fleur embraced Bertra. Bertra giggled and turned to go.

The clucking of the chickens could be heard from the garden,

and the morning was very fresh.

After cleaning up evidence of the breakfast—evidence that had to be kept from Olar—Fleur put on her cloak and carefully covered her head in her scarf.

"Goodness, are you leaving so early?" said Bertra, surprised, as she dried her hands on her apron.

"I'm heading to the port. Tell Olar where I've gone."

"Very well, milady," said Bertra, and then continued in a low, indistinct voice. "It's surprising…Somehow I've gotten used to seeing you in those clothes."

It was an honest admission from Bertra, though it did not displease Fleur to hear it. She spun around in her cloak. "I'm off," she said in an affected, dramatic voice.

"Take care," said Bertra with a long-suffering smile that was very like her.

Upon leaving the house, Fleur found that the morning air was very pleasant. The cold, dry winter had ended, and each day was warmer than the last, the air smelling as fresh as the heart of the forest. The shadows cast by the buildings and trees in the morning sunlight felt somehow deeper and sharper than usual.

When spring came, it would bring blossoms that bloomed and scattered, and then the season would turn vivid green.

Fleur stepped lightly to avoid a merchant dragging a line of goats all tied together. Her destination was a loading dock at the port, where she would meet someone.

Many streets led to the docks, the port town's center of trade, where many ships arrived every day. The cargo had to be unloaded quickly—as quickly as possible and moving as much as

could be moved.

Most of the dockworkers arose before the sun, and by the time the clergymen in the church were ringing the morning bells, the port was already buzzing with work. The working hours for craftsmen in the town were strictly controlled, but the port was an exception. A damaged ship on the verge of sinking could not be turned away just because it happened to arrive outside of working hours—or so the excuse went, and it was probably only half-true.

But the market would not open just because a mule hauling goods there was about to collapse from exhaustion.

"Right, this is everything! God be with you!" shouted a shirtless dockworker, slapping the side of a wagon as he finished loading it. But the din of the port was such that even this shout was soon lost in the tumult.

Once the sun rose, even the oldest, feeblest merchant would be able to move his goods.

This was also the hour, apparently, when travelers setting out from the port were most numerous. The many companies' docks were crowded with wagons, horses, and people, all making ready to leave. Between them wove errand boys carrying messages between ships and companies, merchants carefully counting boxes to make sure nothing was forgotten during loading, and beggars collecting the salt that spilled from the tightly packed barrels of salt-preserved herring.

It was a mad throng.

In the midst of all the goods, one would want to leave as soon as possible—but the moment one did, they would begin to miss it. It took time to get used to.

At the moment, though she still had yet to reach Olar's level,

Fleur could navigate the waters with some measure of calm.

"This is the last? Huh? *Twenty?!* It's fine! They should be there!"

She soon spotted a young man shouting directions to the horsemen fastening goods to a stout horse. There in the midst of shirtless men with arms as thick and strong as their legs, he stood out like a poet on a battlefield.

"Right, I'll be off! We'll meet atop the hill! God be with you!" He probably didn't have to shout so loudly, but the man couldn't seem to help raising his voice amid the hustle and bustle around him.

Fleur found it a bit amusing, and she approached the man who held the horse's reins.

The man noticed her just as he was finishing his inspection and making ready to take the horse on its way. "Ah—"

"Morning." She had wondered how politely to greet him, but when the time came, it was a casual greeting that escaped her lips.

Milton glanced at his cargo, then looked back to Fleur and returned her greeting. "And good morning to you."

"I'm glad I caught you in time."

"Ha-ha, I didn't dare to hope you'd come today," said Milton with a smile, the breath escaping his mouth in puffs of white in the still-chilly air. He looked past the horse, and after waving his hand broadly, he began to lead the horse. "Mind walking with me?"

"Not at all."

Fleur drew alongside Milton as they began to walk.

There were many sorts of people who all fell under the title of "nobility." Some lived in towns, others in forests, others atop hills with grand views. Some even lived in monasteries built on great plains.

The noblemen Milton was now going to deal with were a well-known family who controlled a forest and its adjacent river.

Fleur had not been sleeping well over the past few days, but her youthful, fine features were just as sharp as always. As they cut through the crowds, she did not embarrass herself with a single yawn. Beneath her scarf she took deep breaths, careful not to have them noticed. As a merchant, she had to appear calm.

"So, about our recent discussion," Fleur began, once they had joined the avenue that led away from the port and the landscape changed from trading houses and companies to inns and taverns. She did not continue, though, and not because she had collided with someone else on the crowded street. It was because Milton smiled as he led the horse.

"It something amusing to you?" If she hadn't been wearing the scarf around her head, she probably would have exposed even more of her own ignorance.

Or Milton would have been even meaner.

"Ah, apologies," Milton said, covering his mouth.

Fleur could not be truly angry, because Milton's expression seemed genuinely pleased. His smile was a kind one. It was too pleasant a morning to rage at someone with such a smile.

"It just seemed mysterious to me, that's all."

"Mysterious?" asked Fleur.

Milton smiled apologetically. Fleur looked away, but not because she was angry. Milton was her trading partner. She re-

minded herself of that emphatically.

"Yes, mysterious. A year or two ago…or even just a short while ago, if you'd stood beside me and asked about 'our recent discussion,' my heart might well have thudded right out of my chest."

The horse's hooves clop-clopped as it walked along.

Fleur closed her eyes, trying to calm herself with the monotonous sound of the horse's footsteps.

It was indeed just as Milton said. Time had certainly changed them both.

"Of course, I can't say my heart is exactly at ease right now, either," said Milton with a smile.

When Fleur finally realized she was being teased, she grinned as though she was not wearing the scarf at all.

"My apologies for teasing you. Now then, what do you think of my business proposal?"

They were out of the center of town and now starting to see more travelers and visitors from other towns. Craftsmen's shops lined both sides of the street, and young apprentices bustled around here and there as they prepared for work. The bakeries were already buzzing with activity, and the sinfully delicious smell of baking bread wafted about.

"I accept," said Fleur. She had aimed for the moment when the bakery had stolen their attention. She returned her gaze from the bakery back to Milton.

"Truly?"

"I do not lie," she countered.

Feeling like a true merchant, she exhaled slowly beneath her

scarf. But when she saw Milton's face shift from surprise to happiness, she suddenly felt very small and petty.

Now she truly understood what the term *shining eyes* referred to.

"Thank you…very much." He spoke slowly, pausing in the middle to take a breath.

"Of…of course," she replied, her voice muffled by the scarf, knowing how foolish she must sound.

Fleur cleared her throat and thought back to what Olar had said. His advice was always good.

"I was up all night thinking about it, and I have decided to accept your proposal."

"I see…truly, my thanks to you."

"…"

His boyish smile hit her yet again, and she fought to keep her equilibrium. Looking ahead, she feigned composure and took the opportunity to calm herself. "Still, between the buying and the selling of the clothing, is there truly no cause for worry?"

"No, the trading company that introduced you to me, Miss Fleur, is sincerely trying to cooperate with me, I'm sure."

Thinking on Olar's sharp eyes, Fleur continued her questioning. "Can they be trusted? You don't imagine they're doing this merely to obstruct other companies?"

"Well, that's always a possibility, of course. But think of it this way: Clothes are light and can be packed very tightly aboard a ship. And the more you're moving, the lower your shipping expenses are per unit. But that's nothing if you fail to sell it. On the other hand, if you believe you can sell it all, then the more you

can buy up the greater your profit margin, and because you're selling a lot, your profits are boosted yet again. The Jones Company is desperately trying to become the largest company at this port. Was your price beaten badly down?"

Milton's smile was a rueful one, perhaps because he was not speaking ill of the company they were using in order to convince her.

But Fleur was strangely ready to accept this. The sense that they each would do anything for their own self-interest was very clear.

Milton continued. "Everyone's trying to get away with something. I can understand why you would be suspicious."

Fleur, a girl who had once been a proper lady and known nothing of the world, drew her chin in at these words.

"Everyone—everyone!—is putting their own self-interest first. I'm no different, of course."

"If that's so—" Fleur began, but shut her mouth.

If that's so, then why should I trust you*?*

Had she actually said those words out loud, she would have looked like a child who could be counted upon to try to argue with anything. Fortunately, thanks to a mighty effort of self-control, she had managed to avoid embarrassing herself.

And yet Fleur did not know if she was successfully hiding her feelings. Such childish words were trying to come out of her mouth because other feelings swirled about in her chest.

She looked at Milton through the gap in her scarf.

He had youthful, noble, sensible features, and his expression was soft and his voice quiet as he spoke. "It may sound like a poor

joke, but this is truly all I can say—"

They had arrived at the edge of town, and Milton stopped.

"—Please, at least trust me."

She realized a moment later that her own smile was narrowing her view.

Here at the inspection station at the edge of town there were farmers from nearby villages bringing goods in, and as the sun climbed higher, the last travelers to set out were paying their taxes and arguing with the inspectors.

There were oxen and horses, and along with the poultry in various wagons, it was a very noisy place.

But none of that noise seemed to penetrate Fleur's attention.

"...That's not a very convincing case."

"I know. I wasn't even able to get you to remember my face."

Fleur very clearly laughed under her scarf, then took a breath. Maybe being driven from the manor had not been such a bad fate.

"Push, pull, push again...

"Catch a butterfly, a cat, a hair, a fox..."

It was a line from a poem that poked fun at young nobles playing at love. There was surely no one else in this town able to hear the little verse and laugh at it.

Fleur and Milton shared merry laughter, which eventually faded like ripples in water.

Fleur then let quiet words slip from her lips. "I'll trust you, then."

It was not a long statement, but far weightier than the lengthy contracts merchants so frequently drew up.

Milton nodded seriously, then let go of the horse's reins. "I shall rely on it."

Fleur took his offered hand. "As will I," she replied.

Milton then immediately retook the reins, looking at the horse, then back to Fleur. "I'd like to stay here, if possible."

His earnest face was too earnest by half.

"Surprisingly skillful words."

"The moment of falling is decided in the manner of parting."

"To feign interest so that I lie awake all night unable to think of anything but you?" Fleur herself was surprised at how smoothly the words slipped from her mouth. It was surprisingly refreshing to dust off the rusted old mask of nobility that had lain buried at the bottom of her mind for so long.

"If my hand is so easy to read, perhaps I'm unfit to be a merchant."

"Oh? I haven't even yet asked when next we might meet."

It was not such a bad thing to play the part of a nobleman's daughter, pining away for her knight so desperately that a single day felt like an eternity.

"In the evening, three days hence."

"I shall be waiting." Her body moved of its own accord—no doubt her noble blood reasserting itself. Her chin rose, but she still lowered it and averted her eyes deceptively.

Milton pretended not to notice. "If you'll excuse me," he said

and began to walk away. The *clop, clop* of his horse's hooves faded into the distance.

"In the evening, three days hence." She murmured the words to herself as she watched Milton's form recede, and for the first time, she realized her hand was clasped to her breast. She hastily removed it, smoothing the wrinkled material of her clothing.

Milton greeted the guard at the inspection station and passed through unhindered.

He looked back only once.

Fleur turned and walked the opposite direction, as though she did not care about Milton at all. She could not bear to look at him any longer.

"In the evening, three days hence."

As she headed back into the city's tumult as it awakened and began to work, Fleur repeated the words to herself again, as though they were the name of some treasure.

The spring sun shone down.

In the city, buildings were packed so closely to one another that it was sometimes impossible to even slip a single piece of paper between the houses. Where once sunlight could be taken for granted, now it was a luxury commodity. And when even something that fell in unlimited quantities from the heavens was a luxury, life on the earth was hard indeed.

Such idle thoughts ran through Fleur's mind as she leaned on the windowsill and rested her chin in her hands, watching song-birds gather around the midday meal's leftover crusts.

