



# Drunken Wolf translations



## MEET THE TEAM!



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SPECIAL THANKS TO XILENT FOR PDF ASSISTANCE



支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Merchant meets spicy wolf.

狼と香辛料  
XII



# 狼 と 香 辛 料

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支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉 十

Jyuu Ayakura







Art dealer Hugh Athner

Silversmith Fran Bonilly

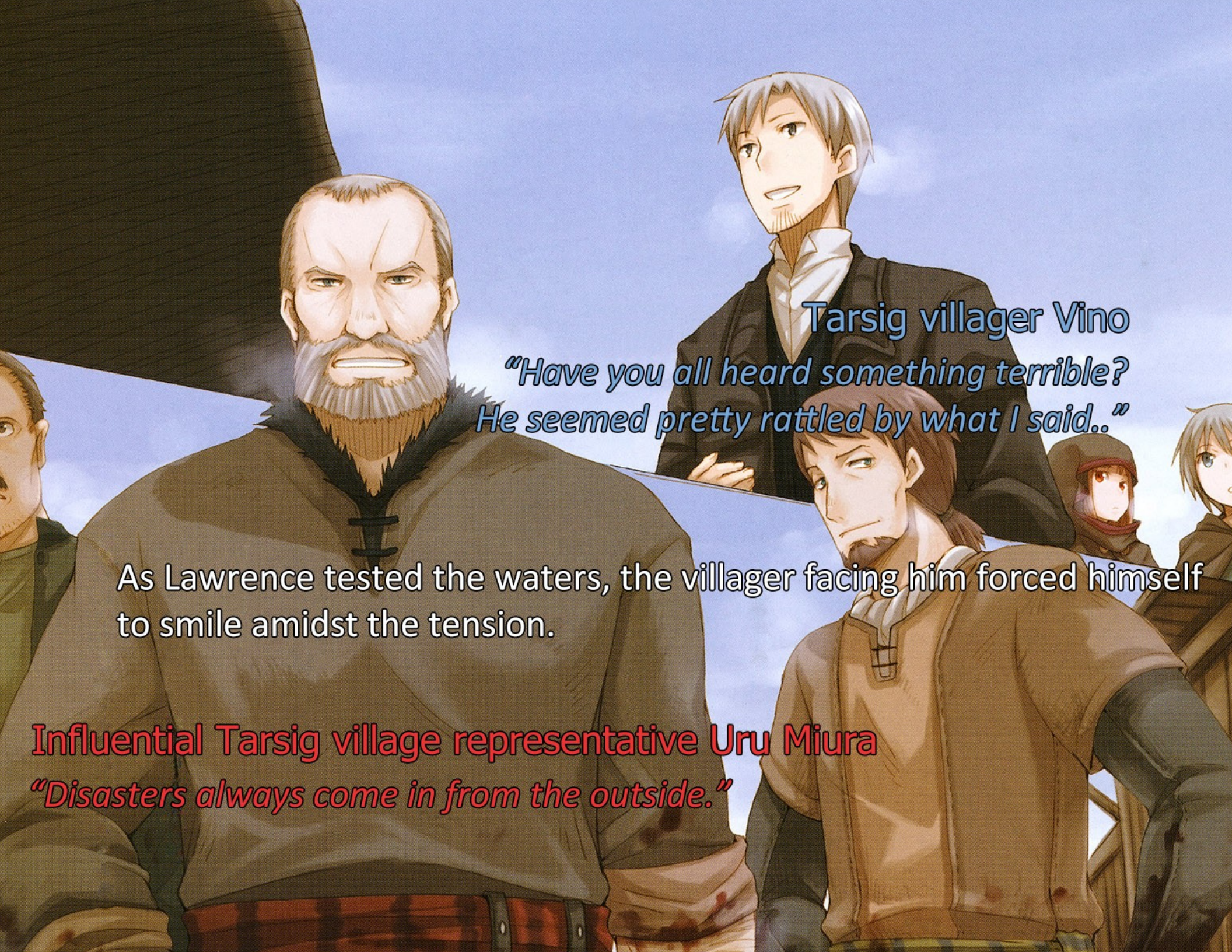
*"Ms. Fran Bonilly has returned."*

A petite girl suddenly popped out of Hugh's shadow.

*"This is the merchant who seeks me?"*

A perfectly ordinary girl - only distinguished by the odd color of her skin and eyes. Her beauty seemed to mask her true identity as an enchantress ; there was an incredibly mysterious charm about her.





Tarsig villager Vino


*"Have you all heard something terrible?  
He seemed pretty rattled by what I said.."*

As Lawrence tested the waters, the villager facing him forced himself to smile amidst the tension.

Influential Tarsig village representative Uru Miura

*"Disasters always come in from the outside."*





*"Failure will not be tolerated."*

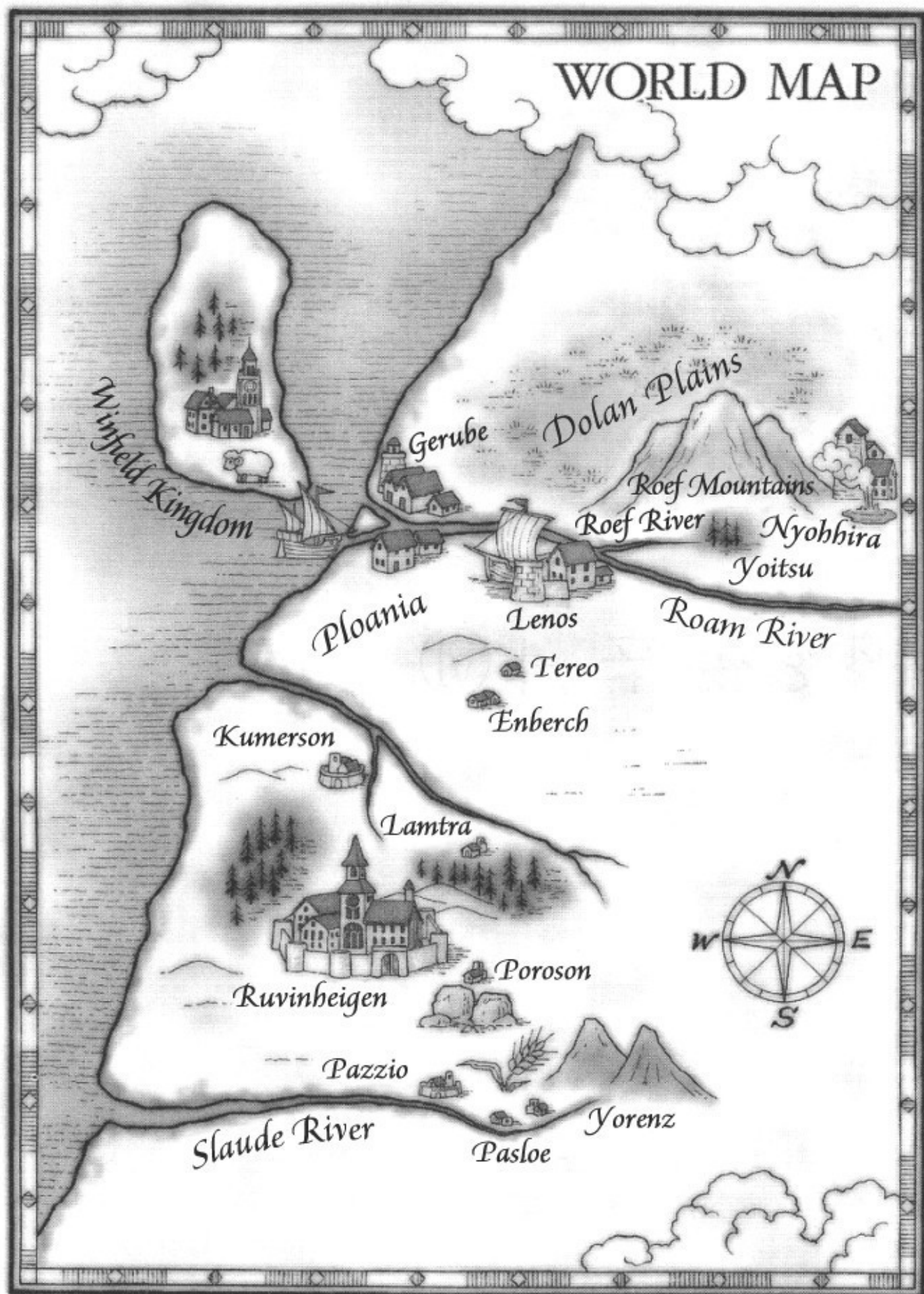
*"Of course."*

Lawrence replied, lightly pressed his forehead against hers..

*"Of course."*

..And repeated his assurance a second time.





Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa



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# *Spice and Wolf*

## Volume 12

*Translation & Editing by  
‘Drunken Wolf Translations’*



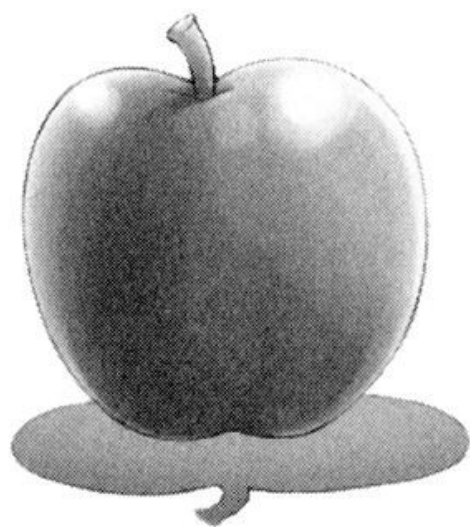
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# Introduction

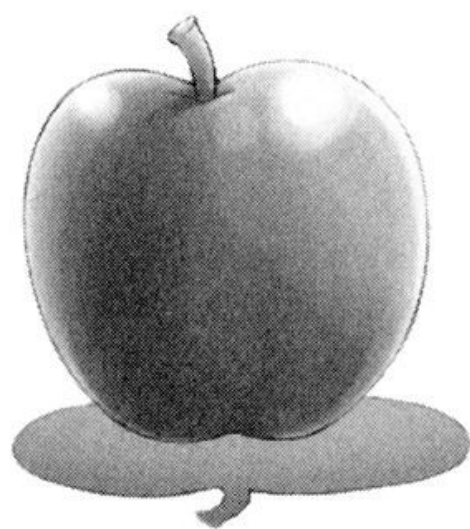
Upon leaving the Winfield Kingdom, Lawrence and his companions opted to see an art dealer in the port city of Gerube, to help them locate a silversmith who could draw them a map of the north. That silversmith turned out to be a beautiful girl with the tan skin of a desert dweller, Fran Bonilly.

When Lawrence made his request for a map, she made some suggestions. They were asking for directions to a village where, legend had it, angels had descended to have their shared holy wisdom recorded. However, it wasn't just angels who were reputed to have been there, but also a witch.



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## Prologue

Dawn was breaking across the horizon of the vast, snow-covered plain. It was freezing, to the point where simply breathing could give one a headache. Their only company was the sheep that had already been driven out onto the plain well before dawn.

It was a view that hadn't changed for centuries. It probably wouldn't change over the following centuries, either. Just a sunny sky and a flat plain with sheep on the snow. He drew in a deep breath and exhaled. For whatever reason, his eyes always watched the vapor as it was dragged off by the bitter wind.

The person next to him was still quite groggy. She was kneeling over the ground, playing in the snow.

“Perhaps it does not exist anymore.”

He didn't have an immediate response to her sudden statement, but eventually spoke.

“Well, at least that way you can't ever lose it again.”

She threw a snowball she had formed while he considered his reply. It landed into the rest of the snow and sank, leaving barely any hole behind.

“Some humans will again lose precious things they have lost.”

Another barely-visible hole appeared in the snow, and another belated response followed.

“I don't follow you.”

“Everything ends when you die.. that is what you are saying, yes? But that is not what everyone believes. Some believe that they shall be reborn in heaven, and others shall be reborn in hell. Thus, some shall be split apart and lose each other all over again.”

She opted to not form a third snowball. She breathed on her red hands to warm them up.



“Humans have such terrible imaginations.”

“Indeed we do.”

He nodded in reflection until he heard her next sentence.

“It is as though the snowballs disappear when they touch the ground..”

“Then just throw a broader one. The hole will be much more apparent.”

He heard her clothes rustling as she bent her waist to laugh.

“Such terrible imaginations indeed! Only a brash child could come up with that; it would never have crossed my mind.”

She said that despite being two heads shorter than he was. When he was young all adults seemed fierce to him. But now all the women he saw seemed weak and flighty, so he considered the rare tough one to be something worthy of attention.

“And yet, I am quite happy.”

“..happy?”

“Mm. I had lost something, but because I was not there, I could do nothing about it.”

She tread forward step by step, as if trying to make herself heavier than she was. The footprints she left behind on the snow were small, but left a clear impression.

“But this time..”

She took off her hood and smiled, back-lit by the sun.

“This time I can be there.. In a way, it is as though I have survived to be reborn.”

Her fangs were poking out from under her smiling lips.

“Nothing is more frustrating than being unable to do anything. You can give up or not give up, it



makes no difference. Still, it is better than never knowing.”

There were two kinds of toughness; the kind used to protect things, and the kind that remained when one had nothing more to lose.

“It's always nice to see you acting tough.”

More vapor spread out from his mouth as he told his joke.

“Well, it is because it gives me an excuse. No matter how things turn out, I can be there when they happen. And that is quite comforting.. although 'twould be more comfortable if they also went smoothly.”

Apparently, just being there would ease the pain of losing in the end. But seeing someone aim so low, despite having such strong feelings.. of course they would be compelled to offer her their hand. Because even if it was certain she would lose, it would be difficult for her to lose with grace.

“I still have to survive the cold, long years ahead of me, and sleeping in the cold requires warmth.. that is all I need. Something to dream with, and something to look at when I wake.”

He knew better than to smile, but there was no way he could stop after hearing something like that. Of course, that only made her own smile seem more menacing.. like she was about to rob him of all the treasure he had.

“I can't be with you forever, and I can only offer to be with you as you walk into danger.. but whatever little warmth I have is yours.”

In response, that two-heads-shorter girl rose and blotted out the sun.

She didn't need to see their goals achieved in the end; it was enough to just be with him as long as possible. He could say he'd give up everything he had and face any danger for her.. but he knew she wouldn't take such boasts lightly.

This way, they could just hold hands without ruining the moment with theatrics. Maybe he was starting to get old, but he just wanted there to be happy smiles on their faces when they talked.



“Then, I shall see just how warm you are.”

That was her way of signaling that their bittersweet conversation was over. But she still returned to him and took his hand to rub it for warmth.

“If you eat too much, it might become your last supper.”

It was expensive to keep her belly full, but there was a part of her that was much more vexing - her mind.

“Well, that is because you love me so much that you let me eat as I will, even if my stomach should explode.”

She was like a mental fortress, easily defended and difficult to attack. Finding a spot to attack was like finding a snake hidden in tall grass, so he ultimately surrendered with a shrug.

“I wouldn't want to see you die like that.”

“Hmm..”

Her reddish-amber eyes seemed to be staring off into the distance behind her eyelids, having just peeked at the snow-covered monastery.

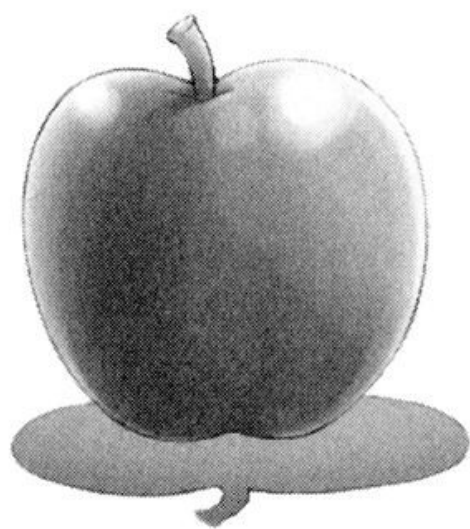
“Agreed. I would rather die in comfort than be killed by your kindness.”

Lawrence couldn't help but wonder if dawn was the coldest time of day because God wanted them to appreciate the coming warmth.



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# Chapter 1

“We ought to catch up sometime.”

This wasn't the kind of pleasantry that a merchant normally took literally. Usually, it just meant “if we're lucky enough to meet again in the future, we should discuss what's happened since.” That was the gist of it. But when it came from someone in a huge economic union or from a complicated network of agencies, merchants took it as a sign that it was pressing.

As Lawrence and his companions prepared to cross the channel at the port back to the main continent, they received a letter from the Great Brondel Monastery behind them on those vast snowy plains. They were staying at the same hotel they had stayed at when they first arrived.

Pisky, the author of that letter, had been of great help to them when they were at the monastery. His letter outlined how he planned to save the monastery from its financial problems in one fell swoop. Many great saints had been raised at the monastery, making it the home of many sacred relics, which was why Lawrence's group had gone there.

The particular relic they were after was supposedly the fore-paw of a pagan God, and was quite likely real. Lawrence had never seen such legends as more than drinking stories back when he was a lone traveling merchant. But now he was somehow here, reading a secret letter about a monastery from the Ruvik Alliance, an economic union with many ships and the respect of kings and popes.

It was enough to make him giddy. But then, upon reflection, such alliances were still comprised of individuals despite their size. And if you met an individual who shared similar interests, it was a meeting worthy of a feast no matter if they were in an alliance of merchants or slaves.

People's destinies were decided by the gods, so everyone should have a couple of amazing meetings in their lives. But if you tried to force something amazing, you'd only be met with spectacular failure. But, most amazing to Lawrence was the spectacular being sitting next to him, who was also keen on the letter.

With her flaxen hair and shapely chin, her amber-red eyes and seductive lips, she looked every bit a noble. Yet under the hood of her cloak she hid a pair of animal ears. She had met him (not a noble) when she (not a human) wished to travel. In reality, she was a tremendous wolf capable of swallowing a man whole.



She had lived in the wheat and governed its harvest, and she had done that since the ancient age of deities. And yet, she had no desire to be viewed as one. In fact, based on the way she kept swatting his calves with her tail so he would give her the letter, the only word that seemed an apt description of her was “endearing.” There was no need for further praise.

“Hey.. give that back to me when you're done.”

Like a robber, she snatched the letter away from him. The relic they had sought at the Brondel Monastery wasn't just the bones of a regular wolf, but the bones of a god - though they turned out to be fake. The letter described why the monastery purchased them.

Holo thought the bones might be the remains of one of her friends, so she felt better when she learned they were fake. But the monastery had bought them regardless, meaning such bones might truly exist. Now she held a letter that might hold clues about them.

“It’s interesting that such a huge monastery was swindled.”

Cole - the third partner in Lawrence's group - spoke as he watched the fire. He was a teenager, yet he looked younger than his age. It might be a consequence of the difficult road he had walked, but it could also simply be because he was exceptionally humble about his intellect.

Lawrence moved next to the fire to warm himself before replying.

“Who would want to buy a rusty sword?”

Lawrence's master had always asked him sudden questions back when he was an apprentice. Then he would assess the quality of Lawrence's answer.

“Hmm.. someone.. poor?”

“Maybe. But they aren't the only ones.”

“Someone who has too much money on their hands?”

Holo seemed to have finished with the letter, even before Cole replied. She seated herself between the two of them, then handed back the letter.

Cole was a young student boy who had wandered into their lives. Now, he was seeking the truth about the wolf-god's bones, because he himself believed in the pagan gods of the north.

“Indeed. Those with wealth will spend a great deal on such articles. Even a dull and rusty sword. Such things have value beyond their sharpness.”

“Then, it was fine for the monastery even if the bones weren't real?”

His excellent answer earned him a pat on the head from Holo. He wasn't embarrassed by the gesture, but he did beam a wide smile.. the kind that would warm the heart of the one who patted him in the first place.

“It also wouldn't matter if they're real or not if they got someone else to look for them.. which is what they basically did.”

Cole resumed reading as Lawrence finished. The letter spoke of the only possibility to save the monastery.

“You mean, they asked a certain company on the continent to find them, then bought them?”

More specifically, D'Jean's company in Gerube, who had a war fund for the wolf-god's bones but got swept up in the Narwhale fiasco.

“Whether the bones were real or not, they could just get D'Jean's to hunt for them, then pretend they knew nothing about it. That way everything would be fine. Shame it didn't work out that way.”

“Well, it has nothing to do with us.”

Holo, who had been roasting cheese on the end of a wooden stick, suddenly chimed in. She then proceeded to take a huge bite of the cheese, whereupon the ears under her hood perked up.

“True, this is hardly important.”

Hearing Lawrence say so, Cole looked back at the letter. If there was something truly important



in the letter it wouldn't be related to that.. and sometimes it was better to not know something. Even in trade, the value of information wasn't easy to judge, especially when it was information that no one could corroborate. Misinformation was sometimes leaked in situations where no actual evidence was available.

“It seems these kinds of trades are being made everywhere. I guess the people involved in them probably have insider information. It's not stable in the north, so may God be with us. Pisky.”

Holo flung her stick into the fire, having eaten the cheese.

“That only proves what Huskins told you, yes?”

It was rare for Holo to call someone by their name. The name she mentioned was, in fact, the real name of the legendary Golden Sheep in the myths surrounding the Brondel Monastery. For her to name him meant something. She was a stubborn Wisewolf, and everyone she didn't respect, was a “you” or “them” to her.

“Mr. Huskins told me that D'Jean's company, the ones after the bones, was once a branch of Diva Company. But even though Diva Company owns the mining rights in the north, they aren't part of the Ruvik Alliance.”

Huskins had secretly built a home base for himself and his friends at the monastery. His compatriots hailed from all over the world, and could thus meet there once in a while to relay distant news. Huskins had mentioned hearing something to Lawrence, something about Holo's homeland of Yoitsu.

“So then.. the real bones are in the hands of the Diva Company?”

“Probably. If they're on the market, Diva will sniff them out.”

When Cole handed the letter back, Lawrence slowly tore it.

“Ah!”

Lawrence ignored the surprised boy and tossed the torn letter into the fire.

“Sending only one copy on paper, which is easily burned or dissolved in water, is a sign. Usually,

letters are written on parchment so they'll last, so if one's written on thin paper it's meant to be confidential. We can't let others read it."

It didn't take long for the letter to burn, its ashes gently wafting up to the ceiling in the heated air.

"So, what should we do?"

Cole and Holo were watching the ashes float around, but only Cole was focused on them. Holo's amber-red eyes were focused entirely elsewhere.

"Mr. Pisky's letter corroborates Huskins' news of the north, so we have news that two large social networks agree upon. In other words, we can safely assume it's the truth."

"So, they did drive people away to open their mines?"

Cole had snapped back to reality.

"They wouldn't be blindly collecting holy relics without knowing they were real. That's what Huskins told me. So their goal is obvious. No one's more capable than the Church when it comes to using violence to solve disputes. Diva's wants to get on their good side so they can put a good spin on their conquering of the mining areas."

Suddenly a small wooden stick was heard snapping.

"In other words, a holy war.. claiming back God's land from the pagans, right?"

Lawrence nodded, but Holo spoke.

"Holy relics belong in a world of beliefs and superstitions, so they were investigating using the bones to promote the Church's religion. They know it was a holy relic to pagans, so by disrespecting it and showing that they were unpunished, they would disprove the existence of that god, and prove theirs was the real one."

No matter how strong a creature was alive, it had no way to bite them back when it was nothing but bones. It was easy to imagine the reaction of pagans seeing the Church do this. To



Diva, however, it was all about starting a war to win the mining rights in that region. It had nothing to do with faith, only profit potential.

Just as Huskins said, wherever people went to eradicate old forest and river gods, merchants would be seen looming in the background. This time, they weren't even staying in the background.

“It's likely many were left in dire straits when the Northern Expedition was canceled. No one likes wars taking place in their country, but when it's some remote region it's a different story. Food and goods can be sold at ridiculous prices, and mercenaries will all leave to join the marches. A lucky conqueror might even find treasure, and new settlers will also reap the benefits.”

“It is even better when it is the land of another religion, is it not?”

Holo's home was destroyed several centuries in the past, but there should at least remain familiar forests, hills and rivers. There should still be gentle hills to lie on under the sun. So in a way, her home would still exist. Not so if it had been mined for metals or gems. Trees would be cleared, hills flattened, rivers filled. In the blink of an eye, the entire area would be unfamiliar.

“Well..”

Cole raised his hand in frustration, almost in tears. He was one of the few brave enough to take action to save people from the Church.

“Can we attack them before they attack us?”

“No. But..”

Lawrence smiled in an effort to comfort the boy.

“We can prepare. The larger such an effort, the more difficult it is for them to hide it. Plus, even if we can't stop the inevitable, we can still turn their spears from the places we want to protect.”

Cole sadly bit his lower lip and nodded. If this was happening in 20 years, perhaps Cole would have enough influence in the Church to prevent it. But the operative word there was “perhaps.”

Holo pinched his face.

“So what shall we need?”

“We'll need an accurate map of the north. It doesn't matter what we want to do if we don't know how to get there. We don't even know how the war's spreading. Plus, if we're lucky, we might also get some news about the bones while we're at it.”

Holo nodded and took a deep breath.

“Mr. Huskins gave me the name of someone who knows the north, and who can draw us a map. And, since he only knows nice people, like a certain wolf I could name, we should be able to trust them.”

Holo responded to his joke with a stony stare, but Cole broke out laughing.

Earlier that morning, Lawrence had made himself clear to Holo: he would be happy to honor his promise to take her home, but he probably couldn't live up to a promise of incredible heroism, such as foiling Diva's plans. They were a huge company.. even their mines were huge.

It wasn't just about money. The plot involving holy relics would be just one small part of their grander plans. Lawrence had just learned all of this from Huskins; he wasn't saying any of this to point out how small they were in the face of things, but rather because he felt overwhelmed.

One man could only do so much, and traveling merchants weren't exactly renowned for their strength. But Holo wasn't blaming him, so he didn't feel ashamed of any of that. He was still going to do whatever he could, and only offer his best.

“So basically, we should go back to Gerube and meet this person.”

Back to Gerube.. where that mess with the Narwhale just happened. Holo was clearly unhappy to hear that.

“We are going back to that twit who caused so much trouble for you?”

“Keeman? No, not him. Probably just one of Huskins' friends.”



Hearing that only worsened her mood.

“Yet more sheep..”

“Still better than a shepherd, isn't it?”

Holo wasn't exactly nobility, but she could pass as one of blue blood. Yet, her motives and behavior were often capricious and vain, like a child. Even she would admit to that. Her off-hand reply to Lawrence sounded more like a statement.

