

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Merehari

meat:

spice: wolf

狼と香辛料

XV 太陽の金貨〈上〉

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Desired by Himekara/Wakana also (original)



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*



Volume 15

狼と香辛料

Shimo no Wolf

Author: Isuna Hasekura
Released: 07/15/13
Project Manager: Pitythefool
Translator: Terrence
Editor: Bashzestampeedo
Proofreaders: MyInnerFred, Integirl
Typesetters: Elensar, Xilent
Visit our forums: <http://isg.exocboard.com/pitythefool>
Questions? DrunkenWolfTranslations@gmail.com

Artwork by Ayakura Mui

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that made this project possible

Contributors



Reybangs
Graywind
Roose44
Mithphoenix

Battlezoid
The_Nice_Guy
ashp

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狼と香辛料



太陽の金貨〈上〉

支倉凍砂

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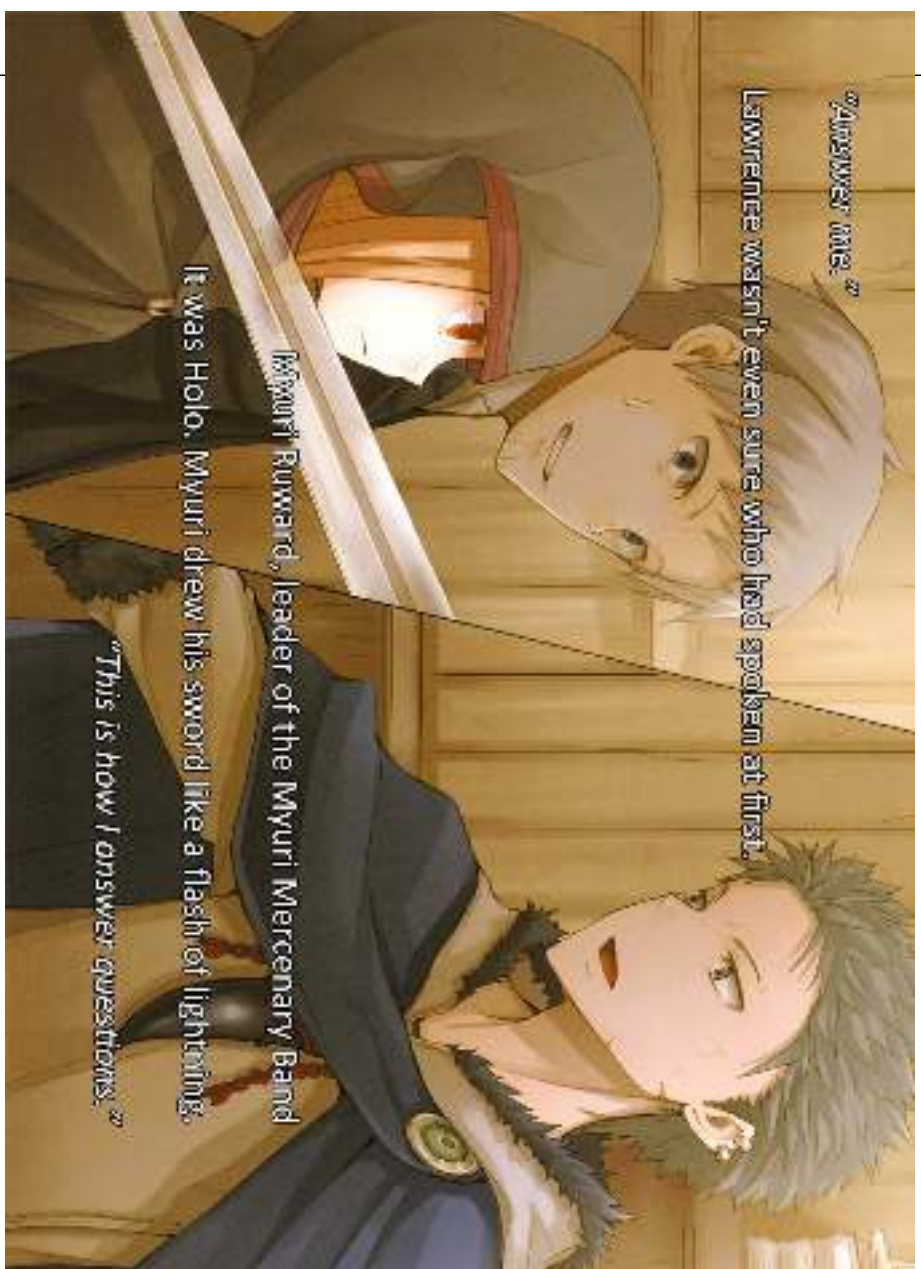
"Answer me."