"Milady," came an ill-timed voice, finally.

But Fleur was not angry as she continued to stare out the window, because even she knew that it was Olar, who had the right to anger.

"Milady!" The birds flew off at the suddenly loud voice.

At this, Fleur finally raised her head and turned lazily in the direction of the voice. "Why must you yell so?"

"If yelling is what convinces you to listen, then yell I shall!"

"Yes, yes…it's just, the weather is so fine…" Fleur yawned, then stretched grandly in the chair.

On the desk were several sheets of paper as well as a quill pen and ink. One of the sheets was covered in smooth-handed writing.

It was a list of common words and phrases used in contracts between merchants. It included terms like *purchase* and *disposal*, *loan* and *borrow*, and all their usages, as well as all the ways one might pray to God.

Merchants had a whole vocabulary unique to them, as they often had cause to trade with people from far-flung lands. Small trades were one thing, but misreading a single line or clause in a contract involving fortunes could utterly ruin a merchant in a single instant.

When dealing with those who would prey upon one's inattention given the slightest opportunity, one had to be at least slightly prepared for battle.

Fleur thought on Olar's exaggerated warnings and turned over another sheet of paper. On it was a large table of currencies and their names. Beside the names were the exchanges rates with other coins, all of which seemed like so much esoteric spell craft to Fleur.

But to become a proper merchant, she had to have a general grasp of such knowledge. She didn't have to be told as much to know it was true.

"Milady," came the flat voice, the one that came out when he was truly angry.

Fleur looked back at Olar, then furrowed her brow. "Don't be so angry at me. I hate being like this myself, you know."

Olar was clever enough to know she wasn't talking about her restlessness in the face of the nice weather.

The wrinkles in his forehead reached all the way to the top of his head, and he regarded her with a single open eye—which meant his next words had been very carefully considered. Olar was both extremely clever and possessed of a deep sense of duty.

Even in the face of such foolishness on Fleur's part, his treatment of her was meticulously courteous.

"Milady, as your ledger keeper and your tutor, I must speak my mind."

"Mm," replied Fleur, whereupon she was met by the following words.

"Be careful not to misunderstand the truth."

It was an irritating insinuation to hear. Merchants excelled at constructing such maddeningly vague statements, and if she tried to turn it back upon him, there was no telling how many different ways he could twist the meaning.

Hearing those words, her smile clouded over as she hit upon the realization.

Olar rubbed his head and continued. "I don't particularly wish to say this, but the master of the Post family came to prosperity

by wooing the widow of the former lord. Rumors swirl that the disposition of all the family lands and wealth is decided within ladies' bedchambers. What I mean is—"

"What you mean is that Milton, being of that blood, is an unparalleled rake." Fleur stared at the wall behind the desk as the words were drawn out of her.

Perhaps the songbirds outside the window had returned; their chirped songs could be heard coming through it. Perhaps the high voice that joined them was a child, scampering around on the streets.

Then the low sigh of the house's wise man joined them.

"After all, he is Milton, a man who trades with the nobility. Surely it's so, is it not? And I'm a mere girl."

"...I would not go that far, but..."

"It's fine. I know it myself. My feet aren't on the ground. It feels like if I were to jump from the windowsill there, I could just fly away," Fleur said, narrowing her eyes at the bright sunlight that shone down onto the courtyard garden.

Olar opened his mouth to speak, but in the end, he swallowed his words. His old master had been Fleur's former husband. And he'd seen every detail of how she had been wedded to the man. Fleur knew that Olar felt more agony over the union than she had.

There was probably a degree of atonement in the way he had come to her aid when the Bolan house had fallen, leaving her on the verge of wandering the road alone. And so even when this poor daughter of fallen nobility found herself stricken with something that couldn't really be called love, he still felt it would be cruel to make her just throw it away.

That was probably it.

It was just a guess, of course, but she doubted it was far from the mark—and might well have been exactly right.

Fleur returned her gaze to the room and smiled self-consciously. “But business is business. People change when profit is involved. Isn’t that right?” It was one of the things Olar had taught her.

The grizzled old merchant nodded regretfully but nonetheless firmly.

“Anyway, you can’t put any trust in what someone says with their mouth. That’s—”

“The mark of a true merchant, milady.”

He skillfully completed her thought, and she managed to give him a natural-looking smile.

The kindly old merchant was obviously relieved to see this, which meant that her own course of action was clear.

Fleur quietly cleared her throat and straightened up. The desk was full of things she needed to memorize.

“I’ll do it. I’ll do it, all right? So would you kindly leave me to it?”

Olar took a moment to think this over, then took his leave of her with exaggerated politeness.

Fleur continued to face the door after it was closed, smiling in spite of herself.

They were both so kind to her. She knew she had to make sure their trust wasn’t misplaced and to protect them.

Fleur scratched her nose lightly, shrugging her shoulders in amusement at her own ambition. She then picked the quill pen up and turned to the material on the desk with renewed seriousness.

Trusting a man's word that upon their parting he would return in three days was the stuff of silly poetry and had no place in the real world, and Fleur was well aware that trading did not always proceed according to plan.

On the evening of the fourth day, when a message arrived from Milton saying that there had been a delay and he would be unable to return for a time, Fleur was not particularly disappointed. If anything, the news seemed to affect Olar more.

And it was not as though she was sitting in her room basking in sunbeams as she waited for him. The days were very busy.

The Jones Company, which had introduced her to Milton, contacted her to inquire about the purchase of hay, and for a week she was a frequent visitor to the portside trading company.

In the morning and evenings she received impromptu lessons from Olar about clothing, on subjects like knitted woolen fabrics and woven linens. However, be the components animal or vegetable in origin, or even something she had never heard of originating in some far-off land, it was doubtful whether what she learned of them then and there would last two days.

After all, in the case of something like wool, the places where they were born differed from where they were raised, as did the locations of shearing and dyeing. And there was the matter of the towns where spinning and weaving guilds did their work, to say nothing of fulling or milling. There was no room for her to remember which goods then sold most easily at which towns.

Even if she could memorize everything Olar knew off the top of his head, Fleur herself doubted it was really sinking in.

She even talked about her struggles with one of the traders she saw on her trips to the trading company—surprisingly, the same man who'd tried to underpay her before.

The man—whose name was Hans—smiled as he sympathized with her. "It was the same for me."

"Really?" Fleur couldn't help saying out of pure surprise.

"Of course. There's so much to remember, and trying to pack it all into my head, it felt like I was going to forget my own name," said Hans, the same man who'd tried to renege on his promised price after Fleur had hauled stinking herring up and musty, dusty hay down.

Fleur felt shocked out of her own skin.

"But you've got nothing to complain about given that fine tutor of yours. Us apprentices get nothing but the strap or the rolling pin if we're unlucky enough to work for a baker."

"Olar…er, I mean, that 'fine tutor' said the same thing. I was so sure he was making it up!" Fleur laughed, which made Hans roll up his shirtsleeves and bare his arms.

"This is from when I was whipped. I was learning to write, using shells on slate, and I'd gotten white all the way up to my elbow. The dust was beat clean off me." Next he pointed to a spot on his left arm where hair no longer naturally grew. "And here's where I burned myself with a candle trying to keep awake late one night."

He spoke of the memories as though they were pleasant ones, but even those who seemed like they were born knowing everything about the world had suffered and toiled to gain that wisdom. Fleur could understand, then, why he might have looked down on her or regarded her with a certain amount of derision. It must have been irritating to anyone who had worked so hard

when someone like Fleur demanded to be treated as a peer, despite not having earned the right.

"Some of the other apprentices seemed to be born clever, so I swore I wouldn't lose to them, which led me to do such things. Even now I'm a bit proud of it. If you work hard, you can succeed. On the other hand…" Hans stopped in the middle of his fluent expounding and smiled self-consciously. "Sorry, I talk too much."

He hardly needed to finish his statement.

If you work hard, you can succeed—but on the other hand, even a naturally clever child won't get anywhere without hard work.

That confidence was what led merchants to make fun of nobles and kings and led directly to their peculiar strength.

They feared nothing. Fleur found herself asking if that meant they had nothing to lose, nothing they wanted to protect.

"We can't hold a candle to monks," said Hans after a moment of thought, letting a not-unimpressed expression flicker across his face. "Unlike them, we merchants are filled with worldly desires."

"Even monks have the desire for their own salvation, or if not that, for the salvation of others, I should think." The words that came from Fleur's mouth as she looked at Hans were ones Olar often spoke, but now they were her words, spoken as someone who'd seen the monks receive tithes from the Bolan family with her very eyes.

Hans regarded her appraisingly, stroking his chin as he did so.

Until very recently, Fleur might well have found the gesture a rude, cold-blooded one. But now it just seemed to her like a charmingly merchant-like habit.

“You might be right. If so, perhaps we’re similar to those monks. Instead of a land without sickness or death, we work for a land without loss or bankruptcy,” he said, amused. “’Twould be paradise,” he added quietly to himself.

Merchants pursued profit above all else, relentlessly, tirelessly, seeing only that—they regarded all others with suspicion and would betray even a faithful comrade in service to their avarice.

Everything was for profit. Always profit.

Titles like lord or king held no meaning for them. After all, to become a good merchant, one endured lashings and burnt one’s own flesh just to stay awake, while a king or lord was such merely by fortunate accident of birth.

“Might I ask you something?” Fleur said. They faced each other, and after all their conversation over the past several days, it seemed silly to hide her face. There just hadn’t been an obvious opportunity for her to remove her scarf, but she now did so.

She did not know if he would understand her gesture as the compromise that it was, but his expression as he said, “Please do,” was a gentle one.

“What is it that makes you work so hard?” Fleur felt she had an inkling, but she wanted to know for certain.

There might be any number of practical reasons, ones even a girl raised in a forest-rimmed manor could imagine. And yet Fleur asked because she thought he might give another sort of answer—a secret one, one that might validate her own secret hopes.

“Ha, that’s what you want to know?”

“I-is it such a strange thing?” She smiled an embarrassed smile, a gesture well practiced from so many banquets with gossipy aristocrats.

“Not at all…I understand the sentiment. I’ve wanted to ask my own master the same thing, truthfully. But at the moment I’m just one merchant in a vast ocean. Asking me why I work so hard to accomplish so little makes me feel rather embarrassed.”

So he had yet to gain anything to show for his effort.

Fleur mused that she would probably have remembered Hans’s face forever if this conversation had not come so soon after he’d so brazenly tried to beat down her selling price when she had dealt with his company. For all his avarice, he was awfully humble.

Merchants were a strange bunch.

“I was the fourth son of a poor farmer’s family, so I’m fortunate to even be alive. I left home with nowhere to go and nowhere to return to, and when this trading company brought me in, I had no choice but to cling to them. Although in honesty many apprentices did not make it.” Hans spoke with a measure of bashfulness, lightly scratching his nose in an effort to hide it. It was a boyish and charming gesture. Eyes used to scorning or mocking others were now tinged with a melancholy nostalgia.

“And yet if you want to know why I’ve endured it…there are many reasons, of course, though I don’t really know which one might be the truest one. Part of it was that this was the only path open to me. But…hmm…”

Despite being stymied by the bothersome question, Hans nonetheless seemed to be enjoying the conversation. He fell silent, looking off into the distance.

Fleur turned her gaze from his profile down to her own hands. She wore a smile on her face. Hans’s expression was a very familiar one to her. And his silent profile was all the confirmation that she needed of her supposition.

Fleur had had no special love for her husband, but there was one thing about him that she envied—the fact that he had a goal, which he would sacrifice absolutely anything for: pride, faith, friendship, even love. He was not a good man, but he had something that drove him to incredible achievements.

She wanted to see what it was that waited at the end of his vision, just once, and she desperately envied whatever it was that inspired such ecstasy in his eyes. Lately she had come to resent her terrible miser of a husband less and less.

