



WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 8

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

ISUNA
HASEKURA

WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 8

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





THE TWILIGHT
CARDINAL, RELIGIOUS
REVOLUTIONARY
TOTE COL

"HEY, ARE
YOU LISTENING
TO ME?"

DAUGHTER OF WOLF
AND MERCHANT
MYURI

"NO. I
AM NOT.
IT'S LATE.
I'M GOING
TO SLEEP."



THE WISE WOLF
LUTIA

"YOU ARE PARASITES
OF THIS CITY—YOU
HAVE NO TALENT
BEYOND SCHEMING
HOW TO GET RICH!
IN THE NAME OF MY
LORD, YOU WILL BE
PUNISHED FOR YOUR
CRIMES!"



“... THIS DOES
NOT SOUND
LIKE BAD
NEWS.”

“THE
ECUMENICAL
COUNCIL,
MASTER COL!”

CURIA ARCHIVIST
APPRENTICE
CANAAN
JOCHATEM

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE



WOLF
&
PARCHMENT
<NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF>

Vol. 8

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


NEW YORK

Copyright

WOLF & PARCHMENT, Volume 8

ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SHINSETSU OKAMI TO KOSHINRYO OKAMI TO YOHISHI Vol. 8

©Isuna Hasekura 2022

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: May 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Ivan Liang Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Hasekura, Isuna, 1982– author. | Bernhardt, Jasmine, translator. | Ayakura, Jyuu, 1981– artist.

Title: Wolf & Parchment : new theory Spice & Wolf / Isuna Hasekura ; translation by Jasmine Bernhardt ; cover art by Jyuu Ayakura.

Other titles: Shinsetsu ookami to koshinryo: ookami to youhishi. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017– Identifiers: LCCN 2017035577 | ISBN 9780316473453 (v. 1 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975326203 (v. 2 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975326555 (v. 3 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975359560 (v. 4 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975321727 (v. 5 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975340438 (v. 6 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975352264 (v. 7 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975369583 (v. 8 : paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Fantasy. | BISAC: FICTION / Fantasy / Historical.

Classification: LCC PZ7.H2687 Wo 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017035577>

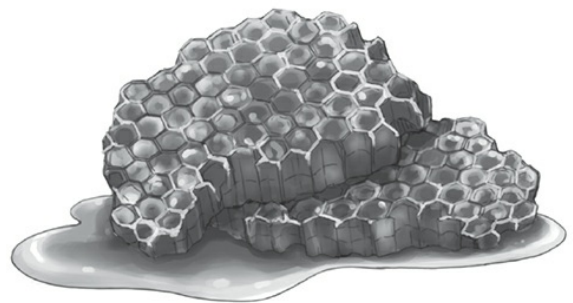
ISBNs: 978-1-97536958-3 (paperback) 978-1-9753-6959-0 (ebook)

E3-20240424-JV-NF-ORI



Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

The translated scripture lying open before Col scarcely registered in his mind.

Perhaps that was partly due to the lingering echoes of the grand jousting tournament. Another possible reason was the preparations for the printing of the scripture, which had started in earnest after the tournament concluded.

Either way, there was one clear cause.

And that would be the girl beside him. Her swishing tail, her shining eyes, and the way her quill flew across the page.

“Myuri, you are sitting too close.”

Despite how many times he pressed a finger to her forehead to bring her face back up, she sank back down a few moments later without fail. The recent jousting tournament turned out to be the perfect inspiration for the rambunctious girl who loved nothing more than spending all her time writing fantastical tales of knights. No matter how much she wrote, it was never enough. She was hunched over the page as though all those joyous memories would fade if she did not write them down fast enough.

When the excitement of the tournament had reached its peak, she completely forgot she was supposed to be acting as a saint and leaped over the barrier that surrounded the seats of the most distinguished guests, waving her arms around and generally making a big fuss. Col remembered staring up to the sky in bewilderment—she had finally started acting like a proper young lady before this latest uproar. He also distinctly recalled the color of the sky being dulled from all the dust.

But perhaps it would not be so terribly awful if Myuri concentrated on her tales of knighthood.

As she sat folded over the page, looking like she was ready to leap into the paper itself, her silver hair threatened to spill onto the still-wet ink. Col reached

to brush it away, but sighed—the cord around his wrist caught his eye. The cord drooped from his wrist, and if he were to follow its trail, he would find the other end tied to Myuri's sash.

Myuri had at first attempted to tie the cord around his neck, but he eventually managed to get her to fasten it around his wrist instead.

She refused to remove it—not during meals, not during sleep, not even for baths.

If anything, she insisted on clinging to his clothes whenever her hands were not otherwise occupied by quills or food.

Col stared at her as she thought of nothing but writing down her wild knights' tales, and thought of the moment she tied the cord to him.

“The second I take my eyes off you, you’re going to get kidnapped by more shady people.”

This was a line an elder brother would typically say to their younger sister, but he had absolutely no room to argue. Though it was the result of a simple misunderstanding or perhaps just bad timing, Col had been kidnapped from their inn, which caused Myuri plenty of undue worry.

No one would tell him how frightened she had been at the time, and everyone managed to dodge the question with vague replies. And so he allowed Myuri to do as she pleased, thinking of it as his recompense. At the same time, he still was not used to this arrangement.

It brought to mind the phrase “bonded pair” and Col could not help but recall how Myuri had constantly demanded he take her as his wife at the very beginning of their journey. To think they would one day be literally bound together...

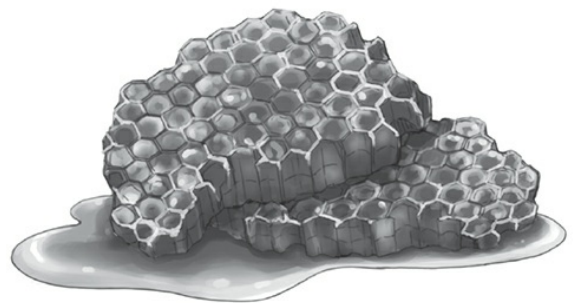
Myuri, whose sash was also tightly bound to the cord, seemed rather pleased by this arrangement.

“Good grief.”

Col did not know if what he said was meant for Myuri, or for himself in a roundabout way. Then he noticed the way Myuri's forehead was practically

touching the paper, so he used his finger to bring her back up again.

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Upon hearing that it would be a cast in metal, Col had initially pictured a stone oven that towered over him, in which great amounts of lumber and coal were burned while large, muscular men operated the bellows. But that was mainly for manufacturing metal or glass; lead, on the other hand, was not nearly as troublesome. Improvised hearths in temporary workshops were not like the bread ovens he had been imagining. It was more like a sarcophagus with a lid, similar to ones used to roast pigs.

Myuri was curious and intrigued by everything, so it was not surprising when she went over to get a closer look at the crucible over the furnace and the bellows made from a cow bladder that were connected to the furnace's vent. The smiths explained how everything worked.

It was only now that she undid their cord. Even so, she had given him strict orders to not leave her sight for even a moment as they walked around the temporary workshop.

Yet when she watched how the lead melted within the crucible, or when she whipped around in delight whenever the bellows sent embers into the air, Col began to have doubts that she wanted him nearby just to keep an eye on him.

Regardless, Jean, the former artisan who had been pursued by the Church, and the other workers under his command were working smoothly. It was not long before they began experimental casts for the letter stamps that would be used in the printing. Normally, after pouring molten lead into molds carved by metalsmiths, the next step would be to carefully refine the product. They had something different in mind for the first stamp they made, which was for the very first letter of the scripture. Once Jean inspected the quality of the cast, he proceeded to dip it right into some waiting ink.

All eyes in the workshop were fixed on the stamp as it was pressed onto the paper. The result was a rather ugly-looking letter. There was nothing about it

that betrayed signs of witchcraft, but Col could clearly sense it was the product of a new age.

“Hey, Brother. Isn’t my writing nicer than that?”

Only the fearless Myuri shared her thoughts out loud when she quietly whispered into his ear.

Once the print preparations began in earnest, Col felt compelled to check his translation of the scripture with more care than ever. If he made a mistake, it would be copied over and over again with incredible precision.

And though Myuri complained about the legibility, she had been greatly inspired by the birth of a technology that had never been seen before in this world. The sights she had seen at the recent jousting tournament, coupled with the stories she heard during rowdy nights *and* a technology that defied God’s wrath, helped her weave a truly grand adventure.

That was how brother and sister came to sit together at their desk, lost in their work. While both were very dedicated, they had been careless and not realized there was no one left to admonish them for neglecting everything else. In fact, when their prominent associates returned to Rausbourne on business after the jousting tournament, Col and Myuri had completely forgotten they had been tasked with looking after the monastery in their absence.

Hyland had gone to Rausbourne to hold an official banquet, one that would announce to the world that the heirs fighting for the Winfiel throne had finally reconciled. Clark accompanied her as the future head abbot of the monastery.

Young Canaan, who came from the Holy See with the plan to mass-produce the scripture, had watched Jean passionately revive once-forbidden printing technology. This inspired him to return to his home at the papal archives to inform the other archivists that the plan they thought impossible was coming to fruition. He was very likely on a ship at that very moment.

Le Roi, the bookseller, was conducting business with the nobles who had attended the jousting tournament while they were still in Rausbourne, all while gathering information on the new continent.

Sharon, the eagle spirit, quickly made sure things were squared away after

the tournament and then made a quick stop in Rausbourne like the others. She needed to procure supplies and people for the temporary workshop that would be established on the monastery grounds. She also needed to secure materials needed for building repairs, as well as a mountain of other daily necessities for the workers who would be staying on the grounds. That then brought her to Eve, who was taking orders for precisely these things.

This was how the theologian who was very little help in practical business, and the girl who was perfectly happy to swing a sword when she was not penning every story that popped into her head, had both been left to their own devices at the monastery-slash-workshop.

And when Sharon returned, Col understood by the look on her face that they were more unsuited for the job than he had originally imagined.

“...Before anything else, you two need a bath.”

This was the first thing she said when Col came out to greet her as she returned at the head of a caravan overflowing with supplies. There was so much that she carried a mountain of it on her back like a traveling peddler.

One glance at Myuri confirmed her face was smeared with ink. The rambunctious girl cocked her head questioningly, pressed her nose to his side, took a good sniff, then rudely pinched her nose shut. If he smelled, then Myuri was partially responsible, considering how she clung to him every night.

“Have you had a proper meal?”

Col, shaking his head, had been about to follow Myuri to the well, but Sharon’s flat tone stopped him.

“I...I think I did?”

After thinking on it for a few moments, he realized he had no memory of eating. Sharon sighed and jerked her chin toward the well.

“I peeked into the workshop and those fools were totally absorbed in their work, too. You’re all the same. Go fetch the others. I’ll make some food.”

When Sharon scolded him, Col simply bowed his head and did exactly as he was told.

Many found Sharon rather brusque. But the way she cared for the children at the orphanage revealed a softer side, and she was very good at looking after others. She must have anticipated the absolute state of the monastery, for she had had the foresight to enlist the aid of some children from the orphanage in Rausbourne to help prepare the massive meal. The ease with which she organized the efforts made her seem like a nun who served as the backbone of a monastery.

By the time Col and Myuri were done cleaning themselves with water from the new well dug by the workers, the central square had transformed into a food line.

“Ha-ha, everyone has a beard now.”

Myuri laughed at seeing so many people who could’ve been mistaken for common bandits concentrating on nothing but filling their bellies and knowing these were the same people who were devoted to printing the scripture. This was definitely their first proper meal in a long time.

“You don’t really have a beard, Brother.”

He was capable of growing a bit of facial hair if he neglected to shave, but Myuri had always seemed to expect him to grow a big, fluffy one. When he had shaved a little earlier, she made a big fuss about the wasted potential.

“I do admit, I like the thought of stroking my beard while lost in thought,” Col said.

“Then when it’s long, I’ll braid it for you,” Myuri offered with delight. Col decided that he would perhaps continue to refrain from growing out his beard.