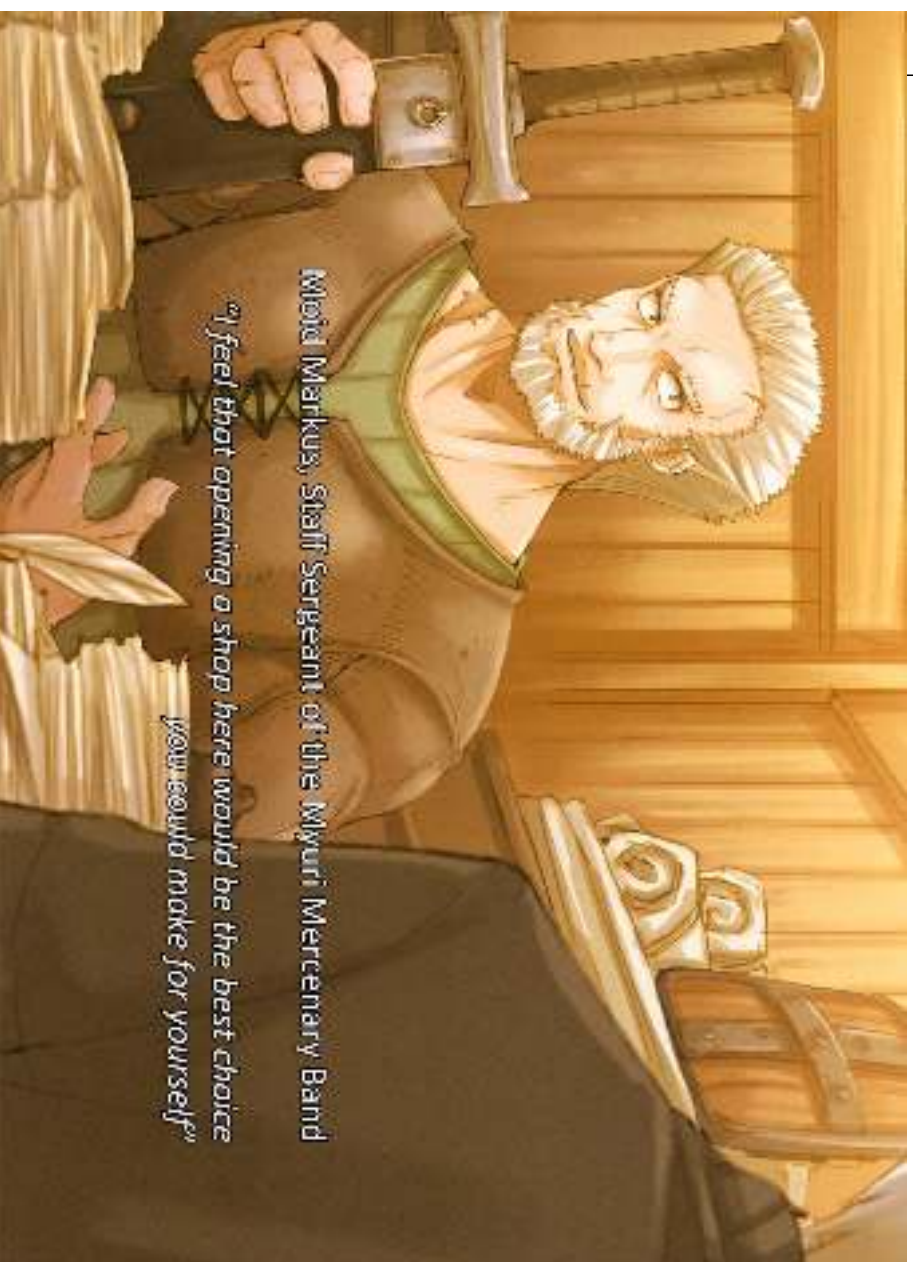
Lawrence wasn't even sure who had spoken at first.

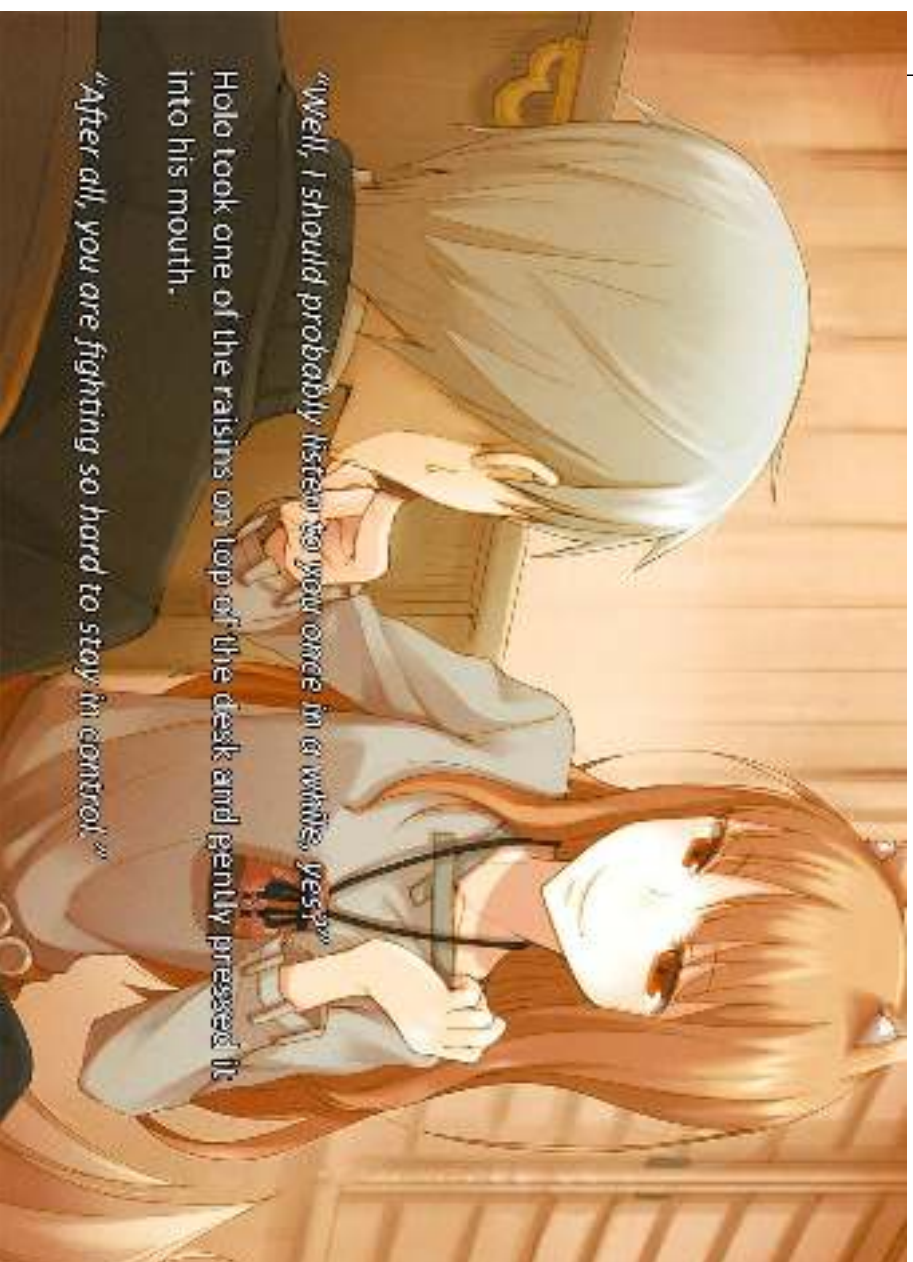
Myuri Ruward, leader of the Myuri Mercenary Band