When their ruin had become inevitable, he'd lost forever whatever it was he was looking at. When the house had finally and completely fallen, he hadn't appeared terribly disturbed. Perhaps in his heart, the object of his desire had already been taken from him—whatever it was that was of such value it made enduring any misfortune or suffering worthwhile.

Hans, who spoke of the trials he had suffered a child, was another person chasing that thing.

"I can't really explain it," he said, returning to the present from his reverie. "But it's a feeling of anticipation."

"Anticipation," Fleur repeated, which Hans smiled and shook his head at.

"Forget I said anything. I'm far too young to answer your question."

If he'd refused to answer, treating her like a beggar he was turning away at his doorstep, she probably would have given him a malicious retort here. But he was honestly acknowledging the difficulty of answering the question.

Even knights these days could hardly brag of such honesty.

"It was a strange question. My apologies."

Hans regarded her playfully out of the corner of his eye. “Not at all.”

It seemed they had become a little closer. And Fleur had received an answer worth more than mere words.

“Thank you,” she said.

They were honestly, modestly, and above all greedily running down that road.

After this short exchange, they turned to talk of bringing in another load of hay, but Fleur’s feelings toward doing so had completely changed.

Completely unaware that the hay had come from the former lands of the house of Bolan, Hans was very interested in learning which hay was best and who to talk to at which villages in order to ensure smooth trading. He was showing real courtesy, which Fleur had long since realized was because she was now in a position to help him profit.

But where once she would have found this courtesy for profit to be somehow ignoble and shabby, she realized the truth was a bit different. Merchants did not advance on the virtue that came easily to born philosophers and wise men. They endured whippings and beatings and still struggled onward.

And if someone happened to help them in their struggle—well, of course such a person should be treated with courtesy.

Fleur returned to the matter at hand. That day, as usual, she had hung around the trading company collecting gossip, exchanging information and jokes by turns, and returning home, making sure to cross the road that led from the edge of town to the port.

She met up with Milton, whose face was somehow cheerful despite his being unable to hide his exhaustion—but there was only

one thing on her mind. She wanted to put forth every effort to maximize their profit, then split it, and not because she was simply thinking about how to buy tomorrow's bread.

Milton had said he wanted to earn money to get back at the family that cast him out. But was that motivation enough to drive him to work himself to the bone and somehow force the pleasant smile he wore?

Milton, Fleur was certain, was the same as Hans. He was anticipating something.

He was anticipating something that awaited him at the end of his path of commerce.

If so—

Fleur stood before Milton, who looked so tired he seemed ready to fall into bed in that instant, and offered neither greeting nor encouragement.

Instead, she said, "About the clothing purchase."

Surprised, Milton's face slowly but steadily shifted to display a fearless smile.

They decided to hold a meeting at Fleur's house.

Bertra was there, and she knew the house top to bottom, from the roof's ridgepole to the mouse holes in the floorboards, so there was no worry their conversation would be eavesdropped upon. And on the other side of the wall, there was Olar.

Even without her scarf, Fleur was well protected.

"Talk has progressed to the request of a purchase representative for the company."

“Have you talked to any of the companies you’re connected with about starting new business?”

“Yes. That’s why I had to show a big profit.”

“And that’s why you’re so late?”

Milton smiled tiredly at the question. “Yes. So I won’t be able to visit that house for a while. I’m not saying I forced the goods off on anyone, but I sold all the way down to the gardener’s apprentice, so unless someone suddenly gets fat, they won’t need more clothing for a while.”

Milton had been carrying twenty pieces on his horse when he had set out. Even if they had been aprons, it was more than he could sell to every member of the household. There was no question he had worked hard.

But that only proved the depth of his sales ability. They would not be taking a loss on this deal.

“In that case, what you’re saying is that when next we go to sell clothes we’ve bought up, even in the worst case, even if you feel like you’re utterly desperate, we won’t lose money?”

Milton stroked his chin—more scratched than it had been a week ago—with his finger. It had some stubble on it now, which made him look dignified. “That’s right. Of course…”

There was a high squeaking cry, and a mouse ran along the rafters in the ceiling.

“Of course, I truly did feel desperate. If possible, I’d like to avoid that,” said Milton, looking not at Fleur but at the mouse.

With effort, Fleur avoided openly wondering what he meant by “that” and instead tried to deduce it. He probably had been just as desperate as he was suggesting and did not want to wind up running around like the mouse in the rafters.

“You’re quite worried over, aren’t you, Miss Fleur?”

“Huh?” she replied in spite of herself.

Olar had warned her ahead of time to keep her mouth shut when she failed to understand something and wait for whatever would be said next. When she betrayed her own lack of comprehension, he said, she opened herself up to be exploited.

So when Milton chuckled, she immediately decided he was chuckling at her. When Milton spoke the next moment, though, it was clear that was not the case.

“I had debt, you know.”

“Debt.” There was no question mark at the end of her reply.

The word had sunk into her ears even before she voiced her response.

“Yes. It was another company that first took notice of my talents, you see. But they took advantage of my position and used me terribly. But it’s the current company that lent me money for room and board. I suppose it’s good luck, but I can’t really thank them.”

Fleur soon hit upon the solution to the riddle.

Milton’s mouth curled up into the sort of smirk an uncouth mercenary might wear, and slowly the words spilled from his mouth. “Work is precious. But if a man works during the day, he must rest at night. That’s the way of the world that God established. And yet there are those who work day and night, on holy days, on days of celebration, on days of mourning. Even though to do so means borrowing the power of the devil.”

It was a famous scripture. And Fleur knew the next line well. “And that devil’s name is usury.”

No doubt the size of the loan for his immediate needs had been tiny compared to what he owed now. A greedy merchant would have had the interest rate rise 100 percent or more over a short term.

Fleur's former husband had constantly accrued debt, adding more day and night until finally summoning a usurious lender wearing a pointed cap, who had given him a loan against the manor itself at the interest rate of 70 percent per half year.

The reason Milton needed to make the greatest possible profit was to pay down the debt he had accrued.

Debt was worse than any collar around any dog's neck. No favor or foe could banish it.

When Fleur realized it, she looked at Milton with eyes afresh. To her surprise, despite having recited that famous scripture, Milton's eyes were now placid. They shone with a light that said, "Yes, I will return. Yes, all well be well. Yes, I will protect you."

For a moment Fleur was at a loss for words—because Milton, who labored so mightily to rid himself of his debt, had gone into debt all over again.

"If I—" Fleur began, then stopped out of nervousness and raised her chin.

Milton's eyes were soft. "If you?"

"If I said I wanted interest, what were you going to do?"

One didn't have to be a merchant to know that money was power. The reason Fleur had not been utterly destroyed when her house was ruined was not because she had Olar and Bertra.

It was because as a small revenge upon her husband, she had pilfered money from his coin purse as she went.

Milton's ability to earn money was so far ahead of Fleur's that it barely merited mention. But when it came to who had more influence—it was Fleur.

Not even able to dress herself and not paying their wages, Fleur's nobility alone was enough to command the service of the house servants in the manor.

Milton looked up and spoke slowly. "I knew you were a kind soul the first time I saw you."

"—!" Fleur utterly failed to feign nonchalance. She could feel her face flush, and though she looked down, it was too late.

Still, Fleur averted her gaze and coughed before responding. "P-people change when there's money at stake. Su-surely you know that much."

These were Olar's words, but in these circumstances the only thing Fleur could do was repeat the words of another. When she tried to think of something to say on her own, all she had were her feelings toward Milton.

"Yes, of course. That's why you can see someone's true nature when profit is involved. And," Milton continued with a smile, "you aren't going to charge interest. I would be quite certain of that even if you were wearing that scarf of yours. I would know."

Fleur knew only too well that she was being treated not as a fellow merchant, but as a young lady of noble birth. And yet—it was so comforting that she wanted to cry, to rage at it.

The comfort was frustrating, irritating, like scratching a spot afflicted by chilblains.

Surrendering, she wrung the words from her throat. "I…won't take interest. I promised we'd split the profits, after all." She paused, then added something in an effort to save some small

amount of dignity. “As a merchant, I must keep my promises.”

But Milton was merciless. “We haven’t signed any contracts.”

By this he meant that if Fleur decided to charge interest, she still could, though she could hardly imagine drawing such a contract up.

Just as Fleur had bit by bit smashed her own anxiety, perhaps Milton, too, had wanted to dispose of his.

Fleur shook her head, but instead of changing his expression, Milton only leaned back in the chair as though the strength had left his body. It did not seem like an act. She realized this was the first time she had seen him nervous.

“Perhaps now we can speak in specifics.” He tossed the words out into the space between them.

He was every bit the noble youth cast out of his house. In the languor following the battle, he grabbed hold of the conversation.

“I do believe I can trust you.” And in truth, Fleur’s worries had disappeared.

Milton had arrived at the most reasonable possible decision and then come to her. All that was left was to buy the clothes and sell them.

“Now then, shall we discuss the styles and quantities of clothing?”

“Let’s,” said Fleur clearly and with a nod.

Dinnertime.

Around the table sat its usual occupants: Fleur, Bertra, and Olar. Fleur had tried to invite Milton but had been turned down.

Upon reflection, Milton had carried clothes, sold them off, returned, and met straightaway with Fleur at her house to discuss their contract. No doubt he wanted to rest before taking a meal.

She mused on the matter as she waited for Olar to look over the amounts, styles, colors, and provenance of the clothing Milton had proposed purchasing.

"Mm."

Having looked over the list, the first thing that came out of Olar's mouth was a sigh. Perhaps it was his age showing—he closed his eyes and leaned back, taking a deep breath and letting it out.

Fleur was mildly anxious, but lines had yet to appear on Olar's forehead, so whatever his thoughts were, they could not be so very bad.

"Rather impressive," he said. In truth, she hadn't expected him to say anything remotely complimentary.

"It's not bad?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, it's quite good. The whims of the nobility change very easily, but their basic preferences do not. The current fashion is for bright colors and delicate fabrics. Most impressively, he even has a grasp of textiles sourced from far away. All that matters now is how convincing he can manage to be."

"I've checked that already," said Fleur wryly, which made Olar clear his throat, his expression carefully neutral.

"Next, there's the matter of the contract regarding the funding of the Post lad."

"…Is there yet some problem?" Fleur asked, less out of displeasure than sheer exasperation. She had initially written out the ba-

sics of the lending, repayment, and profit-sharing arrangement she'd worked out with Milton, which Olar had then looked over to make sure she had not missed a single scrap of possible gain—and thereupon substantially rewritten it.

He had changed more than the terms, too. The language was very different. It was roundabout and rambling, using all sorts of terms that would never be used in ordinary conversation. It brought her back to when she was a child learning how to read and write, and convinced that Olar was just trying to confuse things as much as he could, Fleur sighed an irritated sigh and called for Bertra.

As Bertra brought down more and more of the not inexpensive paper for revisions, Fleur could see the lines on his face all too clearly.

"We cannot be too careful. If there is a mistake in this contract, we stand to lose all the profit we are going to such trouble to gain."

If Olar—who had spent so many decades of his life in trade—said so, then it was surely so. Yet Fleur could not help but think to herself that there had to be a limit.

After all, the other party in the contract was Milton. He was not some born merchant, but a former member of a noble and proud house, a house that relied upon its word and honor. If anything, he might be offended to be presented with such a meticulously constructed contract. At the very least, Fleur knew *she* would have been.

Whether he knew Fleur's thoughts or not, Olar made ready to read the contract over again, drawing his body up and holding the paper at arm's length, squinting as he read the words on it aloud.