In another display of wise sensibility, Sharon had purchased a great deal of bread in Rausbourne. She sauteed mutton and garlic in a big pot hanging over the furnace they had used to melt the lead, then heaped it onto bread rolls. It was rich and filling, and after washing it down with a bit of wine, Col felt all the tension drain from his body. It was only then that he finally realized how tired he was. He also spotted Myuri lying down in a corner of the square, napping alongside the other workers.

“You people really would work yourselves to death if no one’s there to pull

you back, huh? Clark's exactly the same."

Sharon reprimanded Col for his self-neglect due to work, and he could only draw up his shoulders in response.

"Yes, it is rather shameful... Your return could not have been timelier, Miss Sharon," Col said.

Sharon snorted, watching the children clean up the serving line as she said, "The Twilight Cardinal, a household name, is just a handful of a child." It took three children to carry the big pot holding all the mutton and garlic. Once Sharon saw they had a safe handle on it, she turned back to Col. "Rumors calling you a savior are starting to pop up around Rausbourne."

Col was not entirely sure if that was true, considering the mischievous grin Sharon wore on her face, but he could still picture it.

"They say it was the Twilight Cardinal, acting on God's behalf, who reconciled the bickering princes, and that the jousting tournament was just a pretense."

Sharon beamed as Col sighed.

"You know it was nothing nearly as elegant as that... The whole idea was simply the result of me panicking, trying to think of a way to keep Myuri from ripping out Heir Klevend's throat for kidnapping me."

What's more, the kidnapping was the result of a mistake—Heir Klevend was not a bad person. The reason Col had gone to such pains was not to protect himself, but to keep his kidnapper from the maw of the wolf.

But the average person had no knowledge of this. All the world knew was that the second prince, previously rumored to be fomenting rebellion to seize the throne, had finally reconciled with the first prince. No one was willing to believe such a miracle could happen so easily.

Of course, Col did not publicly take credit for this, nor did Heir Klevend and his men mention anything of the sort. But when people heard that Hyland, mediator of the princes, had sat among the tournament's guests of honor, many were convinced the Twilight Cardinal must have been acting behind the scenes.

“Hyland told you not to attend the reconciliation banquet at Rausbourne, right? She’s sharp. If word got out you were in the city, the people would be mobbing you by now.”

Col felt a faint pang of disappointment when he saw how brightly Sharon smiled. He had indeed left Nyohhira saying this and that about righting the Church’s wrongs, about bringing God’s teachings back to a chaotic world. Now, with his renown growing by the day, he felt more and more like the mounting pressure was threatening to overwhelm him.

Canaan had also brought up the absurd suggestion of becoming a bona fide saint, but considering how his name was treated *now*, Col was almost certain he would never live in peace again if he actually attained sainthood.

Ignoring his dejection, Sharon suddenly said, “Right. I have something for you.”

She left the hall to retrieve a large leather sack from all the cargo piled out front—it was big enough for Myuri to fit in. Despite its size, Sharon carried it easily, and though he understood how when he looked inside, it also raised new questions.

“Letters? Why so many?”

There were too many for Hyland to have written all of them, even given what a worrywart she was. Moreover, many of them were noticeably extravagant.

“If you think you’ve earned popularity beyond your station, then I hate to say that pup has you beat.” Sharon gestured with her chin toward where Myuri had curled up for an after-meal nap.

Col reached for a letter from the sack. It was a grand thing of fine parchment bound by what appeared to be horsehair, and it had been sealed with red wax that bore a family crest.

“They’re all marriage proposals.”

“—Eh?”

Abject shock and the beginnings of a laugh met in his throat and came out in a weird noise.

“They all think she’s an angel with a smile like the sun. Guess that’s how she looked from far away on the jousting grounds.”

Myuri had been dressed as a nun and she was the perfect picture of a saint as long as she sat quietly.

But despite her appearance—or perhaps *because* of that—she had been overcome with great excitement for the tournament and had leaped on top of the railing with her arms in the air, causing a terrible commotion. It would seem that, too, had tugged at the heartstrings of many a knight.

“...But...this many...?”

“Hyland wasn’t sure if she should give them all to you or not. You can’t just throw these away, after all. She was *far* more worried about this than the banquet that’s supposed to show the world how well the princes are getting along. The entire country’s fate is riding on the outcome, but this was what occupied her thoughts.”

Hyland was already so busy. Col could easily see such unnecessary matters confounding her.

Col briefly prayed that God would give his honest patron guidance, then returned the letter to the bag.

“I suppose if I’m being referred to as the cardinal of twilight, it only makes sense for her to be called a saint who smiles like the sun,” Col said in resignation while Sharon grinned. “I hope this puts the idea of marriage in her head and convinces her to act a bit more ladylike.”

“Yeah, that’s probably too much to hope for,” Sharon said bluntly at the very same moment that Myuri rolled onto her back, provoking a grumble from the worker whose leg she landed on.

“Then perhaps this many candidates means at least one will prove to be a good match for that wild child, and he will make her happy.”

Considering how many letters there were despite how little time had passed since the tournament, he was fairly confident that many, many more would come in the future.

“If that’s what you honestly think, then I’ll leave it at that.”

Though Sharon and Myuri were constantly bickering and calling each other names, they shared a deep understanding of one another. Col, too, understood the significance behind Sharon’s words and smile.

Despite how she dressed it as a joke, the cord wrapped around his wrist was a physical manifestation of just how worried Myuri had been when he was kidnapped.

Col recoiled from the bag. A sweet odor was emanating from the mass of love letters. Perhaps there was parchment infused with perfume and aromatic herbs. Once he pulled the bag shut, Sharon asked, “By the way, you think the printing is going to go well?”

“The tests were very promising. Once I finish my proofreading, I’ll give the text to the workers in the workshop. Then after all the stamps are fabricated, it will be time for a trial run.”

“Huh. I see.”

The displeased look on Sharon’s face caught Col’s attention. Technology that copied great amounts of text using lead stamps was convenient, yes, but it also posed a sizable danger. Col understood why the Church had banned it.

He had thought Sharon was fairly neutral on the idea, but the capable former tax collector said to him, “We ran into a little problem with buying the materials.”

Col looked to her inquisitively, and the look he received in return showed just how tired she was from running around on business in Rausbourne.

“You got all the paper and ink you needed, considering the scripture’s page count, yeah?”

They had come to a rough estimate after speaking with Jean, but it was the absolute bare minimum they might need. Those were the numbers they had given to Sharon to order.

“Did it cost too much?”

That was the first thing Col thought of when she mentioned that purchase

had not gone smoothly. They had been confronted with a lot of monetary issues as of late.

Even the scripture, which housed God's own words, could not be replicated by prayer alone.

"That's not a problem. That wily merchant, Eve, made a load of cash at the jousting tournament, and I hear Hyland got enough donations to catch a breather."

The jousting tournament had been a lively affair, and Eve was more than capable of lining her pockets from the event.

And hearing that Hyland, who was ready to bend over backward for every little thing, had received donations brought Col genuine relief.

"But with all our money, we've got nothing to spend it on. The best season is the end of spring, early summer. The merchants' businesses are thriving at that time of year, so they need a lot of paper for their contracts and to record their deals. The amount that we want is way too much, Eve says—we could ask every workshop in the country and they wouldn't have enough to supply us."

If Eve said so, then it was so. She was former kingdom nobility whose social influence reached far and wide, after all. Col, too, had personally seen the low supply from all the visits to papermaking workshops during their search for Jean.

And the amount of paper this new technology would require was on a scale far beyond that of hand-copied manuscripts, which had been the norm up until this point. It was impossible for papermakers to suddenly meet this new demand on such short notice.

"Which means...?" Col asked.

Sharon sighed. "We could extend our search to companies on the mainland, but it's much the same over there. Hyland apparently reached out to the Debau Company, but paper is made from old rags, right? The population up in the north is sparser, and the colder climate makes it harder to collect rags, and local production has their hands full meeting local demand. But if we look to the south and make our orders there, people will start suspecting something is up,

right?”

That was a well-reasoned conclusion. And since what was happening here involved technology the Church had tried to seal away, they wanted to avoid as much public attention as possible.

“Those Canaan people you were working with said they were going to try to get their hands on paper and ink once they got back to the Holy See. That bookseller, Le Roi, said he’d be asking the copyists he knew if they have extra at their workshops, too.”

Col could tell by Sharon’s tone that she was not expecting much from either of these initiatives.

“If we put in our orders now, no matter where we order, we’re probably not gonna get out of this rut until winter, when business slows down. Everyone’s running low on paper. We might have to scale back our plan.”

The vernacular scripture was meant to play a big role in the conflict between the Church and the Winfiel Kingdom. The faster it spread throughout the mainland, the faster people would better understand the Church’s wrongs, strengthening calls for reform. And more importantly, the longer they dragged their feet on this, there was no telling what sort of methods the Church might resort to.

Therefore, the most important thing was to get started as soon as possible.

But there were also practical problems to consider in addition to those strategic concerns. Employing the workers cost a considerable amount of money. At the same time, they would face major difficulties down the road if they paused operations and then tried to start back up later.

“We also need to get around to repairing the building itself. This is giving me a headache.”

The first time Col and Myuri visited this place it was quite literally nothing more than a ruin. Back then, Clark had been working alone, trying to clear as many weeds as possible. While the conditions had improved quite a bit since then, they would still need to conduct major renovations before it could function as a monastery.

The children Sharon brought from the orphanage had not simply come to distribute food. They were reliable and would be helping with a bit of cleanup on the inside. As they quickly put away the pots, they began to run around with hand tools.

“We don’t know what’s going to happen in this conflict between the kingdom and the Church. I have to ask you to get this situation under control, Mister Twilight Cardinal.”

Though Col’s reputation was growing and spreading, Col himself did not command any special power.

All he could offer in response to Sharon’s request was a lopsided smile.

Afterward, he went to extract Myuri from the pile of sleeping workers, returned to their room, and placed her on her bed. He was exasperated by the way she slept as she scratched at her stomach, but when he drew the blanket over her and fixed her bangs, she looked like a princess waiting for a kiss from a prince who would wake her up.

While that was not the specific reason for his doing so, he still glanced at the leather sack filled with marriage requests, which he had brought in at the same time, and a wry smile crossed his lips.

He was proud the world finally recognized how special Myuri was, but he was also a bit tired. He was ready for her to finally grow up, and the world seemed just as ready. But as he sat beside the dozing girl, running his fingers through her hair that always reminded him of flecks of silver in ash, he found himself dreading how he was going to tell the owner of the bathhouse in Nyohhira about this.

There was also the small matter of his recent failure to send regular letters to the bathhouse, which made him feel even worse about it.

As he played with Myuri’s soft bangs, pushing them back and forth, he considered his next move.

What if, for example, he began by explaining how they were running into trouble purchasing enough paper and ink for the printing of the scripture? Considering how difficult it apparently was to get paper from the Debau

Company, who had been working with them due to their aligned interests of being anti-Church, their best bet may be the man who was both the rambunctious girl's father *and* a former traveling companion of Col's—Lawrence. He had innumerable ties—*odd* ties at that—even more so than the Debau Company, and they were the ones who printed their own currency and acted as rulers of the northlands.

Perhaps if he gently brought up the issue of the marriage requests while seeking out Lawrence's advice, it might lessen the blow.

As he was working out this plan in his mind, Myuri rolled over and clung to his hand.

There was an innocence to the movement that made him think the matter of marriage was best left for the distant future.

And perhaps in the mind of the man who remained at her home, father to an only daughter, she was much too young for that yet.

"...Maybe I won't bring up the matter of the marriage proposals."

If he did, everything else mentioned in the letter would no doubt vanish from the loving father's mind.

"Goodness, you are quite the wicked girl."

Perhaps she heard him scold her—at some point, she had let out her wolf ears. They twitched slightly, and she continued on snoring happily.

"See! You're the only person who doesn't see my charm, Brother!"

This was the first thing Myuri said after waking from her nap and discovering the large sack of love letters. Her tail whipped about proudly as she randomly grabbed a letter from the sack, undid the seal, and read the contents.