It was Holo. Myuri drew his sword like a flash of lightning.

"This is how I answer questions."



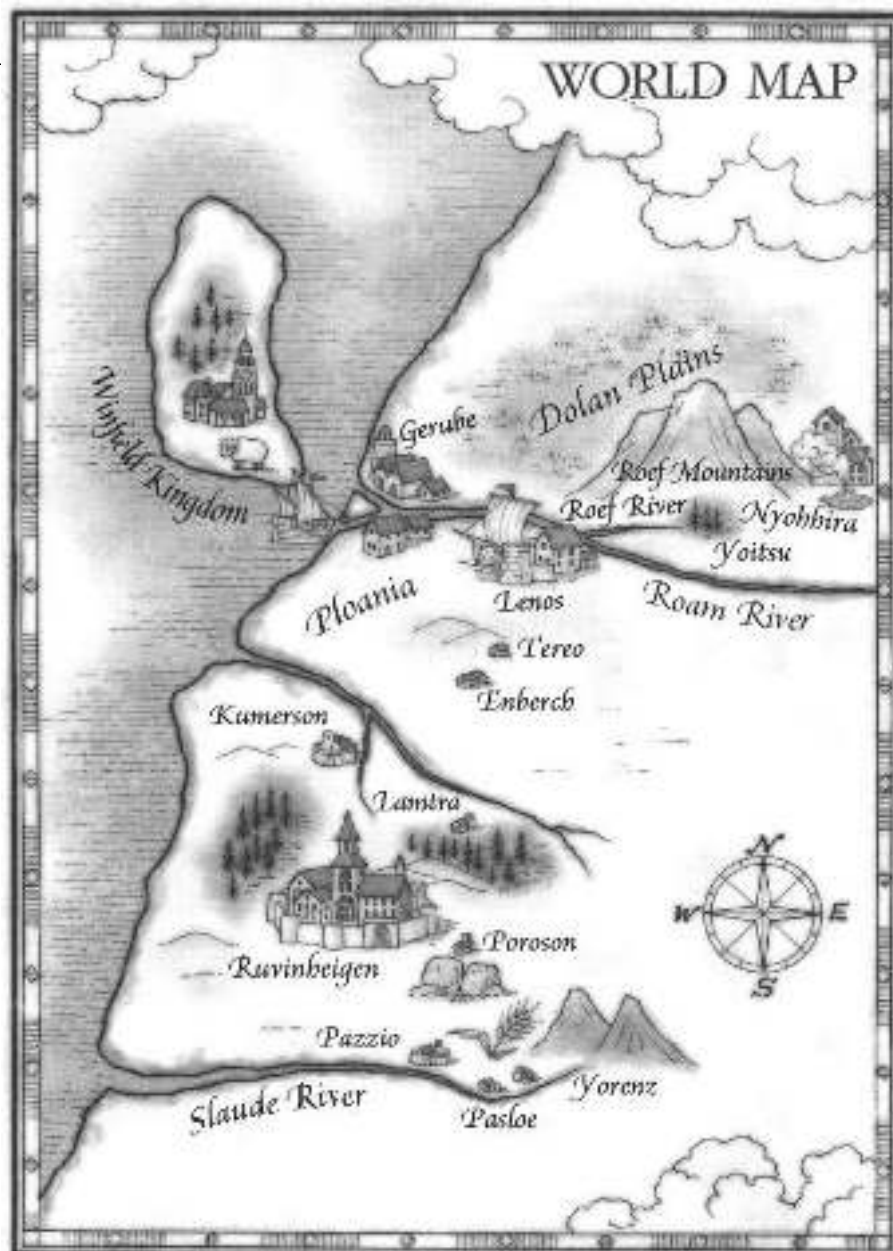




"Well, I should probably listen to you once in a while, yes?"