“What else, if not a shepherd?”

Lawrence's answer was direct.

“An art dealer.”

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Just as rivers divided territories, channels separated continents and islands. The key difference was that the climate on each side of a channel might differ. In fact, an old joke was that you could write a summer's letter to a friend across a channel and get back a letter covered in snow.

It was cold in Gerube, but not quite freezing. Yet the view further north on the Roam River would resemble the Winfield Kingdom's - pure white. The world really was an amazing place.

“So are we heading to the north or south side?”

Holo questioned him with tired eyes from under the blanket. She had joined him with the excuse that it was cold, only to continue drinking under the blanket. He brushed the hair away from her brow and replied.

“South. The crowded side.”

Gerube was divided straight down the middle by the river. The north side was full of the original residents, while the south was full of merchant newcomers and was much more crowded.

“Hm.. then, there will be good food?”

Holo yawned, staring off into space. Perhaps she was already seeing a great feast in those dreamy eyes. It was enough to make Lawrence worry if his purse would make it, so he decided to joke around to avoid the topic.

“I just knew it was a mistake to not take those sheep back with us..”

Huskins, who was a shepherd working for the monastery, had offered to let them have a few of his best sheep to take back with them.

“Well.. as you said, that would have been far too much trouble.”

“I never expected you to accept that argument so easily.”

Sheep were expensive. And Huskins was the Golden Sheep - he surely knew which sheep were be the best. But still, in the end they didn't accept his offer, for the reason Holo just repeated. He knew she was unhappy that he refused the offer, but she seemed to understand.

“Of course. After all, one sheep is trouble enough..”

Holo, who was lying on their luggage under his arm, smiled up at him mischievously. She didn't continue her assault, maybe out of kindness, but probably more out of fatigue.

“Can't you sleep quietly, like Cole?”

Being afraid of fainting, Cole had had a bit to drink and dozed off next to Lawrence.

Holo closed her eyes slowly before replying.

“I do not fear fear, but I do fear the drink. While I need fear nothing when I sleep, to sleep I fear I need to drink.”

A priest's joke. Priests, of course, were not allowed to drink. Holo wasn't evil because she knew a lot, but because she used that knowledge in just the right ways and at just the right times.

“I hate paying for food, and now it seems that I've been left with only my tears to drink.”



He heard no reply. Perhaps she'd finally been sufficiently bored to nod off. It wasn't until the boat arrived at Gerube - on time - that he roused Cole and lifted Holo to her feet as well. They were the last to leave the boat.

"Well.. huh.. it has only been a few days, but it feels like much longer. I did not expect to feel that way."

Those were Holo's first words upon setting foot on the south side of Gerube. During the Narwhale incident, the city had been divided in two, so perhaps it was simply that vivid a memory.

"Maybe it's because Winfield looked so different? But you're right, I feel the same way."

Cole was helping Lawrence with their luggage, while holding down Holo's cloak as she stretched so her fluffy tail didn't make an appearance. He continued talking.

"It's the first time I've returned to a town since I joined you two."

"Hmm? Oh, that's right, now that you mention it."

The streets were still crowded and disheveled, but that only relieved the three of them after having seen the sorry state of the Winfield kingdom. Merchants always preferred markets and towns to be lively.

"..and we've been traveling together for a while now, haven't we?"

"Hmm?"

Holo squinted and looked around, then put her hand behind her back and walked ahead of them.

"Every town has a joke worth laughing at for 50 years!"

He perceived a hint of loneliness in her manner. It wasn't something he could just dismiss.. he knew he wouldn't be around anymore if she stopped to laugh at him for 50 years.

“..”

Hearing no response from Lawrence, she stopped and turned to face him.

“Hey, you.. Just treat that as another happy moment in our journey, will you not?”