"Your artless demeanor and beautiful smile have stolen my heart... That's exactly what it says! And this one, too! Oh, and this one!"

She grabbed one letter after another and tossed them all over the bed. Col sighed. Every last one mentioned how she leaped on top of the railing at the match and waved her arms around, how she smiled so freely, and how she had left such a big impression on all of them. As much as it made him uneasy, Col

found himself agreeing with the letters that likened her smile to the sun.

“I think you’re the only one who doesn’t understand how pretty I am.”

The way she stood there, hands on her hips and with a look of dissatisfaction, was something only a dauntless girl full of self-confidence could pull off.

“But you know all of these are a misinterpretation of who you are, yes?” Col asked as he massaged the bridge of his nose. He did this because he was tired from proofreading the scripture, but also because Myuri’s antics were making his head spin as per usual. “The saint’s guise you wore at the tournament was just that—a guise. Had you truly the flame of faith in your heart, I would wholeheartedly agree with all the gentlemen heaping praise upon you.” He placed his quill down and turned to Myuri, fully intent on making this a lecture. “While you can generally pass as a saint if you remain quiet, who you truly are becomes strikingly clear the moment you open your mouth. And that is because you have not a single spark of faith within you.”

During the entire two-week tournament, Myuri had come to enjoy pretending to be a saint. And so she had put great effort into learning what movements she needed to make during prayer, as well as how to walk in a more ladylike manner and table manners, thanks to Hyland. It was all to play the part better. Hyland readily and enthusiastically assumed the role of teacher, delighted that Myuri was asking her for help, and Myuri was all too eager to learn.

Col had never seen a better chance to bring up faith. But when he did, Myuri looked at him with the blank expression of a riverside frog and absorbed none of his teachings. After three attempts, he gave up.

And naturally, Myuri was not the sort of girl to flinch at having this pointed out to her.

“I’m sorry, what? I bet that if I actually spoke to these people, every single one of them would come with us on our journey.”

The confidence to say such a thing either came from her youth or from being raised with a little too much love. On further thought, Col concluded that it was probably both, but he also realized he was rather guilty of the latter, which was headache-inducing.

“Oh, actually, now that I think about it... Yeah, it could definitely work.”

“...What could work, Myuri?”

Whenever the girl wore an expression of understanding, Col knew that she was not thinking of something wholesome.

“So in the tournament, right? There was a whole mock battle in groups instead of just one-on-one fights, remember?”

“Ah...hmm. Yes, I think I remember...”

“Wasn’t that amazing?! There were all those horses in metal plating, and then watching them go at it with those extra-large shields, lances, and flags in such perfect formation was verily a dance unto itself!”

The latter half of what she said was almost certainly a quote from a bard he had heard before. The single combat was fun to watch, yes, but the group battle felt like a refined look back at the knights of old. Despite himself, seeing that had thrilled Col.

But where was Myuri going with this?

Myuri closed her eyes to think back on the recent tournament for a moment before they burst open like she had just gotten a taste of the sweetest candy.

“That’s why I thought, you know, it’s totally doable!” she exclaimed, fist tightening around a bundle of marriage proposals. “I’ll reply to every single one of these people, and then we’re gonna have sooo many knights in our order—”

“No.”

Col did not have to hear the rest before turning her down.

He could feel a headache coming on—did this wild girl not know her limits? But Myuri, cheeks puffed in anger, approached him in protest.

“Why?! Everyone’d be more than happy to join! Isn’t it a good idea?! Wouldn’t you be proud to have such a huge order of knights? That way, we could stage battles every day and could even fight in a war! We might even be able to find the new continent ourselves!”

She grabbed his lapels and began to shake him.

He was astonished she was saying this with such confidence. And his head hurt because her idea was all too plausible. War maidens leading knights into battle with sword in hand were a common motif in many war epics.

But all Col had to do was picture Myuri, a girl who loved swinging a sword around for fun, at the head of an army of knights—knights who had, in fact, already professed their love to the girl leading them. He could not let such a foolish and embarrassing order of knights exist.

Col could not even begin to imagine what sort of position *he* would have in such an order.

Despite how much he had worried about the significance of them sharing a knights' order between just the two of them, the thought of an order comprised entirely of Myuri's suitors made his stomach hurt.

"Come *ooon*, Brother!"

Despite how often Col thought Myuri had become more grown-up as of late, this silver wolf was still a pup.

Col shot from his chair with such vigor that it was like all the air was rushing out of him. Then he grabbed the pup by the scruff of her skinny neck.

"Enough with this foolishness! Clean up the letters on the bed!"

At this stern order, Myuri twisted around to look at him, scrunched up her face, and stuck out her tongue.

Col sighed deeply and turned back to his desk as Myuri began to put the letters away, grumbling all the while. If there was a problem in her upbringing, he was at least partially responsible. He sat down and began to offer a prayer of repentance before the scripture that he had left open as a reference for proofreading. Then a certain someone draped their arms over him from behind.

"You're praying again? Oh, are you writing home?" Myuri peered over his shoulder. She looked at the ink that was still drying and her wolf ears twitched. "Yeah, you definitely shouldn't mention the marriage proposals."

She wrapped her arm around his neck, and he could feel both her giggling and her higher-than-usual body temperature from just waking up.

“Hmm, so there’s no paper or ink anywhere?”

Myuri had been in a bread-and-mutton–induced nap while Col had the conversation with Sharon.

“It’s not as though there is an absolute lack of ink and paper. There’s simply less than expected. And that means our printing and the plans to restore this monastery will fall behind schedule. That is why I thought it might be good to contact Mister Lawre—”

“Then we shouldn’t ask my unreliable father. We should go straight to the paper workshops ourselves!”

He may seem unreliable from your point of view, but he is an incredibly capable man, was what Col wanted to say. Sadly, he knew she would not listen to him despite having two sets of ears, so he decided against it.

“We could borrow all kinds of tales from them while we’re at it!”

They had recently learned that bards who wandered from town to town often wrote down all the songs they knew in little booklets and exchanged them at local papermakers, collecting popular tunes in each town they visited.

In Myuri’s eyes, it was like discovering there were little hidden treasures in every town.

“Also, I heard from the knights who came from far away to attend the tournament that folktales in this kingdom are waaay different from stuff you find overseas. And some people who are part of really ancient houses in Winfiel told me that there are families out there who still use wolves in their crests today! We could kill two birds with one stone if we visit them!”

Her glib chatter made her sound a lot like a street market vendor, but the only one who stood to gain anything here was Myuri.

That said, if they bought their ink and paper domestically, it would negatively impact the local merchants, which would in turn trouble the regular townsfolk. In light of that, perhaps it would be better to hit the road and purchase a bit from all kinds of places.

“Also, Brother,” Myuri said, her bubbly voice taking on a slightly different

tone. Col glanced sidelong at her. “Weren’t you talking to that cheeky prince?”

“Cheeky...? Ah, you mean Heir Klevend?”

He did certainly come across that way, but in Myuri’s eyes, even the man who was second in line for the throne was nothing more than a brat who misbehaved.

“Don’t you have to look into the new continent for him and his people? They’re itching for a fight, but no one actually wants a war and stuff, right?”

Klevend was leading a band of second and third sons from noble families whose chances of making names for themselves had been lost to the wind the moment the world found peace.

The jousting tournament had been a good place for them to alleviate some of their dissatisfaction with their lot in life. And as it turned out, some of them had performed so well, their martial exploits had drawn the attention of the right people and earned several of them respectable positions as officers. But most were still in limbo and needed something more if they were going to come to terms with their situation.

Klevend had showed great interest in the new continent as a potential answer.

“But whenever I asked any of the knights about the new continent, they laughed me off and treated me like a kid. Didn’t Miss Ilenia and old man Nordstone also leave the court because everyone there wouldn’t pay them no never mind? Now they’re looking outside the kingdom for someone who’s willing to fund the search, right?”

Legend had it there was an undiscovered continent at the far side of the western sea. That people knew of its existence despite no one ever seeing it sounded like the setting of a fairy tale, but even Col had his own reasons for pursuing the legend now.

First was that personally, Col believed it could serve as the key to resolving the conflict between the Winfiel Kingdom and the Church, which had settled into a stalemate after several long years. Neither side could back down without losing face at the moment, but the rich potential of a new frontier could benefit

both sides, which Col was hopeful would convince everyone to put aside their differences.

Another motivation was the girl beside him, whose eyes shone at the prospect of adventure. She had the blood of wolves flowing through her and she was not human, meaning there was no place on the map where she could truly rest easy. But unclaimed land could become the cradle of a new country, one meant for nonhumans like her. They had met a sheep avatar named Ilenia who had told them of this potential that was also her dream.

And there was yet another reason Col was deeply curious about the new continent that was for Col, and Col alone. The impetus was what he had seen during all the commotion that surrounded Nordstone, who had been rumored to be trading with a ghost ship. Of all the ridiculous tales that circulated the world since the days of yore, the one Col had stumbled upon then could be considered one of the most absurd and unthinkable.

The alchemist who had vanished right from under Nordstone's nose had apparently set sail for the new continent. Personally, Col was convinced that she had, in fact, left to verify the shape of the world.

He wanted to ascertain the truth of that metal globe he had seen in Nordstone's hut, with those lines running along its surface as though the moon itself had been dragged across the earth.

"Brother?"

Myuri's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

What the world truly looked like was a more dangerous question than the banned technology Jean had kept hidden.

He was afraid of looking this question in the eye—it had everything to do with the correctness of the scripture, after all—but he was even more afraid of pretending to know nothing.

And it was a secret he had to keep very, very close to his chest. He could not even talk to Myuri about it.

"I'm sorry...", he said, forcing a smile on his face. "I almost passed out due to your rambunctious behavior."

Myuri let her eyes shoot open, puffed out her cheeks, then smacked Col with her tail.

“But... You know, that’s not a terrible idea...,” Col said, trailing off.

It was not long ago that he could not even imagine moving their activities to the mainland. That was because while the Kingdom of Winfiel was in conflict with the Church, there had been turbulent rumors surrounding the succession to the throne.

But now, with no more concerns surrounding the succession, everyone could finally turn their full attention to the long-standing conflict. Col believed that this meant it was time for him to broaden his own activities as well. It was time to make his way to the mainland where the Church’s influence ran deep and continue advancing his cause.

Just thinking about it made him nervous, but Col knew he was no longer alone, no matter what sort of adventure awaited him.

“I know I can begin a new journey with you.”

Myuri’s pout quickly morphed into an indomitable smile.

“And if we are to tour the mainland in search of ink and paper, we could also pass out what copies of the scripture we do manage to print. In terms of learning about the new continent...well, we could ask renowned scholars in each region we visit, so I suppose that would kill two birds with one stone.”

“Exactly! And then we can recruit knights and kings from all over to join our fight against the Church!”

Even if Col decided to ignore that last part, he could not deny that Myuri’s idea was surprisingly sound. And what truly opened his eyes was the new sensation that they were no longer simply reacting to the Church’s aggressions —*they* were the aggressors now.

In a word, he was excited.

“A new adventure, Brother!”

The word *adventure* normally tired him out whenever he heard it, but this time it just felt right.

They had gone through an enormous deal of pain and hardship, but they had gotten this far despite it all.

“Oh, but then we probably should’ve gone with Canaan.”

Canaan was from the Holy See, which lay to the south. It was very likely he was familiar with the lay of the land in that region, so he would have been a powerful ally in a journey to the mainland.

“Mister Le Roi may be able to contact him, so shall we send a letter?”

“Mm-hmm... On the other hand, if you say you’d rather go on a journey with just the two of us, I’m not going to complain.”

“.....”

Col looked at her flatly, and she beamed back at him.

Was God watching this foolish exchange?

Myuri’s ears suddenly pricked up and she moved to peek out the nearby window.

“Myuri! Hide your ears and tail!”

Col quickly threw a nearby coat over her head, but Myuri paid no mind. She pointed at something in the distance.

“Brother, look at that.”

“What is it?”