"In the name of God. From Fleur von Eiterzental Bolan to Milton Post, a good man and true. These two, having met in trade by

the grace of God, do now purpose to exchange via the Jones Company a quantity of fabrics of wool, linen, and silver, the cost of which shall be entirely borne by Bolan. However, five-tenths of this cost shall be counted as debt upon Post. Upon the purchase of these goods shall this debt be recorded. Upon this debt, Bolan pledges to hold no interest. Profits shall be split evenly. All purchased items shall be held under the ownership of Bolan. Concluded. God's blessing be upon this contract."

Having read the contract in its entirety, Olar's gaze remained fixed upon the paper—despite all the revisions, despite his scrutiny of every word, despite having finally written it all out.

Yet Fleur had a good idea of what Olar was likely to say next.

"About the amount we're loaning to Post."

It was just as she had guessed. Fleur grabbed a piece of bread out of protest. "Half is fine," she said briefly and with finality.

Olar stared at her, but she had no intention of caving in.

That part of the contract meant that if Milton fell short of his expectations and was forced to sell the clothing for less than they had paid for it, Fleur also stood to lose.

Olar had wanted to count the entire amount as a loan to Milton as a matter of course and explained that a greedier merchant might have pushed that to one and half again, or even double the loaned amount. It would have been cruel to do so, but the Church reluctantly allowed "thanks given for money lent" in amounts of up to 20 or 30 percent per year, and trades could take several years to complete from purchase to sale, so Fleur's insistence was a bridge too far.

But the profit would be split evenly and Milton's responsibility would amount to only half of the outlay, an extraordinarily, almost divinely generous arrangement the likes of which Olar had

never seen.

And yet Fleur insisted upon it.

There was the fact that she trusted Milton, but that was not the most important point, which was this: By having a bit of money she had no power at all, whereas Milton was given the greater share of that same power. Just as Olar and Bertra had to bow to those who just happened to be born as nobility, there was Milton, who had to bow to those who just happened to have money, and he could no longer stand it.

In exchange for borrowing power, they would assume risk. Fleur felt this would put her and Milton on equal terms and that it would be cowardly, even despicable, to do otherwise.

It was just such despicable positions that her former husband would take, and yet he had brought such misfortune upon their house. Fleur was sure she could pursue profit without resorting to such tactics. She was sure.

She admitted, though, that her notions might be naive—but it was the only way to find a partner she could truly trust.

Fleur explained as much to Olar, insisting that nobody had any intentions of taking a loss, so the fuss over this particular condition wasn't going to amount to anything.

Olar looked steadily at Fleur, then closed his eyes and heaved a sigh. And then he folded.

The tension went out of Fleur's shoulders, and she smiled in relief.

"In that case, I have nothing else to say. We need only pray to God that all goes well." Olar tidied up the scattering of paper, then reached for the bread that Bertra had bought cheaply with her usual skill.

“It’ll be fine. We don’t need to pray.” Having gotten Olar’s approval, along with a fine demonstration of his skill, she was certain there was no need for divine intervention, Fleur thought to herself, her spirits high as she picked up her spoon and started to sample the soup.

But then she heard Olar clear his throat yet again. “You must not let your guard down. It is the nature of business to be unpredictable. Even if we do not make a single mistake, the ship could sink and our goods might never reach us, or bandits might attack while the goods are en route to their sale.”

Olar’s words were a splash of cold water on Fleur’s good mood. Her smile disappeared and was replaced by a pout as she slurped her soup—his observation had hit the bull’s-eye.

It was true. She could not ignore those possibilities, nor should she. But that hardly meant one should never do anything for fear of what might happen.

“Still, worrying over such things is for the servants. Milady would never get anywhere if she agonized over such things as I do.”

At Olar showing the slightest bit of consideration, Fleur completely forgot the taste of her soup. While his logic might have been inconvenient or frustrating for her to hear, it was certainly sound, and she had to admit it would be a mistake for her to become displeased upon hearing it.

But when Fleur looked up, she saw Olar looking off into space, a rueful smile on his face.

Regardless of what it was he saw at the end of his vision, Fleur knew this expression well. She’d seen it when her former husband had been Olar’s master.

“My old master was also an unpredictable sort. Rather, he

made decisions his own way, and it was certain he could see things that I never did. Many were the times my worries came to nothing, it's true. There are different sorts of talent in this world…the sort that forges new paths and the sort that follows those paths. There's a great difference between the two. And milady…" Olar's gaze moved from the distant past to the here and now, fixing upon Fleur. "You have the former."

This was not the sort of joke or jape that Olar occasionally made.

Fleur put her spoon down, and after politely wiping her mouth, she smiled a shy smile to hide her real embarrassment.

"You'll embarrass me saying such things to my face. And I'm likely to become rather full of myself if you keep it up."

"If you have that much self-awareness, then I have little to worry about. And as I said, worrying is my job, not yours. Caution is part of that. And of course Bertra will also be on hand."

A model servant, Bertra had betrayed no interest in her masters' conversation. Although it was more likely that her head was already full of the housework she planned to do next, given that she alone did an amount of work that would normally have been handled by several maids.

At Olar's words, though, she returned to herself with a start, her cheeks reddening as she looked intently down. Fleur wondered if she was angry.

"Risking Bertra's ire is the second worst thing I might do," said Fleur with a small smile, looking at Bertra cautiously.

"And what's the first?" Olar asked.

"The worst is making her cry."

Bertra's eyes fluttered; she seemed to understand in what light

she was being discussed. She put her hands to her reddening cheeks. “Please stop making such fun of me!” she said.

Fleur couldn’t help but be charmed by Bertra, who had seriousness beyond her young age.

“It seems I’ve nothing I ought add this time,” said Olar.

“And that might be the happiest outcome of all.”

The old man raised both hands in surrender. “God’s blessings be upon us.”

Night had quietly fallen.

Ship traffic was heavy.

The previous day had seen ships arrive from long distances for repair or resupply only to be gone the very next. Moreover, there was a limited number of priests praying for the safety of those ships and their sailors. If Fleur and Milton missed this shipment, it would be at least a month before the next chance to do business.

The very next day after her meeting with Milton, Fleur found herself at a table with him at the Jones Company.

But Hans, the man representing the Jones Company in this transaction, was nowhere to be seen.

Before they completed a contract with Hans, there was the matter of the contract between Fleur and Milton.

“Will this do?” It was the very same contract Olar had so carefully revised for Fleur ahead of time. Milton was no mere apprentice, so a brief look was all he needed.

The nobility used contracts only when they did not trust the

other party or else wanted to deliberately insult them. Fleur was certain the thudding pain in her heart was not her imagination.

Milton accepted the proffered sheet of paper, then looked up and regarded Fleur uncertainly. She froze, and visions of his angry face flashed through her mind.

But far from being angry, Milton smiled. “Well, this is certainly a relief.”

Fleur had trouble understanding what he meant, so though it made her sound like a fool, she asked, “A relief…?”

“Yes. I was mostly certain that you wouldn’t assume a verbal contract would be sufficient—not that I don’t trust you, Miss Fleur. But since you’re the one lending your precious money, and money is life. If it had remained a verbal contract…” Milton jokingly patted the hilt of the short sword at his waist. “Like any knight, I’m ready to lay down my life.”

Fleur realized what he meant with a start. “Ah!”

Unlike the relationship between a noble and their knight, the relationship between merchants was one of clear mutual responsibility, where profit and loss were shared.

Though Fleur might have infinite trust in her partner, the amount of profit that partner would bring her could be very small—uncomfortably so.

A large amount of trust invested did not necessarily lead to commensurate returns—such was the way of trade.

A knight could lay down his life. A merchant did not have that luxury.

“Still, this is very generous. No merchant is unhappy at being trusted. And this amount…I’ll have to work like mad to be worthy of it.”

Though he was simply discussing the figures in the contract, Fleur felt her face redden at Milton's words. It was hardly surprising that he was interpreting the degree of trust she was putting in him as a measure of her affection.

But this was a company meeting room. Fleur chose her words carefully. "An old veteran knight who saw many battles once told me that it's only when you have no worries that you can reach your full potential."

"And worries can be banished with trust." Milton ran his eyes over the contract, then signed his name at the end. While the terms were indeed very favorable, he could still incur debt if things went poorly. "Next, it'll be my turn to banish your worries. I will sell it all!"

Her former husband had shouted those same words in their home. *"Sell it all! Buy everything!"*

She no longer found this vulgar. The words echoed in her mind like a horse's gallop on the battlefield.

"Now, let us turn to the purchase."

Fleur signed the contract after Milton, then rang a small bell that sat on the table, calling Hans back into the room.

"Woolen fabric from Lubick, thin, in various colors, twenty-two pieces. Hempen robes stamped with the mark of the Yirin Craftsmen's Guild, in various colors, twenty pieces. Silver jewelry from Chuaifult…"

Hans slowly read off the list of goods Milton had chosen and Fleur had written down. His expression was the same as it always was, so Fleur had no sense of the impression the list of goods might give. Yet she still had the sense that they had been well chosen.

Of course, since they were buying the goods through Hans's employer, she didn't expect there would be any trouble no matter how fine they were.

Hans checked the quantities again, looking carefully over the colors and prices, then rubbed his eyes and looked at Milton. "I don't know if I'll be able to get twenty-two pieces from Lubick right now. Their wool is very popular at the moment. There's no problem with supply, but they know what the current market here is like so they're keeping the price high. I might be able to get ten or fifteen. They won't be gold threaded, so shall I put the order in for that?"

Naturally Hans's company, being the importer, would earn more if the purchase were larger. And this was an overseas order, so his claim couldn't be immediately confirmed.

"I can't move on the price. Just get as many as you can in that range."

"Understood." Hans wrote the order directly on the paper, then moved to the next item. "The pieces from Yirin…these colors shouldn't be a problem, and at this price we should be able to buy ones with the guild seal on them. As for the Chuaifult silver…do you have a particular shop in mind?"

"Not particularly, so long as they all include either pearl or coral."

Hans's eyebrows went up for the first time at Milton's reply. "I see…so their amber's no longer moving, eh?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

The strangely antagonistic conversation was full of implications and somehow still friendly. Rather than feeling as though her own negotiation skills needed work, Fleur was taken back to her childhood and the way she had felt excluded when she heard

boys exchanging secrets to which she was not privy.

"Understood. I'll do my very best to obtain the listed goods. Now, if you'll both sign here." Hans put the list down on the table with a smack, indicating the bottom of the page.

She wondered if this was a substitute for the contract. Milton glanced at her, and Fleur nodded. Milton accepted the quill pen and signed first, then allowed Fleur to take her turn.

"Please confirm the goods one more time," Hans said from across the table.

It *was* an order from across the sea, after all. If there were any mistakes, returning the goods would be no simple matter. Particularly when colors had similar spellings, small mistakes could cause huge problems. Having Fleur and Milton sign both the list and a warning statement was both for their protection and for Hans's.

Fleur thought back on Olar's words, words she had merely memorized, and started to feel a bit more appreciation toward them.

"Is this correct?"

Fleur didn't know how many times she'd checked the list, but she checked it yet again before signing her name: *Fleur Bolan*.

Hans's eyes lit upon the name and then glanced up at her. She saw a flicker of surprise beneath his inscrutable mask but pretended not to notice.

"Very well. I'll now sign. And…in the name of God…"

Neither Fleur not Milton were unused to writing with quill pens, but Hans was clearly in a different class altogether. Wil even bothering to sit down, he had the strongest and clearest

hand of anyone present—even elegant. And as proof of the agreement that the three of them now shared, he wrote the usual godly phrase beneath the signatures.

Hans wrote his own name in a flowing script, but the benediction he wrote in bold, solemn letters.

How many styles of writing had he mastered? Fleur wondered at how many talents merchants concealed.

"Our company has entered into a contract with you both to obtain these goods on your behalf. May God's blessing be upon us."

Previously Fleur had engaged in trading only with Olar's help. This was the first time she was personally involved in signing documents.