His eyes had focused on something behind her - eels being fried in oil.

~~~

Having dropped off their luggage, Lawrence then met with Keeman to thank him for writing them the introductory letter that got them to the Brondel monastery. Despite Lawrence only being able to thank him with trivia about the monastery, Keeman seemed to enjoy it nonetheless.

Keeman handed Lawrence another letter. It had been sent to him several days ago, from a famous port in the south that dealt with furs. It went without saying who sent that letter, and indeed it contained but a single sentence: “We made a killing.” If he put his nose to it, he would surely smell the distinct odor of a wolf who wasn't Holo.





“An art dealer? You mean Athner Company?”

“Yes. I'd like to meet Hugh Athner.”

“Then just hop on down the road outside; it's on the right. You can't miss it, their sign's a big goat's horn.”

That was sure daring, for someone who knew Huskins' and his friends, and their true forms. Hearing that brought a smile to Lawrence's face.

“But hey, why are you going to see Athner?”

Only the upper crust would be interested in buying artwork. It wasn't the kind of place a traveling merchant would care about. Lawrence wondered if Keeman, branch manager of the Rowen Trading Guild in Gerube, was concerned about him: he might be thinking Lawrence had been swept up in another strange incident. Maybe Keeman knew something he didn't.

But Lawrence had no room for doubts, nor was he here to comfort Keeman.

“I want to see a painter, Fran Bonilly.”

The moment the name Huskins had given him escaped his lips, Keeman reacted with obvious surprise.

“You know her?”

He covered his face with his hand to massage away the surprise, then smiled and spoke again.

“She's famous. But not for good reasons.”

What did that mean? Lawrence stared blankly for a moment before turning back to Keeman with a look on his face asking him to continue.

“Mainly because of her clientele.”

Keeman's eyes made it clear that he was concerned about Lawrence, but also that he was concerned about not saying anything negative about Fran Bonilly.

“Everyone lauds her for gaining the appreciation of nobles at her age.. but nobles all have their secrets that they can't afford to have public. And no ones knows who her master was, so she's considered mysterious.”

Keeman's social network was like an intricate spiderweb, so that was all probably true. Just what kind of person was Fran Bonilly, then? As Lawrence mulled it over, Keeman continued.

“I think you'd be better off steering clear of her sort.”

Keeman far outranked Lawrence in the Rowen Trading Guild, so any such advice from him was really more of an order. And yet, he pretended he was just reading his ledger, and raised his eyes after jotting something down in it.

“Oops, I should be more careful to not let others hear my inner thoughts..”

A strained smile crossed his face, making it clear that he really did intend this only as advice. Lawrence thanked him, and got up to join Holo and Cole, who were waiting for him outside. Keeman made his final request without raising his eyes.

“Let me know how it turns out.”

It felt quite odd to count Keeman as a friend, but he spoke it without the usual guile of a merchant, putting Lawrence at ease.

“Yes, of course I will.”

With that, Lawrence smiled and left.

“Nothing bad happened, did it?”

That was the first thing Cole asked, his face full of worry. Anyone would want to avoid Keeman after what he put them through. But merchants weren't the types to hold grudges - they could happily drink with a former enemy. Lawrence patted the boy on the head.

“There was a letter there waiting for us. Just one sentence: we made a killing.”

Cole's eyes lit up with a look that made it clear he liked Eve. In fact, Eve liked him as well. Holo was the only one who seemed unhappy with the news.

"I hope all of this does not merely mean that another disaster is waiting ahead of us."

Holo clearly still held a grudge with Eve, who had nearly killed Lawrence. But was she probably also talking about Keeman's advice about Fran Bonilly. If he was right, it meant trouble. But Lawrence just looked at Holo as if begging her to let bygones be bygones.

"Well then."

She broke the silence.

"Where are these art dealers?"

Her obvious bitterness was obviously a mask to hide the happiness she actually felt underneath, so Lawrence trudged on ahead. The fact that she followed him was proof of her true feelings. And shortly thereafter, they were looking up at the signboard of Athner Company. Holo was trying to hold back her laughter.

"I do not know what to say about this."

"Maybe they're doing it to mimic nobles who draw eagles onto their stamps."

He opened the door in front of them as he spoke. The interior of the building appeared simply decorated, but also shone as if covered in a layer of gold. The smell of paint struck them.

It seemed to be a rather small company for one on such a busy street, but Lawrence soon realized just how much they probably earned. Many paintings hung from the walls, all of them sharing a common element: they were huge.

What determined the price of a painting wasn't the painter, nor other intangible concepts, but simply the cost of the paint itself. The secondary price-driver was the size of the painting, followed by the quality of the paint's colors.

All of these paintings were clearly expensive.



“Oh my..”

Some paintings pictured the God of the Church, or the Holy Mother. Some were landscapes. Some had reclusive saints standing beside lakes. But each of them had an impressively large background. It was as though the paintings subjects were the backgrounds, rather than God or the Holy Mother.

“Is no one here?”

Lawrence walked forward leaving Holo and Cole behind, impressed and breathless respectively. Of course, he didn't leave the oh-so-curious Holo behind without a warning.

“Don't touch the pictures.”

She seemed enraged at being treated like a child, but had only her finger - about to touch the picture - to blame. If she so much as chipped a bit of paint off of one, they would have to hightail it out of there.

“Excuse me, is anyone here?”

His shout earned him a muffled reply. It seemed the shopkeeper was somewhere deeper in the building. While he waited for him, Lawrence took a closer look at the painting nearest to him. It featured a group of monks walking along a riverbank.

“Can I help you?”

The man who came out after a while resembled not a sheep, but a hog. His flat cap gave off the impression of a clergyman, but not his luxurious merchant's attire. His air was entirely different from Huskins', and seemed every bit the greedy merchant.

“I'd like to see Mr. Hugh Athner, if he's..”

“Oh? That is I. So.. how may I help you?”

It was painfully obvious that Lawrence was just a traveling merchant, and with him was a nun and a boy who seemed pulled straight off the streets. Paintings were the domain of the wealthy, so they must have seemed quite oddly out of place.

“Actually, Mr. Huskins of the Brondel Monastery introduced us to-”

Lawrence trailed off when he saw Hugh's giant nose - almost more like a snout - quiver. He was staring past Lawrence. Holo, having noticed this, turned away from a painting of the Holy Mother holding an apple and faced him. She appeared small, but she was still a wolf.

“Oh.. um.. uh..”

“This would be Holo. She quite enjoyed our time with Mr. Huskins.”

Lawrence turned back to the frightened Hugh, doing his best to smile politely as he spoke. Hugh, on the other hand, clearly didn't hear any of it. He was staring back at Holo like a cornered rabbit about to run for his life. He might have stayed that way if Holo didn't move. Rather than sighing, she walked up to him.

“Might you have any apples like the one in that painting?”

When one was surrounded by wild dogs, their only chance was to fling dried meat in another direction and pray. Obviously, that was what the now-nodding Hugh was thinking. The flesh on his face jiggled as he nodded, and he quickly shot into the back room.

“Less a sheep than a pig, I would say.”

Holo spoke softly as she stared at his back.

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Holo ate her basket of apples with relish. Despite being the owner here, Hugh was the one who seemed cornered.

“Mr. Athner..”

Lawrence began talking but only startled Hugh, who kept inching away from them. By the time he finally managed to offer Lawrence a seat, he didn't look like he was the owner of his own shop anymore.

“We've heard everything from Mr. Huskins.”

Hugh stared at the apples being devoured and raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow. He only stopped because Lawrence had begun to talk again. His eyes were pleading for his life.

“How.. pathetic..”

She whispered to herself as she wolfed down the apples. She only peered at Hugh out of the corner of her eyes, unhappily. Of course she wasn't whispering about Hugh's offering of apples, but his cowardly reaction to her. And yet, something told Lawrence that she would have been just as upset even if he wasn't so fearful of her. She was a complicated wolf, after all.

“..and stubborn.”

Look in a mirror, thought Lawrence. He cut in.

“He's seems outstandingly prudent to me.”

“Wh-wh-what did you.. uh, no, what's your relationship with Huskins?”

Clearly, if he wasn't so terrified he meant to ask “what did you do to Huskins?” Holo continued eating her apples delightedly, proudly showing off her fangs. Wolves and sheep seemed doomed to be this way; always set in these roles, according to who was the hunter and who the hunted.

“We merely listened to the story of his involvement with the monastery - a great tale, indeed. And then? We helped him out a little bit.”

Hugh's eyes darted between Lawrence and Holo thrice before he spoke.

“And why did he.. mention me?”

“We're looking one who's familiar with the north.”

Hugh's eyes seemed to clear when he heard that. He truly was a merchant of some renown, so he really shouldn't have any trouble with an opponent on Lawrence's level, a traveling merchant.

“Wellll.. alright then. If that’s what you’re after-”

He kept whispering as his eyes remained glued on Holo. He seemed to be about to say “but”, but stopped short as if having suddenly lost his nerve. Having eaten 5 or 6 apples, Holo had just paused to lick the juice off her fingers. Once she had licked them clean, she spoke.

“Huskins is a wise sheep. He knows the order of things.”

“..”

Hugh stared at her, unable to respond. In fact he seemed unable to even breathe.

“That is, he knows that it is his turn to repay us for our help. And it is up to you-”

She turned her eyes to Hugh.

“-to decide if you can provide that payment.”

“Well..”

Hugh swallowed as though trying to un-stop his throat.

“Of course I will.. if it’s his request.”

“Mhm.”

Holo poked Lawrence in the arm, making it clear that it was his turn now. She then poked Cole, making it clear that if he didn’t take one of the delicious apples soon, he would lose his chance.

“Basically we’re hoping that you, Mr. Athner, can introduce us to someone.”

“Um.. then it’s someone that an art dealer like me would know, maybe some wayward artist..?”

“Yes. Mr. Huskins gave us a name.”

Finally, Hugh’s face became like one that a proper merchant should wear. At the same time,



Holo's apple-eating form was downgraded from a wolf's to a mischievous little girl's.

“The name was Fran Bonilly.”

Hugh frowned, but not out of fear. His was the frown of a merchant whose secret to success had been discovered. He was well and truly back to being a merchant. And as a merchant, he was quite aware of his responsibility to treat an important person's introduced guests well.

“Indeed, I know of her.”

“I hear tell that she's a master silversmith.”

Hugh nodded, albeit unwillingly.

“Her painting keeps her fed, but indeed she was originally a silversmith. However she managed it, she's a friend of several aristocrats. Each greatly admires her work, but the most troublesome of those are the ones who live their lives on the battlefield.”

These kinds of patrons were like money-growing trees for a company like Hugh's. He seemed to be making that point clear. Lawrence coughed.

“Will you bring us to her?”

No one in his right mind would want to let a potential opponent see their greatest source of income. That was understandable, even if they were a traveling merchant with an impoverished child and a wolf.. even if he owed Lawrence dearly, or was threatened with his life. No one could blame him.

Lawrence could see the scales of Hugh's mind tilting behind his eyes, trying to evaluate whether his livelihood was more important than his present safety or Huskins' friendship. But Holo was the one to tilt that balance.

“We seek Yoitsu.”

“Huh?”

Hugh turned to her instantly.

“Yoitsu.. that's quite an ancient name. Not many remember it, much less its location.”

Hugh's mouth might be bone-dry right now, but he still desperately tried to swallow some saliva.

“I am looking for my home, Yoitsu. So.. will you help me?”

If one was to gasp at how irrationally she was acting, they would hardly be in the wrong. But in spite of that, her sense of loneliness was so apparent it was overwhelming.

“If you know then please tell me. Please.”

Holo's body tensed up, and she stared at the ground. One didn't have to see her tail to know that it was probably between her legs.

“Well.. um..”

Even Lawrence was stunned. Hugh was well beyond that, and was unable to even calm himself. He could no longer remain seated, and shot up to his feet to say something to Lawrence and Cole. But, though his mouth was flapping, no sounds were coming out of it.

It seemed that Holo's initial intent had been to scare the information out of Hugh, but somewhere along the line she'd had a change of heart. Back in the Winfield Kingdom, she'd learned just how naive she was from a sheep, of all things. The kind of creature she liked to scoff at the most.

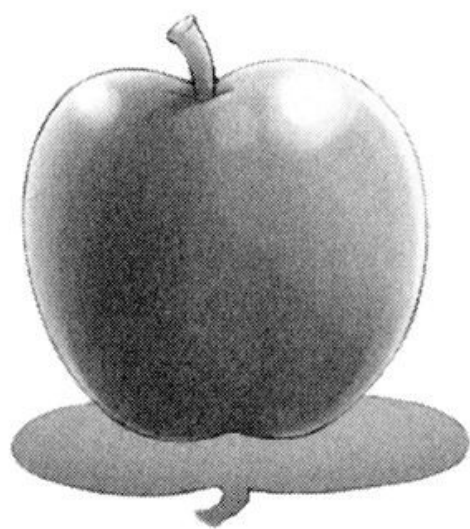
Now, she seemed to have realized that she shouldn't abuse her apparent status, and should instead make a humble request. And, it turned out, Hugh might not have a brave bone in his body, but he did harbor kindness.

“P-please don't do that.. since he's introduced you - no, no, since we see each other for what we really are, I'll help as much as I can. So please- please raise your head.”

Upon hearing him say that, Holo slowly looked up at him and smiled. Despite feeling silly to have such a thought of a being centuries older than he was, Lawrence couldn't help but see it as a very grown-up kind of smile for Holo.

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## Chapter 2

Hugh gave them some warm wine to go with the apples.

“It'll warm you up, so please.”

After thanking him, Lawrence took a sip. Holo followed suit. Her face remained the same, but Lawrence knew she wouldn't find the wine to her liking. Cole had to settle for warm goat's milk, and eyed Holo curiously as she stared at it enviously.

“So that's why you're looking for the silversmith Fran Bonilly, is it?”

“Indeed.”

Hugh still seemed to be hesitant, but at this rate he was getting more at-ease and determined.

“Well, she's in town right now, as it happens.”

Holo smiled, but Lawrence could tell it was out of satisfaction at a job well done. She realized that she had to pull out the big guns before she would get to see this money tree. Lawrence knocked her with his knee before he followed up.

“Is she painting or still doing silverwork?”

“No. She's preparing to leave. She loves to run around everywhere, and lives wherever she goes. I didn't think I would see her for a long time, but several days ago she came back out of nowhere and told me that she'd learned about some myth.”

“Myth?”

Hugh nodded at Lawrence's confirmation.

“In a place called Tarsig, in the mountains that block off the winterlands. It's a mountain village deep in the forests there, so she came back here to prepare for the journey.”

A myth in a mountainous region of forests and lakes.. Lawrence couldn't help but look over at Holo. But he found her not looking back at him, but at Cole.



“Do you know anything about the myth, Mr. Athner?”

“Of course. It's only just rumors, but I've heard about it over my own information network. We can't be certain that it's real..”

“And it seems more likely to be fake.”

Hugh nodded.

“But she's not the type to give up. As soon as she has a theme for her silverwork, she listens to no-one. I suppose some people might find that side of her charming.”

“Hmm.. that means she won't have time to draw a map for us?”

“Mhm. However..”

“However?”

Being pressed, Hugh replied with a reluctant look on his face.

“However, she's always running to the north for new themes. So she's far more familiar with old names and legends than Huskins or I. After all, she's been chasing myth after myth.”

Lawrence nodded, urging him to continue. But it wasn't possible to tell what he was thinking from his words alone.

“So, well, I honestly just don't know if she'll help if you just go directly ask her to draw a map for you. And I've worked so hard to establish a working relationship with her..”

Hugh wiped the sweat from his face. If that wasn't an act, it was obvious just how difficult Fran Bonilly was.

“Surely it will be fine if we ask. What is there to fear?”

Holo cut straight to the chase, ignoring Hugh's concerns and smiling. Her implication was clear: just threaten her. Whether it was a joke or not was hard to tell, but Hugh smiled in return. It

wasn't in agreement, of course, but rather because the word “smith” was synonymous with the word “stubborn.” Some famous swordsmiths would rather live in poverty eating rust than make a substandard sword. It wouldn't be prudent to just waltz up to her and beg for a map.

“I see what you mean. But is there nothing you can do to help us?”

Asking this way again should help soften Hugh up a little more.

“She's.. very hard to please. So-”

So getting her to agree to meet someone she didn't know would probably be the biggest hurdle. Lawrence fell into deep thought. The scales in Hugh's mind were swaying between keeping Ms. Bonilly happy, and keeping Mr. Huskins - who had built Hugh and others a permanent home - happy. And the scales kept tilting to Ms. Bonilly.

Was Huskins' word really not worth as much as they hoped? Or did Hugh simply not value such things as much as most would? Or was Fran Bonilly really such an outstanding individual? Lawrence was capable of working through this problem on his own, but anyone lost in thought like he was was an easy mark.

After all, Hugh was someone of renown. He suddenly continued, with a tone practically begging forgiveness.

“I wish to stay on her good side.. but it's not about money, actually.”

Business was always about money. So when Hugh saw the curiosity in Lawrence's eyes, he stood up as though he had just confirmed something. He then walked up to a specific painting.

“The place in this painting was once named Dira.”

It was the largest of the paintings. It was of someone standing on craggy ground among boulders, hands raised in prayer, with a barren cliff behind him. Perhaps he was the patron saint of Dira, and this was a painting of his legend. Saints were common subjects for paintings. But as before, Lawrence was more interested by the background.. something about it seemed off. And just as he was wondering about that, Hugh spoke and surprised everyone.

“This.. is my home.”

“!”

Holo flinched as she stood next to Lawrence.

“However, long ago it was a fertile place, without that cliff. That cliff, you see, was carved out by a paw.”

Holo's husky voice was heard.

“The Moon-Hunting Bear?”

“Yes. Our kind cannot forget the past. Ms. Bonilly was commissioned for this painting. I have been dealing in art for decades now. Having given up on a home that has become unrecognizable to me, I now collect such paintings for my friends and comrades. Though I will not lie and say it is not lucrative, profit is not my chief aim.”

Hugh stared at the painting as though looking through some grand window.

“On top of that, I hear the view will change even more. Gold was found there; someone in heaven must have a sense of humor, because it was found by the very person I commissioned to paint this piece. Yet even if they don't find a mine, the wind and water will still wear it away. It will disappear like the views captured in many paintings in this room, in churches, and in aristocratic mansions. Not even paintings last, it turns out.”

He gently stroked the frame of the painting, as if unwilling to turn his eyes away from it. It was a record of a time long gone. A time far too long ago for humans, but far too recent for his kind. They could only watch as things changed and became unfamiliar to them.

When Hugh finally turned back to them, he wore a wistful smile that was clearly aimed at Holo. Lawrence decided not to look at her; it would be too cruel for him to toy with her emotions right now. This was something only Hugh could discuss with her, having also lived inhumanly long.

“I'd like to help you, if that's at all possible. This shop isn't just for sheep; reindeers, rabbits, foxes.. even birds have paid us a visit.”

Her clothes were heard rustling when she heard that. Lawrence kept his mouth shut.

“But Fran Bonilly is irreplaceable. She's a font of knowledge and has a sharp memory. She's even willing to give up her life for her pursuits, and has the ardor necessary to record her experiences in paintings. Losing her is not an option; we're running out of time.”

Hugh's eyes shone with colors that no selfish person could ever manage. They were wells of time, which he was hoping to set down in a record of paintings. His words struck Lawrence quite hard.. out of time? Things were changing that quickly?

“Running out of time?”

“Yes. We must go faster. There are many places Ms. Bonilly still has to paint, but her lifetime is so brief. I always find myself wishing that she might live longer.”

Lawrence wasn't the only one surprised to hear him say that; apparently he wasn't the only one who expected that she wouldn't be human. But that just made him want to ask the obvious: why didn't Hugh, a creature with so many years ahead of him, take up the painter's brush, if time was the problem..?

“I'm only cut out to be a merchant..”

Lawrence's hand shot up to his face - it was revealing his thoughts again. Hugh sighed and stared at the floor, then squinted as he eyed the paintings on the wall.

“I have tried, though. I took up the pencil (amateurishly) and went to the east and the north. My friends tried the south, and their shadows rarely ever made it back north. They've since passed on.”

Holo once said that she lived in the wheat, and might well vanish if it it was destroyed. It was likely that she, too, would die some day. Hugh didn't seem to like saying that his friends had died of natural causes.. not in front of someone like Lawrence, who viewed them all - including Holo - as undying creatures. And yet, he remained calm. A time-worn creature of wisdom, both gentle and profound.

“They took their pencils far in travel, out of a sense of responsibility. But everywhere they went, they saw humans cutting down forests, filling in rivers, and flattening mountains.. even valleys.

When they couldn't take it anymore, they traded in their pencils for swords.”

Lawrence had heard such stories before. Unsurprisingly, Cole seemed spellbound.

“But they weren't strong enough. One fell to the Church's flames. Another was slain by their soldiers. A third succumbed to exhaustion. Still others are now only distant memories, gone like bubbles in the air by the hands of humans- ah, I'm sorry..”

“It's alright.”

Hugh smiled sadly at Lawrence's reply.

“Humans are.. strong. The world has been theirs for a long time now; our age has passed. As much as I don't want to admit it, the only way we stand out now is as legends on paper. And now? Even those legends are being nibbled away by insects and mice. We're the last of the kind the humans view as sheep. We no longer even have the courage to hold a pencil. The bravest of us were the first to vanish.. it's.. too painful to talk about.”

Even if Hugh didn't feel obligated to protect Huskins (who had cast off his identity as a sheep) or Holo (who was a wolf), he wanted to protect Fran Bonilly. It made sense now; they didn't want to reveal their true forms to her. And if they didn't do that, there weren't many ways they could persuade her to stay. Yet they wanted to do everything in their power to keep her painting. It was already a big risk just to tell Lawrence all of this.

“Quite sad, indeed.”

Holo spoke, after sipping some of the wine she wasn't enjoying.

“Then.. that is why you are so fearful of me?”

This time Lawrence did turn to face her, as did Cole. Birds and deer had visited Hugh's shop, but not wolves. Wolves were brave, and had sharp fangs and claws. They would surely be the first to fight.. and the first to die.

Hugh nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off of her.

“Yes.”



“Oh, ho.. well, that is fine. I would be quite sad if you did not feel that way.”

Such pride was the only thing Holo had to suit her title of Wisewolf. Hugh's eyes no longer seemed to be viewing her with fear.

“..You're quite tough. Like me, perhaps. I've always wondered why I was born a sheep, and not a tree or stone.”

They began to talk as if they were the only ones in the room, with Holo showing no signs of embarrassment.

“Well, I think I prefer it this way. Were I but a tree or stone, I could never travel with these two.”

Hugh smiled.

“It's rather interesting, at least, living in the human world.”

“Mhm. They surely are interesting.”

The only thing the "interesting" people beside them could do as they talked was smile bitterly. Lawrence felt that the wine he was drinking had also begun to taste rather sour.

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Gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, lead, brass, and stones. When people mentioned “gems hidden among rocks,” they were talking about how difficult it could be to know what was truly valuable.

Lawrence and his companions had been told that Fran was wandering around town, so before she came back to his shop, Hugh decided to give them a tour. He had more than just paintings; various crated artifacts and baubles were often sold in addition to paintings.

“In truth, many of these are fakes. Here is a golden scroll-reading rod.. well, gold-coated, anyhow. Oh right, this one might actually be solid gold. What do you think?”

Not even he seemed to remember all of the artifacts in his own shop. He casually judged the weight of the rod in his hands before making his evaluation. He'd told them the truth about Fran for Holo's sake - a kindred spirit. But he wasn't just a sheep spirit, he was also a merchant. He didn't mind asking her for her opinion.

Hugh led them around while trying to find paintings of Yoitsu, but he also kept an eye on Lawrence. Traveling merchants didn't have much money, but they did have front-line information about prices in various markets. He surely wanted Lawrence to help him determine if anything in this dusty back room was valuable. Lawrence felt like a boar being used to sniff out truffles.

True, prices trended differently in towns. Some places would be mad for objects in the shape of wolves, while others might have such a high demand for gold objects that even fool's gold or gold-coated items would fetch a high price. In any case, Lawrence didn't hesitate to offer what he could - he was enjoying his trip to this town that much.

In fact he was on a merchant's high. Here, he could see things being sold he would never have imagined. And Hugh's shop alone held so many trinkets that he couldn't help but view it as a pile of trash with priceless items buried within.

“Well.. that’s basically all I can offer.”

“Oh, oh.. my sincerest thanks. I can collect news in a shop like this, but since only merchants come here it's rare that I'll ever get offered any information related to trade.”

Even while talking, Hugh was busily scrawling notes with a pencil on the back of a now-useless receipt. From this perspective, he seemed to be a paragon of merchants. If he wasn't just putting on an airs like a certain other spirit-being Lawrence knew, then his success as a merchant made sense.

But Lawrence was a merchant as well. He wasn't going to lose to Hugh, even if he wasn't human. Holo would surely frown if she read his thoughts right now, but he couldn't help but be attracted by a certain article in Hugh's huge pile of items.

“What's this?”

“Oh, that.. I'd almost forgotten that I left it there.”

Lawrence pulled it out from its resting place between two crates. Hugh happily received it from him. Lawrence simply had no idea what it was for, but Holo would surely chuckle if she saw it - it was a golden apple.

“What the heck is it for?”

“Just like this.. to warm your hands.”

“Warm.. your hands?”

Indeed, it did feel warmer after Hugh handed it back to him.

“It's one of those vanity baubles; merchants love this one. You heat it by an oven or keep it under the blankets for a while, then you warm your hands with it as you write. But it can get also get quite cold in the winter, especially if you travel with it outdoors.”

That might be a problem on the wagon.. but then it would be a convenient excuse for Holo to keep it in her arms like a hen guarding an egg. Actually, maybe it wouldn't be a problem after all..

Lawrence forcefully snapped himself out of it, and nervously peeked at Holo out of the corner of his eye. He shouldn't be thinking such stupid things. He handed the apple back to Hugh.

“Truly, thank you so much for your information.”

Hugh had finally finished transcribing Lawrence's words. It might have taken until evening, but Lawrence couldn't feel bad about it - or even worry about profit - when he saw that look of gratitude in his eyes.

“Don't mention it. We asked you for a favor, after all.”

“Then when we're done, at least let me offer you a meal?”

Now this was more like a friendly merchant chat. Lawrence smiled and nodded as they shook hands.

“But they're still busy looking at the paintings..”

Hugh exerted himself to stand, then peered around them. Sure enough, Holo stood there looking at the paintings one by one, only briefly uttering things to Cole. With Hugh watching her in silence like that, even Lawrence could tell what was running through his mind.

“Would you mind if I asked you what your relationship is with those two?”

Fair enough. Holo would surely have overheard, yet she made no move to respond. There wasn't any need to hide anything, either, so Lawrence replied.

“I picked Holo up in the south, on my business route.”

“I see.”

“Long ago, a friend asked her to care for his village's wheat crops, but over time her efforts were forgotten and she longed to return home. I was passing through the village, and she hopped into my wagon without me even noticing it.”

Hugh's lips formed a serene smile. Her tricks were probably just the kind of things his kind would do.

“But it had been many centuries since she left her home, so she'd forgotten the way back. We've been hunting for clues since, and picked up young Cole along the way. He's from the north, from Pinot village.”

“Oh? Pinot village?”

Hugh's eyes, which had been closed, now opened in surprise. He turned his head to look at Cole.

“But that's so far away.. ah, I get it. I see why Huskins would have told you about Fran Bonilly now.”

Lawrence smiled, but not because it was funny. He just knew that if he didn't smile when talking about this, Holo would get upset.

“The northern lands are heavily contested.. the names of places there change too often. For all I know, I actually do know Yoitsu, but by another name.”

Lawrence nodded as he listened, until Hugh's next words took him by surprise.

“You mentioned you wanted a map of the north, so I thought you were involved in the problems there..”

Hugh was just kidding around, but he seemed to regret doing so when he saw Lawrence's reaction.

“You.. you are?”

“You're talking about Diva Company? Are the rumors true?”

He could have overheard the situation while collecting paintings. After all, the Roam River passed through here, and also passed by Diva Company.

“Well.. it's not like there's any real evidence.. after all, more rumor than sense comes from that region..”

“But what's your take?”

Hugh looked like someone who'd taken their jokes too far, and wasn't sure how to recover. When it seemed to dawn on him that he wasn't getting out of this, he grudgingly replied.

“I'm.. not interested in the slightest. That's the honest truth.”

Lawrence could swear he was lying.

“..Not interested?”

“Yes. Many of us are closing our eyes and ears, like we did after the Moon-Hunting Bear attacked. We just grabbed what we could and fled. We couldn't go back, so we had to adapt or vanish like dust. So..”

Even a sheep that only seemed intent on eating the grass in front of it could come to realize the



ways of the world when it finally raised its head. Being upset at Hugh would be easy, but what he said was the truth - one couldn't blame him for being realistic.

Lawrence's journey of education was continuing. He'd seen villages attacked by mercenaries, and towns torn apart by landlord disputes. Resisting such things was futile; no one could really stop them. At best they could just weather the storm.

"That's why I never listened for any news about it.. I'm just not as stoic as Huskins. When I hear something like that, I can't sit still. I'll end up doing what the three of you are now doing."

He joked, probably hoping to end the topic. What he said made sense; some people wanted to make sense of what they heard, and by the time they had, they would be involved themselves. Hugh was turning a blind eye so he could live a peaceful life. And none of them had any right to ruin that desire.

"Sorry.. I shouldn't have asked."

"Let's call it even.. I couldn't help you either. Well, so what now? Are you going to return to your inn?"

Lawrence looked over at Holo, who looked up and smiled. She shook her head and pointed at Cole, who was digging in a pile of objects, looking for something.

"Looks like we're still not done."

"Alright, then I'd better get back to work. Well, here's something to keep you warm while you wait for them."

Lawrence was stunned that he would leave them on their own. The shop was filled with expensive paintings, and crafted items of true gold and silver. It would take a lot of nerve to just leave strangers unattended. But his reaction was just the reflex of a merchant. Hugh smiled.

"If she wished to steal, she wouldn't waste her time and would just bite my head off. Besides, us forest-dwellers have no need to lie."

If he hadn't said it so half-heartedly, Lawrence would have mistaken his words for flattery. But he nodded earnestly to apologize for his reaction.

“Sorry about that.”

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After their chat, Hugh returned to the back of the shop to work. Lawrence sat and waited for Fran in the front room, reading a book of travel notes to pass the time. The author of that book was evidently a merchant who had traveled the world over. But unlike the information that Hugh was interested in hearing from Lawrence, this book wasn't really about passing along accurate information. Such a book would be worth more than just about anything, and no one would publish something like that.

No, the book was merely light entertainment. But at least it was entertaining.. Lawrence kept laughing as he read its exaggerated narratives, until something dropped between his eyes and the book, landing on his stomach. He looked up in shock and saw Holo bending over to pick it up, then looked down at his belly to find the golden apple sitting there.

“Twas not very tasty.”

“I should have known you wouldn't be able to keep from giving it a taste.”

He picked it up; it was quite warm. As he mused over how similar it was to Holo's head, she snatched it away from him.

“You humans love gold so. But 'twould be naught but agony if all were to become gold.”

Of course too much of a good thing made it bad. Even too much rain was as problematic as drought. But the merchant in Lawrence knew exactly how to counter her.

“If that were the case, I could just find something that wasn't gold to sell at a high price.”

But Holo wasn't satisfied by his quip. She sat down, looking dejected. She wasn't even tending to her tail. She simply fiddled with the apple.

“Where's Cole?”

As Holo craned her neck, he noticed that her ears were flat and pointing outward - a sure sign

that she wasn't in a good mood. Even rarer, she had left Cole on his own in the storeroom. There weren't many reasons for her to be acting this way.

“You couldn't find one, huh?”

There weren't any paintings of Yoitsu or the region around it, nor even a view that she remembered. She'd likely thought that with so many paintings she was bound to find at least one. Hence her unsurprising reaction. Disappointment only happened when one had hope, and depression soon followed if those great expectations were dashed. Especially when Cole was probably pointing out all of the places he himself had seen.

“..Mhm”

She nodded, though she nodded more at the apple than at Lawrence.

“So only the best things from the past survived to this day.. all the more reason to treasure them.”

He said that to aggravate her into speaking, and sure enough, her ears perked up and soon flopped back down. She then began talking as though he'd uncorked her mouth.

“Is it.. wrong of me?”

“Wrong?”

She nodded gently to confirm.

“Like that sheep, Hugh, says, most of us covered our ears and closed our eyes..”

Lawrence looked at her as he closed the book. It was a wonderfully bound tome full of interesting stories. Even after centuries, its author's name would be remembered.

“You mean getting involved in such things?”

She nodded. Beneath her calm exterior was someone who was quite excitable, who couldn't turn a blind eye to people in trouble. If she saw humans rushing out to cut down and trample a forest, she would jump in to resist them - even if it wasn't Yoitsu. Perhaps that would make her

a legend, but it was only a temporary victory in an ongoing war. If only the war could be won so easily.

“I talk like there is nothing of it, but I know that I am quite special.”

She spoke in a happy tone as if to conceal her embarrassment.

“No matter the problem, I could bare my fangs to solve it. I honestly believed this, and yet..”

Her smile revealed the depth of her disappointment. But she suddenly turned and took Lawrence's arm, wrapping it around her like a scarf and clutching it tightly.

“..and yet nothing in those paintings is familiar to me. What does that mean?”

The paintings were all either reserved for people or commissioned by the shop, probably to sell to prospective buyers. So the answer to her question was quite obvious - she wasn't seeing anything familiar because no one had asked for a painting of Yoitsu. Even her own friends, who she probably fancied as being on some everlasting journey of their own.

Such a fancy was plausible, because despite wolves confidently fighting with fang and claw, her friends had fled from the Moon-Hunting Bear, seeing just how small they were in the grand scheme of things. They could always fight back once they found the weapons with which to do so. Only those who had no such way to fight back would flee such a disaster; they hardly had a choice. Perhaps that made them cowards, but it also meant they had survived.

“Closing one's ears, not wishing to hear the truth? That is such a moronic notion I must scoff at it. Yet.. he is the owner of such a shop? And still has so many friends? Whom he tries so hard to comfort? Compared to that, I-”

Her nails dug into his wrist.

“What am I doing?”

Of course she wasn't in tears. She wasn't sad, just frustrated at her own weakness. Time flew by faster than a river, changing the world while all she could do was watch. Even the riverbank she was watching from was being slowly eroded. It was surely a painful wound to bear. Lawrence flexed his arm to pull Holo closer to him.

“No one can definitively say whether you're right or wrong.”

She smelled faintly of dust, probably dragged back with her from the storeroom.

“You've had a mind to give up your life for your ideals before, haven't you?”

She didn't respond until some time had passed. She gently nodded.





“Just think: even if you're stuck in the mud, you're still the Wisewolf, right?”

She wouldn't be happy until she knew what became of her friends, but it wouldn't do for her to just waste away in front of their graves. Regret wasn't going to cut it. Hoping for time to reverse in order to get a chance to fight, and fighting to avoid repeating one's mistakes in the future - these were very different things.

She nodded. She wasn't a child, nor was she stupid. It was just difficult to contain such emotions.

“And it's not like you're the only one suffering.”

Her ears leapt up in response.

He smiled; he wasn't teasing.

“When you feel miserable, so do I.”

As a lonely trader, he'd never had the chance to say something like this to anyone. Obviously, he'd never heard such a line from anyone else either. But in his weaker moments he'd always hoped that one day he'd get the chance to say such a line. After all, if he died alone, he'd never get the chance; and that would never change. The dead just lay in their tombs. It was only while he was alive that he could see her eyes.

“Fool.”

She whispered, as though unsure who to direct her statement at; she could just as easily have been directing it at herself.

“At your service. But now what will you do?”

She seemed aghast at his reminder.. she'd left Cole on his own, after all. Despite knowing she must have her reasons, she left him on his own. Knowing the boy, he'd just continue rummaging. Even if she wasn't upset with him, the longer he was left alone, unable to find whatever it was he was looking for, the more upset he would become.

She finally replied.

“I shall go apologize.”

“You should.”

Being spoke to as though she was a child made her break free of his grasp with a toothy smile.

Time always flowed forward, and one couldn't be certain their choices would be the correct ones, but at least one could enjoy the present and make every day count.

But those weren't words Lawrence needed to say to someone who was well aware of that wisdom. All he could do was continue reading his book.

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“Ms. Fran Bonilly has returned.”

Lawrence tapped Holo's knee lightly and stood up. He turned to see Hugh, who beamed him a suspiciously wide grin. But as Lawrence mulled over the wisdom of smiling like that in front of a wolf, a petite girl suddenly popped out of Hugh's shadow.

He was at a loss for words; he just didn't know what to say to the person he beheld. Before him stood a perfectly ordinary girl, bearing neither Holo's wolf ears nor Huskins' horns - only distinguished by the odd color of her skin and eyes.

“This is the merchant who seeks me?”

Her voice was melodic, and her diction hinted at a proper education. Of the many kinds of beauty in the world, this was the first time Lawrence had come across hers.

With black hair, black eyes, tanned skin (common in the beach-filled lands of the south) her beauty seemed to mask her true identity as an enchantress; there was an incredibly mysterious charm about her.

Hers were the qualities of the people living in the hellishly hot sandy lands of the south. Her kind was counted as fearless - even in the face of Holo's true form. Lawrence swallowed before finally introducing himself..

“I am Kraft Lawrence.”

She smiled and nodded.

“And I am Fran Bonilly.”

“Let's have a seat.”

They all sat down at Hugh's suggestion, with Holo dragging Cole to join them. He seemed rather taken by the mysterious charms of Fran.

“Then how may I be of service?”

Desert-dwellers had their own language, yet Fran spoke the northern tongue with a practiced style that spoke well of her education. She didn't seem especially stubborn; perhaps they had been worried over nothing Lawrence thought.

“We're actually heading to the north, but only know the name of our ancient destination. Hence we came here seeking you, who are familiar with the northern legends.”

After seriously and carefully listening to Lawrence, she calmly questioned him.

“And what is that destination?”

“Yoitsu.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“That is quite a remotely ancient legend.”

“Then you do know where it is?”

Lawrence was only half-acting, but Fran didn't react to the half that was truly from his heart. An enchantress would never be swayed that easily.

“Quite.. yet there are few who could draw you a map of the north.”

“Of course we will pay you appropriately.”

His foot was stomped by Holo the moment he finished. But the damage was done. Holo seemed to have understood Fran's character.

“Appropriately?”

Fran was surprised. Hugh buried his face in his hands from his perch behind her.

“Then you have my thanks. Fifty Lumione should be appropriate.”

Her tone was that of an artist inexperienced in the art of bargaining. Had she already bewitched Lawrence? He was annoyed at himself, but time wasn't going to turn back and paying fifty Lumione wasn't appropriate at all. She'd played him like a child.

He was beside himself, baffled by how he could have slipped like that. He just hadn't expected anything like that from her. And there was nothing he could say. But despite badly wanting to say something, it was Fran's clear voice that was first heard.

“However, because of that, I'll draw one for you at no charge.”

“Wha?”

His mask had fallen off completely. He heard Holo sigh in disappointment. Once a wheel fell off the cart, it was difficult to put it back on. And yet, it wasn't him who Fran was staring at, but Holo.

“You look like a nun.”

“..that's Holo..”

Not even Holo realized Fran was talking to her. Lawrence stared in shock for a second before he caught himself and replied with obvious surprise.

“Ah, Holo! I see.. it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Fran Bonilly.”

Holo, the self-styled Wisewolf, was always calm when on the prowl and always took her time.

“Oh, is there some way I might be of service?”

“Well, if you truly are a nun I would ask for your help.”

It was Hugh's turn to be nervous when he heard Fran say that - he probably knew what she was asking for. He tried to speak to her, but was stopped. This was the typical kind of interaction with an artist who felt she wasn't being well-served.

“Then I shall do what I can.”

Fran didn't smile at Holo's response, but craned her neck instead.

“It's nothing that arduous. Then.. Holo, Lawrence and..”

“Oh, uh.. I'm Cole.”

Fran nodded at his reply, then continued.

“..and Cole.”

Just what was she planning?

“There won't be any problem if you three go with me.”

Hugh was signaling to Lawrence desperately with his eyes, clearly begging him to not agree.

“I would like you all to come with me to Tarsig for my investigation.”

“..to Tarsig?”

“Indeed. Hugh surely has told you that I have returned for that very reason. I wish for you to come with me to investigate that legend.”

That was it? Lawrence didn't know how to react. From Hugh's face, it was clearly more complex than she was letting on. Lawrence wasn't under her spell anymore, so he knew better than to



reply immediately.. even if it annoyed her.

That was when Holo spoke.

“And then you shall draw us the map, yes?”

“Yes. But only once we've learned and proved the truth behind the legend.”

Lawrence knew why Holo was smiling: Fran was clever. This was a surefire way to spark Holo's interest and ignite her passion. Learning of legends, proving they're true.. Holo wouldn't be able to resist such an adventure. She'd even resort to violence. Yet she remained silent, as if she didn't even have to say anything.

“Well, then let's do this.”

“My thanks to you all.”

Fran stared at the ground as she stood up, then spoke with Hugh expressionlessly as his face betrayed how badly he wanted her to stay.

“How are the preparations for my quest?”

“Oh, uh.. everything's set..”

“Then let us leave tomorrow, Lawrence. Can you drive a wagon?”

Lawrence nodded and, noticing her desire to keep talking, beat her to it to try to save some face.

“Very well then, let's leave tomorrow.”

Fran smiled, perhaps amused by his desire to save face. But it was the smile of an innocent maiden; Lawrence had lost yet again. It was easy to win over someone acting stubborn, but not when faced with such a smile - that's exactly why Holo was so tough to beat. He resolved to be even more serious, knowing that Fran could smile like that. He'd been given a completely different impression of her by Keeman and Hugh.

“Hugh.”

Hugh stood up tall when he heard his name.

“Please send dinner to my room. I must prepare for the trip.”

“V-very well, but..”

“But?”

She wore the same kind of smile Holo often did, where only her mouth was smiling. Hugh obediently nodded and stopped talking.

“Please be so good as to explain the details to them.”

Fran left with that parting shot.

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The tail beside him was swollen, but far more horrible was the smile. Lawrence knew there was nothing he could say to excuse himself.

“Sorry about that.”

“Idiot.”

Holo wouldn't even look at him - a deity's anger wasn't cheap. Cole nervously shuffled away to the other end of the room, but she still remained silent. Perhaps sensing the awkwardness, Hugh broke that silence.

“Her daring and that smile.. I too suffer from them. She is an exceptionally stubborn smith. I had to chase after her in towns - even up in the mountains - for her help, and the only reason she finally listened to agreed was when I saved her from danger. So, if it's any consolation, you're lucky you can even speak to her on the same level.”

He was clearly aiming that sentence at Holo, who nodded before finally wiping the terrible smile off her face.

“So what's so special about Tarsig?”

Hugh shook his head at Lawrence, now that he'd finally relaxed a little.

“It's just your everyday ordinary village.”

“Then why..”

Hugh stared at the ground for a while before raising his eyes; he was choosing his words carefully.

“That myth of forests and lakes is just as ordinary as the village. It's said that an angel walked on the river flowing from that lake, whereupon the howls of beasts trumpeted from the sky and a golden door opened up. Then the angel ascended up through that door, as if on a reversed waterfall.”

That was ordinary. But Hugh wasn't finished.

“But there's a bit more to it than that.”

“There's more?”

Hugh nodded.

“A witch. I don't know the details, I just hear that it's famous upstream in Lenos. Apparently a nun came to live at Tarsig, but she turned out to be a witch. I believe it's only a rumor, since the lord of that area is very loyal to the Church. But even if there was no witch..”

“Hmm.. I see. Then the villagers there don't take kindly to outsiders, do they?”

Hugh nodded again.

“Fran asked for you three to join her because she knows she'll get nothing if she goes on her own. Her skin is strange enough in these parts.”

That was true. Even Hugh, who had a lifespan much longer than humans, wouldn't have met

many with her tanned skin, let alone Lawrence.

“Is she from the desert?”

“So I've heard. But her parents died before she could even remember them, and she was raised by a rich moneychanger in the Duchy of Anglo. She somehow ended up as a silversmith, and she jokes about being a slave. But knowing her character..”

Lawrence knew what he meant. The way she spoke, Fran seemed like someone born with social status. But slaves.. they led varied lives, depending on their masters. Some ended up serving wealthy and kind families, while some adopted sons were treated worse than slaves.

This was all quite close to the information Keeman had given Lawrence, albeit slightly different. And yet the pieces fit.

“She seems quite daring.”

“Indeed, which is why I've always suspected her to be from a line of warriors. But she's a puzzle, regardless. Oh dear, what are we talking about?”

“Hmm.. in any case, it's not something I'll speak of to others.”

Hugh nodded, and Lawrence changed back to their main topic.

“Mr. Athner, you seemed rather concerned about that village.. is it that dangerous?”

Many villages weren't welcoming to visitors, and each had their own reasons. If they received few visitors to begin with, then every visitor would seem suspicious to them. The slightest rumors of a witch would be enough to set them off.

“To be honest, I've no idea. They're not on any trade route, and never come here. Few in the city ever go there, and so they're like a cask - you put food in, then forget all about it.”

What an odd metaphor. You'd be afraid to open the lid eventually, for fear of what you'd find inside.

“What? You feel it is dangerous, even with me here?”

Holo broke the tense atmosphere, making them look at each other (and probably with the same thought).

“It's not like we have any say in the matter, since you've already decided. But still..”

“Then let us just up and do it. Damnation, we are but her lapdogs now, yet we are paying fifty gold coins for the privilege. A daring girl, indeed.”

Had Holo been angry, Lawrence would have had words to say. But she was smiling.

“What is more, that bold girl is the one with our information about the north, yes? That is what old man Huskins said, is it not?”

It was indeed.

“But she cannot get everything she wants. Such a small brain can only store so much, and she only has one. So let us bide our time to bite it off!”

It was a smooth, well-prepared speech, but it wasn't like Holo to say such things. One would only say such things with a smile in the presence of those who were willing to challenge them. Knowing this, Lawrence was left without any room to maneuver.

“This it is decided. Oh, and Hugh?”

“Yes!”

He sat up straight in response, making her smile.

“If we make that arrogant thing so angry that she never wishes to trade again..”

The way she spoke made it seem quite likely that Hugh would in fact suffer that blow.. what was she after? They stared at her in anticipation..

“If that happens.. well.. I shall apologize.”

Hugh was an accomplished merchant, but when he heard that his smile melted into an honest

one. He smacked his belly and replied.

“Just like a proper wolf!”

“Mm.”

It was watching a play. But between a wolf and sheep, it was a miraculous production, thought Lawrence.

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A day later, they were all sitting in an Athner Company wagon, heading north to Tarsig village. There was a pile of meat, bread, onions, garlic, salt and wine behind them to one side, and a stack of firewood and blankets beside that. Lawrence was on the opposite end, holding the reins, with Holo and Cole at the rear. Fran was on her own horse, knowing the directions.

It felt like such a long time since Lawrence had been on a wagon that he didn't feel like himself.

“That witling little girl.. who does she think she is?”

Holo was muttering to herself as she stuffed herself with bread.

“Is the bread really that delicious?!”

Lawrence turned as he snapped, and without meaning to he frightened Cole. The boy always waited to be handed food, but for once he'd been bold enough to reach into the sack of bread on his own.

“Uh, not you.. you've only had two, haven't you? That creature next to you is on its sixth.”

He brusquely pointed at Holo, and Cole's eyes darted back and forth between them and the sack of bread. Finally he nodded; a destitute lad like him could never be expected to resist fresh rolls with butter. By contrast, Holo was, well, wolfing the bread down. She tore at the edges of the bread before opening wide to devour the final bite. The white air aura around her was her own breath.

It was probably a mistake to have such fine food on an open wagon in such cold weather. Cole



was beyond resistance, and Lawrence could barely hold back after eating one of the delicious loaves. He feared spoiling himself and being unable to return to his lonely traveling life afterward.

“If only you became an artist, we might be eating bread like this every day.”

“You mean because I can draw simple graphs and charts and pictures of my dream shop?”

Not so long ago, he'd been sitting on a wagon on his lonesome, even willing to stop and pick up coins from ditches. Each time he'd earned a bit of profit, he would spread out a piece of paper and draw that dream shop.

“Well.. if you put it that way..”

Ever since he picked Holo up, he'd left his dream off on the side. She bowed and came up behind him, placing some bread in his mouth. Her lofty manner earned her no thanks, but it didn't earn any scorn, either. It was easy for him to smile and swallow the bread when he knew how well they understood each other.

“Hey Cole, can you draw?”

Cole flinched, as if he was seriously about to jam the bread in his hands into his ragged pockets. He seemed too embarrassed to want to be the center of attention, and sat there, mystified. Lawrence couldn't help but laugh at his nervousness, and Holo quickly reacted with her usual mischief, stuffing a second piece of bread into his other pocket. Of course, she didn't forget to flash him an evil smile.

“Well.. um.. I guess I can draw some angels and spirits..”

“From copying books?”

It seemed to embarrass Cole to hear that, though he smiled at Holo and nodded at Lawrence.

“Yeah, the poor kids all helped with copying books. I usually pressed the paper to make it easier to make the copies, but some of the students who actually made the copies taught me how to draw a little.”

Cole had been in the south studying, hoping to get a foothold into the Church power structure. He wanted to protect his village's beliefs from the Church's influence. That was really what he seemed best-suited for; compared to him adventuring, one could picture him hunched over a desk in careful study. If he'd received a better education from a rich family, he'd surely become famous one day. Now, he was looking and Holo and speaking.

“And you..? Well, I guess there's no need to ask.”

If Holo picked up a pencil she'd probably draw an astonishingly detailed picture.

“Hmm. I do not draw. It is not as though I can eat an apple that I draw.”

She was devouring another piece of bread as she spoke.

“In the end, it seems that Fran's skills are top-rate for her to freely ask for such a price. Especially if she's always going off to different places to investigate myths.”

Lawrence calmly talked as he was stared at the plain ahead of them. The mountain didn't seem to be getting any nearer, even after all this time riding.

“She's probably seen her share of disputes. The northern lands are still being fought over, and keep going from religion to superstition, and back to religion again. It never ends. It's a bit risky to chase after myths because of that, so maybe it really is reasonable for her to ask for so much.”

It was more challenging to find good stone the further north one went. Even the larger buildings were usually made of wood. One wouldn't see saints on stained glass or large statues in front of stone churches, so the Church needed to use imagery to promote their faith. And thus, paintings were always in demand, and painters could profit handsomely.

“So I really admire her.”

Lawrence stroked his beard as he muttered that under his breath.

“Well, I have done enough admiring for one day.”

She patted her swollen belly and began looking for a blanket.

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That night they slept on the dried yellow grasses of the plains. Walking on foot wasn't much slower than taking a carriage, so they ended up at the same place they would have if they were walking.. a spot people obviously used for campfires. The grass was trimmed, and runes of fires were written all around. There was even a round log, perfectly shaped to sit upon. The previous users of that spot were obviously grateful. One end of the log was flattened and carved with runes of thanks.

It was so cold that night that their bread was reduced to a block of ice. They huddled around the fire, warming their food so it could be eaten. Even without any wind, it was as cold as a snowstorm. They looked like birds perched together on the log. Sharing one blanket would, after all, be warmer than each of them having their own.

As to why there were only three people under the blanket instead of four, Fran remained in the wagon.

“Here, the stone's warm now.”

Lawrence had placed a stone into the fire pit for a time, then wrapped it in a piece of cloth and handed it to Fran. She was using her luggage as a makeshift pillow, lying there quietly staring up at the sky. Beside her was some bread and cheese, but she seemed so engrossed in her stargazing that she'd forgotten all about them.

When he handed her the stone, her hand finally left the blanket. As it did, he caught a glimpse of paper underneath. Lawrence too had stuffed paper in his clothing as improvised insulation, on those nights where he couldn't light a fire. Fran seemed quite accustomed to travel as well.

“You're not gonna join us around the fire?”

Fran placed the warm stone under her blanket, then replied to him while looking up at the sky.

“I won't be able to see as well.”

I see, thought Lawrence. He nodded. Fire kept animals away, but not humans. And no one knew if they were friend or foe. It was harder to see in the pitch black when one's eyes were

accustomed to the fire light. Perhaps she wasn't just used to traveling, but was a rather accomplished traveler instead.

“So..”

Fran turned in response, but obviously wasn't going to try any harder than that. He continued.

“..what’s the plan when we arrive in Tarsig tomorrow?”

He'd lost their first match at Hugh's company yesterday, so she probably wasn't going to trust in his intellect. Indeed, her eyes reflected an intent to keep as much information from him and his companions as possible, in spite of asking for their help, and so he was deferring to her as respectfully as possible. And yet, after staring at him for a while she smiled and closed her eyes in understanding.

“That’s up to you.”

That was quite a shock to Lawrence, who realized she was probably testing him. He responded right away.

“Then I'll introduce you as a silversmith and Holo as a nun from the Church. Will that do?”

“..that should be fine.”

From her slight hesitation she probably intended to do so herself.

“So Holo is a nun on pilgrimage, and Cole is her guide. I'm the merchant they hired to take and represent them. How about that?”

“Okay.”

She agreed, but with a smile. His irritation compelled him to ask why.

“Alright, what is it?”

“..it's nothing. It just feels like I'm in an acting troupe. I wonder if I could pass for a nun as well.”

She really had a knack for objective manipulation. That's why Lawrence lost so easily to her the first time; it was like there was a second copy of her there, and yet she made it feel natural.

“So where are we supposed to be from?”

Lawrence was already trying to fill in those questions in his head, so he could reply right away.

“Ruinheigen. That should do, right? There’s a lot of churches there, so a lot of parties like ours set out from there. It should be convincing enough if we get our stories straight.”

“..”

Her eyes finally opened, staring at him. As he was wondering whether he'd misspoken, she gazed back up at the sky and spoke.

“But that's so far away..”

Relief washed over him, hearing that.

“A lie that can't be proven false might as well be the truth. It's far enough away that we'll be alright.”

She nodded, but didn't avert her gaze from the stars.

“Is there where your base is?”

Base? What an odd choice of words.. did Lawrence look like a thief or a mercenary?

“I was a peddler in the south, when Holo hopped into my wagon one day. She..”

He paused to look back at Holo, who was still drinking on the log. Only Cole seemed to be paying attention to them, so he turned back and completed his sentence.

“..She told me she wanted to travel north and asked me to take her. As for Cole, we met him on the Roam river on our way to Gerube. He just kind of fell into our laps.”

It was obvious that Fran was listening closely, even if she was just lying there with her eyes

closed. At length, she spoke again.

“Then why do you want a map of the north?”

She looked over at him, with the stars reflecting in her eyes. Lawrence had always heard that stubborn people were always kinder in the end, but he didn't try to take advantage of that fact. He simply chose his words carefully for best effect.

“Well, because the only memory she has of her home in the north is the name 'Yoitsu.’”

Fran didn't look away.

“I see.”

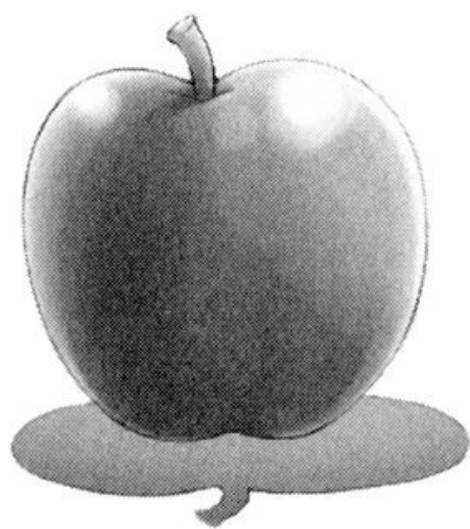
Her eyes finally closed and she turned away, sighing. She was probably hoping to sleep, judging from how casually she was ending their conversation. She was proving to be a tough egg to crack, but in a typical manner. If she was just being stubborn as an affectation, then it wouldn't make sense to get upset by her actions. With that thought, he turned to quietly leave, and heard her once more.

“Then I'll leave things up to you tomorrow.”

He nodded; it seemed she had her own expectations of him. She still fell asleep quickly though.

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## Chapter 3

All of a sudden, the wagon swerved violently. That probably woke Holo up.

“Are we there yet?”

She turned to face him with a yawn. The mountains were much more prominent now. The snow was thicker as well. Even in the winter, the trees were still green here. The meadow, despite looking flat, was actually a very gentle slope, and looking back they could see just how high up they'd climbed. Off the road, the snow was even higher, and it was noticeably colder here than in Gerube.

“From what I heard, after the next turn we'll be there after a straight jaunt.”

The grass grew up to their knees on this golden path, and it extended far off to the east. If they weren't taking the next turn, they would head back down past the foot of the mountains. But they stopped before that, to confirm their roles and plans for when they entered Tarsig.

Holo hadn't been interested the previous evening, but it was just her acting stubborn. In fact, once she'd heard the details from start to finish, her tail waved quite happily under her cloak. Fran was too impatient to go over this again, so she'd continued riding ahead of them.

“By the way, I forgot to ask, but that wasn't you in the myths, was it?”

Lawrence asked her suddenly because they were quite distant from Fran. Holo who was eating dried meat replied without interest.

“Alas, I know of no one from this region other than the girl I met at the boat party.”

“Then you don't have any idea?”

Holo shook her head, and sighed.

“I should have forced that bratty girl to just draw us the map.”

She proceeded to turn her face away as if to apologize. It was obviously an act, but if he didn't fall for it she'd get angry. Lawrence expected Cole would cheer her on, but he only smiled at

them.

“If all goes well, how will we fill the time while we wait for her?”

Holo smiled and looked up while holding Cole's hand. Given her young maiden figure, they looked almost like siblings. She couldn't fool them by pretending it wasn't an act, but on some level she did seem to want it to be true. They spoke while gazing at smoke off in the distance, probably from a chimney or furnace.

Just a short while later they arrived at the village entrance. Seeing the size of the village, Holo spoke bluntly.

“We shan't be eating much white bread, shall we?”

This village hiding under the mountains did indeed seem unlikely to have anything so posh as white bread. The cheap fences would barely keep out animals, despite being half built on the foot of the mountain. The very moment they passed by the fence they saw signs of the Church: wards for staving off evil.

Anyone unfamiliar with the witch would be amazed; normally such wards would be facing the dark mountain forests, not the plains. It was quite something to see this; like travelers watching for wolves in front of them while forgetting the thieves behind them.

And yet, it was still not as bad as Lawrence had imagined. Children laughed, goats were grazing lazily, and it otherwise looked quite normal. It brought to mind the old quote that arguments were born of misunderstandings. He jumped off the wagon and shot Fran a look, who replied softly.

“Please, go on.”

Lawrence led her horse with his left hand, and held the reins of the wagon with his right. They proceeded into the village slowly, eyeing the large piece of wood near the entrance. An old man sat there, who noticed them a moment later.

“Well, it's time to start.”

He now wore the mask of a merchant.

“Oh my, oh my.. are you travelers?”

The man seemed to be an animal-herder; a shepherd, judging from his staff.

“Hello, I am a traveling merchant. My name is Kraft Lawrence.”

“Oh, a merchant?”

The man frowned as he studied Lawrence. The first question that would have popped into his mind was “why would you come to such a far-off village.” The children noticed them a moment later, followed by adults wondering about their unusual guests. Some watched them through their windows, others from their doorway. They all had their eyes fixed on Lawrence.

“We come from Ruvinheigen in the far south.”

“Ruvin..”

“Ruvinheigen.”

The man just stared at Lawrence, without so much as a nod. He looked more like a clumsy doll made of bark than a man.

“The City of Churches.”

The old man moved. He looked at Fran on the horse. Then he looked at Holo and Cole. Suddenly he sighed. As his eyes met Lawrence’s again they were full of worry.

“Why are people from the Church.. coming to our village?”

Lawrence revealed an expression that could calm a crying child and replied.

“Hmm? There is a rumor that an angel once visited this place. Being loyal servants of God, we were hoping you could tell us more?”

There was no reaction, so Lawrence decided to break the ice with a joke.

“Don't tell me the angel's still here now?”

“No! How would that even be possible?!”

Hearing the old man's sudden shout shocked not only Lawrence, but the animals around them cried out. Even the flightless chickens beat their wings furiously in an attempt to flee. The old man stared him right in the eyes, so Lawrence tried to calm him down.

“Actually, we're just passing by and wanted some directions.. that's all. It's really not related to that at all.”

The old man was so grim that it made Lawrence nervous, but thankfully the man seemed to be restraining his anger now.

“Just passing by? Not related?”

“Y-yes.. so please don't over-react..”

The old man wasn't saying anything else, prompting Lawrence to raise his hands in surrender. The man's breaths were short and raspy, and his lips were quivering with emotional turmoil. He badly seemed to want to tell Lawrence off, but his over-reaction was supremely confusing.

Just then, several men started walking out from the village. Lawrence heard clothes rustle behind him.. probably Cole. He seemed to notice, as well as Holo, that the men were carrying weapons. Only Fran sat on her horse, looking down at the ground without moving. Lawrence turned around to calm Cole and Holo, in case they mistook the gesture.

Had they been brazenly walking up with weapons, Lawrence would have fled. The reason he didn't was the same reason Fran wasn't nervous - their hands were bloody, and they seemed troubled rather than wrathful. They were likely butchering an animal, and theirs was not the look of someone with a killing intent.

“You're travelers?”

The stoutest of the men questioned them as the old man frantically tried to speak to him.

“It's alright, elder. Don't panic.”

The elder's mouth opened and closed as if unable to speak any further. It seemed the villagers were troubled just as much by the elder as they were by Lawrence and company.

“Saka!”

A woman rushed out of a house at the stout man's shout. He pointed at the elder, and she nodded. Saka immediately ran to the elder, rubbing his back after receiving him from the stout man, who then turned back to Lawrence.

“Our apologies, everyone. Are you alright?”

He sheathed his knife and casually rubbed the blood and entrails off his hands on his trousers. Town residents always seemed to somehow know who the leader of a band was, and Lawrence was surprised that this was also true for villagers who spent their lives in the mountains. He had to hand it those who survived without a care for wealth or status.

“We’re fine.. have you all heard something terrible? He seemed pretty rattled by what I said..”

As Lawrence tested the waters, the villager facing him forced himself to smile amidst the tension.

“Disasters always come in from the outside.”

He seemed to be well aware of things.. perhaps he was the village representative. Lawrence decided paying him his respects was the logical thing to do.

“Kraft Lawrence, traveling merchant, at your service.”

Lawrence held his right hand out, and the man stared at him, then his own hand for a moment. Ultimately, however, he shook Lawrence's hand.

“Uru Miura. In any case, the elder only reacts that way for three reasons: it's just that time, the tax collector's arrived, or someone asks about the village's bad rumors.”

Mountain villages had to be hunters rather than farmers. Miura had twice the build Lawrence did, and seemed full of energy. His face wasn't that of an enemy's, but steam was still wisping

off of him. Clearly he had been busily working just now. But if Lawrence lied now, it would only confirm that they had come with malicious intent.

“We’re actually here to hear the myth of the angel.”

“The angel?”

Miura frowned and stared at the rest of Lawrence's party. He soon nodded as though he'd just remembered something.

“Oh, I see! You’re asking about that.”

“Could you tell us?”

Lawrence acted humbly, and Miura replied with a unique smile blending that of a farmer's with that of a hunter's.

“Haha, now there's no need to be so polite. You've clearly heard about us in other towns. They're always quick to judge people like us as superstitious fools. Of course, there are villages like that, but not us. We'll be happy to share that story.”

If people could trust each other, they could live without fear of being cheated or thieved. But here, at least, it didn't seem like the villagers were terribly suspicious. Besides, even if they fooled Lawrence they couldn't pull the wool over Holo's ears.

“..uh, Mr. Lawrence, was it? Have you all eaten lunch?”

As a lonely traveler he wouldn't have refused a meal invitation even if he was full. But now he turned back to Fran and confirmed with his eyes. She seemed to agree with his assessment.

“No, we haven't.”

“Then come join us, and enjoy the deer we've just slaughtered.”

He swept his eyes across the village as he spoke, perhaps hoping someone would agree to host Lawrence and company.

“Vino! We need to tan the hide.. how about we borrow your hearth?”

“Well, if that's the will of God!”

Vino played along, obviously knowing how much work it took to tan hides. Few would invest that kind of effort when it was so much simpler to just welcome some guests for a glass of wine and some meat around the hearth. But Miura frowned.

“I won't let you off the hook that easily.”

Miura wasn't just tall, but also old enough to be taken seriously. Vino only shrugged; clearly they were just joking around.

“Alright then.. and lay off the wine, will you?”

It felt like such a peaceful place that Lawrence was taken in and smiled happily. He also caught a look of nostalgia in Fran's eyes, making him wonder why someone who grew up in a wealthy family would miss something like that.. maybe from her many trips? As he wondered, Vino suddenly called out to him, and Fran's smile quickly vanished.

“Please come with me.”