He joined her in peering out the window, and he spotted several horses rushing this way.

He squinted and spotted a familiar silhouette atop one of the horses.

“Oh, I know what this is! Speak of the devil, or something or other?”

Ever since Myuri had started writing down her fantastical tales of knights and adventure, her vocabulary had grown. Col considered this a happy thing, but he knew that the man arriving on horseback had not come bearing good news.

Col patted Myuri’s shoulder and removed the apron he wore when he wrote.

“Something must have happened for Mister Le Roi to come in such a panic.”

Myuri's eyes were glittering, sensing impending trouble. When she stood back on her heels, she quickly began to get ready.

"An adventure?!"

Once she had finished tying her sash around her waist, she reached for her beloved sword. Col snatched it away from her, and an argument ensued.

The number of horses led Col to believe that Le Roi had brought other people with him, but it turned out that Le Roi had been handling all three horses himself.

Le Roi opted to ignore Col's bewilderment when he came out to greet him; he simply handed over the exhausted horse he had just ridden in on to Sharon, who had come to see what all the commotion was about, then he hopped on the back of one of his other horses.

He then turned to Col and said, "I'll tell you more on the way."

One horse had been meant as Le Roi's extra mount, and the other was for Col and Myuri. Col was so taken aback by the sudden development that he found himself turning to look at Myuri, who always took situations like this in stride. Without a moment's hesitation, the wolf girl forcefully grabbed Col's arm and turned to Le Roi.

"Food and blankets?" she asked.

"No need," he replied. "This will not be a long journey."

Myuri nodded, turned to Sharon, who was caring for the horse that had doubtlessly carried Le Roi all the way from Rausbourne, and said, "Can you keep an eye on things here, Chicken?"

"Sure. I'll make sure your bed is clean of fleas by the time you get back."

Myuri growled at her, then realized her sword was not at her waist. For a moment, she hesitated over whether to go back to the room or not. The recent kidnapping had convinced her there was no guarantee bad people would not appear at the most inopportune moments. The pouch stuffed with wheat hanging from her scrawny neck, meant as a way for her to turn into a wolf, was a last resort.

But before Myuri could rush back to her and Col's room, Sharon took the broad-bladed knife meant for housework at her hip and tossed it to Myuri, sheath and all.

"Don't break it," she said.

Myuri stared wide-eyed at it for a moment, then giggled.

"Thanks! I'll give it back soon."

After everything was said and done, they were quite close.

Col climbed onto the horse's back before pulling up Myuri and placing her in front of him. Then they followed Le Roi as they left the monastery.

Myuri turned back several times to wave at Sharon and the children who had come with her.

"May I ask what's happening?" Col asked.

They were not going fast enough to require whipping the horse, but this was not a leisurely excursion, either. Moreover, they were not headed toward Rausbourne as expected, but inland, toward the northwest.

Le Roi had come to them alone, pale in the face, which meant it was very likely this was not going to be pleasant business, and Col's mind kept going to the absolute worst-case scenarios he could think of—like what if the newly reconciled princes were at odds yet again?

It was then that Le Roi said something strange.

"There was a visitor at the Rausbourne cathedral."

Though it was supremely unlikely anyone would be eavesdropping on them in these wide-open fields, Le Roi still spoke in a hushed voice.

"They occasionally come to the cathedrals of larger cities, like Rausbourne. You know the sort—those who claim to be reincarnations of an emperor of the old empire, or those who have supposedly been charged with a great task by God Himself."

The rhythmic clapping of the horses' hooves only emphasized Col and Myuri's silence. That was because they personally knew several people who were liable

to say things considered strange by society's standards.

"What did this person say?" Col asked.

He was tense, wondering if someone came claiming to be a wolf avatar.

"That they were dispatched from the Curia, and that they would like an audience with the king."

Col was somewhat relieved to hear that it was not a nonhuman, but this news was just as ominous. Myuri stirred in front of him where she sat between his hands that gripped the reins.

"Were they looking for Canaan?" she asked.

Canaan was someone who worked in the very heart of the Curia, and so for him to be present in the kingdom was essentially an act of betrayal.

But the strangest thing about all this was that if anyone were pursuing him, it would almost certainly be an inquisitor, and they would undoubtedly use craftier methods if they were trying to smoke him out. It was hard to imagine they would appear so boldly at a nearby cathedral.

Col thought for a moment that perhaps a friend of Canaan's had come bearing urgent news, but that, too, did not feel right. Canaan was a sharp and careful person—no doubt he had secure lines of communication.

"They did not seem to be an inquisitor, nor did they seem to be a friend. They may have nothing to do with Canaan at all. But our strange visitor showed us a beautiful incense burner of exquisite make and detail."

"An incense burner?" Myuri parroted curiously, and Col swallowed.

"It is an old trick for those who have been given secret tasks and are not permitted to carry anything that might prove their identity."

Myuri's interest was immediately piqued; Col could almost see her ears and tail pop out.

"If you successfully hide your identity from your enemy, then it will also be difficult to prove who you are to the intended recipients of your message. One way to earn their trust is by keeping a fine article on you that is much too nice for your shabby traveling clothes. I have seen people like that plenty of times in

Nyohhira, when they come to visit noble guests enjoying the baths.”

Myuri, with all her love for adventure, flared her nose and stood up straight.

“That is precisely it,” Le Roi added. “Bishop Yagine went straightaway to speak with Heir Hyland. In the meanwhile, they apparently looked over the incense burner at the cathedral, and came to the conclusion that it had been made by a renowned artisan who frequented the Holy See. Miss Eve was brought in to appraise it as well, and she came to the same conclusion.”

It was hard to believe, but there was a perfectly good chance that this person had indeed come from the Holy See on at someone’s behest.

“The blondie talked to them?”

“To some extent.”

Col wondered why Le Roi was being so evasive. Perhaps they could not disregard the possibility this person simply happened upon a very expensive incense burner on the street and decided they had been given a mission by God.

“Well, either way, it’s hard to imagine an individual more suspicious than this, so we are keeping them in the dungeon for the time being. They apparently spoke of an outrageous tale on the other side of the bars.”

Perhaps it was a revelation from God? Or was it something more akin to a witch’s curse?

Col could clearly tell that Myuri was simply buzzing with excitement.

And Le Roi then said, “They wish to invite the Twilight Cardinal to the ecumenical council. That is all they said—no matter what anyone asks, they refuse to elaborate.”

“.....”

The horse narrowly avoided stepping on a stone in the road, yet the movement suddenly threw Col off balance and he almost fell.

No—he realized that his consciousness had briefly winked out, and that he had scarcely been breathing based on how Myuri was currently holding the reins instead of him.

“Ecumenical...council?”

Col finally managed to squeeze the words out in response, and even the typically easygoing Le Roi gave a grave nod.

If someone were tasked with bewildering Hyland from behind bars in the least words possible, what would one say? In that sense, this traveler had devised words more precious than the incense burner they had hidden on their person.

“Brother!”

Myuri elbowed him in the stomach. She twisted to look at him from over her shoulder with a frown—it was likely due to not knowing what an ecumenical council was.

But that was precisely why those who knew what it was would shiver so.

What the individual in the dungeon had said was telling—they knew the Church and its practices far too well to be a madman or a simple jokester.

“Heir Hyland believes this may be a plot orchestrated by an unknown enemy, and so she insisted on acting like nothing was amiss. Therefore...”

At this point, Myuri, who was upset that she was failing to follow the conversation, had spotted a building up ahead.

“...She believed it better not to summon you to Rausbourne, where people are watching, and instead have everyone gather while she was on her way home from the royal court.”

The horses were headed for a countryside manor that sat right in the middle of vast fields. It was a characteristically large building, not the sort found in Rausbourne or Nyohhira, of course. The grounds came with a barn meant for holding harvested crops and livestock, as well as a residence that could house a large family.

Smaller towns and villages did not have facilities equipped to host royal families and their attendants, and Col had heard royalty and nobility preferred buildings like this. Also, it was more difficult for suspicious types to get close to buildings that stood out in the middle of farm fields.

Several horses stood lined up at the front of the house, along with several banners painted with the crest of the royal family—a sheep crest. An armed guard noticed their horses and asked them to identify themselves, to which Le Roi replied truthfully. Upon closer inspection, Col noticed there were three types of banners—one was the present king’s and those related to the royal family. One was Hyland’s family, and the other was likely Klevend’s emblem. Col wondered briefly why the eldest son did not have a banner, but Le Roi had informed him that once the banquet in Rausbourne was over, the prince first in line for the throne had been the first to leave the city. Those in positions of power had plenty of work to do—for example, calming those who were not pleased with how the prince had reconciled with his younger brother.

“Master Le Roi has arrived.”

Once the large double wooden doors swung open, they were greeted with a large entrance hall with a very high ceiling.

There was no division between the kitchen and living room, which meant the cooking stove was being used in place of a fireplace, and there were several long tables one might find in a tavern. Farming tools hung on the walls, and the scent of livestock lingered in the air. It seemed the barn for sheep and horses was under the same roof beyond the partition.

Inside there was a long table that Col assumed originally hosted discussions on crops, state of the fields, and planting. The ones sitting around it now were guards wearing armor that was practical for travel and the noble sons Col remembered seeing during the kidnapping. In the middle sat Klevend and Hyland.

“There you are.”

Klevend stood, nodded, and all those around him left the building.

The ceiling beams were visible above, which meant that once the accompanying guards and other followers left, the cavernous interior felt much too large, and Col much too small.

“What have you told him?” Hyland asked.

“The gist,” came Le Roi’s answer, before Klevend continued.

“But the gist is the whole of it. The visitor who came to the cathedral said exactly one thing and has kept their mouth clammed shut ever since. It’s a lot like that myth of the cursed bird of passage that speaks of calamity, then promptly dies.”

Klevend spoke gravely, and Hyland sighed.

“Either way, sit, Master Le Roi and Your Eminence. And of course, you as well, Saint Myuri.”

The smile Hyland flashed Myuri was basically the only source of comfort in this situation.

Though Le Roi had been invited to sit, he smoothly maneuvered his larger frame to pour drinks for Klevend and Hyland, then poured nonalcoholic juice for Col and Myuri, and then finally sat down.

“Either way, we believe one domestic problem has been neatly solved for the time being. I must give you my thanks again,” Hyland began.

Klevend took his stein in hand and said, “Of course, you have my little sister’s talent for throwing a party in Rausbourne, too, but the real clincher was that jousting tournament. After friend and foe alike exchanged blows with shield and spear, the royal brothers everyone thought were on terrible terms came out with their swords and started laying into each other like kids! In the end, we were both a bloody and dusty mess, but we sung praises of each other’s skill. Nothing could’ve been better to show that we were on good terms!”

Just as there were those who would never sit on the throne due to the circumstances of their birth, there were those who were unhappy that their only purpose in life was to take over the throne. The man next in line for the throne, the first prince, was a handsome fellow, but he, too, had his piece to say.

But the two princes were wildly different in both appearance and personality. They were like oil and water—had it been in any other situation, it would have been unthinkable for the vastly different men to share a cordial handshake over anything.

Thus, there was nothing better than a fight—punching each other as hard as

they could was nothing more than an extension of their childhood squabbles, and had nothing to do with their social status.

The reason Myuri climbed atop the railing and showed such delight was because the two grown princes had been given a unique opportunity to take all their grievances they had kept bottled up and slam them into one another without worrying what anyone else thought as they let themselves brawl it out. There had been no room for the crafty plots for power often found in the courts.

That was also the reason why Hyland hadn't been overwhelmed by worry and nerves, though she did look quite tired.

"It was nice to have our little saint here waving her arms around, cheering for us. That told everyone that this was a good fight, one everyone could laugh about," Klevend said to Myuri. It was unlikely the rambunctious girl had the foresight to think that far ahead, but there was a very real possibility the fight could have taken a dark turn without her.

Myuri was chuffed by the compliment, of course, and she held her head high.

"That's why I think it's entirely possible that when the guys from the Church hear rumors about the match, they'll start panicking."