With Hans's statement, the paper that Fleur and Milton signed would now determine their fate. Fleur felt something akin to regret, having now started down a path from which there would be no return.

She took a deep breath, then exhaled. It was a pleasant nervousness.

"We leave it in your capable hands," said Milton as he shook hands with Hans.

Hans then offered his hand to Fleur, which both surprised and pleased her. The feeling of being treated like a true merchant was a buoyant one.

"It will probably take around two weeks to procure the order."

"So quickly?" asked Fleur, which Hans smiled and nodded at.

"If we had to go to each town separately, it would take years. But the wonderful thing about the items written here is that procuring them is much simpler. They're all items that have been

stockpiled in warehouses here and there nearby, and none of them will be difficult to find. Hence, two weeks. Of course, that's provided there are no delays with the ships."

Judging that the ink on the contract was dry, Hans carefully rolled up the signed document and placed it in a desk drawer. Fleur took note of this, but perhaps that was simply how deals proceeded when conducted via companies like this.

Most importantly, there was nothing in the contract that could be taken advantage of. As long as the specified items were purchased, all would be well. If the goods were not purchased, Fleur and Milton would be able to object.

Fleur reminded herself of that and directed her gaze toward the shelves on the wall. The many documents stored in those shelves were all records of trade, just like this one, and the notion stirred her heart. Even a quick glance revealed the enormous number of them.

When she tried to imagine how many transactions like this happened in the world, her imagination boggled at it.

"Let us hope all goes well," said Hans casually. Fleur and Milton both smiled and nodded.

To toast the commencement of their contract, Fleur and Milton went to the same tavern where Hans had first introduced them.

Mornings around the port were the busiest, as ship cargo was taken from the docks and distributed into the town. Come afternoon, the flow reversed, and goods were brought from the town to the docks. And in the evening came the work of loading those goods from the docks onto the ships that awaited them.

Those ships would depart early in the morning.

The work continued through the years, repeated tirelessly.

As Fleur savored her ale, she realized that as of today, she herself was now a participant in this great river of commerce.

Milton was not saying much, and Fleur did not ask him his thoughts. He was simply sitting across from her, smiling quietly.

Buy clothes, then sell them. Even splitting the profit, it could come to 20 percent of the original investment if they did well. Fleur had taken a moment to write the figures down and do the calculations. Twenty percent profit in one trade. The next time, she would make another 20 percent of 120 percent. Continuing to repeat the process would double her money in four trades and quintuple it in nine. If the goods could be obtained in two weeks and it took a week to sell them, they could conduct this trade seventeen times in a single year.

Thinking about the profit that would result from that made Fleur spontaneously grin. She was like a daydreaming child as she called up the memory of the figures she had written down.

In a year, she would have twenty-two times her current wealth.

She could now understand why it was that merchants tended to snicker at the nobility. They must be earning such amounts every year. If she'd told Olar how easy she found trading, he'd surely scold her yet again.

But the outlook was so bright she wanted to tell him nonetheless—to tell him that there was such a thing as a fortunate encounter.

Fleur drained her first cup of ale with much greater speed than was her usual wont. She was not particularly strong with liquor, but she felt like she could do anything.

"Careful—if you overindulge, you may find yourself stumbling."

Fleur was overindulging enough that these were the first words out of Milton's mouth. She had just finished ordering her second round, and facing the tavern keeper with a raised hand, she lowered it in embarrassment.

"Although truth be told, I couldn't sleep at all last night. I stayed awake by candlelight, thinking of profit."

"Twenty percent in one trade. Double the money in four, right?"

Milton seemed surprised at Fleur's words but covered his smile with a quick sip from his cup. "Possibly, but I wasn't assuming that everything will proceed according to plan."

"Do you suppose the Jones Company is up to something sly? Or are you talking about your debt?"

After gazing out at the men busily working on the docks, Milton looked to Fleur. "There was also the possibility I wouldn't have been able to gain your trust."

"…Add that in, then."

It might have been better not to be in so crowded a place. But they had ended up here, which was why they were having the conversation in the first place.

"It might just be my prejudice to imagine trading companies to have a vicious side." Milton smiled self-consciously, but unlike their last meal together, there was more than just beans on the table. He stuck his knife into his roast mutton. "For good or ill… they will do anything that brings them profit."

"…Sometimes even things that drive one to rage."

Last time, Milton had chewed his beans in order to hide his rueful grin. Mutton was apparently less effective for such purposes.

“I’ve thought about that. They might’ve been more aggressive, like demanding a higher commission or worse conditions for the contract. And yet they were very accommodating. When you’re a company as large as they are, there comes a time when you must worry about your reputation.”

“So we should be able to worry less, then?”

Milton cocked his head slightly at Fleur’s question, but not to refute or quibble. He seemed not at all displeased. “And I did receive terms so favorable from you I yet find them hard to believe.”

Fleur looked bashfully aside at his teasing, though she did so deliberately. They both fell silent for a moment, and then unable to bear it any longer, they simultaneously burst out laughing.

After the ripples of laughter subsided, all that remained were hearts washed clean.

“So, here we begin,” said Milton, extending his hand.

Even Fleur understood that when he said “here,” he was thinking further ahead than this single trade.

Olar’s warnings echoed in her ears, but Fleur wanted to treasure this fortuitous encounter, rather than doubting it. To earn, to profit—and soon.

And she was certain that it would be more fun for two merchants to chase whatever lay at the end of that road of anticipation than it would be for either to go alone. And Milton wasn’t such a bad choice of partner for that journey.

While she had not remembered it, this was very different from their true meeting at the Milan banquet—in that *this* time, Fleur accepted the hand that was offered to her and grasped it firmly.

Back then, her hand would smart after the merest brush with

another's. But now she didn't shake hands without an honorable reason to do so—with a trustworthy partner or a profitable partner. And so shake hands she did with firm strength.

When she'd been first cast out of her house and walked on her own feet, she was surprised at how firm the ground had been—and now, shaking hands firmly for the first time, she was again thus surprised.

Milton smiled faintly as he gazed at her. Fleur returned his look, but this was no white-clothed table. After their hands had stayed clasped for a goodly span, they each grinned and returned their attention to their ale.

"This is the way for merchants, surely."

At Fleur's words, Milton feigned regret, a gesture she wouldn't forget.

Milton would be a good partner.

Fleur raised her cup and knocked it against his.

That evening over dinner, Fleur reported the details surrounding the contract to Olar, including the amount of time it would probably take, the commission Hans specified, and the impressions he'd given off.

Olar listened carefully, eyes closed, then finally opened them, his face slowly breaking into a smile. "Let us hope all goes well."

Fleur had to laugh—it was the very same thing Hans had said. Apparently all merchants of a certain experience level liked these words. Perhaps it was most prudent to hope for the best while not assuming that it would come to pass.

They had only placed the purchase order, and when it arrived, the work of selling it awaited them. But that evening, Fleur felt

her chest unblocked by something, and for the first time in a while, she was able to take her meal. When she looked back on the experience later, she had the feeling that this moment was where her fate had taken a turn.

If only she had told Olar about that when she'd discussed the contract with him.

Hindsight was clear indeed.

Merchants were no saints.

Two weeks hence, she would come to understand that.

During those two weeks, Fleur did grunt work that required no capital.

If one was trustworthy and had a good sense of geography, the town fairly brimmed with people who needed goods taken from one place to another.

She took woven goods to a distant mill to be fulled, and on the return trip, she accepted a letter from a villager to a townsperson.

Both jobs were honest and steady, but the profit was proportionate to them—tiny.

In her heart, Fleur could think only of the clothing they had ordered. If the business went well, she wouldn't have to do these demeaning tasks anymore. She was sure of it.

As for Milton, he had been going around town intercepting servants and messengers, trying to learn the condition of the coin purses and tastes of the nobility.

She had known as much when she'd come down into the town, but evidently information on the goings-on within the manors around its outskirts was worth money. Servants sent into town on

errands were well aware that the hints and gossip they possessed could be converted into cash.

In the past, Fleur had often wondered why the servants enjoyed going into town so much, and now she knew that in addition to the obvious reasons of food and shopping, there was this more direct incentive as well.

When she had asked Bertra about it, the housekeeper had looked away, embarrassed. Even she had done it and not just once.

Fleur had then asked Olar about the practice and learned that Olar's company at the time—the company run by Fleur's former husband—had paid a tidy sum to the servant who told them of the Bolan family's dire straits.

Surely it had been the maid who had gone missing a few days before the company master came knocking at their door with his proposal of marriage. Now, though, Fleur did not hold the maid in any real contempt and was actually rather impressed with her for taking advantage of her situation. There were crafty people all around, she realized.

"Milady," Bertra said to Fleur as the latter sipped her cheese stew at lunchtime. Bertra had just returned from speaking with a visitor to the house.

In her hand was an envelope.

Fleur looked to Olar, who nodded at her.

"Thank you," she said, accepting the envelope from Bertra. It was sealed almost apologetically with red wax, and she opened it.

In it was Hans's signature, along with news that the ship containing their cargo had safely arrived in port.

She folded the letter, tucked it into her breast, and stood. Even

Olar, who was usually so insistent upon her finishing her meals, would surely overlook this one instance. Fleur apologized to Bertra and took out her cloak and scarf. “I’m off to make money,” she said.

Bertra’s eyes went wide, and Olar sighed a long-suffering sigh, both of which Fleur ignored as she put on her cloak and wrapped her scarf around her head.

Her destination was the lodging that Milton rented in a craftsman’s workshop.

Back when she was as yet unaware of her family’s privilege, she had employed a servant she got along with particularly well who now worked in that same workshop and who had introduced Milton to the place when he was cast out of his own home.

Human connections truly did cross much of the world—this was another thing Olar was fond of saying, and Fleur was coming to understand the truth of it.

“Excuse me, is Mr. Post in?” Fleur was becoming more and more confident in her ability to lower her voice to sound like a man.

A leatherworker who sat astride a long, narrow table, pounding a strip of leather, looked up in vague surprise.

Fleur asked again, and the man finally seemed to understand she was asking after Milton.

“Oh, Milton? He just came back from lunch. He’s up the stairs on the fourth story.”

“Thanks,” she said clearly and briefly.

The young craftsman flashed her a pleasant smile. Fleur had learned how to charm craftsmen while coming and going from the waterwheel-powered fulling mill over the past few weeks.

She climbed the narrow, steep stairs, which felt very familiar to her, as they were not so very different from a waterwheel's use of different levels of water. She had received only a bit of profit out of her short employment there, but had learned much. She continued up the steps and soon arrived at the fourth floor.

What greeted her there was surprising, as she had expected to find a hallway and a door, which would have given her a chance to catch her breath.

Having run up the stairs in such a hurry, she was out of breath in a most embarrassing manner. And yet the moment she reached the top and rounded the handrail, Fleur was immediately greeted by the sight of a bored Milton eating a piece of bread.

"…Hello there," said a surprised Milton after swallowing his bread.

Fleur tried to respond but found that the words would not come. Flustered, she produced the letter and held it out. "Look—" she finally managed.

Truly important matters often did not require words.

Milton stood from his chair and rushed over. "The ship?"

Fleur nodded, which made Milton hurry to fetch his cloak.

Cutting through the heavy traffic of humans and horses that congested the port, they nearly flew to the Jones Company. The company employees stopped in their work to regard the pair with dubious eyes, but neither Fleur nor Milton cared.

"Where is Mr. Hans?" asked Milton, whereupon everyone—whether they were engaged in negotiations or taking inventory—pointed to the interior of the building.

Mumbling their thanks, Fleur and Milton hurried inside. The

first step on their road to riches awaited them inside, after all.

"Hans!" said Milton in a strangled-but-still-loud voice, upon spotting Hans emerging from a room with a colleague.