~~~

They followed Vino to a rather typical farming village home. It was surrounded by a typical farming village field, with typical farming village goats and chickens grazing lazily within it. In the doorway sat a woman with a baby on her back and a shawl covering her head, determinedly grinding flour.

Vino greeted her casually and kissed the baby, revealing their relationship. The woman then stood and wiped her hands on her apron, at first surprised to see Lawrence and company, then nodding seriously like a diplomat.

“I shall fetch some wood and light a fire. Please go inside and have a seat.”

Lawrence nodded to Vino and walked inside onto the tamped-soil floor. A hanging stove was



fixed to the ceiling, with several holes in the roof as its vent. It wouldn't be a surprise to see mischievous birds nesting up there. Raincoats and straw baskets were in one corner of the home, making it look all the more typical. Just the sight of the almost-dead fire, barely flickering on the hearth, was enough to make one feel even colder.

Fran seemed quite comfortable to play the guest; she sat next to the hearth without hesitation. As Cole and Holo both pawed at the strings of onions hanging from the rafters, Vino returned with an armload of wood.

“You guys grind flour with your bare hands?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, kinda. Just set your things off to the side somewhere. I'll get the fire going again, so we can cook up some meat.”

He indeed got the fire going again, with such skill that it was raging as he blew into it in no time. He took a moment to nod in satisfaction before rushing back out nervously.

“So, what was that all about?”

“Hmm?”

Holo didn't even turn to ask Lawrence, she just continued staring out the window, presumably wondering why he'd asked about the flour.

“Nothing much, I just find it odd to grind flour by hand when there's a river nearby.”

Vino's wife was milling by hand with two large stones. Grinding it that way should be provide enough for a single family, though the quality might be a bit rough. Of course, if they used a watermill they'd be able to grind far more.

Since bread needed to be baked daily, villages next to rivers would normally build a water mill. It wasn't free of course; the landlord would usually commission it, and then tax the residents for its use. Thus, if they ground their flour by hand, the landlord wouldn't be collecting taxes.. it made Lawrence a bit suspicious. Holo nodded, though he wasn't sure if she felt the same way.. in fact, she seemed to have lost interest already.

Lawrence sat across the hearth from Fran, with Holo and Cole now joining them. Lawrence gave

Holo a nudge, pointing at Fran so she would sit next to her. Holo seemed unwilling, but sat down anyhow. For her part, Fran hadn't moved since she'd sat down, but Lawrence had caught her peeking at him as he mentioned watermills. He decided he might as well ask Holo about it later.

Not long afterward, Vino returned with a large pile of meat. He grabbed a pan hanging from a hook, tossed in some vegetables, garlic, and few cow kidneys, and set down a huge plate of venison next to it. Holo was fidgeting already, despite having stuffed herself full of bread earlier.

Since it wasn't polite to just eat all of their food, Lawrence had brought them a gift. It wasn't dried meat or cheese, but salt. Given the surprise of Vino and his wife, it was clear that there was a shortage here, like in many villages. Even though they could catch this much venison, salt to preserve it was hard to come by. Of course, Holo would probably brush him off if he tried to point out that this could be a new business opportunity.

"It should be alright now."

Hearing Vino say this, his wife added venison into the pan she had been stirring. Holo would be upset at a meatless hot pot, but the smell of cooking meat seemed to calm her. Soon, Vino's wife was placing the cooked meat onto the plates of Cole, Lawrence and Holo, in order of who was nearest to her. But when she finally reached the quiet Fran, there came a solemn response.

"I.. cannot eat meat."

Vino's wife gasped in shock, not knowing how to react. A village without a church like this probably wasn't aware that nuns abstained from eating meat. She turned to Holo nervously, who seemed to be on the verge of tears, with a look on her face saying "you mean I have to go without?"

Vino quickly smoothed things over.

"Ah, that's right.. I've heard that God ordains that you must go without.. but you can have vegetables, yes?"

Holo nodded, so he continued.

“This deer only ate grass since the day it was born, so it might as well be a plant. As such..”

He grabbed the pan of venison from his wife and piled another 5 pieces onto Holo's plate. Despite reaching over to put some on Fran's plate, she smilingly refused. Lawrence suspected he would put it on her plate anyhow, but ultimately she ended up with a bowl full of vegetable soup.

However, it wasn't because he was touched by Fran's devotion; everyone could tell that he was surprised by her skin color. And yet, no one called him out on his reaction. Even people living in a large and prosperous town would react that way. And he recognized his own impoliteness, surely realizing that it would harm his reputation. So he smiled.

“Let's eat.”

Cole grabbed his plate, but ate slowly.. perhaps savoring a taste not unlike what he would eat in his own hometown.

“It's delicious.”

It was quite an ordinary statement, but Vino and his wife were still delighted to hear the praise.

“We just caught it this morning.. you guys were quite lucky.”

“Definitely.. meat this delicious is hard to come by in a village.”

Villagers really only needed to see people eating and appreciating their food to be happy, so when Holo had quickly wolfed down her bowl and handed it back to Vino for seconds, he was amazed. After piling it back up, he laughed spectacularly.

“So, you're here because of the angel myth?”

He poked at the fire on the hearth, and sparks rained up toward the ceiling. Villagers didn't usually play with fire that casually, but it seemed they were a bit more carefree here. Houses were far apart, and rebuilding a home wouldn't be a problem.

“Yeah, although we heard some of it back in town..”

Lawrence set his plate down and cleared his throat, then introduced Fran to Vino.

“This is sister Fran. She's basically our de-facto leader, and is after the truth at all costs.”

“Oh? Why would a nun care about this..”

“Sister Fran isn't just any nun from a convent; she's also a silversmith. The Bishop commissioned her to create a piece in the image of the angel.”

“I see..”

Fran continued to stare at the ground, despite Vino's glance in her direction. She looked, for all intents and purposes, like a proper nun. Compared to her, Holo kept wolfing down her food, only stopping when it was her turn to be introduced. She then swallowed the meat in her maw and finally put on a nun's appearance.

“And this is Holo. The Bishop asked her to accompany Sister Fran. This lad's Cole.. he's our guide from the north. I'm nothing special, I was just asked to be their representative.”

Lawrence coughed and continued.

“So I hope you can tell us about it, and..”

He leaned forward as if to ask for a favor.

“..please take us to where the legend took place, if that's okay.”

Vino popped a bit of raw meat into his mouth. In frigid areas it wasn't that rare, so Cole clearly wasn't surprised, but Holo was.

“Well, it should be okay, but..”

Legendary spots were usually revered by villagers, so Lawrence suspected his request might cause a stir. But things were going surprisingly smoothly.. Vino seemed more concerned about them than the legend.

“Is that wise? I noticed your luggage out there, were you planning on spending a night in the

witches' forest?"

"The.. witch's forest?"

"It's where the rumor originated. You've heard about the witch, haven't you?"

Vino was drinking with Lawrence, and had stopped while pouring himself another cup. He frowned, probably remembering Miura's request that he lay off the wine. Lawrence finally had a chance to learn a bit more about the witch.

"Well.. all we were told is that there was a witch.."

"Ah, then the rumor's finally dying down.. well, it's not like it's a big deal. If you want to go to the forest, I'll take you. It's pretty close by anyway."

Fran nodded at Lawrence.

"If that's the case, then please do."

"Haha.. my pleasure. After all, because of you guys I've been able to sit here and drink, while the others keep working. It's quite tiring to butcher deer, you know."

One had to clean the meat, skin, bones and entrails.. and that was just the start. The meat had to be cut, the skin had to be tanned before it rotted away, and the entrails had to be cooked before they could be processed into sausage. Tendons and ligaments had to be picked out carefully to be able to use them for belts and strings.. and it all had to be done promptly. It was indeed an arduous process.

Vino downed the last of his wine at once and continued.

"Well, then before we head out, let's chat about the legend. Otherwise we'll have to talk when we're in the forest."

From his attitude it felt like he didn't harbor any particular dislike of the forest, besides considering it an unlucky place.

"So how much do you know?"

“That there's a lake nearby, where beasts howled, and then a door opened in the heavens and the angel flew up into it..”

Vino raised a spoon and eyed Holo and Cole as Lawrence spoke, silently asking them if they wanted more. Fran was still holding her bowl and drinking her soup (which she was slowly savoring), but Holo and Cole merrily passed him their plates. Vino happily obliged.

“That's it in a nutshell. The forest has a river that comes from the lake. It happened during a cold winter, back when the village elder was just a child.”

He smiled after refilling their plates, though it seemed to be a smile of embarrassment over discussing such a story.

“It's said to have taken place on a windy day, so cold that people's ears nearly froze off. The hunters were trapped in the forest for several days when a blizzard suddenly struck, but thankfully managed to get a fire going in a charcoal-burning hut near the lake. When the snow finally ended, the moon shined out as bright as the sun. Not one cloud was in the sky, yet the wind blew fiercely and the forest was so loud that they didn't want to spend a horrible night huddled together in the hut. So they started walking for a breath of fresh air.”

Everyone listened to Vino intently as the log in the hearth crumbled.

“Just then, they heard a howl. A fierce one. They were scared, they thought they screwed up and were about to be caught by some monster of the mountains. But as they turned to run back into the hut, the howling stopped.. and when they turned to look at the lake..”

Vino's eyes shone sharply, like the eyes of a hunter. He turned those eyes up to the ceiling and continued.

“..they saw an angel, pure white, spreading his silver wings above the lake.. and then he flew up into a golden door in the heavens.”

Despite being finished, Vino kept staring at the ceiling, as if lost in his own story. He stayed that way for a little while, then poured a bit more wine in embarrassment once he'd snapped back to reality. He clearly had a soft spot for this tale.

“That's basically the whole story. It's been talked about for each generation since.”

“I see..”

They could still see the angel in their imaginations. Myth and superstitions always defied reason, but had some amazing aspect to them that made people believe in them. That's why they were passed down from generation to generation.

“But no one's seen any angels since then. I remember hearing that when the town started talking about it, our village celebrated for a while.. but these days only kids like to hear this story.”

He squinted as if laughing at himself.

“And what do you think, Mr. Vino?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think it's just a myth?”

Lawrence knew better than to ask such a dumb question, but felt compelled to ask anyway.

“Well.. who knows..”

Lawrence got the response he expected; Vino smiled and stared at his hands. He wanted to believe it, but couldn't bring himself to do so.. it was written on his face.

“We want to believe it's true.”

“I see.”