It was finally becoming clear why Col and Myuri had been summoned.

"I hear this visitor mentioned the ecumenical council."

Even though there was no one else around, Col still wanted to lower his voice.

Hyland sighed deeply, a troubled expression crossing her face.

"I'm still skeptical. It seems like a useless ploy of resistance by nobles who would find it more convenient if we had civil strife. I wonder if you're being chased away to the mainland, since they might think the kingdom's own conscience—you, the Twilight Cardinal—will be a nuisance if he hangs around."

Col nodded. That was one way of looking at it.

"I think you should take the offer," Klevend said.

It seemed as though Hyland and Klevend had already debated this before their arrival, but Myuri still did not exactly understand what was being

discussed—what the ecumenical was—and so she sulked as she sat by Col. This was what prompted Col to confirm, as he wanted to be sure as well.

“Did this person explicitly mention the ecumenical council?”

The two royals, who apparently differed in thought, turned to look at him.

Col quietly cleared his throat. He crafted his question, both to explain what this was to Myuri, as well as to make doubly sure this was what they were talking about. Col did not want there to be any misunderstandings.

“As you may already know, the ecumenical council is the most important meeting the Church can hold—and any decisions made there must be obeyed by all, even the Pope himself. If memory serves, I believe the last one was held eighty years ago, and the main topic of debate was the war with the pagans.”

The Church was a hierarchical organization, with the Pope at the very top. But it also comprised renowned theologians, great abbeys whose territories were the size of small countries, and powerful archbishops who were inseparable from and often directly related to secular leaders, so by no means was it a seamless monolith.

There were a great deal of those whose values differed, and whose interests were at odds with one another. The need to coordinate them all was no different from how matters were handled in the secular world.

But victors of wars were not always right when it came to larger problems of faith, so they needed to follow the teachings of the scripture in order to determine what was right when it came to the Church.

So the system to determine these things peaceably was none other than the ecumenical council. Considering the sheer influence it possessed, it was natural that the council was rarely ever held. A decision made at one could change the course of the entire Church, reaching every corner of the world. Even the most powerful individual in the entire organization could not overrule it.

And this mysterious traveler had apparently said that the Twilight Cardinal was wanted at the ecumenical council.

There were several major problems with this.

“First—is the council actually being held?” Col asked.

“I think it is,” Klevend said with dissatisfaction, folding his thick arms over his chest. “My brother and I have joined forces. The kingdom is on solid footing again. Which means the Church is finally at a disadvantage in this conflict. That’s what they must be thinking. They’re gonna try to get the entire Church on the same page with the ecumenical council. That must be what’s happening.”

Col, too, had been planning a trip across the mainland in accordance with Myuri’s idea, so he understood Klevend’s reasoning.

“I’m skeptical. If they are to hold the ecumenical council, then that would be the Church publicly acknowledging the conflict with our country is a big enough problem that it has the power to affect their future. And the council is just that—a meeting. All the clergy scattered across the world would be given a chance to make formal remarks. It would devolve into a shouting match among scholars and control will be difficult to regain once it’s lost.”

Hyland spoke smoothly; Col could tell she had thought this through. After a moment of pause, she added one more thing.

“I doubt the Pope wants to open the lid of such a terrifying box.”

Hyland thought like a careful administrator.

It was an old trick of the powerful to completely disregard problems by simply not acknowledging them.

It did not seem that the opinions of those within the Church would ever align regarding the conflict with the kingdom, so the Pope and all the other members of the governing body, who were also fully aware of what was going on in the darker parts of the Church, knew that holding the council would only bring them straight to ruin.

That was easy enough to understand.

“If I may add—I do not understand what purpose there could be in summoning someone like me to the ecumenical council.”

Though Col did have something akin to renown, he was not technically a

member of the clergy.

It was hard to imagine that he would ever be invited to the ecumenical council—a formal function of the millennium-old Church, whose influence would be felt for millennia to come.

Not only that, but Col was, as it were, a marked enemy of the Church.

“I think there’s a good possibility and a bad possibility behind this,” Klevend said. “But you want to tell us there’s only the bad reasons, huh?”

He turned to Hyland, who smoothed out her disheveled blond bangs with her hand and nodded.

“I think this must be a trap orchestrated by someone. Even if God willed the holding of the ecumenical council. It would be much faster to lure His Eminence out and cut him down along the way than trying to sway him with words alone. And if they cannot cut him down, they will crush him with more words than he can handle. It is not the nobility that wants to distinguish themselves.”

The archbishops contending for power by denouncing the Church’s enemy, the Twilight Cardinal, would do so not because it was right or wrong, but because it was how they could make a name for themselves. And those who successfully managed to claim credit for vanquishing the Church’s enemy would make leaps and strides toward advancing their ambitions.

Hyland had suffered as an illegitimate child; she knew what it meant to walk the corridors of power.

But Klevend did not seem to subscribe to that way of thinking. He seemed dissatisfied with that assumption, considering how dismal it was.

Myuri drew her lips into a thin line, too; of course, she need only bare her fangs to make sure no one tried anything untoward.

It was Klevend who spoke up.

“There’s a perfectly good chance that it’s a trap, of course. But if the pope and the rest really do intend this to be a trap, then there’s still meaning in accepting the invitation.”

Klevend, who led a band of noble sons, was clearly used to giving these sorts

of speeches; he made sure he had everyone's attention before continuing.

"There have to be people in the Church who want reform, too. Maybe those people, when they heard the Pope's plan to hold an ecumenical council, put their brains together and decided to enlist the Twilight Cardinal's help? Maybe the Pope and his allies are making preparations because they think they can get the jump on us, but if that info leaks, then we can prepare as well."

Not long ago, that would have been an impossibly hopeful prediction.

But Canaan indeed wanted to better the Church, much like they did, and so he came to them in the kingdom, not minding that his actions would most likely be interpreted as betrayal. It did not require a leap in imagination to think there could be others who carried the same hope.

Which meant that disregarding this chance would undermine any potential scenario where the Church could reform itself from within.

Both royals' theories were equally believable, and Col found it difficult to pick one over the other.

"Which ultimately means we cannot make any decisions until we know for certain whether or not the ecumenical council will be held," Le Roi said, after seeing that all opinions for the time being had been accounted for. "I have sent an emergency notice to Archivist Canaan summoning him back to the kingdom. I believe his help will give us a degree of insight as to what may be happening. We will have him see if our mystery guest in the dungeon is a real envoy, and then have him contact his colleagues at the Holy See. And since we're talking about the ecumenical council, we know for certain this will not be held today or tomorrow. There is no need for us to make a hasty decision."

Hyland looked as though she was contending with a looming threat when she heard about the council, but Col agreed with Le Roi.

"I, too, was shocked to hear about the ecumenical council, but this is something that *may* happen once every century. With that in mind..." Col trailed off, putting his thoughts together as he did so, looking to Hyland, Klevend, Le Roi, and then finally Myuri. "The kingdom has finally come together. Whether we go on the defensive or the offensive, we have no reason to stop what we are doing entirely and think. Though there are several issues with the

printing of the vernacular scripture, we are still pushing forward with it. We have no need to fear discussing the ecumenical council. And most importantly, God is on our side.”

Everyone besides Myuri nodded slowly.

And then Myuri, who had been upset this entire time, unable to find her place within the conversation, made a noise—it was not growl of displeasure, but a rumble in her stomach.

“You...” Col sighed, and Myuri looked away in a huff.

Hyland smiled, her tension draining away as she stood from her chair.

“It’s been a little while since the last time I saw you. Why don’t we have something good to eat?”

Myuri beamed up at Hyland, and Col sat beside her with another sigh.

As they enjoyed a lavish lunch, local rulers who heard royalty were in the area on their way home from the royal palace came to pay a visit all at once.

There were some, like mayors and manor stewards, who came bearing land disputes, and several people from small, rural churches that fell outside the jurisdictions of larger cities timidly came to say hello.

Every time someone arrived, Hyland got up from her meal to greet them.

“What a good girl she is,” Klevend said flatly, picking out slivers of meat stuck between his teeth with a slim, pointed wooden stick as he watched her.

“Don’t you have work to do, old man?” said Myuri, who was munching on a honeycomb filled to the brim with honey, brought as a gift by one of the visiting mayors.

Klevend gave a wry smile. “Are you ever gonna forgive me for accidentally kidnapping your brother?”

Le Roi, who had white in his hair, did not mind the address at all, but Klevend seemed to rather dislike being called “old man.”

Those in power often wanted to be seen as older, so many deliberately fattened themselves up and grew out their facial hair. In contrast, Klevend

seemed less like a member of royalty and more like a grown mischief-maker, just like Myuri had once said.

“They see me as a lone wolf. People who need to chat about that stuff go to the others who are openhearted and good with people. Instead, it’s the folks who’ve got nowhere else to go who come to me.”

Holding a position of status did not necessarily guarantee having the confidence of the people.

Col felt as though Klevend’s bad reputation was very likely a result of a misunderstanding from those around him.

“Well, it’s both good and bad. If I sat on the throne, then we’d have a lively country, but we probably wouldn’t survive the winter.”

Myuri cackled at that.

“And instead of my sister, who’s earnest but dour by nature, or my brother, who’s all business all the time, I’m way more suited to go along with your wild plans.”

Just as Klevend said that with a grin, Le Roi, who had gone out for a bit after lunch, finally made his return. He had salo and alcohol with him, which were likely brought to him by a local. It did not seem like it was because he had not eaten enough for lunch, but because it was an appropriate snack for wild tales.

“I had Le Roi’s help when I told my brother about the new continent. The reason we called you here wasn’t just for the ecumenical council, but because I wanted to get right to talking about that, too.”

Myuri loved sweets, but she adored savory snacks just as much; she quickly reached for a piece of salo.

“Old man Nordstone said he went to talk to the king, but he was apparently shut down really fast. Right, Brother?”

The eccentric old noble, Nordstone, had gone to the royal court to ask for funds to raise a fleet after independently pursuing the new continent on his own.

The news of their progress—or lack of it—had come from the sheep spirit

Ilenia, who had gone with Nordstone. They had heard it from Eve, who had heard it from Ilenia herself.

“It’d be a matter of dignity if the first in line to the throne took that conversation seriously. He had no choice but to chase him away.” Klevend took a sip of his ale and licked the pork fat off his fingers. “But make no mistake; my brother understands the significance. He knows the value of it as an outlet for dissatisfied kids like me and the boys, *and* its potential as a key to reconciliation with the Church.”

“And that means I had an easy time collecting information in Rausbourne, too,” Le Roi said, his tongue slick with pork fat as he looked to Col. “But what I found was not very promising, and even the most eccentric of people who have heard about the rumors of the new continent typically said nothing more than seeing mention of it in old tales from the ancient empire.”

“Which naturally means we should start digging up stories on the empire.”

“The possibility of a continent no one’s seen existing at the edge of the sea is essentially legend. And most legends are considered pagan by the Church, so when the empire fell, the Church declared them heathen beliefs.”

As a result, talk about the continent was nothing more than an unbelievable tall tale that drunkards would bring up from time to time. The ones who truly believed it were limited to a small portion of the strangest eccentrics, or alchemists who had access to ancient knowledge from the time of the empire.

“As you’ve suspected, Master Col, our only choice is to look for books from the era in lands where the Church’s power does not reach. In short, that means the desert.”

Myuri’s eyes gleamed and her breathing grew fast, as though she had just heard about a treasure hunt.

“When Le Roi told me about it, I thought, that’s perfect! I’ve got plenty of guys who’re itching for adventure.”

In an era of peace, there was no place to win glory for those who were skilled with swords and horses. This perfectly described the noble boys who had gathered under Klevend’s banner, and he could see the logic, but all Col could

do was sigh when he saw Myuri nodding along enthusiastically.

“And then all of a sudden, we get hit by this weird talk about the ecumenical council.”

Klevend complained as though he was talking about a sudden downpour, and shook both fists at the ceiling.

Le Roi continued, “Old imperial knowledge lives on in the desert. But it isn’t something they will show just anyone. Those with specialized knowledge and passion need a real reason to go there.”