Holo took one of the raisins on top of the desk and gently pressed it into his mouth.

"After all, you are fighting so hard to stay in control."



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ⑩
太陽の金貨〈上〉

Spice and Wolf
Volume 15

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Written by Hasekura Isuna

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Prologue

Goodbyes are simple things, at least as far as Lawrence saw it. No matter how upsetting parting was, it was just another event in life. Much like removing an arrow from one's body. Hesitating due to a fear of pain would be even more dangerous. One had to do it quickly, in one movement, for the pain to subside as quickly as possible.

But being a human meant that even though you know this wisdom, you won't always be able to apply it. Merchants who traveled more than they lingered around all knew this fact. They were always the ones who were sent away.

Yet, when they had seen Cole and his group off with their eyes, watching them as they kept turning to look back at them, Lawrence realized that he'd simply never had much experience being the one sending someone else off, rather than the other way around.

Holo kept waving her hands at Cole, with a face she had never shown Lawrence before. She smiled with a look of happy closure; it was the same expression he remembered seeing on the faces of those who'd sent him off in the past. Holo eventually stopped waving and hummed in relief, then stretched.

“So, shall we go for a drink?”

She spoke casually, in the same manner she used when she was upset with Lawrence or feeling lonely. It was the right decision for Cole to go with Lou Loah and Elsa; Holo knew that in advance and was prepared for it.

Lawrence was supposed to be the one to tell Cole how to write them letters and get in touch with them if he ran into trouble, but Holo ended up beating him to it. She also carefully bought the boots, to replace his ratty old shoes. She evaluated the quality of each pair with a wolf's keen sense and enthusiasm that surprised even the cobbler.

She even slept with him one last time, holding him in her arms. Her body was warmer, like a child's, and that wasn't even counting her tail. He was probably far too hot, given how sweaty he was in the morning. Knowing him, he probably even had nightmares that she would eat him.

They all met by coincidence, and parted ways by coincidence. In the end, Cole was just a temporary party member. Of course he had more ambition than seemed reasonable for his size, so he was the type adults would gleefully laugh at with cheer.

Lawrence knew that the lad had only joined them to confirm whether his hometown was safe, and with the hopes that they would help if it was not. But Lawrence also knew, as a traveler, that Cole had to keep moving forward to his own goals.

That lesson was one of the few that Lawrence could proudly say he'd learned on his own. He was so used to being alone on his trading routes that he even got over that rare illusory feeling that one gets that they're the only ones on the entire planet. He knew better, of course, having experienced just how impressively big the world really is.

That's why moving forward to one's goals was so important. Everyone had to follow their own paths from time to time, or risk missing their own opportunities in this vast world. You could only find so many reasons to remain with a person instead of parting with them.

Of course, Lawrence had just such a reason to not part ways with Holo: he made it his goal to keep traveling with her. Even if he knew that would come to an end some day.



Chapter 1

It might be cold and dry outside, but at least the sun was warm. In other words, this was great weather for curling up under a blanket, especially with the sounds of a moving wagon to be your lullaby. Lawrence, however, could only sigh at his situation. He wasn't in the mood to nap under a blanket right now.

His deer-skin gloves were nice and toasty, and the wool blanket on his lap was thick, but light. Even his horse, happily fed, was merrily wagging its tail as it trod this wonderfully flat road. It put him in the perfect mood for traveling, no matter how hard he wished otherwise. To top it all off, he wasn't on his own.

Far behind them in the south was Pasloe village, where he had one day met his companion. The villagers worshiped her as a goddess of the harvest for many centuries. She was actually a giant wolf who could swallow a man whole, though lately she chose to remain in her present human form.

Her human form was that of a teenage maiden, and a pretty one at that. And where were her aristocratic-looking brown locks of hair, and soft and frail-looking body right now? They were under the blanket in the back of the wagon, where this girl-like creature named Holo was busily snoring away.

Of course she would never let him call it "snoring." It had to be "breathing." But ever since the time in Lenos, that "breathing" was weighing more and more heavily on his mind. He had to part ways with her when they got to Yoitsu, after all, no matter how much he struggled to prevent that parting.

He'd heard of a book about efficient mining techniques, which was apparently banned because the techniques it spoke of were forbidden. Mining, of course, meant digging minerals out of the ground. It took explosives and clear-cutting, not to mention massively polluting rivers, to make it efficient.

All that was left after mining was a barren and lifeless land. Holo's homeland of Yoitsu was a forest, so this truly concerned her. It would undoubtedly be a nightmare for her if a mining company should ruin that land, especially with banned mining techniques.

That's why they were now working with Lou Loah, a book merchant, and heading to a city named Lesco on the upper tributaries of the Roef River. The best mines in that area were owned by the Diva company, the world's most successful mining firm, and Diva was planning on starting a larger-scale mining operation in the north.