Vino smiled, as though wondering who would believe in such a thing even when the village itself didn't?

“I often go to town with Miura, so I know better than to think that a myth in a remote village like ours is true; all villages have myths like this, and it's just us wanting to deeply believe in a fairy tale. Some places even have myths of monstrous eyes in the mountains that just turn out

to be gold mines.. so I assume it's something like that here. And yet..”

Vino paused, as if tired of being suspicious. Lawrence had seen this look in other people's faces. They once believed, but as the childlike magic of legends was explained riddle by riddle, those beliefs were lost. Lawrence left his own village at a young age, so he too had the same experience. Even Cole stared sadly at Vino with understanding eyes.

Only Holo's face remained expressionless.. but that didn't mean she was calm underneath that facade.

“If the legend of the angel is just an illusion, well, then that's just too bad. It's not like we can help it.”

Vino shrugged and sipped his wine.

“The cleverer people here said the angel and its wings were probably just snow blowing fiercely in the wind, and maybe that's all it was.”

Holo and Huskins both knew what it was like to be forgotten, and how difficult it was to integrate into human society. It was tough for humans to leave behind their old beliefs, but riddles were slowly solved, miracles explained away, and secrets uncovered. Lawrence couldn't bring himself to speak; he felt sad for Vino. Everyone had moments when they wished they could relive their childhood.

“Oho.. so now I've shared our story with people from the Church, who seem to believe it more than we do. But don't get the wrong idea; it's not like the people of Tarsig have no beliefs. I may not look like it, but I do want to believe in it.”

Lawrence nodded and smiled. It was probable that they treated the myth of the angel this way to avoid thinking about the witch. If Vino was the stubbornest kind of believer, he might have fainted at the mere mention of the witch.

“But I don't really know if I should give you the impression that it's more than a myth.”

“Oh?”

Vino turned to Lawrence. He stood up suddenly, then spoke in a deliberate tone.



“The story of the witch is related to the legend.”

He didn't so much as look at Lawrence as he sheathed the knife he had eaten with. He rubbed his nose and stared off into space, with the same hunter's eyes reappearing on his face.

“Disasters come in from the outside.. that's Miura's favourite line.”

Being an outsider, Lawrence had no idea how to respond. He just asked Holo and Cole to finish eating as quickly as they could, while he and Fran prepared to leave, Fran having long since finished her soup.

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Miura and the other villagers were setting the deer's hide and entrails out in the sun in the village square. Lawrence followed Vino as he briefly went out of his way to greet them, then they left town. There was a road through the village into the forest but wagons couldn't take it, so they took a detour on the village outskirts.

Vino was leading them to a road that followed the river to the lake, but it meant walking upstream. Lawrence had heard that no one was using this route anymore, and indeed it was so close to the forest that it was a bit disconcerting to take it; it felt like the trees were reaching out to swallow them.

Their wagon slid along this route nonetheless, until they finally arrived at the bed of the river that carved a path through the forest.

“Just head north from here. It's quite a wide riverbed, huh? I hear the river used to fill up pretty much all of the bed in the old days.”

It was wide enough that Lawrence could lead their wagon through it, and in fact they weren't just seeing rocks covered in snow; apparently the river had been dry for quite a long time now.

“Hey, why do you guys still hunt in such cold weather? I'm kinda surprised you even managed to catch a deer.”

Vino had grown quite serious since they left the village, but that seriousness melted into proud

laughter upon hearing Lawrence ask this question.

“We can see footprints more easily in snow! But they're quite clever, and know to avoid the spots where we normally hunt in after it snows. But we're the kinds of hunters who can give a wolf a run for its money; we can turn into trees, or vanish in the snow. We're patient enough to wait until it's certain we'll catch our mark.”

Vino wore his pride on his sleeves, certainly looking nothing like the master hunter he was describing. But that made Lawrence smile, because it quite reminded him of himself. He'd never met people quite like the villagers of Tarsig, who were willing to open up to him like this despite his first encounter with them provoking their anger.

“But there's a lake, isn't there? Wouldn't it be easier to hunt the animals there?”

“Well, yeah, but that's just it: hunting hasn't been normal around here for years.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's the curse. That's why we call the forest around the lake the cursed forest, and why no one goes there.”

Vino saw how stunned Lawrence was to see him admit it, and put on a troubled expression.

“Um.. don't get the wrong idea, now.. we do say that, but it's not really the curse.”

Lawrence stole a glance at Holo, who seemed to think he was telling the truth. Apparently the villagers did keep the secret a bit closer to their hearts after all.

“To be honest, the curse is really..”

“It has to do with a nun, I hear..”

Vino turned to look at Fran, who was talking from the horse's back. She slowly turned to face him, smiling warmly and tilting her head slightly.

“Yes?”

“Ah, yes, sorry.. I don’t remember her name, but anyway, it was someone like that. She was from a town called Anos on the Woam river, or some such.”

“You mean Lenos on the Roam river?”

“Ah, that's probably it. Sounds about right. I hear she's clever and a beauty, so much so that even God wants to hear her speak.”

Holo nodded and looked over at Lawrence suggestively. Vino had a way with words, and a silver tongue when it came to pretty girls. Lawrence simply shrugged, and Holo turned away.

“Her eagerness converted a lot of people. She was just so devoted; she preached every day, and eventually she touched all the hearts in town.. and then she had nothing more to do. And so she moved on to other things.”

They were hanging on Vino’s every word, just like they had when he talked about the angel. He was quite the storyteller; which was probably why he'd been chosen to host them.

“First she started talking to birds and cats, but everyone only remembered her mercy as a saintly woman. But when she began to talk to swine and mice, opinions started to change. At some point wild dogs began to hound her, while she preached on like one possessed. People begged her to stop, but she paid them no mind. Until one day..”

A grinding noise was heard between their footfalls; Cole had clenched his fists tightly.

“..She just disappeared. Probably with those hounds.”

Vino blew into his hands as if blowing away feathers. Cole seemed to watch those imaginary feathers drift up into the sky before nervously turning back to Vino.

“Then what happened? After she’d gone?”

“Whoa, easy there. That was just how Mr. Miura saw it. Now I'll tell you my version.”

Ah, so that was what was going on, Lawrence thought. Miura had been the village representative during that time and bore witness to this strange nun.

“It was a hot summer's day, where we were roasting in the wheat fields. Bugs were everywhere in this hated time about.. ten years ago. That's when the nun arrived, wearing thick clothes in spite of the heat. Even thicker than what we would wear in winter, a train of wild dogs trailing behind her.”

On a sunny day, no sight would be stranger than a heavily-clothed nun entering the village with a pack of wild dogs. Cole nervously tugged at Holo's cloak.

“When the elder saw her, he was shocked.. he thought the angel had returned to announce the end of days. Ever since, he's been standing where you met him, busily confronting travelers.”

“That's too pitiful..”

“But nevermind.. at least he's grown quieter over time. I've still to tell you about the nun. Back then, Mr. Miura was brave enough to question her a bit.. who was she? From where? What for? And how do you think she replied?”

It was like she was standing before them right now. Vino's hoarse voice had pulled everyone into the story masterfully.

“At any rate, we soon figured out that she came about the legend of the angel at the lake, and because we wanted nothing to do with her, we immediately took her there.”

Cole swallowed deeply.

“The moment we arrived, she ordered her dogs to attack us. See? Here's the wound I received.”

Vino held his hand out to Cole, who was utterly spellbound. Even Lawrence and Holo couldn't help but take a peek, before turning to look at each other. Lawrence wore a blank expression, thinking deep down that it was just a wound from a sharpened stick.. it even looked like it had been there since he was a child. But this was quite a strange turn in the story, so neither he nor Holo could calm their interest.

“Afterward, she occupied the forest with her dogs. She took our best hunting grounds from us. Pretty terrible, huh? That's why we called her a witch, out of spite and anger. And that's basically all there is to it.”

“Then, where is this witch now?”

Vino sighed.

“No one knows.. haven't seen her in years. We're guessing she left. But it's not like anyone wants to check, so we just don't know. After all, why make God angry when we don't want to face His wrath?”

Lawrence nodded. It made sense, since a traveling merchant could just run, but it wasn't like villagers would want to risk having to abandon their homes.

“So it's been out of sight, out of mind. We don't go there anymore. So.. are you sure you want to spend a night there?”

They'd been scared off by a witch, despite having no trouble facing the terror of a dark forest. Even though "witch" was just a label, anyone would be scared by that label. Lawrence kept his cool.

“Oh, it's nothing. After all, three of us are messengers of God.”

Vino would have no trouble imagining that Fran and Holo were from the Church, but he wasn't sure about Cole.

“This lad here's a student learning to copy the Scriptures; it's quite a rare calling.”

Vino's shock was obvious, though he immediately apologized.

“Pardon my impoliteness..”

“Besides, it's dangerous enough for them to spend a night with me.”

The well-timed joke made Vino laugh out loud. But Lawrence switched right back to a somber tone.

“But, that being said..”

“Hmm?”

“If we come back to your village at night, will we be treated like evil spirits?”

Once more Vino was shocked, but this time it was into laughter.

“Haha.. of course not! We live on a mountain, so we know how badly one wants to come home. Now if it was our kids wanting to spend the night in the forest, we'd beat some sense into them.. but that would hardly work on you, would it?”

Lawrence recalled his first expedition into a forest with his mentor.

“Still, even if it's dangerous to spend the night in the mountains, the night won't last forever. I've walked around here long enough to say that with confidence.”

Vino was a proper villager to the core, it seemed. It made Lawrence smile and nod in response.

“Then I guess I'll leave you to it.”

Vino then breathed in deeply and put an end to this jovial atmosphere. They were standing on a road by the riverbed, which looked the same for as long as they could see.. but that wasn't all that far, because it turned out of sight a bit further into the forest.

“If you follow that, you'll come to a small waterfall above the lake. The hut we used for shelter isn't far from there. And, if you feel you'd rather turn back, then just go ahead.”

Vino was sending them off like a father instructing his children.

“May God go with you.”

I see, thought Lawrence, maybe the villagers are the real angels here.

There was no mud on the riverbed, just a thick layer of snow. They had no trouble making their way on the wagon. After Vino vanished from sight, Holo crawled into the driver's box.

“How upsetting.”

Those were her first words. She held a small bottle in the palm of her hand, the distilled liquor

people carried for emergency use in the winter. Lawrence's first instinct was to snatch it from her right away, but only until she glared at him.

“She knew all of that already, yet still pretended she did not.”

Fran rode ahead of them again, as if in a hurry. They knew the details of the legend now, but Fran was after the truth. By that token, of course she wouldn't have responded. But saying that wouldn't improve Holo's mood.

“You're not angry?”

He tilted his head toward her.

“Anger knows no end.”

She bit the lid of the bottle while continuing to glare at him. Surely she knew better, so maybe she was drunk? But as he debated this, she sighed and tossed the bottle back to him.

“You are terribly kind.”

“..H-hey!”

He had no time to properly reply before she returned to the back of the wagon. What was that all about? Lawrence studied the bottle and realized she hadn't drunk nearly enough to be intoxicated. Was she just being difficult on purpose? He capped the bottle and took the reigns once again.

After that incident, their ride went smoothly. When Fran finally stopped, they were in front of the hut, with the waterfall still in plain sight. It was barely trickling, but quite tall nonetheless.

The legendary hut was placed between two stunted trees; perhaps it was just that cold. Thankfully they still shielded the hut from the snow with their overhanging branches. Fran hopped off her horse and walked toward the hut. Lawrence nervously followed, remembering Vino's words that the witch had dogs at her disposal.

“Nothing.”

That was all she said after opening the door. She'd done so too quickly for anyone to stop her. Lawrence just stood there as Holo pulled Cole over to them, who was looking around in worry.

“She seems to know how things work.”

Even Holo couldn't hate everything about Fran, and Lawrence agreed with her assessment. It was like Fran had been there before.

The hut looked old, but not abandoned. There wasn't much dust inside, and the wood hadn't rotted.. and yet, Vino had said no one from the village came here anymore. Was he lying?

“Mr. Lawrence, please bring our luggage indoors.”

Fran spoke, her face half-hidden behind the door. Lawrence felt like he was an apprentice all over again.

“Now.”

“Don't be upset, now.”

Lawrence placed his hand on Holo's shoulder as he said that and walked by her, which earned him a kick. But at least that kick also freed Cole from his fear, so Lawrence consoled himself with that fact. He took their bags indoors one by one, where Fran had pointed. They had food for the four of them, wine, blankets, and firewood for days. It was quite a lot of luggage, so he was sweating by the time he finished.

The hut was just large enough to accommodate them and their luggage. It was a bit musty, but there were no cobwebs nor the smell of rot, nor even any holes in the ceiling - clear signs that someone visited here regularly. Their last visit seemed likely to be before the last snowfall. Lawrence wiped the sweat from his brow as he considered this, watching Holo enter an adjacent room by brushing aside the animal-hide curtain that served as a door.

“Where did that brat go?”

Of course she meant Fran, so Lawrence pointed outside.

“She's getting her smithing tools on her own; maybe she doesn't want me to touch them.”



“Hmm.”

Holo nodded.

“And Cole?”

Lawrence wondered whether to joke about her having left him on his own again, but thought better of it.

“You’ll find out when you come back out here.”

Holo just let the animal hide curtain fall back down as she turned back into the room. As Lawrence was wondering what was in that room, Fran entered the hut with a chisel, hammer, rasp, bellows, and anvil. Each of them was small, but it seemed a lot to carry at once. She's wrapped them up nicely into a bundle on her back, and looked to Lawrence like she was ready to go on an adventure, no matter how difficult it proved to be.

“Are the others inside?”

“Oh, here, let me help you with that..”

It was more difficult to put down heavy and cumbersome objects, but Fran shook her head. She bent her knees like this was something she did all the time, and set her bundle down on the floor. Lawrence's mentor had always advised for him to use his knees like that instead of his waist or he'd regret it later, so Lawrence found himself wondering where she'd learned that little bit of apprentice's wisdom.

“What've you got there?”

Fran didn't reply, and just pulled out the tools needed to light a fire. She just turned to him with the tools in her arms and eyed the fire. Apparently, she wanted him to light the fire. Anyone seeing this would think he was some pathetic manservant, but as he walked up to the hearth with tools in-hand, she finally answered him.

“You'll see soon enough. We're heading out.”

“..Huh?”

He didn't get the chance to ask her who "we" meant before she ran into the room behind the animal skin. What was she talking about? Lawrence pondered what it might be as he lit a fire, until he heard two people walking up to him. Looking up, he saw Fran pulling Cole behind her.

“You'll be cold wearing those. Change into these.”

She pulled a thick pair of shoes from their luggage and handed them to Cole. They were made of tanned fur, several layers, and looked rather expensive. Cole took them, but looked worriedly at Lawrence. It's not like she's eating you, thought Lawrence, and nodded at Cole.

“We should be back by evening. Would you mind preparing supper?”

Lawrence sucked in his pride, reasoning that he had no reason to be stubborn if he was begging her to draw him a map. And besides it felt like she was slowly opening up to them, so he happily accepted. Had Holo been there she would have probably flown into a rage. Fran nodded and waited for Cole to change his shoes, then took his hand and left with him.

After lighting the fire, Lawrence stood up and walked around. The only decoration here was the dirt on the ground. It was so barren it made him feel cold, but at least it was tidy. There wasn't even any sign of rats. It was a bit eerie. When he finally entered the room behind the animal skin, he found Holo sitting on a chair and staring at an emblem of the Church.

“Wait.. what?”

No, that was completely wrong.. Holo was standing in front of a bookshelf, sniffing at a book. So who was that on the chair? He turned back for a better look, and the rays of sunlight poking in through the window shutters revealed someone only slightly taller than Holo. Upon closer inspection, her cloak was mended, and her hat torn.

“That should be our ‘witch’.”

Holo returned the book to the shelf, and walked up to the figure in the chair, poking it in the head.

“H-hey!”

“It does not matter, she is dried out. I expected Cole to be shocked, but he is actually quite bold.”

Dried-out corpses were common in places thick with snow. And now, Lawrence also understood why Fran wanted to drag Cole around with her.

“And yet she died looking at the sign of the Church.. some 'witch'.”

“According to Cole she is quite famous.”

“Really?”

The room was full of books and papers, so it made sense that the nun lived here. She was still praised even after she lost her mind, and to this day people came here to pay their respects. Otherwise this place wouldn't be so tidy, and the books would be gone.

Lawrence said a silent prayer before reading the papers on her desk. It was dusty, and the papers were rather old, but he could still make out the words. Apparently, there had been an investigation into her faith, but apparently she was too devoted to quit even if her faith came into question. In fact, judging from the flowers on the corner of her desk, she was too popular to be mistaken for a witch.

“Hey you.”

“Hmm?”

Holo pointed at the shelf, which she was still happily observing.



“Look here.”

“What is it?”

She was pointing at some space on the shelf.

“What, so there weren't enough books to take up all of the space?”

“Fool. What about the dust, and the fact that there looks like one book in a series is missing?”

The room was clean, but there would always be a little dust. Lawrence looked more closely and realized there was indeed less dust on that spot than on the rest of the shelf.

“I don't know when, but someone took one of the books.”

“How does that matter?”

Holo looked around in disbelief before eyeing him suspiciously.

“Surely even you can tell.. Someone has been here before us.”

She meant "here" as in the home of the witch, where Vino said no villagers would tread. But Holo didn't seem to be suggesting that he was lying, so that meant someone outside of the village had to have visited, or someone that Vino was unaware of from the village. Who else would have taken the book?

“That brat has been here too. So, you..”

She stopped talking and look up at him with pleading eyes, as if saying “be careful.”

“I know. Hey, where do you think she took Cole?”

“Hmm.. the lake, I should think.”

“Why the lake?”

“Do not ask me, I would not know.”

Given how unhappy Holo was, she was probably ordered about by Fran as well. So if even Cole wasn't free of her grip, of course Holo would be angry. But that just made Lawrence realize what she wanted to hear.

"Well then, shall we join them?"

Hearing this, she finally smiled.

"Took you long enough."

She happily grabbed his hand. Why was she being so obtuse about everything? Lawrence didn't have the time to joke around with her if he was going to cook supper, but she pulled him anyway.

"Hey, hey!"

She ignored him and paid the fire no mind. She had her heart set on pulling him outside with her. She only halted when he flinched from the brightness outside.

"What do you think of our dried-out friend?"

It wasn't that the sun was too bright; it had just been dark inside the hut. Lawrence shielded his eyes from the light. He squinted and looked at Holo.

"What?"

"I do not feel that the title of 'witch' suits her."

Holo didn't know that much about the Church or its religion, but her intuition was sharp. Lawrence felt the same way, given the flowers at the nun's desk. She didn't seem to be a witch.

"I feel the same way, especially because of the flowers on her desk."

Holo didn't seem to understand what he was talking about, but he was more interested in the fact that the nun wasn't related to her in any way. Would she be, if she had turned out to be a witch? He felt Holo's hand tighten around his as he mulled that over.

“I have met those like her before; the girls were always so nice to me. They were the very embodiment of kindness.”

Lawrence remembered Holo saying something like that not long after they'd met. He nodded, but she just stared at the ground as they walked.

“She feels the same way to me.”

“Mhm.”

He agreed with her, but let her keep talking as he held her hand.

“I just wanted to say..”

“..Say what?”

“She was rumored to take wild dogs into the forest..”

She looked up with an unexpectedly determined expression on her face, but he knew she was really holding back tears.

“..But no one considered whether they were wolves, did they? Be careful, you.”

He didn't know how to react. She then ran from him, letting her tail free as if she knew no one was watching. Its tip looked even more beautiful when contrasted with the snow, though it was as difficult to make out as a belt on a goblin. She slowed down as she approached the snow-covered lake, looking even more like a goblin.

“Well, I can only say that I understand our dried-out friend's stubbornness.”

She spun around suddenly, her usual fearless smile now on full display. He stared at her next to the lake, beside a mossy cliff, and saw how easy it was to imagine that an angel really did pass through here into heaven.

“And why is that?”

He took her icy hand as he walked up to her.

“Because I too am stubborn and think too much, sometimes acting foolishly in the process.”

She laughed at herself, making him look at the crumbling cliff and reply.

“Like when you hop into merchants’ wagons in the nude?”

“Or leave home to find a friend.”

Her embarrassment made him want to touch her face, but he decided not to. She was probably seeing visions of Yoitsu in this place with a hut and village like the ones she was probably familiar with. He had no mood to ruin her nostalgia, so he simply held her hand as they wandered around the lake.

They wouldn't even have a goal if Cole's footprints weren't there for them to follow. Holo looked like she was recalling similar events from the past, possibly sad ones. But when he looked at her, and she looked at him, they both seemed to have the same thought. She had long ago made up her mind to avoid a path of sorrow and worry. It was the wisest course, but neither of them wanted to regret their parting. His hand gripped hers more tightly.

“So.. was an angel ever really here?”

That was her first question after they silently walked beside the lake for a while.

“Well, I'd guess it was someone like you or Mr. Athner, and they were mistaken for an angel.”

“Indeed.. we met that bird after all. But I should have felt something if that were true..”

She sniffed the air around them.

“Could you really still smell it after such a long time?”

“Well, I have no idea.. but their presence should not have faded entirely, and I feel none. This may simply be a forest overrun and controlled by humans.”

It was especially convincing to hear that from a guardian spirit like Holo. She seemed to detect



his thoughts and intentionally bared her fangs.

“Or perhaps it is just hidden in the snow, waiting for a cowardly human to prey on. There are many monsters like that, you know.”

Holo surely knew a lot about this, given how happy she seemed.

“Oh? Such as?”

The path beside the lake was surprisingly firm; it was especially fun walking in Fran and Cole's footprints.

“I'm mostly familiar with the ones living in wheat fields, and the ones that skulk in the night. There's at least ten that live in the wheat alone.”

To Lawrence they sounded more like creatures to be pitied, but somehow, strangely, they had become monsters.

“But some of them were nothing like me.”

It seemed that Holo had missed his thought that time.

“Which ones?”

Holo seemed to be at a loss for how to answer, and sighed.

“I remember one kid who fell down crying, and thought his own echo was a monster, and only ended up crying louder and louder.”

“Oh, that's what you mean.. I see.”

“Hmm?”

Climbing up a steep slope was easier going in a zig-zap; whoever conceived of that notion was a genius. They were already quite high, but were only halfway up.

“That reminded me of a famous miracle that everyone understands now.”

“Oh?”

They ran into a huge tree root blocking their way, so Lawrence climbed onto it and pulled Holo up beside him.

“It's a story about the northern marches.. all travelers hear about it at some point.”

He paused.

“But it's related to the Church, so please don't tell Cole.”

Holo pulled in close to him, smiling mischievously.

“It is nice to have our own little secrets.”

Lawrence smiled wistfully and continued upon her urging.

“On one of the northern marches, a famous band of knights was losing a battle with pagans as the sky turned red. The sun was setting, so their commander prepared to retreat -- and just then, a huge shadow spread out before them. The knights looked up, confused, and guess what they saw? The emblem of the Church, covering the sky in white!”

Lawrence looked up as he related the story, making Holo look up as well. She muttered to herself as she lowered her head.

“..Birds?”

Damn, she was clever. Lawrence nodded and continued.

“Yup, birds. But to the knights, it was a miraculous sign that they were sure to win. So they fought with renewed fervor and won before the sun even finished setting. When they later established a new nation, its flag was the Church's emblem in white on red and.. bam! It went down in history as a miracle.”

The angel, too, was likely just something natural. Fran probably believed that as well.

“So how can we coax the angel to reappear?”

They finally made it to the top of the slope after a final turn, and looked down at the lake so far below them.

“What a beautiful sight!”

Holo said so breathlessly, despite not being short of breath, even after all that climbing.

The surface of the lake was like a mirror reflecting the mountain peaks of the surrounding view; the one solitary cloud that was reflected seemed almost depressed somehow. Small black rocks dotted the shore, peeking up through the snow. There were no reeds or seaweed under the water, making it extraordinarily clear. Catching fish on a boat here would be effortless.

“Suddenly I wish it was summertime.”

Anyone would have shared her sentiment.

“Oh that's right, you know how to swim.”

“I do. It is lovely to feel so weightless.. so comfortable.”

He found it hilarious to picture the image of this huge wolf, able to swallow a man whole, jumping into the lake like a dog.

“But your wolf form is so big.. wouldn't all of the water spill out of the lake if you jumped in?”

Even the waterfall caused a hole underneath it, so he meant it as a joke.. but she seemed to be taking him seriously.

“But seeing me jump in with this body would make you spill something.”

Hearing her turn his jokes around was normally like having a boulder land on his foot, but right now he was too busy breathing in to chase certain thoughts out of his mind. Wandering around this serene landscape was quite the luxury for a busy merchant.

“Cole has gone quite far.”

The footprints they were following seemed to go around the lake entirely, to the other side covered in fog where a taller mountain loomed.

“Hmm?”

Holo suddenly muttered to herself and looked back at the waterfall.

“What is it?”

“That waterfall is probably quite new..”

“What?”

She turned to him upon hearing him repeat himself, and nodded.

“Not recent in your terms, but see.. this cliff should have collapsed entirely.”

She pointed at the path they had just taken, and Lawrence realized what she meant.

“But the rocks that fell only blocked the waterfall.. even though the lake is surrounded by mountains it is in a bowl.”

She formed a bowl with her hands, showing off just how differently a person living in the mountains for hundreds of years might think.

“And that's why the river level dropped..”

“Yes, just like how pouring less water into a sieve only means that less will come pouring back out.”

So there had been a rockslide that divided the waterfall in two sometime after the lake below had formed. That would explain the “angel” everyone had seen.. but not entirely. After all, who would mistake falling rocks for white feathers?

“Or perhaps it was made by the angel as it flew up.”

Lawrence was quite happy to have thought of that, but Holo simply sighed and moved away.

“Well, at least you have a vivid imagination.”

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Fran and Cole finally returned long after supper was prepared. They were soaked, like two children that had been playing in snow all day, and only their upper halves had any warmth left in them. In fact, they were practically frozen. Holo held Fran's hands and placed her feet on Fran's; certainly not what she wanted to do, but there was no faster way to warm her up. Likewise, Lawrence placed Cole's hands under his own shirt and held his feet to warm them.

“Well, what did you find?”

Their leather boots were drenched and heavy as lead. They must have wandered through thick snow, so Lawrence figured they had a good reason. But Fran simply shook her head, looking exhausted. He didn't miss the tinge of sadness in her expression.