“Le Roi, the boys, and I were thinking about taking on that role together, but when the ecumenical council came up, that all went up in the air.”

The ecumenical council was too much of an enigma to leave everything behind and venture into the desert.

“There is a possibility this council is a ploy by one of the nobles who think it’s a lot more convenient that there’s domestic in-fighting, like my sister said. Which means it’d serve you guys a lot better if I stayed here in the kingdom.”

With a man like Klevend on their side, one who cared not for the delicate balance of power among the nobles, one who would rather charge with sword in hand at his problems, it was a little more difficult for others to plot intricate schemes against them.

Klevend’s unrefined mannerisms also came in handy from time to time.

“And supposing this talk about the council is real, then I believe I would be of most use at your side, Master Col.”

Le Roi was a merchant who dealt in valuable books, so he of course had a lot of very rich customers.

Among them were the likes of powerful nobles, or clergy members who owned great swaths of land, and he would be able to find them staunch allies should they get caught up in the storm surrounding the ecumenical council.

“Obviously, going to the desert yourself would be outrageous,” Klevend added as he looked straight at Col, though probably more meant for the girl who sat beside him, knocking her knees together in excitement over the

possibility of adventure. Perhaps he was holding a surprising grudge over her calling him an old man.

“Yes, I also think it is far too outlandish for me to go to the desert myself,” Col said. Myuri’s eyes went wide when she heard that, but he turned away from her and continued. “But now that the domestic dispute has been settled, I believe it might be time for us to take a new approach to dealing with this conflict between the Winfiel Kingdom and the Church, and that we should head for the mainland anyway.”

Myuri, who had run out of patience, interjected. “We can just make our way to the desert while we take care of all our errands on the way, right?!”

If that were to happen, then they would find *even more* adventures.

“Listen to me, Myuri. We have no idea how far the desert is. And most importantly, there’s too much we still don’t know about the current situation. As things stand, we have to carefully consider our plan of traveling to the mainland, never mind the desert,” Col said, pressing Myuri’s face back as she grumbled at him.

Le Roi, clearly enjoying the exchange, chimed in. “There’s no need to rush. Once Archivist Canaan returns, we will have a clearer picture of things.”

“When’s he coming back?!” Myuri practically leaped at him as she demanded to know, and Le Roi gave a hearty laugh. He leaned toward her, as though teaching her a secret spell.

“Going to the desert isn’t an ordinary thing. There would be no time to sit waiting around, considering how much preparation one must make ahead of time.”

Myuri’s mouth immediately clamped shut, waiting eagerly for what he might say next. Perhaps the reason Le Roi was so good with children was because he still had a solid grasp on his own inner child.

“You’ll need rations, clothes, a map, of course, and you must collect information from those who’ve already ventured into the desert. And the most important thing is finding someone who understands the language of its inhabitants.”

“Oh, I see... I get it. But wouldn't all of our problems be solved if the people working for Miss Eve helped us?”

That Myuri had not a shadow of a doubt that Eve would aid them on this supposed journey was the privilege of a girl who was used to being showered with love.

“The sort of person Mister Le Roi is talking about is someone who can read more specialized texts in the local languages of the desert, or those who can understand the ancient empire's script. Isn't that right?”

Myuri frowned, not following. Col simply looked to Le Roi for confirmation.

“Precisely. We *are* searching for fairy tales dating back to the ancient empire, after all.”

Just how many people were out there who not only had the courage to travel all the way to the desert and speak the local language, but could also read the empire's script *and* had the specialized knowledge to identify which books contained tall tales about the new continent?

“Of course, we also have the option of dividing these roles and hiring experts for each, but...”

“That would force us to travel in a large party, and that'd just invite attention,” Klevend said.

Le Roi nodded. “But I suppose Archivist Canaan would have an idea of who might be able to help us.”

There may very well be someone who had such niche knowledge among those who worked in the mazelike archives of the Curia.

There were not many who could read to begin with, even fewer who had such specialized knowledge, and that number truly dwindled when the new continent was involved. And who among them could speak the desert languages and read the empire's writing on top of everything else?

“Well! Seek and ye shall find, Master Col!”

Col knew what he was feeling was written all over his face.

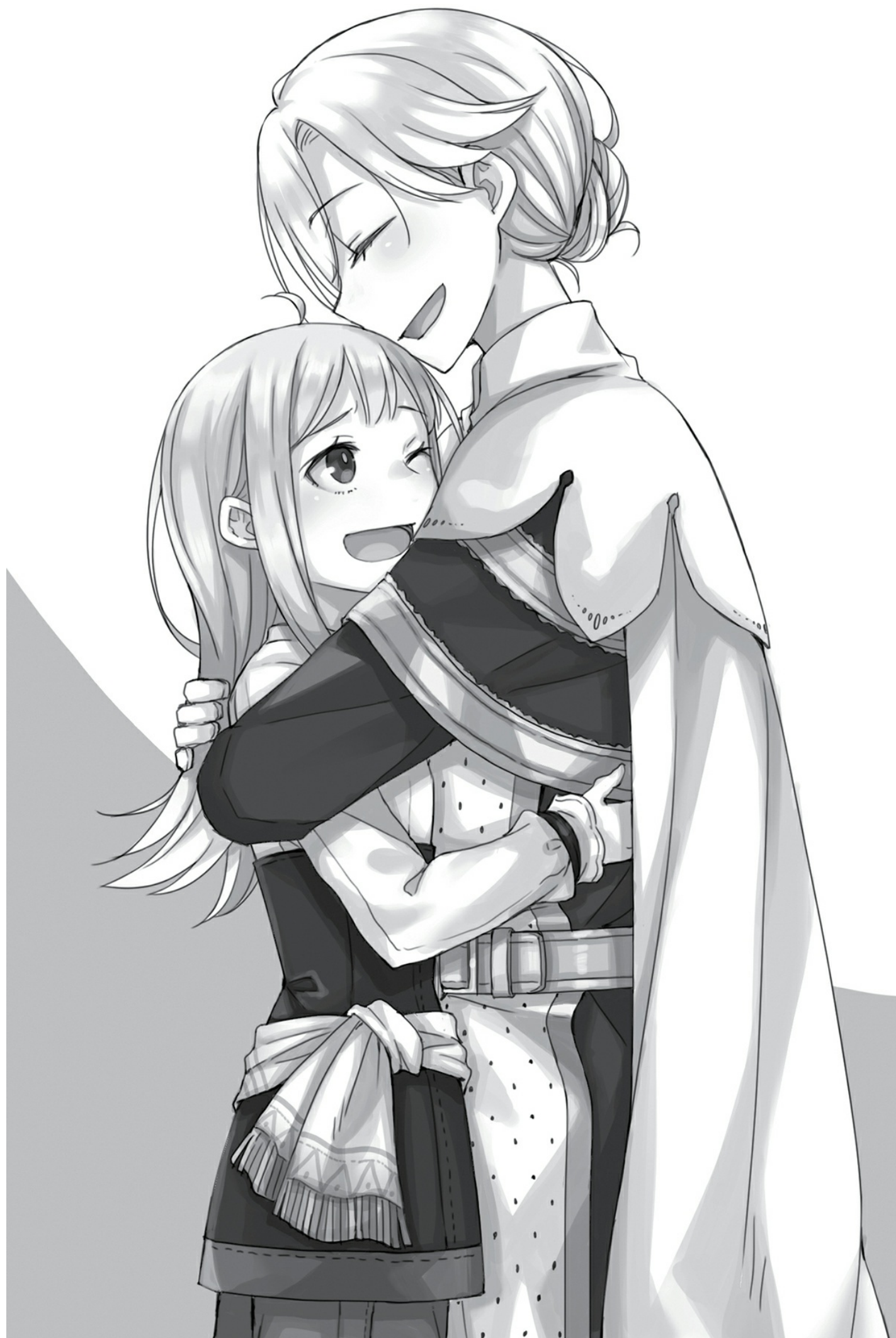
He looked up when Le Roi quoted the scripture and gave a strained smile.

“Come on!” Myuri leaned forward over the table, her voice echoing even louder in the room. “What do we have to do to get to the desert?!”

The reconciliation between the eldest prince, next in line for the throne, and the second prince, who was quite the problem child, had sent a considerable shock through high society in the Kingdom of Winfiel. When both Hyland and Klevend saw that the local visits had tapered off, they gave the order to depart so they could finally make some progress along their respective journeys.

The reason the inside of the manor felt so empty was not because the countryside house was so spacious, but because they had been ready to depart at the drop of a hat.

“My dear, I feel as though a hole has been bored into my heart at the thought of not seeing you for the next while,” Hyland said as she pulled Myuri into an embrace. It was apparently a turn of phrase she had learned from a court minstrel; Myuri giggled and parroted the line.



But the terribly regretful look on Hyland's face as she pulled back from the hug told Col the emotion in the line did not come from superb acting skills. She understood, however, that being too openly sad would only sour Myuri's mood, and she turned to look at Col, as though cutting off her attachment.

"Clark will be mediating for Archivist Canaan—he's still in the cathedral. Archivist Canaan has long since set sail on one of Eve's company ships, so you don't need to worry about his safety. If you need to contact me, do so through Eve's company."

"Understood. Once we reunite with the archivist, I'll speak with him and inform you of the conclusion we come to."

"I'm counting on you."

One of her guards informed her they were ready to depart, and she acknowledged him before turning to Col again. He wondered if she forgot to mention something to them; her earnest, royal-blue eyes looked back and forth between him and Myuri.

"I wouldn't mind if you burned those marriage proposals."

It was hard to tell how serious she was being; Hyland's eyes were unusually glassy.

Col turned aside to see Myuri precociously puffing out her chest.

"I bet my brother's jealousy burns hot enough to burn them all. So that's perfect."

He wanted to ask where she ever saw anything that could lead her to say that so confidently, but he knew it would be futile, so he remained silent.

"That's a relief," Hyland smiled. She turned to look at Klevend's entourage, who had begun their departure earlier, and then turned back to them. "Your words have given me courage. Yes—no matter what happens, we cannot stop now."

She stared straight at Col with sincerity. He nodded in response, she smiled; she flicked her cloak and signaled her departure. She hopped onto her horse, briefly lifted her hand, and that was all she gave as her good-bye.

As Col watched Hyland's entourage leave, he felt a smack on his arm.

"...What?"

"Nooothiing."

It was rather clear exactly *who* was jealous here, and Col felt relieved for the moment.

"We should go back as well. We should be able to reach the monastery before nightfall."

"Whaaat? We're not going back to the city?! Mister Le Roi said he's going!"

"If we do, then we would have to inform Miss Sharon first. You need to return your knife, anyway."

Myuri looked at her hip and scrunched up her face.

"I think this was a trap to make us come back to the monastery and then force us to help with putting the cargo away."

"Unlikely," Col said with a wry smile. But considering Sharon's sharp wit, it was entirely possible.

Even though Myuri was constantly snapping at her, Sharon always had the upper hand.

"But we should be getting ready to go to the desert!" Myuri whined as she climbed on the horse with Col.

"Master Jean should be familiar with the route toward the Holy See in the south, and he's working at the workshop."

Myuri had let her guard down since most people had left—her wolf ears had popped out.

"Myuri, ears."

He poked her, and she rubbed her hand over her head like a cat washing its face. She was impatient because she simply could not wait to set out for the desert.

"A new journey... A new journey!"

“Yes, I know.”

“We can’t stop, right? No matter what!”

She sat comfortably between his arms; he had a feeling that if he let his guard down for one moment, she would run off.

Le Roi had left ahead of them, but Col swore he could see him laughing in the distance. He must have heard Myuri’s nonsense.

“Wow, the desert. Hey, Brother. Is the desert on the map that I have?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Mother and Father have never been to the desert, have they?”

“I doubt it.”

“Ooh, what about—”

Col pressed the horse forward as he somehow managed to answer the endless deluge of Myuri’s questions. As the sun began to dip below the grassy horizon, they reached a fork in the road—one path led to Rausbourne, and the other led to the monastery. It was here they parted ways with Le Roi.