He was exiting the room while looking down at a bundle of parchment in his hands, but as soon as he spotted Milton and Fleur, he gave the documents to the other man, along with some short instructions.

Perhaps they were part of a large deal, as Hans seemed a bit nervous, but they had nothing to do with Fleur. The other man bowed and headed the opposite way down the hallway at a trot, and Hans watched him go before turning to regard Milton and Fleur.

"Ah, your order? It's arrived." He flashed a too-perfect merchant's smile and brought his hands together in front of him as he did so.

Perhaps it was some sort of joke among merchants, since when Fleur smiled an awkward smile, she glanced at Milton, who was doing exactly as Hans had done.

Was she the only nervous one? Fleur wondered.

"Your goods have safely arrived at the docks. The winds were uncertain and it looked as though they might be delayed, but fortunately our company was able to live up to its reputation."

Fleur smiled at Hans's mild boasting, but she couldn't help letting a bit of impatience creep into her expression.

Perhaps Milton noticed this, or perhaps he merely felt the same way himself. "So—" he interrupted. "We'd like to take delivery of them. Will today be possible?"

Speed was of the essence in business.

Hans nodded magnanimously, well aware of that fact himself. He pointed farther into the building. “The goods are secured in the rear loading dock. I’ve already asked to have the order document brought up. We must make sure there aren’t any discrepancies between your order and the goods, after all.”

That must have been the content of the exchange between Hans and the other man they had seen just moments earlier. They were very efficient. Olar had told her over and over again to check the goods carefully before taking receipt of them. Complaints stated after the fact would be too late.

They followed Hans as he led them down the hall, Milton ahead of Fleur. In the hallway, traces of the grandeur of the Jones Company could be seen—beautifully embroidered maps and portraits hung on the walls.

They passed an open door and through it caught a glimpse of a room filled with barrels, crates, and large earthen pots, the very existence of which made crystal clear that this was the intersection of sea and land. As they walked down the narrow hallway that led to the rear entrance, even Hans—whose position in the company was not at all low—had to step aside to allow others to get by as they busily traveled the passage.

They were all sorts, too—apprentices and young merchants and big, brawny men.

As they exited the hallway, Fleur was immediately struck by the fragrance of wheat. Perhaps it was the first crop to result from the spring thaw, and the dock was white and dusty with the flour. Workers carried burlap sacks of flour large enough to hold an adult man, and as they worked, the flour in the air caked their sweaty bodies.

Fleur and Milton were led to a corner of the room. The crates and barrels lined up there had yet to become covered in flour dust, which made clear just how recently they had been left there.

The attendant from earlier returned bearing under one arm a rolled parchment, which he gave to Hans.

Next to the crate stood an iron bar flattened at one end; perhaps it would be used to open it.

“Everything fit in one crate?”

The question was put to the attendant. The youth seemed to be even now enduring the sort of hardships that Hans had spoken of earlier, his keen eyes lively and body strong.

He nodded wordlessly and picked up the iron bar. “May I open the box?” he asked, careful to observe the correct protocol.

For a moment, the two former nobles felt as though they had never been asked such a question in their lives.

Milton stepped forward as their representative and nodded, and Hans gave the signal to continue.

The flat end of the iron bar was wedged under the crate’s lid, and a little pressure brought the lid slightly open. The young attendant then set the bar aside and used a smaller tool of similar shape to begin removing the nails that secured the lid.

“We’ll reuse the nails, you see. Although when we want to appear prosperous, sometimes we just break the crates open.”

The pair nodded mutely at Hans’s words. It seemed everything they were watching transpire had a meaning.

Having very cleanly removed all the nails from the lid, the youth stepped away, as though making it clearer than was strictly necessary that he had not touched anything inside the crate.

Hans cleared his throat and held out the roll of paper that held the invoice for the order. Fleur accepted it, and Milton gave her a faint nod, then took a step forward. The first step in their great

trade—the first step in their participation in the merchants' great game.

Milton looked inside the crate.

Then—

"What?" It was not Milton's voice, but Fleur's.

Milton shied away from the crate, as though having seen something he should not have, spinning around and facing Fleur.

His face was ashen.

Milton didn't speak, instead looking again inside the crate, then back to Fleur, this time snatching the invoice out of Fleur's hand.

"What is going on here?" he groaned in a voice that seemed to come up from the abyss.

Fleur recoiled at his obvious rage. If it had been directed at her, she might very well have collapsed on the spot.

"What do you mean, 'What?'"

"Do not joke with me!" Milton's fury seemed likely to send the flour dust on the floor a scatter.

The loading dock buzzed with activity, with merchants hurrying this way and that. A single shout could have easily gone unnoticed, but Milton's was enough to make him the focus of all eyes and ears present.

"I'm sorry, a joke? No." Hans's face remained completely calm, even faintly teasing, as he reassured Milton.

"This…this order is an outrage!" Milton could barely speak through his rage. The parchment crumpled noisily in his clenched

hand.

“An outrage? Not at all. I swear in God’s name that we have committed no errors. These are the items you ordered in the quantities you specified.”

Despite his fury, Milton seemed to notice something amiss in the calm quality of Hans’s voice. He seemed to remember the invoice in his hand, and with trembling hands, he reopened and read it.

As he did so, Fleur took two steps forward and looked inside the crate. Inside it were clothes entirely in black.

As black as her future now was.

“This…this can’t be…”

“The goods are exactly as stated on the order.”

“That’s absurd!” Milton roared, his voice hoarse. He dropped the invoice and glared at Hans with eyes full of rage.

Hans, meanwhile, seemed entirely unconcerned. The moment Milton took a step toward Hans, the youth from earlier came between them, his sword at the ready.

“That’s the problem with nobility; they always want to duel. Unfortunately we are but merchants. Contracts on paper are everything to us. Surely even you can understand that.” Hans’s gaze was cold and his smile faintly mocking.

Fleur looked down at the paper beside Milton’s feet. There upon it were hers and Milton’s signatures and the list of items they had written.

They were all bright, colorful pieces, perfect for the fashion of the approaching spring. So why…?

She bent at the knee and picked the paper up, looking over it again, then rubbed her eyes as though dizzy. It was not an accident. The colors of the items written there had somehow changed.

A few short strokes had been added to characters here and there. That was all it took to change the colors of the specified items to black. All black.

How could this be?

Moreover, the order for four pieces of silver jewelry had been changed as well. Two strokes had been added to the word, and one of the existing strokes was smudged away and erased. Now instead of reading “silver,” it clearly stated “amber.”

Her vision dimmed, and she put her hand to her forehead in shock. The company’s tricksters had far exceeded her imagination and were perfectly content to discard all morality. Olar had scrutinized the contract with Milton so closely in order to avoid exactly this situation—using difficult words whose spelling was unmistakable and difficult to alter and writing them very clearly.

But the truly astonishing thing was not just that they had so brazenly altered the contract. No, it was Hans’s instincts that were most terrifying.

Perhaps having realized the contract could be rewritten the moment he saw it, he had immediately signed it. If Fleur or Milton had thought to ask for a copy to be made, they might have been able to protect themselves now, but Hans had carefully never given them that opportunity.

He had simply signed it on the spot, put it in his desk, and given them a merchant’s smile.

Fleur couldn’t even bring herself to cry.

Monsters. Merchants were monsters.

"A contract is a contract," said Hans, placing his hand on the shoulder of the young man who blocked Milton's way. "Now, if you please, the payment."

Hans's faithful servant held out his master's thick ledger book and quill pen.

A candle burns brightest the moment before it goes out.

As though to prove those words true, Milton's fury had vanished in the time it took to carry their cargo from the loading dock, and he said not a word.

Receiving help moving the crate from anyone in the Jones Company was humiliating, but it would have taken too much time with Fleur alone. With the help of one of the workers on the loading dock, they got the entirety of the order loaded onto a single mule with much effort. In place of any thanks, Fleur spared the man a few copper coins.

"My thanks," he said.

Fleur wondered if she was doomed to become a greedy merchant who saw the world only through the lens of money. A bitter taste arose in her mouth. Yet if she had been one of the greedy merchants she so loathed, she would not have most of her assets, turned into garbage by such a simple trick.

That was the source of Milton's silence. The clothes they had received were essentially garbage. She felt guilty for thinking it, but while they might be able to sell them for a reasonable price, they could never make back what Fleur had paid.

Meanwhile, the Jones Company had managed to sell dark, shabby clothes for a huge profit. All that was left to her were the clothes as dark as her future and Milton, who was a hollow husk

of a man.

Well, that and the contract she had signed with Milton.

"...The clothes," Fleur said, unable to stand any more silence as they trudged down the street. Milton did not look in her direction, but she could see his body stiffen. "They aren't *all* dark colors."

Even though she knew it was little comfort, this was not something to utterly despair over. She wanted to say as much, but Milton first looked back at the mule that plodded slowly along behind them, then to her, his lips curling up in an exhausted smile. "Like silver turned to amber, our hopes have turned to trash."

"That's—" *Not true,* she tried to finish, but stumbled over the words.

Milton smiled. He smiled an angry smile and shook his head. He excelled at selling fine clothes to the nobility and so knew all too well that the cargo they were carrying was worth very little.

Fleur was only acting resolute because she did not understand the true way of the world.

"...How much do you think we can sell them for?" It couldn't be nothing, after all. Surely for 70 percent of what they'd paid—surely.

"..." Milton wordlessly opened his hand. He showed four fingers.

Forty percent.

"Even if a few of the pieces have some value, the rest are essentially worthless. If the fabric isn't poor quality, such dark colors are fit for funerals and not much else."

When a person was truly desperate, their smile quivered pa-

thetically at the edges. Fleur thought of the last time she had seen her former husband.

But unlike then, she did not hate the person she was now looking at.

"But if we can make back forty percent, that's good enough, is it not? We'll just need to find trades that'll double our money in four deals, then do that four times, and we'll be back to where we started."

Milton looked at Fleur blankly. He seemed about to say something and then snapped his mouth shut. And then, unable to help himself—

"Stupid."

His face was distorted in disgust, and he seemed unable to articulate his own thoughts. Fleur herself did not understand what he meant by that single short word.

Before Fleur even had enough time to reply, Milton turned away, diverting off the street.

"Mil—" Her voice vanished into the tumult of the crowd, naturally far from sufficient to stop Milton. He was gone almost before she realized he was going. Left behind were Fleur and her goods, worth at most 40 percent of what she had paid. That and the mule that carried them.

This hurt more than the loss she had taken and more than being deceived by Hans.

Fleur took the mule's lead and trudged back toward her home.

She could not clearly remember the expression on Olar's face when she arrived.

“There is nothing to be done.”

The next morning, Fleur awoke and descended the stairs to the first floor, gazing despondently out into the rainy courtyard and desperately wishing the previous day’s events would turn out to be a bad dream—but when she came to the table, those were words Olar spoke without even turning around.

After speaking, though, he did turn around. Despite the gloom, she caught sight of a small piece of glass in his hand.

The glass was a lens, the sole thing he had managed to recover when a company he worked for long ago had fallen to ruin. Fleur imagined that he had been examining the documents she brought back with her, trying to find some way out of the predicament.

When she looked at the table, she saw a burned-down candle sitting in the candlestick there.

“There is nothing to be done. He was very thorough.” Olar sighed in a weary voice, free of anger or frustration. More than anything else, he seemed exhausted, which pained Fleur deeply.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured again the words she had said over and over again the previous night.

Olar only narrowed his eyes and said nothing, but as Bertra brought in some warm sheep’s milk, he gestured for her to sit.

“By my guess, the clothing is worth about half what you paid for it. But our man Post’s estimate is probably more accurate, since I don’t keep up on the latest fashions. Still, I must admit I’m impressed the company had these clothes stored away for so long. It’s true, though, there was once a time when dark colors like these were quite popular,” he said, gesturing to the contents of the crate that sat beside the table.