Lawrence was a traveling merchant. After meeting Holo he had been involved in trades involving thousands and tens of thousands of Trenni silver coins. He knew first-hand just how horrible and insignificant a single life was in the face of such money.

Regardless, they were still heading to Lesco now. A band of mercenaries named after an old friend of Holo's was there. Lawrence still remembered Holo crying his name in her sleep when they had just met. So even though they had a map to Yoitsu, and Holo wanted to go there right away, they had to chase after the mercenaries while they were still in a known location.

As a result, Lawrence now had to worry about mercenaries in addition to the reputedly powerful Diva company. He couldn't help but be worried about the details. If they somehow missed them this time, it might be centuries before Holo would find them again (as she'd learned firsthand in Pasloe).

The two of them had traveled through danger before, but this time Lawrence was really nervous as they traveled to Lesco. It might be because Cole wasn't with them anymore, and so Holo had been

strangely silent since their last night at the inn. He wanted to do something, but didn't know what he could do. She might just be being quiet, but that seemed unlikely.

“Aachoo!”

He soon heard her moaning after her sudden sneeze. She'd never miss even the softest sound while she slept, and could sense threats like a battle-hardened soldier.. but other than that, she was like a little puppy. He heard her rub her face and roll around under the blanket, and possibly stretch. She wouldn't move around like that unless she wanted to get up. Sure enough, her head soon popped out.

“Water..”

Like a loyal servant, he stared at that sleepy-eyed princess as he handed her some water.

“Ugh.. everything *still* looks the same out here..”

She said that like it was a hard trip, but the only real problem they faced this time was that Les was at the foot of the northern mountains; it would probably snow as they arrived. But even that wouldn't be much of a hassle, since it hadn't snowed much this winter.

“Mmrnmhrm.”

He intentionally mumbled out a vague noise, having absolutely no desire to be more articulate. He got no response other than the bottle being pulled away. He could tell she was looking around, and when he finally looked at her he saw a vaguely angry look on her face.



He'd been trying to figure out what she was thinking for a while now. Was she actually angry? He had no idea. All he could remember was being punched in the face in Lenos. He would have been ashamed, had they not been alone in an alley at the time. She was just too important to him; he didn't want to leave her side for a second. And he knew she felt the same way about him.

True, he was sometimes a little over-confident.. conceited even. But he would be happy just to get any explanation. As a merchant he knew better than to think she would be honest with a reply, but her happiness made him wary. He just couldn't accept it as the truth. If they loved each other, why was it so hard for her to accept it?

She told him she was happy to live as a human, and she seemed to be telling the truth with that much at least.. so why had she rejected him? She seemed so happy after punching him that it scared him. He just couldn't figure it out. And mere moments later, she was already behind her usual mask.

He heard her sigh, and wondered just what he was supposed to do.

“How long before we get there?”

He was so out of it he nearly didn't reply.

“Uh? Um, well, about six days.”

There weren't any villages or towns on the way, and in her human form Holo's stamina was human-like. It was a pretty long trip for her, and she was always a pain at times like this. She always sighed right from the start of a trip, but she was now in her impatient and moody phase. Lawrence was quite accustomed to it.

"Is it lively there?"

That was the most important factor for her. A rich and lively city meant good food. A humble village meant food as poor as what they had to eat while on the road. But this time, they were heading to a city controlled by the Diva company. People walked on eggshells when talking about Diva, so even though he had tried his best to investigate the city, he failed. Not many people went to Lesco to begin with, so he was practically doomed from the start.

Flynn dealt with mercenaries, so he knew where Lesco was, but not their situation. In the end all Lawrence could learn was that they were "prosperous." He had to talk to sailors to get that much, and of course they were too busy loading cargo onto ships to give him much more than the time of day. None of the merchants in town seemed to even know what to trade with Lesco.

It was likely that Diva monopolized all the business for their necessities in the north. Since they dealt in precious minerals, no regular merchant could really deal with them. They could do no business with Lesco, and it took a week to get there by wagon. That was simply too much trouble for a regular person to concern themselves with.

That all being said, people only seemed to think highly of Lesco. They praised it like some sort of rich and powerful king. And they had to be, to occupy such north-facing lands and to be able to compete for the bones of ancient creatures related to Holo. Given all of that, it made sense no one would know what was going on in Lesco.

"I heard that it's lively, but then it's quite far up north."

He had a habit of replying in safely vague ways, which Holo didn't like one bit. Her eyebrows scrunched up and she put on a puzzled expression.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Lesco's even north of the Ploanian border-"

He stopped, realizing that wasn't going to be good enough. Instead, he pulled out a pouch he kept behind him.

"You remember these, yes?"

It was a small pouch with fourteen coins in it that Holo liked to play with at inns to waste time.

"All moneychangers keep stock of these coins, but there are so many nations in the north that you'd never be able to carry enough of any one of them to be of use to you."

He pulled out a Trenni silver coin, which was accepted in most cities.

"Because there are so many coins, people only take the ones they know. And since it takes so much effort to exchange them, no one will do business in the wrong currency. That means few merchants will go there, which means fewer guests, which might mean less entertainment. There are so many currencies it's a huge problem; I don't even know all of them, let alone which places take which kinds. It's a real mess for everyone. Would you do business in such conditions?"