“Let's eat when you've warmed up.”

At first he thought Cole was nodding, but he had nodded off. His tiredness had probably caught up to him in the sudden warmth. Lawrence pulled his wet coat off of him and wrapped him in a dry blanket. Lifting him up, he noticed he was even smaller and easier to lift than Holo was. He also shared Holo's musty scent; a good reminder of just how much time he spent with her.

Now warm, Fran thanked Holo and moved away.

“He should be alright. He's been on the road with you for a while, hasn't he?”

She questioned Lawrence as he handed her a bowl of soup. Lawrence smiled and replied, recognizing that she was talking about Cole's exhaustion.

“He's been quite helpful, yes, but he also seems to be a little short on stamina.”

Cole seemed frail, but then he'd also been traveling in haggard clothes in the middle of winter. His endurance was probably no worse than Lawrence's.. in fact, it might be better. Actually, Fran seemed to be the strangely energetic one.

“..on second thought, maybe not.”

Fran proceeded to drink her soup. Even while eating, she seemed the same as always. Anyone would wear a look of relief after a long jaunt through the snow, but not her. She was as alert as a woodland creature.

“By the way, we thought about the legendary angel a bit.”

She stopped eating.

“Have you ever seen the flag of the Torhiert Republic?”

As expected, Fran looked up at him with interest.

“..You know about them?”

“Only a bit.”

Her interest suddenly vanished, and she resumed drinking her soup as if to calm herself. She even carefully ground the bits of meat in her soup before eating them. And yet, she did so smoothly and efficiently, not like some noble meticulously nibbling on their food. She ate more like Cole, who had the dignity of a wandering student despite being in the same class as a thief or beggar. Perhaps when she'd told Hugh she was a slave, she hadn't been lying.

“I think it was just snow being blown around.”

Just as Vino suspected. It was the most common-sense answer.

“Maybe that's all it was.”

Fran smiled at the joke.

“Of course, that makes the most sense.. but..”

“You've investigated many legends.”

Fran's smile vanished and her eyes closed. She looked like she was breathing in slowly to keep from getting angry, but Lawrence could tell she was actually trying to keep from laughing. That was confirmed when she finally exhaled and her face became gentle again.

"I have. Most were just lies, some were just illusions. But there have been special cases, where no matter what you think there is something special about it."

"Is that the case here?"

She shook her head. Was she implying that she didn't know? She soon turned away and gave a proper reply.

"Someone I know once heard this myth somewhere else."

Lawrence was surprised; he didn't expect to hear that. Fran seemed to have anticipated his reaction, and smiled in embarrassment as she peeked up at him.

"He didn't remember where, but it was the same legend."

It seemed to be a sad memory. The fire lit up her face, making her look even sadder.

"He exaggerates, but never lies. It's been many years since he told me."

"And now you've finally found it, haven't you?"

As she nodded, it felt like a bit of the wall between them had crumbled away. Lawrence offered her some wine; wine always made it easier to discuss the past. Fran graciously accepted it.

"I don't think this angel legend is faked.. I feel it might exist, still today. She.."

Fran shot a look at the room with the animal skin curtain.

"That nun thought so too.. that's why she came here."

The nun had come to be known as a witch because of her extreme conviction. But the fact was that without that conviction, she wouldn't have been chasing such legends. There were just too many legends to sit still in one place for so long.. only someone truly dedicated could do that.

“I think he saw it too.. the angel.”

Fran stared at the ground. The sad smile on her face couldn't have just been a trick of the firelight.

“But he’s so stupid.. he witnessed something like that, yet forgot where he saw it.”

Fran's nostalgic smile was the kind that could drive a man to jealousy. She must have loved him, and covered up her embarrassment by calling him a “person she knew.” She wasn't just chasing this legend because she loved silverwork.. she had a real reason behind her shadow-laced smile.

“Such a useless man..”

She set her wine down to one side. She hadn't drunk much; perhaps she couldn't, or perhaps she was too scared of saying too much. After a moment, Lawrence broke the silence.

“Why tell me this?”

Fran replied almost instantly.

“As an apology.”

“Apology?”

“Yes.”

Lawrence was too surprised to ask her any more; he spun around to Holo, who eyed Fran suspiciously.





“You see, ever since we met in the company..”

Did she have anything to apologize for? Something so bad that warranted an apology? It was an awkward moment, and Lawrence just sat there unable to think. He just stared at her, until Fran finally turned her eyes to her wine and continued.

“I've been cold because I thought you were just another greedy merchant.”

“Huh..”

“I thought you were only after a map of business routes in the north.”

She looked up at him and smiled. He'd told her last night that he was helping Holo, and that was why he wanted the map. But she wasn't apologizing for her behavior, just her presumption. What an odd character. Lawrence was at a loss, so Holo jumped in.

“What was that sudden gust of wind?”

She was clearly still upset, but still willing to go along with the happy mood. At least Lawrence thought so when he stole a glance at her and saw her smiling. Fran intentionally hunched her back and watched Holo in silence. The two of them seemed to be communicating with only their eyes.

“So you wish for our help, yes?”

Fran nodded after a moment. Lawrence's mind was still blank, but he snapped out of it when he heard the word “help”. Holo continued.

“Well, I shan't refuse.”

The ease with which Holo consented made him remember how easily Fran had suckered him at their first meeting. But Holo smacked his back to take his mind off of it.

“After all, we are asking for help as well. It would be silly to remain forever upset.”

Holo seemed to be at her happiest whenever she got to wear a mask saying “well, I can do nothing.” Fran smiled at her, giving Lawrence no choice but to agree even if he didn't

understand what was going on.. so he simply nodded.

“Then..”

Fran whispered, her eyes bright with intellect.

“Do you also find the people of Tarsig strange?”

“As a merchant?”

“Yes.”

Lawrence nodded and continued.

“They have a powerful waterfall, yet still grind their flour by hand.”

Fran kept her eyes glued on him. He figured he knew what she wanted to hear, so he continued.

“In the springtime when the water levels rose, they would not have far to walk. But the landlord has some reason to not set up a watermill. Either that, or..”

“The villages themselves resisted the idea. That is why.”

She leaned over and pulled an old book out of her luggage. It was so old and haggard-looking that it might as well be called a stack of paper. The pages rustled as she turned back to face him and Holo.

“They used the legend of the angel as an excuse to prevent the building of a watermill.”

Fran had suddenly begun to spill everything.

“But that's..”

“The landlord wants them to build a water mill, because of the northern marches.. he wants to protect himself, and he's even willing to pander to the Church by promoting the legend of the angel to do so.”

That was really all a landlord could do if he had no money or force of arms.

“But things have changed.. the northern marches were canceled.”

Lawrence nodded and agreed.

“If the Church still has influence here, even when they're on the decline, then you can't blame him for that.”

“Exactly.. the village made money selling supplies to the northern marches, but they don't care anymore. They have no faith in God, and just want to stay out of things. As you'd expect, there are other pagan landlords in the area, so its a bit dangerous to obey the Church.. in a way this was bound to happen.”

True, if a rope was too long it had to be wrapped around, and survival wasn't exactly a bad motivation.. even if it was a bit disgraceful.

“The landlord thought about it for a while and finally found a way: accuse the nun of being a witch.”

Lawrence breathed in deeply, but Holo's face didn't so much as flinch. She knew the hearts of humans.

“It would be a problem for him, making himself an enemy of the Church, but he'd save face among his people. The villagers were satisfied, because with a witch in the forest they had a reason to not build a watermill, and didn't have to be taxed for one.”

That also explained why salt became so rare. But Lawrence was hardly satisfied.

“..Where did you learn all of this?”

Fran handed him the book, which looked like it had been written by a man.

“The diary of Sister Katerina Rucci.”

So this was the book that had been missing from the shelf.

“Perhaps one of the villagers felt guilty and took the book away. Lucky me, because I know someone who finds these kinds of books.”

She stared at the book while turning the pages, but she wasn't reading it. She seemed lost in thought.

“But if all this is true, why are you telling us? No, why even..”

He trailed off, realizing that if Fran knew this much, she wasn't just hunting for the legend. He eyed her darkly.. she had lied to them from the start. She smiled.

“Sooner or later, Church bells will ring.”

He sighed. When bigger fish swam around in ponds, their tails whipped the water around drastically. This world was just a pond to those with power.

“So it's Diva Company?”

Fran was stunned, but soon nodded.

“So you even know.. yes, it's as you surmise. The Church is on their way, and this witch fiasco will soon become a disaster. This place isn't safe anymore.”

“No kidding.”

This was an incredibly dangerous situation. Fran's stubbornness couldn't solve it alone. She turned to Lawrence.

“The villagers and landlord are terrified. They surely suspect the Church will attack the north once again, and will start by sending someone with the pretense that they are only interested in the legend.”

“So you're saying we just have to calm them down by proving them wrong?”

Fran smiled, seemingly unused to this kind of discussion. But before anyone else could smile, she spoke.

“I came here once before, but I was being watched the entire time.”

And that's why Fran gave up. Lawrence wanted to sigh, but knew better.. nothing was free in this world.

“Of course I don't want to keep you here forever, just until spring. I suspect the legend only appears in the winter.”

“And you'll draw us a map of the north in return?”

She nodded.

“So will you help me?”

If they didn't pack up and leave now, they'd be stuck. Fran had them cornered, yet she'd phrased it as a request for help. Her gall was impressive; almost like a general on a battlefield. She left Lawrence no option. After all, he needed the map, and Hugh would never talk to him again if he left Fran behind on her own. And it wasn't like leaving her behind was something he could bring himself to do.

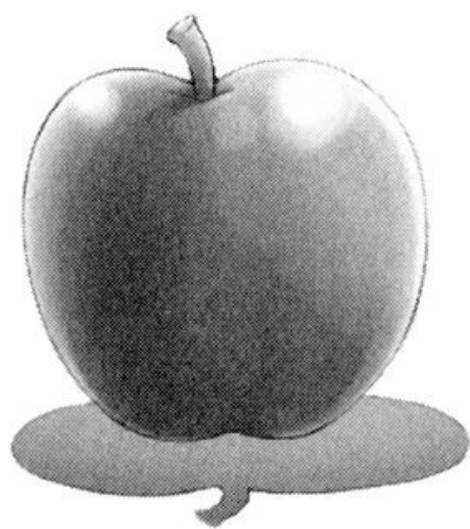
It might be a long time before spring arrives, but at least over time he might find a way to bargain their way out of this. Holo sat still, clearly having made up her mind, so he did all he could do.

“Of course we will.”

He replied flatly.

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## Chapter 4

On the second day of their stay, Fran took Cole back to the lake. Lawrence was a bit concerned about their safety, but Fran shrugged it off.

“It's not like it's any safer in the hut.”

At least this way, it would be obvious to anyone watching them that they were trying to confirm the legend. Lawrence understood that, but it seemed foolhardy to go nonetheless. And yet, Holo held him back. She even insisted that Fran take Cole with her, rather than going alone. Cole didn't want her to go on her own either, so he immediately accepted.

It was strange; not one day ago, none of them harbored any love for Fran, and now they were going to such lengths. Last night's conversation had clearly moved them, despite them knowing that she had planned to trap them from the start. Lawrence couldn't quite grasp why things had turned out this way.

He sent the two of them off and watched until they left his sight before he came back inside. Holo had laid out her tail and was busy tidying it. After watching her fretfully for a while, he finally spoke.

“She must be trying to confirm if the legend was just like our discussion last night.”

Holo ran her fingers through her tail before flicking any bugs she found onto the fire. She turned away.

“Mm.”

“You heard what she said to Cole before they left, right? 'Let's not miss anything that could be related to the legend.'”

“..Mm.”

Fran also thought the legendary angel was just something natural being blown out of proportion, perhaps wind-blown snow off of treetops or the steam from a hot spring near the lake. Those kinds of things might be mistaken for wings. The waterfall fell quickly enough that anything going the other way would look like it was rising quickly, be it steam or snow. Cole had



listened to each of her guesses seriously, and promised to not miss anything with a nod.

“But my, she is serious. She wouldn't budge even if the villagers or the landlord himself came to get rid of her.”

Lawrence expected Holo to grumble something like “she even dared to order me around,” but she didn't. In fact, Holo seemed quite pleased.

“For a stubborn silversmith, she is nothing like I expected.”

“..really?”

Fran wasn't quite what he'd imagined, but she certainly was as stubborn as a proper artisan, utterly devoted to their goals. In all likelihood she stayed up late wondering about the legend, and then ran outside first thing at dawn. Holo smiled at Lawrence's question.

“She must have a lover, and is just chasing after him. That is not quite what I would call stubborn.”

That was likely the “he” Fran kept mentioning, the one who told her about the legend in the first place. He might be her lover, but was at least someone she clearly loved. It seemed Holo shared Lawrence's view on that much. Based on Holo's words, he found himself re-evaluating whether he ought to call Fran “stubborn.” It seemed that “obsessed” might be a better word.

“’Tis quite lovely.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

If Fran wasn't lying to them last night then she was like a youthful maiden praying for her knight to survive his next battle. But Lawrence still had no idea why she apologized to him in the first place. Nor why Holo was so much happier now that she knew what Fran was up to. At any rate, those were the thoughts filling his mind as he tended to the fire, just before Holo spoke.

“She was quite generous, was she not? Apologizing like that.”

A big spark shot up from the flames, but rather than looking like any other random spark, it looked like it was caused by his nervous fidgeting. And it was. He turned to face Holo, who was

staring right at him with an unnatural smile.

“You do know why she was so generous, do you not?”

Lawrence felt stupid for thinking that Holo hadn't seen through his thoughts. Her tail was swishing gently as she held it. He really should have just admitted it to her sooner.

“I.. I'm afraid not.”

“Foolish mule!”

She shouted loudly, and the ashes in the hearth blew upward at the same time.

“W-why are you angry..”

“Ass! You do not even know why I dislike her, do you?”

Given how loud she was, and how bushy her tail was right now, if Holo had shouted that in her wolf form she would have blown the hut apart.

“..Um..”

It seemed she had reached her limit, and suddenly looked down after exploding at him. He thought she'd burst a blood vessel, and nervously watched her until she looked up.

“Well.. that is just the kind of idiot you are.”

She closed her eyes and sighed as though she was spent. When her eyes opened again, the anger in them was gone. But it had vanished entirely too quickly, and what was left behind was pity.

“So, I was the only one who was angry. And even she realized she had gone too far. It is not that you are kind, you are simply emotionally numb, are you not?”

Any man would feel terrible to be on the receiving end of that accusation, especially if he didn't know why it was being sent his way. But before he could voice a complaint, she continued.

“You brought such shame on me!”

Lawrence wondered if she was talking about his performance in the company. He'd been cornered, and looked at Holo to save him. Not even Cole had been so pathetic. Holo bared her fangs, her face the very picture of contempt. Again she turned away.

“And right before my eyes, no less.”

“Ah-!”

So that was it..

“You just don't pay attention to where you are going.. and in the process you make us all look like fools.”

She nearly fell on her chair in frustration. He sat, obediently doing as her eyes commanded him. She would tear his throat out if he said what he was going to say. It was bitter medicine having to keep his mouth shut, but all he could now was wring his hands nervously.

It wasn't that Holo was angry because he'd failed Fran at Athner Company, but because Fran had embarrassed him in front of her. Holo's reason for accepting Fran's request was because she had to in order to save face. She had the same complaints he had, but she wasn't just angry at Fran.

Was he that happy to play the fool? Was he that happy to be embarrassed in front of her? Those were the thoughts running through her mind. He ran the last night's conversation through his mind word for word, and remembered what she'd said. Then he put his head in his hands in exasperation.

What a twit. Fran had realized that Lawrence was asking for a map for basically the same reason she was chasing after the legend: out of love. That's why Holo's anger at her had subsided, and why what was left was purely directed at him right now.

“..Sorry.”

He truly was the only one who'd missed the point. She was right to be angry.

“I wonder if you get stupider by the day.”

Lawrence was beyond knowing what to say, but it seemed that he didn't have to say anything. Holo seemed to have burned her anger out because of his thick-headedness. His incredible thick-headedness. She sighed, looking at her tail and speaking gently.

“At least that saves me the trouble of tidying it.”

It seemed the bugs and loose hair were all forced from her tail when it swelled up in anger. But Lawrence knew better than to smile, unless he wanted to be swallowed whole. He remained silent.

“The world just keeps turning..”

She curled up as she spoke. He might be stupid, but even Lawrence realized she wasn't talking about the same thing anymore. Unfortunately he was too stupid to know what she was talking about now.

“I.. really don't follow.”

She turned, laughing at herself.

“It is nothing.. I just realized I am acting the same way.”

“?”

This was too confusing for him to know how to react.

“The villagers were always saying they shouldn't have their festivals anymore. They didn't respect me, and would rather scold me. They never asked me how I felt, and so I just stood there staring at them from a distance, never understanding what they were thinking. And now I'm doing the same thing all over again.”

They didn't treasure her as they once did, so that was the natural reaction.. but it didn't make it easier for Lawrence to know how to react. Should he apologize? Or just acknowledge her words? He really felt like a complete idiot, silently standing there as she stood up.

“Well, it is good to chase someone you care for. Even if you will never catch them.”

She was wearing her evil smirk of scolding, obviously still upset at him making her look like a fool. This was really letting him off the hook easily.

“The problem is..”

She looked at the animal skin curtain before completing her thought.

“What to do when they are already dead.”

The dead should be respected, and the innocent should be redeemed. Holo was clearly comparing this situation to the bones of the wolf deity. No matter how strong they were in life, they couldn't bite back in death. Even Sister Katerina was able to tolerate being called a witch while she lived. It wasn't because she'd lost her faith, and Holo knew that. Katerina had simply been too kind to deny the lies, and accepted them instead.

“That is why I wish to help her.”

Holo had been forgotten. It was just like she was dead. She hadn't been able to salvage her reputation in Pasloe. She was only able to flee. But there was still a chance for Katerina's name to be cleared. With that, Lawrence finally understood. That had to be her reason for doing this.

“Well, it makes no difference to the villagers what we say about someone who is dead. And that dried-out husk will not care what she is called, so I am not doing anything more useful than whomever cleaned their room.”

“But such actions are meant for those who keep living, not those who have already died.”

Simply put, one could still hope to understand the thoughts of the living. Now that he knew what the situation was, Lawrence could try to find a way to resolve it.

“There is no absolute right or wrong in this world, so I pity the villagers and their landlord.. but..”

She concealed her tail under her robe and pulled her hood over her ears.

“..You would rather help this free-spirited girl?”

Her evil smile took on a whole new meaning. Since a proper funeral was the hope of the living, Holo's reason for helping Fran was really rather comical. The two of them laughed as the fire danced beside them. If he said that the fire had melted their hearts, Holo would surely laugh even more loudly.

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Fran and Cole returned in the afternoon. Lawrence thought they'd returned for lunch, but Fran had other plans.

“Can we return to the village? I want a map.”

“A map?”

They were sweating profusely despite the frigid air, so it was obvious how quickly they had returned. Cole was so out of breath he plopped himself on a chair and just drank. Holo had to shake the snow off his clothes, though he was too tired to even thank her. It wasn't a stretch to see that something had happened.

“Did you figure something out?”

As soon as he asked his question, Lawrence was surprised. And so was Holo.. Fran was laughing merrily, as though she could barely contain herself. She just happily repeated “yes” between laughs. For such a reputedly stubborn artisan, she sure was cheerful once her mask was taken off. Maybe Fran used that mask as Eve used her face-scarves, in self-defense.

When Cole had recovered, Holo handed Fran the waterskin. She received a chuckle and a word of thanks, and smiled back. It was almost surreal after the previous few days. After drinking and breathing in deeply, Fran continued giggling. She seemed to be lost in thought about the legend.

“What kind of map did you want?”

Fran yelped, startled at the sudden question. She looked at Lawrence as if she had just noticed he was there. Perhaps she hadn't realized she had omitted that detail.

“Sorry.. one that shows the rivers around here.”

“Rivers?”

That seemed a bit odd.

“Yes. As we walked around the lake I realized that when it snows the rivers will be frozen still, so the waterfall will be nearly halted. It might even freeze over itself if it snows heavily enough. But they won't be frozen forever. So I'd like to see a map, so I can see how the waters flow into the lake.”

Her words were flowing freely from her mouth, compared to her previous stoic self. Her seriousness was eradicated, as was her conservativeness. She even gesticulated, revealing the full extent of her thrill.

“I see.”

Lawrence waited patiently.

“So when the water builds up past its limit and explodes-”

“We'll get our angel.”

Fran stared at him in anticipation, so elated that she wasn't even bothered at being cut off like that. It was fully possible that if the water built up over the winter, the pressure would build up until it finally exploded through the ice. In the right lighting it would just like an angel floating up to the moon. Even if one knew the truth, the sheer spectacle would leave them thinking it was a miracle.

Lawrence didn't think he would ever have come up with that, though he hardly to excuse himself.

“I agree, that's probably it.”

Fran was nearly in tears of joy.

“I hope we'll get to see it.”

Lawrence felt that was the only correct way to respond to someone in such a state, with that kind of smile.

“Mhm.”

That was all that Fran could say.

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Fran took Cole back the lake, not wanting to wait for the map. Cole seemed swept up in her excitement and followed her, determined. Holo didn't want him to go, and had a look about her like she was losing a sweet younger sibling.

“Well, let's go.”

Lawrence put his foot on the stirrup, at which point Holo ran up to him and grabbed his hand. He pushed her up on the horse, then hopped up in front of her. He grabbed the reins, and the horse began to trot.

“She looked just like a happy child.”

He wanted to laugh at the memory of Fran's extreme excitement. Hugh would have a hard time believing it.

“The truly childish are the ones who believe that adults should be even-tempered.”

She grabbed his waist and rested her head on his back. Her chin and ears poked into him, making him wonder if he ought to set her in the front.

“True. People say the elderly become rather childish.”

“..Meaning the longer you live the younger you get?”

Holo seemed to be in a good mood. Lawrence smiled when she laughed at his line. After her mirth, she replied.



“This seems quite important to her.”

Fran had mentioned a “person she knew” in a moment of embarrassment, someone who wasn't able to be with her now. Perhaps he was just a craftsman unable to desert his job, but her wistfulness made it seem more likely that it was for a darker reason. According to her, they should have been traveling together, so for them to part ways in the middle implied injury, illness, or worse.

Holo turned her head so the other side of her face rubbed up against Lawrence.

“I never expected to see such a kindly smile on her face. She has put on quite the thick mask.. only the gods know what she would have done if she had not chanced upon us, that foolish girl.”

Lawrence sighed and replied.

“Well, anyone else would have been scared away by her determination, and leave her all on her own.. probably.”

Those who succumbed to fear of danger found it harder to succeed in such tasks. And yet, the more one walked along the edge of a knife, the more likely they would stumble. Unless one happened to be with a goddess of luck, of course.

Lawrence knew why Holo was bringing this up, and that she wanted to hear him say something like “If she's daring enough to boss around the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, then even luck itself would bend to her whims.”

But knowing that made another thought cross his mind: why had he been lucky enough to end up traveling with Holo? Holo laughed, probably having sensed his doubts. Maybe she'd planned to sit behind him all along, knowing he would eventually stumble on this line of thought.

“Jeez.. I know how lucky I am to have such a dear partner.”

She laughed loudly.

“Just who are you talking about?”

He had to be the nice one, no matter what. He tightened his grip on the reins and spoke resolutely.

“Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu.”

“Well, then, perhaps you ought to tell her so.”

He heard her tail swishing around behind him. Money could warm him, but not shield his back from the wind like this. It was nice to act like this from time to time, so he let her warmth sink into him as they rode on to the village.

When they arrived, everything seemed to be business as usual; farming, grazing, making repairs. Holo squinted as she watched the sights. It didn't matter how far they traveled, this was the kind of scenery that awaited them.

“I dislike how this village is not taking a stand, but I can understand why they would do so for their own protection.”

How keen of Holo to observe the situation that objectively.

“And, given what Fran has said, someone in the village did not wish to brand Katerina a witch. They even cleaned that hut for some redemption.”

A perfect resolution to this situation would be inordinately difficult. Holo understood that and sat in silence. No one was wrong, per se, yet that didn't make it any easier to accept things.

“Well, it's up to us to reverse the curse on the witch and turn her back into a pious nun. Fran could then focus on her investigations and on drawing our map. That's a happy enough outcome, surely?”

Even if the landlord couldn't get the villagers to enter the forest, he could still use the dead nun to his advantage. Of course that made Holo angry, but it was all for naught. She exhaled out in frustration.

“Very well. Then let us locate a map. It may be wise to hunt down Mr. Vino.”

They weren't noticed by everyone in the fields, since they were hunched over and working. Lawrence decided to catch their attention first, but no one seemed to care much. They just peeked at them once in a while, then resumed working. After all, Lawrence and Holo had arrived the previous day, and Miura or Vino had probably explained things to everyone.

Rather than heading to Vino's home directly, they found him in the town square crafting bows and arrows with others. They were polishing white arrowheads in their hands, probably fragments of bone from the deer they had hunted the previous day.

"Mr. Vino."

Vino looked up and smiled at the greeting. He set his arrowhead down and stood up.

"So nothing happened? You seem to be alright."

"Yeah.. You're making arrows?"

Vino turned and nodded.

"Mhm. Spring's pretty soon, so we're making arrows to sell to the landlord and nearby towns. What brings you back?"

Arrowheads made by craftsmen in towns tended to be made of iron - powerful, but pricey. They were also under guild supervision, so it was tough to get much stock unless you had connections.

"Well, we'd like your help."

"What for?"

"We'd like you to make us a map."

Vino seemed confused.

"A map? Uh.. sorry, we don't use them much, so it surprised me for a second. A map of what?"

"One of the area around the lake, including the streams and rivers."

Vino let it sink in and watched them silently for a while. When he spoke, he did so quietly.

“You're not out to build a water mill, are you?”

He was using a serious tone while obviously joking around.. just the sense of humor of a humble villager. But Lawrence had nothing to hide.

“Why, do you need one? No, it's just that a map might help us confirm something about the legendary angel, so Sister Fran in my group wanted one.”

Vino was on his guard, but nodded when he heard their rationale.

“Oh, is that all? No problem. We've decided to help you out, and this just gives me another excuse for a break!”

Villagers wouldn't work the same way as townsfolk would; in villages, everyone pitched in where needed, so an individual's contributions weren't as important as whether all tasks were all completed. Anyone disliking this situation could move to a bigger town, where they could find friends with common skills and happily do what they were best at. It was all a matter of perspective.