Myuri eventually tired of asking questions. She sat before Col, absently fiddling with the horse’s mane, and Col suddenly realized this was the first time in a long time where it was the two of them alone together.

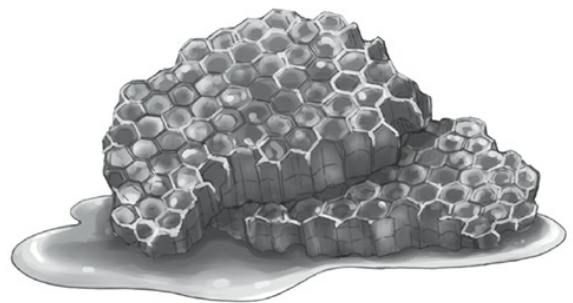
What she said to him earlier that day suddenly came back to him: *But if you say you’re happy with a journey with just the two of us...*

“I suppose that wouldn’t be so bad after all,” he found himself musing aloud, and Myuri glanced over her shoulder at him curiously.

With the rays of the setting sun behind them, they marched toward the indigo sky.

He felt slightly disappointed as he sensed his trip to the mainland with Myuri grow further and further away, and this time, he kept that feeling locked up tight in his chest and did not say a word about it.

CHAPTER TWO



CHAPTER TWO

In the end, and after a considerably rubbish go at it, Col and Myuri handed the reins of the monastery over to Sharon and then made their way to Rausbourne. Canaan's ship docked at the building Eve had made her base on the second day. This was preferred, since they would have drawn attention going to the manor Hyland was borrowing. After the young clergyman met with the mystery visitor in the cathedral, he finally convened with the others.

"He is genuine."

It was not often one could see someone of the clergy look so tense and pale.

The tension was overwhelming even for Myuri—she looked between Col and Eve, waiting for what he might say next.

"His incense burner has several hidden patterns on it. He is without a doubt a real secret messenger."

What those words meant was that the ecumenical council was not a plot cooked up by someone within the kingdom.

Something big was about to happen within the Church.

"Does that mean the Church is gonna declare him a heretic?" Eve, who was present for the conversation, pointed to Col and asked.

"Both Brother Clark and Archbishop Yagine thought the same. However, I firmly believe there are those like me within the Church who want to stand up against it. If not, then there would be no reason that news of the council would leak ahead of time."

Klevend had the same idea. The flush of excitement was returning to his cheeks.

"I believe that the cardinals, including the pope, saw how the kingdom came together through the jousting tournament, and was spurred on by a sense of

impending crisis. That is why they introduced the possibility of holding the ecumenical council.”

The council was a great meeting that was held, at most, once a century, and decided the entire direction of the Church.

In the last one, held eighty years prior, it was recorded that there was profound discussion as to what meaning there was in killing pagans when viewed through the lens of the Church’s philanthropic spirit. While that served as a way to reconcile God’s teachings with reality, it also served to command those who were uncooperative—the weaker-willed members of the congregation who insisted on making peace with the enemy in the face of looming defeat against the pagans. Any and all voices of dissent had been swept aside as a result of the council’s decision, uniting the Church to fight until the very end.

And now, the Church was once again facing a great challenge.

“But this is our chance!” Canaan planted his hands on the table with such force that it made an audible sound. “This is, in fact, a perfect opportunity for us!”

The truth of the matter was that the Church was considering its very last resort—the ecumenical council—and that someone within the organization wanted to inform the kingdom of this. The clergy were in more disarray than first thought, and perhaps even less of a monolith than they anticipated.

But as Myuri’s breathing grew faster in response to Canaan’s excitement, Col could not find it within himself to share their eagerness. There was more than one reason for that, of course.

“I do not mean to deny your assertions, Archivist Canaan,” Col began, carefully weaving his words together. “Even if the incense burner the messenger had was the genuine article, that does not necessarily mean their intentions are genuine.”

Though Myuri could not hide her displeasure at the cold douse of water his words were, Canaan remained calm.

“Of course. Please leave all manner of verification in that regard to me.”

Documents flowed like blood through the Curia, and Canaan's job was to manage all of them single-handedly.

"There is another reason I cannot side with your views, Archivist Canaan. And that is because..." Col faltered, but he decided he needed to say this. "I cannot imagine myself ever being invited to the ecumenical council."

No matter how much renown he had, there were plenty of other notable people in the world. There were even high-ranking clergy members who were members of royal courts, who watched over every aspect of the spiritual lives of royalty.

When all was said and done, it was not more than a handful of months ago that Col had been chopping firewood, making candles, and minding a particularly rowdy child in the remote bathhouses of Nyohhira. He had only managed to make a bit of a name for himself because he had been quick-witted enough to take advantage of some chaos, because he had a bit of luck, and because he had had the help of Myuri and all the others they had met along the way.

If he were to attend an official meeting of true men and women of the cloth, it would be his skill that would be tested.

And that skill did not come from the depth of one's faith.

Those who would be attending the council would be those who handled the day-to-day management of the behemoth that was the Church, and those who had plenty of real-world experience.

"Come *oon*, Brother..."

But Myuri, who feared absolutely nothing in the world, was already sick of her brother's complaining—she did not hear it as a careful interpretation of the situation. And just when he firmly decided that his apprehension was appropriate, he noticed the expression on Canaan's face was even more firm than Myuri's.

"It seems I have something to tell you, Master Col."

"What?"

“There is only one God. All those on earth are His children.”

Col did not quite understand what he meant, and Eve laughed, her shoulders shuddering as she did so.

“Your humility is indeed a virtuous quality of yours,” Canaan continued. “However, I believe your estimation of yourself is a bit too low. Now is the time to see precisely how powerful you are!”

“.....”

Unable to comprehend what that meant, Col unwittingly glanced at Myuri and Eve in a plea for help. But the two wolves only looked on, eyes gleaming, knowing something funny was about to happen.

He gave up and turned to Canaan again, and God’s faithful lamb spoke with a vigor matching that of a wolf.

“Why not join me on an educational excursion?”

“...I’m sorry?”

“Whilst on the ship, I was thinking about what we should do if you were participating in the ecumenical council. And that is when I struck on an idea, and we have just seen now the birth of another important reason.”

This boy worked at the heart of faith itself, and had even been called a child prodigy. He also had a great sense of adventure; enough to venture into the kingdom with a reckless plan, not caring that it involved the revival of technology the Church had deemed too dangerous and sealed away.

He had once even suggested that Col should pursue sainthood.

When Canaan spoke again, his expression was a lot like Myuri’s.

“If you do not believe in your own skill, then you simply need only to test it yourself. For example, why not take a trip to an academic city, where the greatest scholars of the world gather? Debate with the professors there and see what you are capable of!”

If Canaan were to sit silently, he was the very picture of a budding clergyman, but it seemed his true essence was more similar to Myuri’s.

“I am sure of it! The sharpened point of your spear of logic will knock down all those scholars, one after another! And once you pull them back up again as your allies, you need only have them march alongside you to the Holy See and stand by your side at the council! Even if you cannot face unreasonable attacks on your own, they will not find you such easy prey when you march in with a great number of theologians on your side, even in the pope’s own ecumenical council. Numbers are crucial in battle, too!”

From the way Canaan spoke loudly, Col could tell that even this very well-behaved boy had been deeply affected by the jousting tournament.

Along with him was Eve, who was clearly enjoying this, and Myuri, who loved anything and everything related to battle.

Col was the only one who could not keep up.

“Brother! He said this is war!”

A war of words, at least.

Col looked to the most curious wolf in the pack and felt he had no choice but to draw a taut smile over his face.

Considering how Canaan crossed the sea with not much more than a reckless plan, Col found it unsurprising that when he peeled back his outermost, innocent layers, he found a surge of boiling-hot blood.

Col managed to avoid the proposal by simply saying he needed to think about it. Once dinner was finished, Myuri and Canaan spent the evening with Eve’s staff, poring over a map of the world on the first floor of the warehouse-turned-mansion, which the merchant was presently renting. They were likely engrossed in talk about the Twilight Cardinal’s knight errantry on the way to the ecumenical council, as well as how they would recruit more people to their side.

Col ultimately could not muster the will to join them. Luckily, Le Roi had returned just at that moment from an errand, so seeking an impartial opinion, he detailed the proposal to the bookseller who promptly agreed with a clap of his hands.

“That’s a brilliant idea!”

“Mister Le Roi!” Col exclaimed reproachfully.

The bookseller held up his hands to soothe him. “You must understand, Master Col. Archivist Canaan has not brought up the idea to you thoughtlessly, much less because he thinks the idea is funny. It is, in fact, a terribly sensible idea.”

Exactly what about it is sensible? The protest bubbled in his throat, but Col pushed it back down. He decided to wait and hear what else Le Roi had to say.

“What few theologians remain in the kingdom vouch for the quality of your translation of the scripture—as do I, of course. You are not as unproven as you think you are.”

Col instinctively wanted to deny the compliment, but he held his tongue.

“If you cannot take our appraisals at face value, then it is perfectly reasonable that you should debate the worldly scholars yourself. You know what they say—know thy enemy, know thyself, and thou shalt fight a hundred battles without loss. There is obvious danger in overestimating yourself, but the same can be said of belittling yourself too much. If you can more accurately grasp the range of your capabilities, Master Col, then you will be able to overcome even more than you can now. If you misunderstand your strengths, you will only lose opportunities.”

“.....”

Col’s need to say something was likely written all over his face. Le Roi gave a deep, belly-shaking laugh, and with an expression that reminded Col of their time traveling together as a child, he said, “Then let’s set aside the more difficult topics for now. Exchanging knowledge with the professors will be a great opportunity to learn, at the very least. What do you think?”

It would indeed be a great opportunity to learn. All the protests that threatened to leave Col’s mouth quickly slunk back down his throat.

“And when I heard of the talk of academic cities, it came to me. I suppose one could say that the fog that has persisted over these past few days has finally cleared.”

Col was still not entirely convinced, but he urged Le Roi to continue with a

look.

“I speak of the new continent. I told you we would not be enough were we to pursue ancient imperial knowledge on it alone, but giants gather at academic cities.”

That, too, was true. Col nodded, and Le Roi nodded in turn.

“And there’s also the paper needed for printing the scripture.”

“You mean...purchasing it?”

“Precisely. I was hoping to send a letter from the harbor to my associates, but paper is running low everywhere. However, academic cities are places of learning, and with learning comes paper.”

“...Would an academic city have good stocks of paper?”

“There is no other city where so many booksellers gather, though they are a bit of a different breed than yours truly. I doubt there is any other city in the *world* where so many people can read and write. You can throw a stone in any direction and hit a scribe.”

“That...does make sense.”

“And academic cities are mostly located on the mainland. That would certainly satisfy that energetic young lady’s desire for adventure.”

Le Roi was talking about Myuri, of course. She was currently downstairs staring hard at the map like a dog being presented with a bone. Turning down Canaan’s idea would mean hurting Myuri’s sense of adventure as well.

And that would most certainly come with its own exhausting troubles.

“If I recall correctly, Master Col,” Le Roi said, pulling Col’s attention up from the dreaming boys and girls below them. “I heard you studied theology at the academic city of Aquent, didn’t you?”

The reason his expression tensed upon hearing that was not because the candlelight flickered as the door opened.

He glanced at Eve, who entered with mugs of wine in hand, then spoke with a sigh. “To be honest...the reason Archivist Canaan’s suggestion bothers me is

partially because of my past experience in that city.”

“Oh?”

Le Roi took the alcohol from Eve, and Col also took a mug for himself on her urging and took a sip.

This was an unusual occasion. The reason Col decided to take the drink was because he needed something to numb the pain of recalling his own harsh childhood.

He had indeed ventured to an academic city as a child so that he could learn Church law.

However—

“It is a *complete* lie that these academic cities are fonts of knowledge and faith...Well, perhaps that is overstating things, but you must be aware, Mister Le Roi, that the only thing beautiful about them is their facade.”