Holo nodded in acceptance of his explanation. He was quite sure of his knowledge, and it was too boring to spend much time talking about money-matters anyhow. This ought to be good enough.

"I see. Of course traders would prefer less trouble."

She spoke in a monotone voice as she popped back under the blankets. He could tell she was

implying a double meaning, but that she didn't really want to talk about it. He just turned his eyes back to the road and unconsciously touched the cheek she had beaten (on several occasions now).

Ever since they left Lenos he'd felt more distance between them. They were talking again, but things still hadn't improved even after four days. He was also far too exhausted by the trip to keep track of the details anymore.

* * *

That evening (their fourth since leaving Lenos), Holo unconsciously looked Lawrence in the eyes and sighed. It seemed that even she was getting tired of the situation; of waiting for Lawrence to say something so she could twist it every which way. The Wisewolf was showing her wisdom again.

They were still tense during their meal, but at least she asked for seconds - a rarer event than usual these past four days. Lawrence piled a huge helping into her bowl. Her face may have showed no reaction, but her ears twitched. It still wasn't enough, so he started their usual trivial and inconsequential chatting.

When the mood had improved, she finally threw out a topic of her own, though Lawrence responded meekly, not even wanting to startle the rabbits around them.

"You want to talk.. about the Myuri mercenary band?"

"..Mhm."

She stirred the pot and stared at their campfire. Clearly she had wanted to ask about them for a while, but couldn't bring herself to do so in that stifling atmosphere. Lawrence cleared his throat and did his best to answer her as if everything was normal.

"I have nothing new to add.."

She nodded, but said nothing.

"All I know is that they have close to forty members, which makes them a pretty small band. That, and Delink company says they camp near Yoitsu, have a rather young leader, and have a howling wolf as their banner."

"Mhm."

She nodded again, lost in thought. Lawrence chewed on the chicken in his soup. The name of her old friend meant something more to Holo than just some legend from the past. It was a flesh and blood person she knew and touched. She wasn't looking forward to finding the mercenaries.. she was worried.

He could only hope she had been in such a strange mood because of this fact, instead of what had happened between the two of them. He would dearly love to tell her more, but he couldn't tell her what he didn't know. In the end he felt just as responsible for her mood as before, while they silently nibbled at their food.

"Oh, that's right.."

"Hmm?"

Holo raised her eyes from her bowl in anticipation.

"I was also told that their leader is quite brave."

If it was someone named after her friend, she probably wanted to know about that person. Ultimately it was still just a human's praise of another human, so while Holo smiled as though comforted, it looked more like she was forcing the smile. Lawrence quickly continued.

“But apparently, I’m more handsome.”

He intentionally stroked his beard with pride. He wasn’t lying, it was how Mr. Elingin, the master of Delink company, had apprised him. Holo’s stopped eating and looked up at him again, as if at a loss for how to respond to someone so stupid. But she couldn’t hide how happy her ears and tail reacted, so she looked away from him again. She knew he was intentionally joking, so after thinking it over she finally sighed, scratched her face, and smiled in defeat.

“Is that so? I do remember Myuri being rather ordinary-looking, so that eases my mind.”

“Excellent.”

They were talking, but it was such a forced and awkward conversation. This wasn’t good. Lawrence kept forcing a smile, but he was incredibly anxious. Holo spoke up.

“Were you wondering which of you I would choose, if we had just met?”

Good, she was playing along. He quickly replied.

“Perhaps.”

“Neither of you. I would choose Cole.”

She then began slurping up her soup, but stopped midway to continue.

“Oh, but, you remember that boy who wanted to marry me, do you not?”

“..Amati..?”

“Yes. Back then, I chose you.”

It sounded like she was joking around, and he couldn’t tell where she was going with this, but he hoped she was talking from the heart. After all, his looks had never been favorably evaluated. Frankly, he was just a poor peddler, and a borderline swindler. He always felt touched when someone traded with him honestly, and trusted him. He always reciprocated when someone did that. So hearing Holo now made him happy, and feel like he was in the middle of one of those trades.

“Well, I will have to see his face before I can really make my choice.”

She smiled at him as though it was hopeless.

“In other words, all I have is my looks, huh?”

She smiled like an angel when she heard that. Both of them knew she didn’t really mean it, and she was just playing along. He still sighed at her cunning, but on the inside he was just happy to see the usual Holo again. It felt like such a long time since she was herself. He had to keep it going.

“Well, if the Wisewolf says so, it must be true.”

She seemed stunned for a moment, but then grinned in delight.

* * *

“I wonder if we shall find them in Lesco?”

Holo was murmuring as she washed her bowl and spoon in the river. Maybe she’d been staring at the fire too long, and couldn’t see that the river was flowing in front of her. Time was always like that, too, and wisdom meant putting up a bridge to make it easier to cross.

“Even if we don’t, it’ll be fun to keep up the hunt.”

Lawrence knew he had to get back to business as soon as possible, and that his time was short. The truth was that if they missed Myuri in Lesco or on their way back to Yoitsu, it was practically impossible for them to keep up the hunt. Holo also knew that, but hearing him say that still made her

happy. Her head shifted as she poked at a stone in the fire, and he saw her smile.

“Indeed. The more fun, the better.”