“Thanks for the help.”

“We'll have to check with Mr. Miura, though. He's the only one here who's got paper and ink.”

“Thanks again.”

Vino nodded and resumed his work, like some worker at a company. The scene made Lawrence recall that he sometimes desired to work in a company, if only to be around others like Vino was right now. Holo seemed to feel the same way, and she shared a smile with Lawrence.

“Hey, Miura.”

Miura happened to be leaving his home when Vino called him. He was carrying animal hides and a sharp knife, presumably to carve them for clothing. He seemed to be good with his hands, regardless of their large size.

“What is it?”

“Looks like we caught you at just the right time.. we need some paper and ink.”

“Paper and ink?”

Miura was rightly surprised: that wouldn't be a common request in a village. Such things cost quite a lot in remote areas.

“They need a map of the land around the lake.”

“A map?”

Miura looked at Vino, then at Lawrence. He was silent for quite a while.

“Alright.”

He handed the hides and knife to Vino before continuing.

“I'll do it for you.”

Holo looked down at the ground, probably laughing under her breath at the distraught look on Vino's face.

“You got to eat and entertain them yesterday, but you never finished doing this.”

Miura spoke in a devilish tone, like a wicked older brother. Vino had no choice but to nod in defeat.

“Go on. These will be for Lanan, Scott, and Serith. Ask Yana for their sizes.”

“Alright..”

Miura watched happily as Vino sadly turned away. Lawrence couldn't help but be amused by this village; it was a shame they got caught up in this witch nonsense.

“Let’s go inside. You wanted a map of the area around the lake?”

“More accurately, the rivers and streams around it. All of them.”

Having entered his home, they noticed hunting implements scattered around. Tools for cleaning skins were there as well, like it was a workshop. The bed, hearth, and other daily necessities were scattered about as well; it was nothing like a proper company workshop in a city. And yet, the mess had a powerful sense of pride about it. This was the chief's home.

“Oh? That's pretty specific.”

He was quite a contrast to Vino. His mind was sharper.

“I'll bet Vino asked if you wanted it to plan for a water mill?”

“On the nose.”

Miura smiled at Lawrence's honesty.

“Idiot. He ran up to me all pale-faced last night to report that you'd commented on our milling skills. I just had to point out that you wouldn't mention anything like that if you were going to build a mill. That sure shut him up good.”

He seemed to be like the landlord; watching out for the safety of himself and his charges. After clearing his desk, he spread out an old sheet of paper.

“Hope you don't mind if I use this piece of paper.”

It was a piece a bit larger than their faces, so old and torn that it would hardly be worth anything.

“Here, a token of our gratitude.”

Miura nodded, seeing Lawrence's offering of salt.

“Then, I'll get right on it.”

He took up his broken quill and chipped bottle containing ink.

“This won't take long, so just find a seat, you two.”

Lawrence nodded and sat on a wooden crate while Holo played with a chicken that had wandered indoors.

“So, have you discovered anything out about the legend?”

His question came out of nowhere. He was quickly drawing the map, but his attention was still focused on Lawrence. Plainly, he wasn't just making idle conversation.

“Sister Fran found some clues, and shooed me off to get her a map without so much as a 'thank you'.”

“Really?”

Miura nodded. He may have thrown a kid off-track with that question, but not Lawrence.

“Did you find the witch?”

That was his real goal. As the de-facto village chief, he had more than water mills to worry about. The village could protest to high heaven to keep a water mill from being built, but rumors about their village were beyond their control. He stopped, and despite his eyes still being locked on the paper it was obvious that his attention had drifted elsewhere. Lawrence glanced at Holo as she played with the chicken, then smiled.

“No.”

He heard Miura's quill resume.

“Really?”

That was the last thing Miura uttered, before focusing on completing the map. He was surely a marvellous hunter.

“This likely won't be accurate when the season changes.”

Those were the next words of his mouth. The chicken seemed to have come to an understanding with Holo, and lay itself next to her foot, snoozing.

“Sister Fran said that shouldn't be a problem.”

“Huh.. sounds like this won't take long, then.”

Miura stood, and his joints popped and cracked as a testament to his dedication. His stretching startled the chicken, and Holo listened happily to its protests.

“You can have it when the ink's dry. You should be able to get back before sunfall.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“It's nothing. I'm sure Vino said that to you, too.”

Lawrence didn't want to make Vino seem lazy, but he had to smile out of courtesy. Miura grabbed the pouch of salt Lawrence had given him and thanked them. It was hard to get salt when one lacked hard coin.

“Well, I should go check up on Vino. He looks sharp, but he's really a bumbler. If he tore the hides, I'll whip him with the tendons.”

He was just like an artisan talking about an apprentice; it made Lawrence laugh. Holo seemed happy to hear this as she sat next to a window, gazing outside. This was just the kind of idle banter that any traveler would miss.

“Hmm?”

She noticed something as they went outside.

“What's that?”

Miura halted and followed her eyes to where the village elder stood, where all would pass to enter the village. Lawrence heard noises that sounded like mice; the sound of neighing horses from at a great distance. As they came into focus, it became clear that one prominent old rider



was being trailed by men with spears.

Miura's face froze and he quickly returned indoors. He quickly grabbed a set of tools and walked out the other door of his home and through his garden to the next house. Everyone then ran back outside. Even Holo stood up.

“What's going on?”

“No clue.. but they're armed with spears.”

“Hmm.”

Unless Lawrence was mistaken, those spears would bear the mark of a noble family or nation. Mercenaries would arm themselves with poleaxes instead of spears, and there just weren't many other possibilities.

One of the riders was heard shouting.

“We request the presence of Miura and the elder!”

Holo turned to Lawrence, but he didn't reply. Miura was running back through his own home.

“The governor.. he's finally come..”

Miura was pallid, with beads of sweat on his brow. He'd grabbed a parchment from his home, most likely the village's deed.

“You two..”

Miura looked at Lawrence.

“There's a small path directly to the lake behind the village; we keep it under watch so it's safe. The governor shouldn't be aware of it, so if you flee that way you'll get to the lake quickly; please get this to Sister Fran.”

He rolled the map up and handed it to Lawrence, then began pushing them toward his backyard. He clearly had no time for further explanation, and not to impress them. He was

making sure they understood how serious the situation truly was. When they were in the backyard, he finally spoke.



“The governor wants to destroy all traces of the legend. Please have Sister Fran inform the Church.”

“But..”

“Please! We don’t have time!”

Lawrence nervously looked at Holo, who nodded back.. but clearly, she too was hesitant. Should they flee? She had to be asking herself the same thing. They weren't here to prove that Katerina was a witch, after all, and the governor ought to be glad that the Church regarded her as a nun. Miura's words were just too strange.

“We’ll repay your kindness.. this is for Sister Fran’s sake as well..”

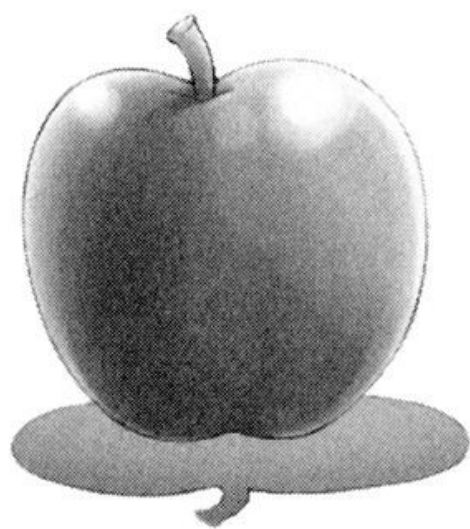
He hastily looked out the door before turning back to look at them.

“The forest and the lake will be destroyed.”

With that, he pushed Lawrence and Holo into his backyard. They stood there, eyes blinking, as the soldiers arrived at Miura's door shouting his name. Lawrence hesitated, but still grabbed Holo's hand. They were going to destroy the forest and the lake?

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## Chapter 5

Lawrence soon came across the path into the forest. It was quite narrow; barely large enough for hunters to carry a deer through. But it was well-traveled, so not only was the snow flattened but it was cleared of foliage. Walking through it proved easy, so Holo and Lawrence ran.

“What was that about?”

Holo asked the obvious question.

“I’ve no idea, but that governor looks like trouble.”

They spoke while running, only ceasing when they had to avoid tree roots. Holo would lift up her cloak and hop over them.

“Did he say ‘the forest and the lake will be destroyed?’”

“Yes.”

As he replied, Lawrence realized something. The governor had arrived suddenly, making Miura nervous. There was only one logical reason for Miura to tell them what he did. But Lawrence didn’t have the breath to announce his finding, and just held Holo’s hand as they ran up a gentle slope.

“Had I known this in advance.. I would just change forms..”

She might be joking, but there was no time to find out. They saw light to their left, and spied the light reflecting off the surface of the lake beyond the trees. After several steps, they came across the regular path to the lake. Sliding down the slope, they came across Fran and Cole’s footsteps, which seemed to both be coming and going in the same direction.

Lawrence glanced around and spotted them on the path to the waterfall from the hut. They weren’t moving; they were simply staring at something. He shook his hand free of Holo’s to shout out to them, but she stopped him.

“Ugh! ..What?”

“Pipe down.”

She spoke softly, making him wonder if she was joking. But she was dead serious. Looking at them again, he saw that Cole and Fran weren’t talking or moving their heads; they were perfectly frozen in place, not even breathing.

“Someone else is probably here.”

“..then shouldn’t we hide?”

“Idiot. If we are still, we will not be found, but even if we simply move behind trees we will give away our presence.”

Coming from Holo, a hunter from the forest, those words seemed authoritative. Fran had stopped Cole and the two of them kept still, despite Cole being in an awkward pose as if his first instinct had been to flee. It seemed Holo wasn’t the only one who used this tactic.. But where had Fran learned it, if even Lawrence didn’t know about it?

“Hmm.”

Holo seemed to be thinking, and perhaps about the same thing. Lawrence slowly pushed her toward them.

“What happened?”

As he quietly asked Fran, Cole finally spotted the two of them and eagerly sat down.

“Soldiers broke into the house. Why are you here?”

“They came to the village too. Their governor came with them, and we’ve been told they plan to destroy the forest and lake somehow.”

Lawrence had no idea what they were planning, but Fran seemed to have considered this in advance. The moment she heard about the governor, her expression became wrathful.

“I’m impressed by the depth of their wickedness.”

“Do you..”

Fran shushed him.

“They’re here to vanquish the witch.”

Lawrence finally understood. Katerina was dead, so what Fran said took on a literal meaning.

“It seems faith is no longer important in this age of money.”

She spoke her line effortlessly, dripping with satire, and her angry lips curled up into a sneer. But she then sighed.

“I have never been this close to the truth.. and the landlord decides to finally to act now? I’m so close.. so close..”

Her fists were balled up so angrily they could be heard. The landlord had taken a third option. Time moves on, and now even the once-authoritative Church was on the decline. He’d given up on them, and wanted to erase all traces of Katerina in order to distance himself from all religious conflicts. He would likely ally with the Diva Company, begin an expedition, set up a water mill, and attract more people to his land. Indeed, wealth spoke more loudly than beliefs.

“Did you get a map?”

Fran was staring at Lawrence.

“We did.. hold on.”

He grabbed Fran to keep her from walking away and stared back at her.

“Please calm down. If the landlord’s decided to remove all traces of Katerina, we’ll only be viewed as a hindrance. Convincing him will be impossible, as he wouldn’t care about any investigations into the legendary angel.”

Her face distorted in pain. She wasn’t stupid, so even if she’d lost her temper her mind was still capable.



“I know we’re close to the truth, and that you aren’t here to fool around. But it’s simply too dangerous right now. Let’s go.”

Hearing him finish, she stepped back. She would have fallen had Cole not been there to immediately support her.

“Unbelievable.. I’m so close..”

She’d been so excited just a day ago, and of course when such high hopes came crashing down the disappointment was unbearable. Holo suddenly chimed in: the soldiers had left. This was their only chance to flee.

“What a shame..”

Lawrence tried to grab Fran’s hand as he spoke, but just then she spoke.

“Lute Keeman told me all about you.”

He was stunned into silence at her sudden change of topic. He never expected her to mention Keeman, and it made him feel naked in front of her. She’d chosen him, having known about him all along. But he settled down quickly. Finding Keeman in Gerube wasn’t difficult, so that was probably all she meant. A merchant’s mind was rational, and his was already rationalizing. The pieces fell into place.

“I heard that you know no fear, and seize your chances to earn. And that you know how to use social relationships to your ends.”

She wiped away her tears and tried to smile, but it only made her look worse. He couldn’t help but ask the obvious, hoping that he was guessing wrong.

“What is it you want of me?”

“Please tell them Katerina Rucci is a saint.”

Holo and Cole were stunned. If beliefs were useless, what was the point of saying that? But Lawrence knew better. The difference between a nun and a saint was vast, and they couldn’t be considered to have the same worth.. especially financially.

“Is that true?”

“She was nominated into sainthood, and is only waiting her turn. She kept her identity hidden in Lenos, but had the backing of many nobles. Her nomination letter is already in the Cardinal’s hands. Isn’t that good enough?”

She then shut her mouth, as though her mind was made up. Fran Bonilly, that proudly forward silversmith, was beyond negotiations. She was as stubborn as a human being could be. Lawrence swallowed.

“When Sister Katerina becomes Saint Katerina, what remains in that hut, including her body, will become holy relics.”

Cole gasped in realization the moment he heard that. Fran smiled as though her secret message had been deciphered.

“She has a substantial legacy, one that will even persuade the landlord to give up on building a water mill. If you don’t believe me, just read the diary in her hut. It’s full of the names of nobles and rulers who all supported her. That’s why her hut still stands to this day.”

It was something that was spoken of only in hushed whispers, but when a saint came into being their possessions became worth a lot of money. Should their deathbed be the place of a miracle, it would attract many pilgrims, and not just ones from the Church. The area could become crowded with people, which was why nobles often banded together and did their best to have saints nominated for their benefit.

This wasn’t just a simple investment for the nobles. It was a risky one, as they had to wait for the person in question to die and because it took a lot of money. It could be very dangerous since it all hinged on mere possibilities. Katerina’s life must have been dragged into all of those considerations.

“Are you asking me to sell a saint?”

“Such things come naturally to you.”

Fran revealed the same expression she had used when she told him it would cost fifty gold

coins to have her draw them a map. But this time he couldn't bring himself to accept.

"I can't do it. In Gerube, it was a bargain between Keeman and other nobles over the Narwhale. And in Winfield, I was only indirectly involved in the trade. In both cases it all happened well beyond my control."

Money wasn't just something that had a quantity; its quality could change just as easily. Especially when it came to comparing simple coins with people's hearts and lives. Holy relics were no different. And yet, Fran glared at him. She was unwilling to back down. And then, she played her trump card.

"I'll repay you by drawing you a map of the north. Do it."

He was beyond shocked.

"What?"

It was clear she wasn't joking. He couldn't believe it. She was telling him to exchange a saint's exalted life's work for a simple map. Yet she wasn't averting her gaze. He did his best to exert some pressure back on her.

"Are you telling me that's a fair trade?"

He wasn't going to lay his hand out on the table in front of her just yet, but Fran simply revealed a beautiful smile and slowly opened her eyes as if to say "and why not?" But those eyes weren't the same ones that gazed at him in disbelief when he told her that soldiers had come to the village. No, it wasn't disbelief that was in those dark eyes surrounded by tanned skin right now. She spoke with a lowered voice, like a fortuneteller meeting his pressure head-on.

"So you're saying you don't want to place yourself in danger for the map?"

Lawrence stole a glance at Holo, who was staring at Fran. Cole seemed entirely puzzled. Of course Lawrence didn't care about the danger. But how could he blatantly lie about Katerina being a saint already, especially when she was cursed as a witch? How could he just make up a story just to sell her over to the landlord? Could he dare take Holo's hand after doing something like that?

“Defrauding a lord and selling a saint? I can’t do it.”

“Really?”

Fran walked away, passing by Lawrence and snatching the map he held in his hands.

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

It was pointless to ask, and he knew it. She paused for a moment before looking back at him.

“And you even convinced Hugh to help you somehow.. I thought you were serious about this.”

He recalled how polite Hugh had been to Fran back at his company. No matter what she said or did, he wanted her to draw the homes of his friends. Lawrence really had convinced Hugh to help him. But Fran wasn’t done.

“I thought you lived up to your reputation, but I guess I was wrong.”

“What-”

Before he could even finish with “do you mean,” Fran had already cut him off.

“You really didn’t want a map of the north that badly, did you?”

“!”

It was like being stabbed in the heart. She walked away, leaving him unable to move or even think. It was like a bucket of cold water had frozen him in place. She had cut him directly, by questioning his resolve to get a map of the north. It was too direct, since she knew he wanted it to keep traveling with Holo.

He’d made a vow to ignore danger for Holo as they chased after the bones of the wolf. He’d found a map-maker, but couldn’t bring himself to compromise. It was obvious, stupidly so, that he wanted to be with her. But it was even more obvious that without that kind of resolve, he couldn’t build a very nice home. He knew that, but being slapped in the face with it was too much.

“She attacked your weakest point.”

Holo looked up at him happily.

“But are you truly going to sell that dried-out person?”

His first response was “impossible.” Given Holo’s earlier words, and the look in her eyes, he knew what she meant. If it was for the sake of these people, Holo might make a move.

But Katerina had been used, both in life and in death, by the village and the landlord. Lawrence didn’t want to add his name to the list of people who used her for their own interests. He wasn’t in any position to refuse Fran, but he could hardly accept her proposal. The soldiers could just as easily run them through to conceal the truth.

“Let’s run.”

Holo nodded as he spoke.

“And leave Ms. Fran behind?”

Cole had raised his voice. They looked at each other, knowing how important Fran was.

“When we’re safe, we can request for Holo’s help, or have Hugh exert his influence to keep her safe. She is still highly sought-after by others.”

She certainly wouldn’t be brought to harm. But that wasn’t why Cole seemed about to cry.

“That’s not it.. I mean are you two giving up on her search for the angel?”

Lawrence had no idea how to reply. They weren’t really related to this. They were here because of Fran’s search. And yet, it was obvious that Fran had confided in Cole and told him her real objectives.

She had already planned to sell Katerina.. that’s how determined she was. But as Lawrence was about to explain to Cole just how foolish it was to pursue that end, he swallowed his words. Cole, on the verge of tears, handed him a book.

“I insisted on traveling with you, and I like you guys, but I can’t abandon Ms. Fran like that.”



The moment the book left his hands, he grabbed his bag and fled after Fran. His kindness was too great, so it made sense that he would have been touched if Fran confided in him. But the moment Lawrence saw which book Cole had handed him, he realized that wasn't it at all. It was a bible. And Lawrence wasn't wincing because it was just any bible, but one covered in dried blood.

"What is that?"

He snapped out of it when he heard Holo ask her question.

"A bible."

He opened it. Several pages were torn. Others had been stuck together with blood. Some were blackened by smoke. This was a book that had seen many a battle. Lawrence finally found what he was looking for on several pieces of paper folded between its pages.

"Dear.. Kirja.. vai.. umm.. Kirjavainen Mercenaries?"

The name of a band of mercenaries was written on this page, which had been folded into a bloody bible. Lawrence wiped the ashes from the page and squinted to read the rest. There was a signature next to the band's name.

"Fran Bonilly.."

It came from the bag Fran had given Cole, so this letter was probably addressed to her. But Lawrence found himself reading the title beside her name twice.

"Military chaplain, Fran Bonilly."

He felt like he'd been struck in the head with an iron rod. He was so beside himself that he didn't even hear Holo calling out to him. He turned the page. Some of the words were blurry from water damage, others from blood or dirt. But it was still clear that this letter was sent to her by the Kirjavainen Mercenaries. She wasn't with them now, but atop the second page was a special section "written requesting prayers for the fallen." Whoever wrote the letter did so with a very graceful hand.

"Captain Martin Groykas was killed in action at the Battle of Lydian."



“We were betrayed on the Lavaan Plains, and pursued by the soldiers of Marquis Rizzo. That night, sutler Reenu died. He left no will.”

“Lieutenant Ron Hieman was arrested, and taken to the Marquis’s dungeon. He remained brave and loyal to the end, and remembered you to the last.”

Lawrence flipped to the final page.

“Mirigua of the Nackoli diocese was hung in the month of Saint Ralphen. He left these words for you: ‘I saw the angel not too long ago.’”

Everything after that was smeared beyond legibility. It seemed there was more on the back, but it too was illegible. Lawrence stood silently for a long time.

“Huh..”

Fran was clearly trusted by nobles, even at her young age. She must be accustomed to dealing with those in power. She had daring, yet wasn’t crass. Hugh said she’d been born on the battlefield and counted herself a slave, and that all finally made sense. She was defended by mercenaries, and used her faith to help them overcome the horrors of battle. She’d been a guide to many lost friends.

Taking everything into consideration, her motivation for chasing after the angel’s legend must have changed with that letter. The wrinkles on the last page were likely caused by her own hands, when she read that the “person she knew” had been hung. In the angel’s legend, the doors to heaven were opened and it had ascended into them. What else could she be after, really?

There were countless tales about the sad final moments of mercenaries. Fran was still alive because she was apart from them during those hellish moments. The letter proved that, and as Hugh’s timely words said, those with strength were the first to die. Chaplains could only pray, not block blades, so they weren’t thrown into battle. And so, Fran had survived.

“Hey you.”

When he finally realized that Holo was talking to him, she stopped talking.

“Sorry.”

She looked at him as if she knew what he wanted to say. The wind that blew along the river and spread over the dried riverbank blasted into his face as it blew the fine snow on the forest floor.

“Will you help?”

He cut to the chase, but she didn’t reply. She reached her hand out as if she needed to see the bible and letter first.

“What do you plan on doing?”

Those were her first words after receiving the bible and reading it to her heart’s desire. The finer details were hazy, but it could still be understood. Cole’s rare outburst and the way he chased after Fran made things all too clear.

“All I can offer is my worthless sympathy.”

“Then why are you asking for my help?”

Lawrence smiled at that, but not because he didn’t want to answer. He was just embarrassed to say why. She grabbed his ear in surprise, but he kept on smiling. It was just too amusing a thought.

“Because even when the world is at its cruelest, it also offers hope.”

Holo didn’t let him go, and he kept staring right into her eyes.

“The world may not revolve around us, but it does have this knack for showing us a miracle when we most need one.”

Fran’s mercenary friends didn’t get that luxury, but Fran was praying in her heart for a miracle beyond miracles. The odds were that a water mill would be built here, and she would end up dead. Even if luck was on her side, all she would have to show for her efforts were more dead bodies all around her, and an escape into a hopeless-seeming world.

Even a child being threatened with a beating would know better, but Katerina was willing to remain true to her beliefs and die in a hut even if she was called a witch. She'd searched for the truth behind a legend, and neither sympathy nor false miracles mattered to her. She'd lived with the hope that the world was simply not that cruel, despite the harsh reality being otherwise.

"You fool."

"I truly am."

"You foolish mule."

Holo's face was scrunched up in confusion, but after sighing she raised her hand as though unwilling to waste any more time. And yet, her finger was curled around one of his.

"You of all people should know how cruel the world really is."

In the end, the Wisewolf had correctly inferred the foolish thoughts of her companion.

"Of course. But.."

"What?"

If he couldn't give her a satisfying answer, she might desert him on the spot; at least that's how he used to think. Now, he simply held her hand and hugged her.

"..Wouldn't you rather help this free-spirited girl?"

She bared her pearly teeth.

"Failure will not be tolerated."

"Of course."

Lawrence replied, lightly pressed his forehead against hers..

"Of course."

..And repeated his assurance a second time.

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“So, what do you actually plan on doing?”

She questioned him again before they had even returned to the hut.

“Nothing complicated. I’m just going to mention Katerina’s nomination.”

“..Are you selling her?”

“Sell a saint? Hardly. We’re just observers, after all.”

He meant that they were bystanders watching events unfold. If they happened to observe anything unnatural taking place, or if any problems arose in the village, the landlord could be held liable.

“Even the stupidest coward of a lord will learn a bit about a situation before he acts. Katerina may be nominated into sainthood, but he should know that we are not representatives of the Church. So how could that possibly-”

She caught herself at the end, finally realizing what he wanted her to do. He fully expected her to pout and act unwilling.

“That’s why I need your help.”

“I shall have to think it over.”

Sure enough, she pouted and grew silent. And so, he continued.

“In the angel’s legend, you’ll remember they heard beasts howling. So if you help, and we time it right, then no one will suspect Katerina anymore.”

“Mhm.”

“Katerina’s nomination isn’t final; she’s not a saint yet. Nothing in that hut is worth anything yet, so there’s nothing for a merchant to sell.”

Holo spoke, perhaps out of boredom.

“Sly.”

“Couldn’t you just say ‘cunning?’”

She sighed in lieu of saying, “they are one and the same.”

“So we’ll have to placate the landlord by telling him this place is worth more to them as a future religious site, which they’ll lose if they destroy it now.”

This would be a strong argument to a landlord flitting like a bat between the Church and pagans. He’d keep his mouth shut tighter than a loyal hound. Of course, it wouldn’t work for very long, but it would buy them enough time for Fran to do her work.

“Well, at least this is better than running.”

With that, Holo entered the hut and cast some wood into the fire.

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Katerina Rucci was going to be a saint. Her diary was a plain record of her daily life, and through it one could understand her. In it was written that even the archbishop (who Lawrence knew of) had sent her a letter. As had wealthy noblewomen, and the masters of great guilds. Her daily life was filled with replying to such correspondence, as well as scribe duties for the church such as copying bibles and other holy texts.

Her diary quite consistently showed off her pious side, but ever so often it reflected her inner thoughts. A bishop had refused to return her translated bible, and had copies of it sold against her will. Women in the Church weren’t permitted to speak out, but they could write their complaints in their diaries just as easily, it seemed. And the contents of her diary were quite damning.

An archbishop claimed he could recite the bible from memory, but that he needed to eat with

nobles to do so. Thus, his gluttony got him into a mess, and he'd asked Katerina for advice on how to get himself out of it. Likewise, wealthy ladies wrote about their quarrels with their husbands, and guild masters had even more direct questions, such as how much they needed to donate if they wished to enter heaven.

Katerina made each of her detailed replies seriously, even having drafts of some of them. And yet, in between those pages of stupid questions there were short sentences asking whether they were tests from God. It was clearly a burden on her.