Fleur remembered Milton’s words: *“Such dark colors are fit*

for funerals and not much else."

"Still, it's fortunate that you did not take on any debt to buy these. You won't owe interest, nor are you facing immediate ruin. The clothes that will sell will sell, so to turn them into money… unfortunately, I'm afraid you'll have no choice but to do the hard work yourself."

Fleur nodded at Olar's plainspoken words.

Bertra was adding honey to the milk in a cup she had carved herself.

Fleur knew that this was not a time for tears, nor for apologies, but she could not yet force herself to look up. What she needed to do was to raise her head and proudly proclaim it: *I will not fail next time! Never!*

But no such energetic, undaunted voice was heard—only the emptily echoing sound of the rain outside.

Just like the politics of a noble banquet, merchants tried to overcome suspicion, gain trust, and then use that trust to their own advantage. And now she had gotten a glimpse of the true nature of that world.

They cared nothing for human emotion and would happily use it for monetary gain, always trying to take the best course, at the best time, to reap the best outcome.

Because no matter how it was earned, money was money. That's what Olar would say. And it was true.

"…I'm so sorry," murmured Fleur, holding the cup in both hands and wishing she could pour her shame into it.

Olar was motionless. Bertra started to stand, but Fleur saw that Olar stopped her.

“Perhaps you should rest for a while. Miss Bertra, if you would…”

Olar addressed Bertra and had her move the crate into the storeroom, while he said he was going to check on the severity of the rain and left the room.

And then Fleur was alone.

Rain continued to fall outside, and now that she was alone the sound was oppressive. No one would notice the sound of a couple more drops falling.

She found her own excuses pathetic as she held her cup and cried. She was frustrated, of course, and felt utterly useless. But worst of all was her rage at the fact that she was still going to have to trade with these despicable merchants.

She couldn’t. She couldn’t do it.

Fleur wanted to call Olar and Bertra and tell them so plainly and definitively. But even if she did so, she had no idea what she would do after that. Hell was behind her, and hell awaited her.

She wanted someone, anyone to save her. She would do anything. Fleur called out to God. And then the very next moment—

“—?”

Fleur looked up suddenly, but not because Bertra or Olar had returned.

There was a strange sound. Cats and mice tended to seek shelter on rainy days like this one, so she wondered if that was what she was hearing—and then the sound came again.

It was a knock on the door. Someone was there.

“—”

Fleur wiped her messy face and quickly blew her nose with a kerchief. There were only a limited number of guests that could be expected on a rainy day.

And if so, there was really only one person it could be. Another person hurt just as she was hurt, afraid, and anxious.

Fleur stood. This was impossible to bear alone, but perhaps with another…

Clinging to that hope, she put her hand to the door, drew the bolt back, and opened it. For a moment she wondered if water had splashed her eyes, blurring her vision.

She did not immediately recognize the individual at her door.

"May we speak for a moment?"

Fleur stared and was at a loss for a reply, which was hardly surprising. It was not Milton at the door.

It was the man responsible for putting them in this predicament—Hans himself.

"You and Mr. Post—I cannot imagine you failed to draw up a contract to provide him with funds, correct?"

He had a vexing voice, like a snake coiling around its prey.

"What of it?" growled Fleur, the loathing boiling up from her stomach and forming hoarse words.

"Post had no assets, which meant you were the investor and he was responsible for sales." The rain rolled off his fine leather coat. Out from under a hood not too different from those worn by monks, Hans looked at Fleur with oily eyes.

"S-so?"

Hans struck a frightening figure, but the reason Fleur's voice was so hoarse and hesitant was because she had absolutely no notion of why he had come.

He had taken all of their money and given them useless goods in return, so he ought not to have any further business with her. So why had he come all the way, and in such weather, to talk to her?

In her heart, Fleur never wanted to see Hans's face again, nor enter into his field of view. But there he was, looking at her. Like a snake unwilling to let its prey escape.

"In that case, I can't imagine you assumed all the risk. You must have let him take on some. So how much? One hundred fifty percent? Two hundred?"

Her hand trembled as she held the door, but not because of the chill. It was anger that moved it so as she squeezed a growled answer from her throat. "I'm not like you. I'm not that greedy."

"How much, then?"

Hans was insistent, and Fleur's rage at him made her dizzy. "Half. Because I trusted him," she managed to answer, somehow controlling her temper.

Hans pressed his lips together and tilted his head. "Goodness. It seems you've taken quite a loss, then."

Fleur had her limits. She saw red and drew a deep breath in preparation to scream her rage at him—but as though he'd been waiting for that precise moment, Hans took a step forward and spoke in a smooth and even voice.

"I'd like to purchase your share of the contract you signed with Mr. Post."

Fleur's mind went white. "Wha—?"

“This sort of thing happens all the time. It’s a simple transfer of liability. Whether or not you asked for interest, it’s clear that Mr. Post owes you a debt. And I want to buy that debt. At a price that will leave you losing absolutely nothing.”

As the clear explanation sank in, Fleur finally understood. She understood what he was thinking—no, what he had been thinking all along. His whole plan had led up to this moment. This had been the goal from the start.

He wanted to buy Milton’s debt. It would allow him to collar and control a brilliant clothes salesman.

“Perhaps I should make the offer more attractive. After all, you’ll have to live the rest of your life somehow. With that… sweetness of yours.” She felt the phantom sensation of the snake’s tongue licking her neck. “What about using that money as a dowry and finding yourself a husband? I’d be more than happy to help—”

It was the first time Fleur had ever hit anyone.

“…Very well.” Hans wiped his lips with his hand and closed his eyes for several seconds. “When you’ve fallen as far as you wish to fall, feel free to knock on my company’s door with that hand. No harm will come to you.”

He licked the blood from his lips with a strangely red tongue, glaring at her rudely.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He turned and began to walk back out into the rain, but then suddenly looked over his shoulder. “Don’t hesitate to call on me when you change your mind.”

Merchants.

Her rage had left, and that single word was the only thing occupying her mind.

Merchants.

They pursued profit to the point of cruelty. And for what? What drove them to such lengths?

She watched Hans as he went, stepping lightly through the rain down the deserted street, and wondered. She didn't understand. It was as though he wasn't human.

Fleur collapsed on the spot, and perhaps hearing the sound, Bertra gave a cry and came running.

She was sure that Bertra was calling for Olar, but Fleur only stared at the puddles in the falling rain. She felt utterly helpless and wanted to cry, but with Bertra's help, she managed to stand again, whereupon she began to walk unsteadily out into the rain.

Bertra was looking at Olar, who had come down the stairs to see what was the matter, and she hastily tried to pull Fleur back inside.

Profit changed people.

There in the rainy street, as the downpour strengthened, Fleur beheld a strange sight.

Despite the rain, a single wagon came into view along the street that ran directly next to the house.

The driver's face was concealed by a hood that came down to his chin, yet the wagon bed was filled haphazardly with goods—as though it had been loaded in a great hurry.

That instant, Fleur cried out in a ragged voice, "Milton!"

Though her vision was blurred by tears and rain, she could still see the driver of the wagon freeze for a moment.

"Milton!" she cried again. Her voice would surely not with-

stand another cry.

Olar rushed out of the house, grappling her into a bear hug and pulling her back inside.

“Milton…It’s Milton. He’s…,” Fleur mumbled deliriously, but she could hear Olar and Bertra’s exchange quite clearly.

“Check the storehouse. The door was broken.”

“Most of the clothes in the storehouse are gone.”

“Milady.”

When she came to, Olar’s serious face was the first thing she saw. “What happened?”

He was holding her face between his hands, so neither escape nor shaking her head were possible. She closed her eyes, hoping desperately to pass out.

But reality did not change.

“Milady.”

She began to sob like a scolded child in response, but Olar continued his questions, like a kindly old priest.

“That was a man from the Jones Company? So…the one who took the clothes was…”

Fleur nodded. There was no mistaking it.

Milton must have realized what Hans’s goal was immediately after they had been taken by the Jones Company. And then he had waited for his chance to steal the clothes. If he was lucky, they might be worth half what they had been bought for.

So he could steal them, sell them, and if all went well, pay back

his part of the debt.

Fleur gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. Milton had never trusted her. If he had, there would have been no need for him to steal the clothing, even if he did plan to repay her. Fleur had never blamed him for her loss or demanded immediate payment and would never have dreamed of selling his debt to someone else.

Profit changed people—as did loss.

She had wanted to believe that it would not change her. But Milton hadn't trusted her.

"Milady." It was something akin to a dog's faithfulness that finally prompted her eyes to open. Or perhaps it was just that this voice had always supported her through difficult times.

Yet it was not Olar's usual face, the one that had always led her to safety. This was a stern old man.

"Milady. You must be resolved!"

For a moment, Fleur forgot to cry. "Re…solved?"

"Even so. You must resolve whether you will be ignored, robbed, kicked, smeared with mud, or stand up on your own strength and walk forward."

He was telling her that if she wanted to continue on as a merchant, she had to get the clothes back.

"Milady!" Olar shouted when Fleur tried to look away. A scolded dog, even when terrified, can never look away. "Milady. I brought you into the world of merchants because I pitied you. Because your former role was simply to exist, you were washed away and had no choice but to rely on others. I wanted to give you the chance to make your own fate, to stand on your own two feet and walk," said Olar. He took a deep breath, shook his head, and con-

tinued.

“No…I cannot be dishonest about my feelings now. The truth is…I wanted you to take revenge for me.”

“…What?”

“Before I worked for your former husband, I worked at a famous trading company. But before that, I was something of a noble myself.”

At those words, everything stopped. Fleur felt as though her heart ceased to beat.

“And I swore that I’d surpass all other merchants and make those perfect nobles fall to their knees before me.”

Olar did not look into her eyes as he spoke, and he suddenly seemed very old.



“Then before I knew it, I had gotten old. Too old to sit on some golden throne. On top of that, the man I’d taken as my master had ruined himself. I had no children. And…selfishly, I suppose, I wanted to entrust my dream to you.”

Bertra came and wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, then placed her hand on Olar as he delivered his painful confession.

“This is all due to my selfishness.”

Everything was so sudden that Fleur had no idea of how to react.

As his eyes swam this way and that, Olar took a deep breath and stood. “Miss Bertra. Fetch some coin and my coat.”

Fleur looked up sharply, realizing what Olar was planning to do.

“So long as I am alive, I will not allow you to suffer, milady. If I may be allowed to atone for my sins, by force if necessary…”

Fleur could not prevent her face from distorting with her sobs. If she were to content herself with what he was saying, then she truly *would* be a pointless doll, whose only job was to exist.

In the past, she had had her family name. Now, having lost even that, if she couldn’t stand on her own feet, then what would she become? The thought terrified her, and she clung to Olar’s leg as he stood.

She could not decide between either path—and the thought that she might take neither was still more horrible.

“Milady.” Olar’s voice was gentler than she had ever heard it. He reached down and gently took hold of her hand, pulling it free from his leg, finger by finger. “Please refrain from selfishness.”

From these words, she knew he had seen right through her, and she clung on still tighter.

"…" Olar sighed, regarding her wordlessly.

In that instant, Fleur realized something. Loving eyes and scornful ones were separated by a hairbreadth. After all, the reason one extended one's hand to help another was because they were weak.

"Do not mock me!" Fleur shouted. She glared at Olar's frozen face, stood, and shouted again, "Do not mock me! I am sick of this! I am sick of letting myself be carried along by life! Your dream? Don't be absurd! I am not your child! I will decide for myself where to go—because I have nowhere to go home!"

She railed at him, shouting everything she felt, then stood there glaring at Olar as her shoulders shook from her ragged breaths.

It was true that continuing to cling to Olar and allowing him to protect her was an attractive notion. But even Fleur knew it was not so simple.