“Well I wouldn’t worry about it. We’ll find them.”

Holo was the Wisewolf, so she knew better. Being comforted like this didn’t really suit her. Her smile was quickly replaced by a wistful one, as though she regretted tarnishing her image in this way. She began poking the large stones they left in the fire to provide warmth for them at night.

“So when I storm off in anger, will you have fun hunting for me?”

She scraped the ashes off the stones and wrapped them in three layers of cloth. It was cotton, and she carefully handled it and tied it. Watching her made Lawrence feel like it was a noose being tied around his neck. But he wasn’t in any position to pretend she hadn’t asked that question.

“It’d be fun, but probably not that hard. You’d be crying in hunger most of the time.”

Her ears flipped up, but it wasn’t the kind of joke that would make her angry. Instead she laughed menacingly, as if to darken the night sky around them.

The two of them then lay down in the wagon, with the stones warming their bellies and their backs pressed against one another. All they could hear was each other’s breathing, until they became so groggy they couldn’t tell whose breath was whose anymore and finally fell asleep. In three days they would arrive in Lesco. Soon after that, they would be in Yoitsu. But at least they could sleep tonight without any worries.

* * *

The plains were coated in a thin layer of snow. They saw more and more footprints as they approached Lesco. Finally they began to see other travelers as well. Most people wore thick fur coats and their faces were all dark as if dusty or burned by the snow.

It didn’t look like they were city-dwellers, but rather the cargo haulers necessary for daily life up north. However that didn’t mean there weren’t any regular merchants. In fact there was a convoy that seemed fairly well-to-do. They weren’t using wagons or closed carriages, just mules, implying that they probably took some dangerous paths.

They had heard that it wasn’t just mercenaries in Lesco, and they even had a governor who visited them regularly. Still, Lawrence was rather surprised that the atmosphere was not as hostile as he expected. The road was firm and well-kept, clearly not hastily built for some war. Lawrence expected he’d have to rely on Holo’s keen senses, but things seemed quite stable in the end.

It was actually a lively atmosphere just under the surface. It felt more like a road people took to earn money, which stirred his merchant’s heart. All this for some remote northern town? Was Lesco really that important?

“I don’t know why, but everyone seems pretty energetic.”

In contrast, Holo looked like she was half-asleep. She hadn’t slept much on the trip, presumably because she was anxious about meeting Myuri. She spoke softly in response.

“’Tis quite the opposite of what we expected.”

They presumed that since the Diva company, owner of mines, occupied the north, that other merchants wouldn’t dare come here and risk war. In reality, there were a lot of merchants on the road.

“Well, at any rate, we’ll see why when we get there.”

There was nothing else they could do, so Lawrence just gripped the reins and let his horse gallop.

freely. The worried Holo could only nod. She was so terribly anxious about meeting the friend she hadn't seen in centuries that all Lawrence could do for her was keep himself in a good mood so she would lift hers.

He had been debating how to do just that. Perhaps a tall tale or two to distract her? Everything he came up with seemed far too deliberate, and in the end he was unsure whether he could even do it naturally enough to pull it off. All he knew was business, after all. He was just a dull peasant with a little wit when it came to conversation.

In the end he decided that all he all he could do was take action, rather than clumsily blurt something out. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself and took her gloved hand in his. He held it tightly to indicate that she didn't have to worry on her own. As expected, she was stunned. She stared at him, then their joined hands.

Lawrence had braced himself for a beating and was staring ahead, prepared to die. But she didn't make a move. It felt like time itself was freezing, but when she finally looked up at him again it was with a gentle and helpless smile. She seemed to be laughing at herself for being so anxious that she had made him worry. But she didn't let go of his hand.

* * *

They were now closer than ever to the Diva company, the mining firm. Even Keeman, the manager of the Rowen Trade Guild branch of Gerube, warned them to stay away from here. Lesco was at the end of the road they had taken. And now, smack dab in the middle of that road and shocked, was Lawrence.

He wasn't exactly darting his eyes back and forth like a curious child, but he was looking around a lot more than he usually did. Why wasn't there a wall around town? He barely even noticed that they were actually in the middle of Lesco. He suspected it was built at the foot of the mountains like a mining town would be, a place where people worked to make their fortunes. But it seemed he was wrong yet again.

Despite being near the mountains, Lesco was nothing like a mining town. It wasn't a depressing and miserable place, and it was far from small. In fact it was spread out quite impressively. There were many nice buildings, and they had even paved the roads with stones despite the ground being far from rocky.

It seemed this was simply done to make an impression so people would hear travelers walking through town. It would have taken several years to pave these roads, not to mention being expensive to maintain. How could they afford such a thing if they didn't even have a wall to help them tax the populace? Was it simply because the businesses along the road pitched in?

Even the side roads were beautiful, despite being less crowded. Far from being a tense place where war might break out at any moment, everyone seemed enthusiastic. It looked like they had beaten the odds magnificently.

“Hey, are you sure this is the right place?”

Holo was just as surprised as he was. Everything they'd heard pointed to a place the northern landowners were making a mess of with a lot of terrible mining operations. What was going on here? The shops were full of goods and customers, and musicians and poets were performing everywhere. All kinds of people were here.