She seemed to want to reject sainthood, but it was clear that her supporters were increasing and her nomination process would likely be quick. Lawrence forced himself to mentally note the names of some of the nobles, but he was feeling worse and worse about doing this.

Katerina had even written about the day a villager had come to explain the situation to her.. that they were going to brand her a witch. She was sympathetic enough to accept that, but just as Fran had mentioned her journal then began to muse about how weak humans really were.

Not long after that, her diary became a normal one, noting the changing of seasons, her dogs, their puppies, asking God for forgiveness for hunting birds, etc. But still nobles sent her letters, even if she didn't seem to be replying anymore. She wasn't even mentioning the villagers anymore.

Perhaps she had finally given up, realizing the world wasn't going to change no matter how faithful she was. As he slowly closed her diary, Lawrence noted that she seemed happier near the end.

It was growing dark, and dusk was upon them. They cast more wood onto the fire and entered Katerina's room. Holo wanted to check the bookshelf for any other useful information, but she wound up staring off at the view outside the window, as if joining Katerina.

"I can see the falls from here."

She was murmuring.

"They are lovely.."

Lawrence stood at her side and joined her. Indeed, the falls were visible. The grass leading up to

them seemed trimmed, since nothing was poking up through the layer of snow. Actually, it might just be a garden.

“Perhaps she simply felt like taking a nap.”

Holo poked Katerina’s head. The diary did give off that kind of impression. As Lawrence wondered whether dying this way would be as nice as it seemed, Holo placed her hand on the windowsill.

“This wind is freezing.”

Going against character, Holo closed the window. Perhaps she just couldn’t take it anymore. Anyone would eventually become sad in the presence of death, even a happy one. And yet, Katerina was still being called a witch and a saint. People just kept on using her for their own purposes. That made having a discussion in that room feel wrong, so after closing her window they returned to the living room.

Lawrence had called the villagers and the landlord selfish, but he knew he was the same: he was going to use her sainthood for his own benefit. But he decided to push these thoughts out of his mind and focus on what had to be done. After all, he was a merchant. His own profit should naturally be the first thing on his mind.

At length, Fran returned and noticed that the two of them were still there. She seemed surprised, but Cole seemed to feel validated. Fran nearly asked why they changed their minds, but when she saw Lawrence clutching her bible she seemed comforted. She looked at Cole, then back at Lawrence. Her past and future were being held in his hands. She looked down, probably realizing that he’d let his merchants’ instincts get the best of him.

“Get ready to draw that map for us.”

They heard her hands clutch her cloak tightly.

“Us merchants have our own convictions.”

Fran’s eyes fell to the ground as she nodded.

“Alright. I’ll do it.”

She wiped her eyes and looked up.

“Thank you.”

Lawrence smiled, though he wasn’t looking at her. The embers in the fire had collapsed, and sparks fluttered around. He looked outside.

“Looks like it’s the moment of truth.”

Fran, being a military chaplain, took his meaning immediately and nodded.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll say the same as before, that you’re a silversmith sent by the bishop. But this time, I’ll add that we’ve been sent here in order to help evaluate her candidacy for sainthood.”

Fran seemed confused for a moment, but her wits were quick and she realized what Lawrence had decided. She nodded, albeit slowly.

“I have no desire to sell Katerina out. All I’m willing to do is verify that her nomination is under consideration. That should be enough to stop them.”

Fran nodded more forcefully and replied clearly.

“Understood.”

With that, they heard the horses and soldiers come to a stop. She wiped her eyes again and clutched the bible Lawrence had returned to her tightly to her chest.

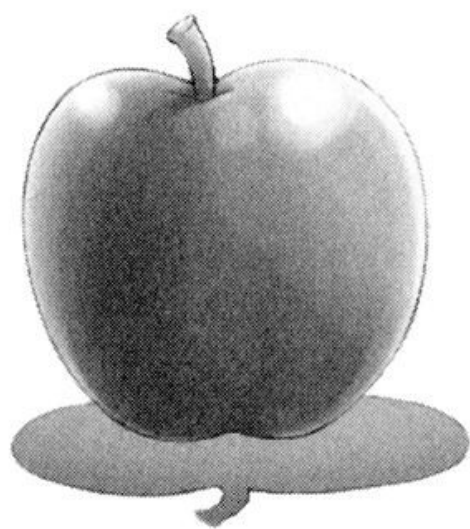
“It’s time for battle.”

When she looked up, her face was deadly serious, and her voice as grim as a veteran knight.



序

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## Chapter 6

When you think of the word “prominent,” you think of something like the old knight who was now eyeing the groveling villagers scornfully. He was nothing but prominent, as if he had flames rising from his back.

“So you’re from Ruvinheigen?”

Had Holo been unwilling to lend her aid, they would have already fled back to Gerube. But behind that old knight was a contingent of hastily-drafted soldiers (possibly farmers), so running now wouldn’t be a good idea. It might even have been better to just stay in the hut and wait for this business with the angel to blow over. Indeed, because it wasn’t clear how things would turn out, Lawrence and Fran were the only ones who had left the hut.

“Yes.”

Hearing Lawrence’s reply, the old knight beckoned the soldiers with his chin. He called himself a governor for the landlord, and at first Lawrence thought he was going to pull out a certificate to validate that claim. But instead, the soldiers pointed their spears at them.

“Either you’ve seen and heard nothing while you were here, or never came in the first place.”

His tone was obviously one of command, making it clear that he expected them to understand if they had any brains in their heads. Lawrence calmly looked up at him.

“Understood?”

He was making himself clear: if they obeyed, they would be safe. He didn’t care if they told the Church; it would all be over soon enough. But if they resisted then no one would come to their aid. It was a clear command, and any normal merchant would obey.

“I have been sent by the bishop, who has commissioned a piece of silverwork about the legendary angel.”

The governor’s eyebrow jumped up at that.

“And it’s no surprise why you came back empty-handed, given how far away from Ruvinheigen

this is. No one will suspect you.”

“Yes indeed.”

He was threatening them, but obviously felt relaxed when he heard Lawrence’s reply; anyone could see that. Kings and emperors were all once just the lords of poor lands, and had built them into kingdoms after convincing the other lords in the area of their courage and ability. As such, this heavy-handed acting was probably the governor’s limit. Lawrence calmly continued.

“But that was not our only purpose.”

A hushed breath was heard.

“Did you know there’s a saint here?”

“A saint?”

The governor seemed shocked, but Lawrence kept talking.

“Her name is Katerina Rucci. Many nobles adored her, and when news of her deeds reached the Pope’s ears in the far south, he nominated her for sainthood. That nomination is now due.”

“..”

Everyone was too shocked or suspicious to react.

“We were sent here to investigate and ensure that her nomination was valid. Her dislike of such things made it take a long time to track her down.”

Nothing would come of stopping Lawrence now, if what he said was true. Treating him poorly now would only come back to haunt them later.

“However, when we did, we found that she had already passed on peacefully. There are many blind people in the world, who would label such a person no better than an animal. But the lord here is wiser than that, so we will report the truth. Incidentally..”

Lawrence stared at the governor.

“..What will you report to your lord?”

It was like a magic spell restarting the conversation. The governor snapped back to reality with a sweaty brow, opening and closing his mouth repeatedly - probably the way he normally looked when he wasn't acting haughty. And yet, before his voice could settle on actual words, another was heard from behind him.

“Perhaps that's true.”

The old knight turned around in shock. Someone behind him was speaking, the nicest-dressed in the bunch. He was thin, and seemed to be in his forties - the nervous type, who would scream at the slightest sound. And yet this odd character also seemed quite lordly. He brushed his governor aside, having hopped off his horse and walked up to Lawrence and Fran alone. Perhaps he wanted a one-on-one conversation.

“I am Reginald Kierken.”

It threw them off to hear him announce his name to them, let alone take Lawrence's word at face value. Even when Lawrence began to kneel to reply, he stopped him.

“I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trade Guild.”

Kierken replied with a hum, then sighed.

“Let me be frank. Have you any actual evidence?”

For a landlord to dismount and say such a thing proved his cowardice. He wasn't even trying to sound tough. He was just a small fry trying to stay alive, thought Lawrence.

“What kind of evidence would you like?”

Kierken was speechless for a moment, but snapped back angrily. He either felt like Lawrence was toying with him, or was wholly unconvinced.

“Something to convince me of why I have never heard of this. This is something important

enough to reach my ears. So speak! What evidence do you have?”

The coward’s anger had been sparked, and his face was red. It wasn’t necessary to play him for a fool, so Lawrence replied immediately.

“I’ve only the names of those who ordered us to come. Being a small fry, I’m not privy to any actual evidence, but I will gladly cite their names.”

The social network between nobles was tight, and they were all aware of each other. A landlord in charge of a religiously complicated area like this would surely be even more keenly aware of that network, especially one who more or less grovelled to them. Lawrence coughed, then began reciting the names from Katerina’s diary.

“Earl Lance of Leen. Sir Marus of Dolan. Marquis Evindott of Schtinghilt. Archbishop Riemann of Corsair.”

He paused slightly to observe Kierken, who was shocked. Clearly he knew at least some of those names. Lawrence went on.

“Then from the Duchy of Lindz there’s Sirs Dionne and Meriff and Countess Rose. As for the rest of Proania..”

Kierken waved at him to stop, his face having lost all color. Lawrence had only gotten through the names of the local lords in the north of Proania, so they were all probably familiar to him. So many nobles were involved, and yet he knew nothing. That would surely seem like he was an enemy of the Church. As such, it would be even more dangerous for him to act against Lawrence, if he was truly investigating on their behalf. If it was really this bad, all he could do was wag his tail.

“R-really? What.. what’ll I do?”

It was almost as if he was clutching at Lawrence’s feet, begging for mercy. He was to be pitied, but there was a limit to such things before pity turned into disgust. Even to merchants, who are said to be the least moral people on the planet, this man was pathetic.

True, it was practically impossible to lead one’s entire life respectably, but shouldn’t a ruler have some character worthy of their exalted position? These thoughts crossed Lawrence’s

mind, but never left his mind. His smile never changed.

“Please stay calm. We haven’t come here to accuse you of anything, it’s clear that you have worked hard.”

That man, despite seeming so much older than Lawrence, nodded like a young child. It was enough to make one wonder if he might have swapped souls with one.

“After all, we saw how well that hut was kept. Good sir, you must be loyal to the Church, and any of the lords I mentioned would feel relieved by those actions.”

“Ah! Yes, they would, wouldn’t they?”

He smiled nervously. Fran hadn’t reacted the entire time. Either her discipline was just that strong or she simply didn’t know how to react to this spectacle.

“However, this is indeed an important process, and should be kept secret. Until her nomination becomes official, no one else should be given a chance to desecrate her.”

“..but..”

“After all this trouble, we’ve finally found her..”

Hearing Lawrence speak so gravely made Kierken swallowed hard and nod back. Their plan was going smoothly, and should work out fine once Holo made her move. At that point Kierken wouldn’t dare try anything funny. And yet, just as Lawrence was about to wrap things up, someone spoke out.

“Hey, that’s her, isn’t it!”

Kierken turned around like a startled mouse. Lawrence turned as well, and saw that a soldier with a broken helmet and shoddy cuirass speaking.. the hallmarks of an experienced soldier. He moved toward them.

“Yes.. yes..”

Fran breathed in sharply.

“What are you talking about?”

“Sir!”

Kierken was a weakling, but he was still a lord. The fact that he was being addressed as “sir” meant that this soldier was a paid mercenary, and not a proper charge. He spat toward Lawrence and Fran as he eyed her suspiciously.

“She’s just like the villagers said..”

“The villagers?”

Kierken was muttering at the man as he turned back toward Lawrence apologetically. The look in his eyes made Lawrence want to hug and comfort him.

“Yeah.. they said a silversmith with tan skin was here. And here she is, in the flesh.”

If Kierken seemed tense before, Lawrence was just as tense now. He was so nervous his eyes had trouble deciding who to focus on.

“Tell us, man! What are you talking about?”

The man spat again and beamed a wicked smile.

“These two couldn’t possibly be from the Church.”

Kierken spun around to observe Lawrence and Fran to gauge their reactions, having already turned on them.

“Don’t be deceived, sir! That silversmith with the tanned skin is Fran Bonilly, the dark priestess of a mercenary band known as the Red Eagles!”

He walked up to Fran casually, then pointed his spear directly at her.

“They’re also called the Kirjavainen Mercenaries, and they’re famous around Proania. My own band was always running into them, and thanks to that my friend of 20 years is gone.”

Kierken jumped back like a frightened bird. The mercenaries that nobles bought had social networks that were just as tightly-knit. No matter how well-spoken Lawrence and Fran were, if they rummaged through her things they wouldn't have any defense.

"They're the enemies of all who rule. Their leader was hung for being pagan, so there's no way the Church would send someone like her on such a mission."

"R-really?"

Kierken sounded like a suffocated chicken. The soldier narrowed his eyes in anger, and thrust the tip of his spear toward Fran.

"Ask her."

He laughed out loud, and obviously not at the sight of his pathetic employer. He was just happy to have a tough opponent at his mercy.

"What say you in defense?"

Kierken stared at Fran, who silently cast her eyes down. She couldn't hide her obvious nature. Lawrence simply looked over toward the hut.

"The angel knows."

"Wait, what?"

Before the landlord had even finished his question, Fran had slid beside the spear that was pointed at her. Lawrence was impressed at how easy she made it look, but in fact there weren't many people who would have the courage to try that with a real spear pointed at their belly.

Only those who lived this kind of life, or had inconceivably firm beliefs would try something like that. As she stepped forward, Kierken stepped back. He seemed overwhelmed by her zeal. He'd moved three steps back even as she made her second.

"You are Fran Bonilly, aren't you?"



She didn't reply, but simply took off her hood and spoke calmly.

"What if I said no?"

Having seen her step calmly around a spear would make it difficult for anyone to react. Not when she was behaving as if this sort of threat was nothing to her, and smiling when she heard her name spoken in hushed whispers.

"The landlord and villagers here called a faithful nun a witch for their own selfish interests. And now, they're even more selfishly willing to label her a saint so they can line their coffers with gold. Other nobles are investing heavily in her sainthood, and yet the lord before me would end all of that just to build himself a cheap little water mill. How can you claim any high road here?"

The soldier seemed confused, but the landlord stared at her like he was hearing the very word of God. She smiled and turned back to Lawrence, who wasn't sure what her intent was. Holo would soon make her shocking contribution to this situation, but Fran didn't know that. Maybe she really did feel that strongly about Katerina.

"Yes, I am Fran Bonilly. Does that make me a holy woman, or a witch?"

She was directing her statements at the village farmers among the soldiers.

"I am certain you understand me. You must."

They heard what was surely the sound of everyone swallowing in unison. Most of them lived on Kierken's land, and knew well what it meant to always wander between the faiths of the Church and the pagans. Being faithful was the more difficult and painful choice.. and the one filled with fear.

"Surely you realize that the angel can see into your heart."

A gust of wind blew by them and Lawrence watched as the soldier raised his spear and thrust it at Fran. Lawrence was just a traveling merchant, and wouldn't be able to do much to stop him. It looked like he was going to run her through right then and there.

"Silence, witch!"

The man shouted at the top of his lungs as he lunged at her.

“Stop-!”

Lawrence shouted and tried to hold the man back, but couldn’t. And yet, the man’s spear didn’t get much deeper than her robe. It was no miracle, however. An arrow had been shot through his leg.

“!”

He looked down at his leg in shock. One of the soldiers dressed as a huntsman had shot him. Everyone’s face went white, and their breathing was sharp and panicked. They were frightened at the prospect that this would turn to blood, now that Fran had lit the fire of fear in their minds.

“Defend her!”

A tense battle erupted the moment someone made that cry. Chaplains could only rely on the power of words during battles. Nonetheless, they could whip ardent cowards into a fervor just as easily as they could send the dying off with a gentle sentiment.

There were many terrified eyes among the crowd, worried that God might punish them for letting the landlord destroy this place. Fran, the so-called dark priestess, had used her skills expertly. And, despite earning a red wound in her belly, her expression toward Kierken hadn’t changed.

“You. Please judge the truth with your own eyes.”

Lawrence expected Kierken to nod, but he was so startled that he fell to the ground. Fran was just that intimidating. She turned and began walking away.

“Wh-where are you going?”

It wasn’t necessary to ask, but Lawrence felt compelled to do so when he saw the blood trickling from her to the ground. She didn’t bother stopping or even looking back at him.

“To look for the angel.”

Her voice was muffled by the clamor around them, but he heard her. Moreover, he felt her faith hitting him like a flame from her back. She was more determined to fight for her beliefs than her own life. She would never yield. He had to run and grab her, so they could at least treat her wound first.

“..Do you hear that?”

Perhaps owing to her blood loss, she asked that in a hushed voice. Because of the noise around them, Lawrence didn’t quite hear her, but knew what she must have asked.

“It sounds like the growling of beasts..”

Hearing that beasts were growling behind him made Lawrence shiver. He turned around in anticipation, but all he saw was soldiers spilling blood without a care for anything but self-preservation. Was she mocking them satirically? Or laughing at the sight? Confused, he helped her walk away, and soon understood.

Whatever this sound was, it wasn’t Holo. It sounded more like a low, rumbling roar. But he recalled Holo telling him that the mountains surrounding the lake were like a giant bowl, and that only people were dumb enough to mistake echoes as beasts in the hills. And earlier that afternoon, Fran had talked about the dam being overrun. So this was what she meant..

He looked up, and spied Holo’s gigantic form wandering about in the forest next to the waterfall. Evidently, she hadn’t expected this. He nodded back at her, knowing that she was looking at him. And immediately, she jumped out and stood atop the waterfall, releasing a mighty howl. The air shook, the trees swayed, and everyone looked up at her.

Fran had asked the landlord to judge the truth with his own eyes, but the sight of Holo howling up at the moon with her great fangs and majestic tail was nothing short of godly. So godly, in fact, that she might as well be a demon. Even Fran could only stare silently at her. Had they made a mistake? Holo hesitated and didn’t jump away, but Lawrence remained confident in their decision as he heard her howl echo over and over like some colossal bell.

Despite her tension, Fran eventually murmured.

“..it’s coming..”

Lawrence didn't reply. As the howling subsided, everyone who had been frozen in place at the sight and sound of Holo caught their breath and heard what Fran and Lawrence had heard before them. It now sounded like an army marching to battle; a heavenly army coming down to them.

Everyone looked around for an escape route in a blind panic, but the sound soon mysteriously ended. Then, there was nothing but silence. No a noise was heard until someone finally pointed up at the waterfall and spoke in a hushed voice.



“Hey, it’s gone..”

Others started chiming in.

“Was that.. an illusion?”

Lawrence knew it wasn’t, and that Holo hadn’t hidden herself to make them think it was. But he and Fran didn’t have to worry about that for long. They knew they had guessed the truth correctly when a soldier suddenly shouted loudly.

“The waterfall!”

The waterfall had suddenly stopped, and a few moments later a tremendous wave came crashing down toward it. As it collided with the rocks at the top of the waterfall, something incredible happened.

In the dead of winter, under a silver moon, tiny little frozen sparks were rushing through the air. They mostly dove deep down into the pool of water below the waterfall. As they did, a strange sound was heard, and the water in the pool flew right back up into the sky as though blown apart by the impact.

The angel made its appearance.

“Look, Ms. Fran..”

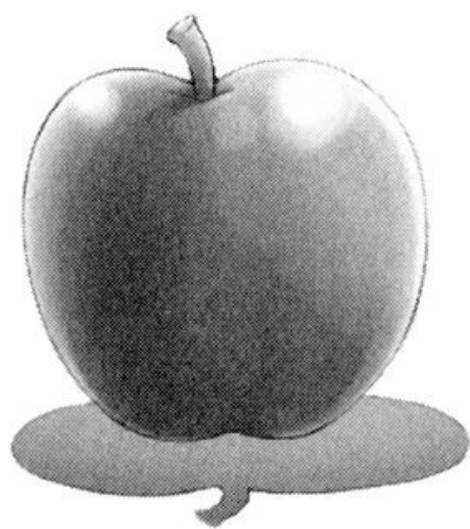
Lawrence hugged the poor girl, who was no longer able to stand on her own. And yet, she calmly sat there staring at the scene that unfolded before her. She spoke, reaching her hand up toward the spectacle.

“It’s.. beautiful..”

Some soldiers were so startled they cast their gear to the ground and fled. Others who were more faithful fell to their knees in regret. The only one present who had any true conviction was looking up and reaching out to the angel as she beat her wings, then vanished, going back to heaven as tiny drops of water frozen in the moonlight.

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## Epilogue

“Then what?”

Hugh eagerly approached Lawrence, who stepped away and pushed him back. The art dealer understood. He sat back down on his chair and clutched at his clothing before asking again.

“What happened next?”

“After that the villagers all believed the legend, and accepted Katerina’s sainthood. It was over. Except..”

“None of them were sure if they’d seen an angel or the Devil, so they chose to keep it all a secret and pretend nothing at all happened.”

“Ah.. I see, I see..”

Hugh was like a boy listening to an adventure story. His eyes closed and his chin tilted upward. He sighed while leaning back in his chair, finally at ease.

“You sure seem calmer, now that we’re back.”

Hugh’s eyes opened and he laughed at the joke.

“In clutch moments that girl will do whatever she wants. But still.. I didn’t think it would come to that. She was hurt so badly I thought something more disastrous had happened.”

In fact the soldiers and villagers of Tarsig ended up tending to her wound, but were shooed away in annoyance as she was recovering. Holo was delighted to see a kindred spirit who hated to be celebrated.

That was three days ago. They’d arrived back at Gerube the prior night. The others went to bed, but Hugh dragged Lawrence alone downstairs to explain what had happened.

“But then what caused that legendary phenomenon?”

Lawrence swallowed his fruit dipped in honey before replying.



“An avalanche.”

Hugh didn’t hide his surprise.

“What?”

“Well, snow from the mountains came crashing down like some tremendous wave, looking like steps up to heaven.”

“..And the beast?”

Lawrence had no real idea, so he chose the most likely conclusion.

“Anything echoing off the lake would sound like the army of God. This time it was the sounds of the battle, so I’ll wager it was something like that in the past, too.”

Of course it was Holo’s howl that was loudest, but he didn’t mention that. As Fran suspected, any noise loud and sharp enough could have sparked the avalanche.

“What a weird world we live in.”

“Isn’t it?”

Lawrence put on a look of sympathy and smiled, earning another laugh from Hugh.

“Well, that settles it, then. Now I’ll have to visit Tarsig too, even if I’m not quite as brave as Holo.”

There was a knock at the door as he returned his joke, but it quickly became obvious. Hugh rose to his feet, still smiling, and answered the knock. In cities, people couldn’t stay up all night. There were bylaws restricting the use of fires and candles, and without light they might as well sleep. A guard had simply seen a lit candle and came to check on it.

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lawrence spoke to Hugh’s back and stood up. He knew they would talk for hours if he didn’t

make a strategic retreat while he could. He took his wine with him and climbed upstairs.

It might not look like much, but the company was quite cozy on the inside. It was rather nice for a four-floor building. Those who were less respected usually slept on the top floor, so Lawrence knew that their being on the second floor meant that they had Hugh's respect.

As he walked past Fran's room, he saw that the door was slightly ajar and the moonlight was peeking through. Surely it wasn't a thief? He carefully took a peek inside.

"Yes?"

She noticed him immediately. Even human travelers were sensitive enough for that, unlike city girls.

"I noticed that the door was slightly ajar, so I worried we might have a thief."

Fran's eyes wrinkled as if smiling.

"It's said that's just what a discovered thief will claim."

That would have been a tasteless joke among strangers at a feast, but after going through what they had it was quite friendly.

"It's cold."

"It's said that only old wounds grow hot; fresh ones are still cold."

It was an equally tasteless joke, but perfectly suited as a retort. "Not that I ever want to find out," he mumbled to himself, happy that he wasn't a military chaplain as well.

"I thought this would be the last stop on my journey."

She suddenly looked at him while speaking. The moonlight washed over her through the window, making her look like she would fade away forever into little beads of light. She'd only recently removed the bandages from her torso, having recovered from the fever she ran in Tarsig. She certainly wasn't frail. Anyone having to stoke the courage and faith of an army probably had to be this tough.

“What do you mean?”

Fran chuckled, obviously embarrassed.

“Looking back on it now, I’m really just a stupid little girl.”

It seemed she was never planning on making it back from Tarsig, judging from her bible, the passion those letters inspired in her, and her cold determination. Those with the sharpest fangs and claws were the first to die, and she could pass for the general at the head of an army.

That’s how she finally came to learn the truth behind that legend. Lawrence had no way of knowing what was running through her mind as they witnessed “the angel,” but he did recall the serene look of relief that had washed over her.

“You’re right about this journey not being over, you know. I still haven’t gotten that map.”

He put on his most accusing tone, making her spin to meet him. The moonlight revealed her face, her chin shining like a polished knife.

“I’ve seen merchants chase armies to have them repay their loans.”

“Are you saying I’ll have to pass through the gates of heaven to get it?”

Fran’s eyes closed like a cat. But they reopened and gazed at him as he walked up to her.

“That’s a shame.. a camel will pass through the eye of a needle before a merchant gets through the gates of heaven, after all.”

He quietly closed her window, and noticed a pained look on her face in the moonlight.

“I.. won’t be getting there myself, either.”

“Even though you’ve helped others so bravely?”

She smiled and pulled her blankets over herself. She probably wanted to be consoled, but not by a merchant.

“A merchant’s help doesn’t come cheap..”

Her malicious smile was the kind that Lawrence was used to. But this time, a hand was reaching out to him as well. It was the same hand that had reached out to the angel at the falls, so he knew she wasn’t really playing around.

“..But I’ll repay you.”

She was probably used to acting this way around the mercenaries. It wasn’t something that bothered Lawrence, either.

“Very well.”

He took her hand. Had she been a city girl he would have knelt down to kiss it, but that would have been too much for Fran.

“May the gods be with you.”

In response to receiving such a rare blessing, he motioned as though tipping an invisible hat to her. She nodded as her eyes closed. But just as Lawrence turned to walk away-

“Back then..”

“Hmm?”

“..Atop the falls..”

He turned back around, smiling.

“Atop the falls?”

If she asked, Fran would receive a response. But she thought twice.

“..Nevermind..”

She paused.

“Must have been an illusion.”

“Good night.”

She didn’t reply, so he left the room and pretended he didn’t see Holo, who was standing there. She followed him closely as he walked into their room. A quiet moonlit night began as he closed the door behind her.