Things were fine now—but what about after Olar died? The world was merciless, humans were unkind, and when money was involved, any trust might be betrayed.

There would be no more afternoon naps in the sunshine, wrapped up in a soft blanket. And yet humans had to continue, to live on.

"So, what will you do?" Olar's voice, face, eyes—all were calm.

Fleur erased the smile that had risen unbidden to her face. "I'm going to get it back."

"Get what back?"

“The clothes. No…” She looked down, took a deep breath, and then looked back up at Olar. “…My resolve. Bertra!” Fleur turned to Bertra and began giving the dazed woman commands. “Bring me all the money I have left and my coat. And my sword.”

A good servant was a servant before all else. Once ordered, Bertra regained her composure immediately, nodded, and left.

“Milady—”

“I thought I told you to stop calling me ‘milady,’” said Fleur, interrupting Olar with no hesitation. “I’m going to get it back. If he’s using a wagon, we have more than enough time to catch him on horseback. It’s not hard to guess where he’s heading. Not many roads lead to the noble quarter.”

Olar voiced not a single objection, nor twitched so much as an eyebrow. Yet she still knew what his gaze meant.

“Is this what you want?”

She didn’t consider the question a meaningless one.

“It is. I’m going to be a merchant. I’m going to regain my resolve.”

Atop the folded coat was a motley assortment of coins—truly all they had left—and a short sword. Bertra held the items out, which Fleur accepted with a slight bow.

“I’d rather be shivering in bed, neither going nor retreating, hoping this all was a dream. But when you die, I’d be lost, and then Bertra would go next and finally I.” Fleur cocked her head. “To the Jones Company, I mean. I’ll bet they’d pay a tidy sum.”

In point of fact, noble blood was worthless without money.

“So I have to go forward. And anyway, I know now.”

“Know…what?”

“I know what’s at the end of the path of profit that merchants walk, merchants who believe in nothing, for whom money is their only solace.”

Olar’s eyes widened, and he drew his chin in. He looked like a parent whose child had discovered some forbidden treasure.

Fleur alone smiled, putting her coat on and fastening her sword at the waist. When she put her scarf on around her head, her heart pounded with such force that it was painful.

“If there’s something out there that will bring me peace, I want to chase it. Olar—”

“Yes?” her faithful tutor and bookkeeper replied, straightening.

“I want you to help me. I won’t cause you any more trouble.”

“Very well.”

“Bertra,” Fleur said, fastening her scarf. “I’m off.”

Fleur tossed the money at a nearby stable, rented horses, and sped out into the rain.

If Milton managed to sell off the clothing, she would surely never see him again. All that would be left for her would be whatever clothing Milton had decided he couldn’t sell and a huge loss. She would catch him and get her clothes back, then decide how to deal with him.

That was all she could see.

In any case, retrieving the clothes came first.

“Olar, do you have your sword?” shouted Fleur through the din of the rain and the pounding of the horses’ hooves. Of course, she was not just asking if he had brought his sword—she wanted to know whether or not he would need it.

“If he’s as you saw him before, I think we’ll be fine!”

Her former husband had walked a dangerous path. He had certainly gotten into a couple of tight spots, and as the man who had kept his books, Olar could be counted upon in such situations.

“Are you quite sure about the way?”

“There were only a few nobles that Milton talked about! I can’t imagine he’ll go somewhere unfamiliar if he needs to sell in a hurry, which means this must be the way!”

The road was muddy, and the horses had stumbled several times. Though Fleur did know how to ride, she was far from an expert. She mostly avoided using the reins, instead merely clinging to her mount and praying as they sped down the road.

There was no anger for Milton in her heart. No grudge.

Why? Fleur asked herself and came up with an answer.

It was loneliness. Bottomless loneliness.

“Milady!”

The rain had ruined part of the road. Fleur nearly wound up in a large hole that had been gouged out of the earth. It was not skill that saved her, but simple dumb luck.

The horse jumped, and as she clung to it and looked down, she saw the hellhole filled with mud and water.

“Milady!”

Her horse stopped, and she nearly fell—it was all she could do to right herself. Embarrassed and frustrated, she found his usual manner of address suddenly very irritating. “I told you to stop calling me—”

She looked up to yell at him, then noticed what he was actually doing. “Olar?” The falling rain blurred her vision. The road was a mire, nearly a swamp. The rain soon washed the horses’ white breath away.

Amid all that, Olar stopped his horse, facing off the edge of the road. “Milady, look!”

Fleur tugged on the reins and brought her horse around. Drawing alongside him, suddenly everything was clear.

Visibility was poor and the road surface was terrible. What might have happened if not for that miraculous jump? She now saw with her own eyes.

“So that was the cause of the hole.”

“It seems so.”

The large hole in the road seemed to have been scooped out by something—scooped out as a wagon, unable to make the turn, screamed out a terrible high groan, perhaps.

Fleur climbed off her horse and walked over to the edge of the road. Past it was a sudden downward slope, at the bottom of which was a small creek. It was swollen and mud colored thanks to the rain, and there in the space between slope and creek—there was a wagon missing wheels on one side and a horse on its back and utterly motionless.

It was the body of the same horse that Fleur had seen in front of her house.

“Milady.”

Fleur didn't think there was any particular meaning to Olar's address. He must just have thought it appropriate to call out to her. She unwrapped the scarf from around her head and carefully descended the slope.

Only a small amount of grass grew, and in this rain, footprints would be easily spotted, but she saw none. Perhaps Milton had lost consciousness in the crash, or—

Step by step, she went closer. The chilly rain continued to fall, and three steps away from the wagon, she noticed him.

Pinned beneath the wagon was a man.

His face was smeared with mud and blood, and at first glance he looked asleep.

"…So you…caught up with me…" A puff of white breath rose from his mouth as he spoke the stouthearted words, proving he was still alive.

Fleur bounded the last three steps to the wagon and stood before Milton.

"…Even I…thought…I was being too selfish…"

His left arm was half torn off. He reached out with his remaining right arm, wringing the words out of himself.

"Help…me…"

He was very clearly beyond help. It did not seem as though Milton himself thought he could be saved, either. But humans are bad at letting go, even at the brink.

Fleur also doubted there would be any lies in Milton's words anymore.

"It was just…panic…Th-they came to ask you…about my debt,

didn't…they?" His smile had to be a tearful one.

Fleur knelt down and put her hand to Milton's cheek, and the drops running down his face were warm.

"I was…so scared, so I…"

Fleur glanced down at Milton's chest, pinned under the wagon. The rain had softened the earth, sparing him a worse injury. And the grip he had on her leg was surprisingly strong.

If his left arm were immediately bandaged and a tourniquet applied, and his body kept warm with the clothes from the wagon bed, he might live long enough for Olar to fetch help and move the wagon.

"I swear…I'll never betray you again. So…"

"So help you?" Fleur asked.

Her first words to him seemed to kindle hope in his eyes. Milton smiled very clearly. "P-please…I beg you."

Fleur closed her eyes at his entreaties.

Milton tightened his grip. "We're both nobles…aren't we?"

When Fleur opened her eyes, she wasn't looking at Milton.

"…Fleur?"

Ignoring his questioning tones, Fleur slowly reached for a stick that was stuck into the earth—perhaps a broken wheel spoke or some reinforcing brace on the wagon.

"Fleu…" Milton's voice trailed off, and he merely looked at her.

"Olar," Fleur called out to her faithful servant, who'd come down the hill. "What of the cargo?"

“It seems intact. The contents are safe. If it had fallen in the mud it would’ve been all over.”

“I see.”

So the cargo was safe.

Milton smiled—Fleur wondered if he thought that meant he would be safe, too.

But she knew all too well that his smile was not a true one. She was still holding the stick, and its tip was very sharp.

“You said it yourself,” she said almost contemplatively. “Black clothes won’t sell unless there’s…a funeral.”

Clever man.

Fleur took a deep breath.

“So that’s why…I thought you had such a lovely face…” Milton choked out a laugh—or maybe it was just more of a choke.

From the mud, cold, and blood loss, his face was the color of clay. His gaze was directed up at the sky.

He would soon be moving on to his next residence.

“I see…ha-ha…” Milton’s laugh was a tired one, and when he suddenly closed his eyes, he smiled a satisfied smile. “Sh-shit! I was pretending to be near death, but you’ve found me out!”

No amount of acting could give rise to that sort of pallor. And yet Fleur still hesitated. She had realized what he was trying to do.

“I-I never hesitated a second to deceive you! You, who couldn’t…rid yourself of the weakness of the nobility…you’ll never be a merchant! You have to delight in deception, have no con-

science, fear no God—”

Milton was cut off in the middle of his speech by Fleur looming over him.

But his eyes still moved.

She hesitated—hesitated to plunge the stake into his doomed body.

“Hey.”

Fleur flinched at Milton’s sudden utterance.

“…If you don’t hurry, I’ll die before you can end me.”

At these words, spoken in a gentle voice, Fleur leaned her weight on the stake. She would never forget the sensation as it sank through.

“…Good. That’s good…”

The taste of blood filled her mouth. Milton put his quivering hand over hers.

“A good merchant has neither blood nor tears…”

Perhaps it had just been the sound of his final bloody gurgle.

Fleur stayed as she was. She did not know for how long. When she got up, she was a different person.

“Olar!” she called out, and the reply was immediate.

“Yes?”

“Get the goods on the horses. As soon as we’re home, we’ll make the black clothes and amber jewelry ready for sale.”

“Understood.”

Fleur gazed at the blood on her own hands and then gave a final instruction.

“He may have been cast out of his house, but this noble son died in an accident. For the funeral, people will need black clothing and amber jewelry the color of earth.”

“Yes, mil—” Olar started to say but caught himself. It was no act. He bowed sincerely to Fleur as she looked sharply over her shoulder at him.

“I am no longer a noble. I am a merchant. My name…”

It had been Milton who had given her the final push toward becoming a merchant who could turn even her heart’s peace into money. And so she decided to borrow his name.

“…Is Eve.”

“Wha—?”

It came from adding but a few lines and dots to Milton. Just as had been done to them.

“Eve Bolan, the merchant.”

The rain continued to fall.

Eve wrapped her scarf around her head once more and moved to help Olar load the horses.

There in the cold and pouring rain, Eve Bolan had taken her first step toward profit.

End.

AFTERWORD

It has been a while. This is Isuna Hasekura.

This is the eleventh volume, a collection of short stories—the second one so far.

Since I've written almost nothing but long works ever since my debut, I feel extremely unskilled when it comes to writing short stories. Also, all of my stories come from the same source, so I got it into my head that using a good idea on a short story was a waste and wound up not writing very many. But when I tried writing this one, I surprised myself. In particular, I found that depicting one of Lawrence's and Holo's ridiculous conversations from top to bottom was perfect for the short story format.

So the stories about Lawrence and Holo turned out very nicely. I will brook no complaints.

However, half of this volume is taken up by Eve's story. Eve is the merchant who shows up in volumes five, eight, and nine. She was perfect for an idea I'd been wanting to use for a long time but just hadn't found a place for, but the number of pages she took up kept increasing, and now here we are. So far we've seen her crafty, money-grubbing side, but this is a story from when she still hadn't rid herself of her nobility. Personally, I think it's interesting to go back and read her earlier appearances once you've read this story. Especially volumes eight and nine!

In any case, I'm an author who writes a lot of disposable side characters, but now that I've done Eve, I'm thinking of doing Norah next. Truth be told, I'd already written about a hundred and fifty manuscript pages of that before neglecting it. So maybe

once that's done, or…I have the plot worked out up to the climax, but…motivation…and sheep…

But I wrote steadily away, and thankfully the pages stacked up.

The next volume will be a long-form story. Hopefully it'll be out just as the second season of the anime is at its peak!

—Isuna Hasekura