Of course there were seedier types as well, but they weren't walking around with spears; they were playing cards in the pubs that were open this time of day. Even priests could be seen here and

there talking, looking well-dressed instead of hard-pressed to spread their faith. What was this? Lawrence stopped their wagon off to the side for a moment to recover.

“Why is everyone so happy here?”

Holo was muttering to herself.

“Now I look like a fool after being so nervous.”

Lawrence wouldn't agree with her, of course, but it was the truth. Were they just seeing the pleasant surface of a place that was rotten at the core?

“What will we do now?”

Lawrence snapped out of it when he heard Holo ask her question.

“Well we can't just sit around wasting time, so let's just do what we came here to do.”

It might have been his sudden enthusiasm, but Holo's eyes opened roundly in surprise. She smiled and nodded. The Delink company and Flynn had given them a letter having dealt with mercenaries regularly, so Lawrence pulled it out and checked which inn they were supposed to head to.

According to Delink, Myuri's mercenary band stayed at a particular inn to avoid being attacked by other bands or armies. Only their trading partners knew which one it was, and if they wanted to keep doing business they wouldn't betray it to just anyone. After all, mercenaries were much worse enemies than as political or financial allies.

Not to mention that slave traders like Delink would benefit most from good ties with mercenary bands. There was no reason for them to give up such an address unless it was for mutually-beneficial business. Mercenary bands had to make the most of each and every opportunity they came across, and so their leaders were ultimately not that different from merchants.

Lesco was such a large and lively place, with no walls and full of prosperous-looking buildings that Lawrence had to keep asking for directions to find the right inn. There was a manger outside that was large enough to accommodate groups of mercenaries, and it wasn't just big: it had glass windows that made it possible to see what was inside.

A worker came out when he saw Lawrence approaching, and reached out to take the reins. He did so so casually that it was clear this was just a regular routine around here. Lawrence was so beside himself that he didn't even know if he ought to hand the boy the reins. But he didn't want to add to Holo's concerns, so he quickly composed himself and hopped down, then smacked the side of the wagon.

“I will take good care of it, sir.”

The boy wasn't that much older than Cole, but his voice and smile seemed quite slimy. Lawrence could tell from his hair and eye color that he wasn't local, but from somewhere in the south.

Lawrence preferred observing a new town on his first visit, especially when it proved so contrary to his expectations.. but right now it was most important to find the Myuri mercenaries. Of course they might just be using that name coincidentally, perhaps having heard a story about the real Myuri and wishing to coast off his legend.

Still, mercenaries and normal merchants were natural enemies. Even Flynn, a grocer who always dealt with mercenaries, was wary of them. Lawrence took a deep breath to calm himself, and noticed that Holo had her right hand pressed against her chest.

“Shall we?”

He couldn't help but ask, seeing how stiffly Holo was acting.

“After you.”

Fair enough. If they were just going to be thrown out, he might as well go first. He triple-checked the letter and his own appearance, then gently pushed the door. A bell rang as it opened, and it seemed that the first floor was a bar with many round tables and three people inside. Their sleeves weren't rolled up, and they didn't have scars on their faces, so it wasn't clear whether they were mercenaries.

None of the three stared at Lawrence, though one of them quickly glanced at him before returning his attention to their conversation. There was another man standing around who looked like a merchant.

“Can I help you?”

He seemed as young and normal as Lawrence, except for his muscular arms. He might very well be a battle field supplier. He eyed Lawrence as though evaluating a competitor.

“I was told that the Myuri mercenary band are here.”

The moment he mentioned their name, everyone turned around. They stopped chatting and playing around for a bit, but soon resumed. Holo's head was cast downward as though her nerves had failed her.

“Makes sense.. I take it you're here to sell something?”

He was looking at Holo, obviously wondering why Lawrence brought a girl like her to a den of mercenaries.

“Actually.. no, the Delink company of Lenos asked me to speak with them.”

He took the letter out of his pocket just long enough to display the red seal on it. It was a gesture meant to make it clear that he was supposed to speak with someone in charge. The corner of the man's mouth rose up, and everyone's eyes were on Lawrence the moment he mentioned Delink company.

“Is the captain here?”

The man stared at Lawrence before turning to ask someone. He heard a voice reply that the staff sergeant was on the second floor. The man's head was turned away, but his eyes turned back to Lawrence.

“Doesn't seem like the captain's in, but you can go see the staff sergeant.”

The rule was that an organization like this had specific people to deal with outsiders. It was obvious that Lawrence would be coming to talk to the captain, but wasn't going to be given that honor. He hesitated, but knew that if he acted tough now Holo might miss her chance to learn about how the group related to her friend. This was the only way he could do that much, so he nodded.

“This way please.”

The young man nodded and turned, but at that moment everyone looked up.

“Uh..”

Lawrence wasn't sure if it was the man who made that noise, but his mouth did move. Just before Lawrence's eyes turned to follow everyone's stares, they all rose to their feet. The bell was ringing again, and Lawrence saw the young man stand up straight and put on the same expression as the others. He turned around and saw another young man, somewhere between teenagehood and adolescence, who was quite short and had trimmed hair and sharp eyes.

“Hmm? What happened?”

His voice was a bit hoarse, as though he needed to clear his throat. His clothes were the same as the others, but seemed to indicate a higher rank. In a way, he looked a bit more like a nobleman than

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