The bookseller, who dealt in banned texts without hesitation, looked neutrally at Col—a very merchantlike thing to do.

“That I cannot deny.”

“I wonder if Archivist Canaan is unaware of what things are really like there.”

Canaan was picturing Col debating with renowned theological scholars, honing one another’s intellect and heightening Col’s understanding of his position as the Twilight Cardinal. Or perhaps he was picturing the ecumenical council, where the pope was hoping to orchestrate the Twilight Cardinal’s downfall, only for the man himself to appear with all the scholars he had won over at his back. But Col himself could not accept these visions of Canaan’s.

He was worried not so much about the professors arguing against him, but whether or not such a rosy situation would ever come to pass in the first place.

Scholars who were nothing but book smart were not the only ones in those cities.

“That said, it is not a bad place to go to procure paper. And it’s an ideal location to find information on the desert nations and investigate whatever is left of ancient imperial knowledge. Would you be willing to accept at least that

half of Archivist Canaan's proposal?"

"....."

A bitter expression crossed Col's face and Le Roi laughed again.

"Ha-ha-ha! I understand there will be plenty of people you may not mesh very well with in academic cities, Master Col. But we will also find worldly, scholarly adventurers, willing to be flexible if it means seizing opportunities. If the ecumenical council is truly going to be held, then it would not be a terrible idea to recruit some of them—they will be sensitive to power of all types, and above all, they will be eloquent."

They would be coming into contact with these people for more practical reasons than the pursuit of truth.

Hearing that, Col recalled he had very recently learned that someone like Heir Klevend, whose praises and criticisms were extreme in either direction, could be a reliable ally depending on the situation.

It stood to reason the wild sages who made their base in the academic cities could also be of aid.

"And I believe some travel will be a good idea. Whether it be the conflict with the Church, or pursuing information on the new continent, there is only so much we can do here in the kingdom."

They would have to seek new paths if they wanted to see new sights.

Col felt as though he had heard a bard sing a similar line before. It rang true in a way that Myuri would appreciate.

Eve, who had been quietly listening in the whole time, spoke as her clothes softly rustled.

"If you're that scared of bad people, do you need me to come along and protect you?"

Col thought he could see the shadow of a wolf behind her with the way the candlelight illuminated her face. Perhaps she had seen a lucrative business opportunity in the once-in-a-century council.

"...I am aware of the expression of a chaperone wolf."

Eve chuckled and sipped her wine.

And if he was genuinely worried about so-called bad people, well, he already had a reliable wolf at his side.

“People often say things are not as difficult as they seem. You should at least go. You may find it isn’t quite what you expected once you get there,” Eve said. Those were the words of a merchant who had crossed many seas.

“May God guide the Twilight Cardinal in his travels.”

Eve and Le Roi lifted their mugs in a toast, ignoring the very subject of their toast.

Col sighed deeply, brought his own mug to his lips as though expressing his dissatisfaction for the world, then stood.

“I will discuss this matter with Heir Hyland as well.”

Both Le Roi and Eve already knew what the outcome would be, but they offered him very grown-up smiles, letting him do as he pleased.

Col felt suddenly exhausted as he made his way down the dim corridor and down the stairs toward the room he was staying in. As he reached the landing, he saw Myuri coming up the stairs at the same time.

“Brother!”

He could tell they had not run into each other coincidentally; judging by the way ink was smudged on her cheeks and fingers, Myuri had been waiting for his footsteps before rushing up to greet him. She unfurled a hand-drawn map, ink still wet.

“Where are we going?”

On the map were several academic cities, locations and names marked—Canaan and Eve’s staff had likely told her about them. Without anyone else around, she had her wolf ears and tail out, and her tail whipped back and forth as though she had found a treasure map.

“Canaan said that a city called Aquent is the closest, and it’s a really well-known academic city, so we should probably go there.”

Col let Myuri babble on with the map in her hands as he opened the door to their room, leading the daydreaming girl in with a hand at her back.

This room was not a guest room at an inn, but storage space for Eve's products, so the room was packed tight once they settled down to sleep. And that meant Col had nowhere to separate himself from Myuri, whose body was running hot with excitement.

Col placed the lit candleholder atop a stack of crates, reached to open a window, and found faint relief in the influx of outside air.

"Hey, are you listening to me?" Myuri asked reproachfully.

He sat in what little space he could; Myuri was so close that his knees practically touched her.

"No. I am not. It's late. I'm going to sleep."

He put out the candle, and the room was suffused with faint moonlight. He used it to guide him to his folded blankets. He spread one across the floor, and the other he placed over his feet.

Myuri gave a grunt of frustration, but quickly kicked off her shoes and stuck her feet under the same blanket.

But as Col lay down to sleep, she only attached herself to him with her gaze.

"...What is it?" he asked.

A tour across the mainland, an adventure to the desert, and now the academic cities—new adventures were falling onto Myuri's lap one after another.

Col thought that perhaps her excitement was keeping her up, but her expression suggested that was not it.

She emitted a sigh that almost could've been mistaken for clearing her throat, pulled her feet from out under the blanket, and adjusted how she sat.

"Look at me, Brother."

"I am looking at you."

"No, *look* at me."

“.....”

This felt a bit different than her usual selfish requests, so Col give her his full attention.

“Canaan told me about a lot of stuff.”

Col glanced at the map, laying flat on a nearby crate so the ink could dry, and he could easily picture that.

But it seemed as though what Myuri wanted to say was not quite related to the map.

“He said your translation was incredible.”

Myuri’s red eyes, inherited from her mother, gleamed in the dim room.

“He just kept talking and talking about you. I probably would’ve kicked his butt if he were a girl.”

He had a feeling Myuri had said something similar before; Hyland, too, had mentioned Canaan doing his best to stay composed in Col’s presence.

“He said that no matter what academic city on the map you decide to invade, you’d win. And he said it with such passion that his cheeks went all red.”

Col pictured in his mind Canaan standing with Myuri as he marked the cities and their names on the map and spoke as though reciting a war epic.

“I think the compliments were a little too much, though.”

She drew up her shoulders in objection—she must have felt he was intruding on her territory.

She abruptly looked away and pursed her lips. It was only after she seemingly put her words together that she looked back at him. And when she did, he flinched—her eyes were so, so earnest.

“Listen to me, Brother. No one wants you to be as awesome as you can be more than I do.”

“.....”

His little sister was very strict with him and often regarded him a fool, so perhaps Canaan’s behavior had struck a nerve.

He immediately felt ashamed of himself for thinking that when he saw just how red her cheeks were, visible even in the faint moonlight.

She was harsh with him precisely because she expected so much from him.

“Oh, Myuri...” He sighed.

Despite how he always struggled to get her to act more feminine, it was times like these that she was more like a young lady than anyone else he knew.

He had simply thought the primary reason she had gone through the trouble of documenting every academic city on the map was because she was thrilled to experience new lands, new cities, and new adventures.

But all he had to do was remember why no matter how powerful the knight in her stories was, she never traveled alone. She always had a foolish, yet alert and undoubtedly brave, priest by her side.

“I was a boy once, too.”

Col poked Myuri’s cheek and then drew back his hand, like a bird taking flight.

“It is not as though I completely lack confidence.”

In fact, he had dreamed plenty of times of speaking with renowned scholars on equal terms, helping one another to deepen their insight.

“Those with excellent scholarship came to the bathhouse in Nyohhira on many occasions. And whenever they would compliment me, I presume it was more than just empty flattery.”

Myuri still stared hard at him.

It was like she knew a little mouse was hiding behind the thin veil.

“But when it comes to dealing with people in the academic cities...and places like them...I have a very hard time. Not for logical reasons, but for reasons that run much deeper.”

Col reached for the blanket, neatly unfolded it, and pulled it over his lap.

He peeled back Myuri’s half of the blanket, and she hesitantly stuck her feet under it.

“Academic cities are unbelievable places, filled to the brim with ambition. I

went through merciless ordeals in one when I was a child. And that is why I don't like them. It's much like a dog who once touched a hot stove and then refuses to ever go near one again."

Myuri stared at Col for a moment longer before averting her eyes and drawing up her shoulders.

"Maybe dogs are like that, but you're a little sheep that never learns its lesson, Brother."

Her fluffy tail thumped against his leg.

"And I'm the kind of wolf where once I bite into something, I never let go."

Myuri was trying to cheer him up in her own way.

That was because—

"You are a knight."

And knights never forgot their duty.

It was the perfect profession for a loyal wolf, and there were few things in the world that could be as reliable. And this silver wolf was looking straight at him, urging him on to a new path.

He knew exactly what he needed to do.

"I was the one who proclaimed we would not stop, wasn't I?"

This conflict with the Church was clearly reaching a climax. If this talk about the ecumenical council was real, then what waited ahead of them was either peace or war. When they stood at the once-in-a-century crossroads, the Church would have no choice but to acknowledge this.

"Then are we going on a new journey to one of these cities?"

Myuri pulled the blanket up to her lap and looked up at Col, eyes shining.

She looked less like a reliable silver wolf and more like a curious little pup—both were a part of Myuri's essence.

"Let's get some sleep. We will need to save our strength for our journey."

That was his answer.

Once he pulled up the blanket and laid down, Myuri quickly and delightfully followed suit, but her gaze suddenly flitted to the sword leaning against the wall.

She slowly reached out and turned the sword around.

“What is it?” Col asked.

“Nothing,” she said, then clung tight to him. She thumped her tail against the ground wildly, unable to contain her excitement about going on a new journey. Perhaps the reason she had turned her sword around was because she did not want the wolf on her knight’s crest looking at her while she acted like an excitable child.

Things that would most certainly bring down the mood were waiting for them at their destination.

But there was a very clear reason why Col slept so soundly that night.

Col sent a letter to Hyland detailing Canaan’s opinions on the secret messenger who paid the cathedral a surprise visit, as well as a proposal on what to do next. At the same time, Canaan boarded his ship again to look further into the ecumenical council back at the Holy See.

On their parting, Canaan said, “When you decide which academic city you’ll be going to, please let me know through the designated communication channels.” Despite how meek he looked, he was just as pushy as Myuri was.

Several days after Canaan’s departure, a surprisingly quick reply came from Hyland. It read:

Tell me how much of an escort you’ll need.

Now that it was clear there was no evidence of a courtly plot, Hyland, too, had determined that going to an academic city would align with several of their goals, no matter what happened with the ecumenical council. In reality, regardless of whether the council was held or not, it was very likely that visiting one of these cities would help them resolve a number of their problems.

The only thing left to worry about was Col’s proofreading work on the parts of the scripture he was supposed to hand over to Jean for printing. However, he

had heard that when Sharon learned about the plan from Clark, she thought in silence for a moment before shoving a thick bundle of translated scripture into his arms.

And so Col would be relying on Clark and his knowledge to handle the proofreading in his absence. Plus, Clark mentioned asking Archbishop Yagine for help in checking as well, so Col had no reservations.

As a result, preparations for the journey proceeded with surprising speed. A week after Canaan departed, Col and Myuri found themselves standing in a harbor town across the strait from the Kingdom of Winfiel.

“Oooh! We’re traveling!”

Once Myuri stepped off the ship, she stretched her arms high into the air and shouted.

A small fleet of fishing boats had just docked. Seabirds swarmed overhead, and merchants clamored as they approached to purchase fish. Myuri was only a small part of the lively scenery.

The weather had not been all that great, so Col felt a bit sick from the rocking of the ship. He inhaled deeply, as though downing something sour.

“Come *on*, Brother! How long are you going to drag your feet for?!”

“I am not dragging my feet, I am seasi—”

“Oh, look, look! There’s a troupe of performers putting on a play over there! Whoa, is that a target for sword practice over there?!”

“S-stop, Myuri, I—!”

She pulled on his sleeve, and it felt like that bitter thing he had just swallowed was threatening to work its way back up.

“Come now, you two! Don’t stray too far!”

Le Roi, who was their guide, waved at them from the other side of the crowd.

Col managed to suppress his nausea. After adjusting his pack, he grabbed the back of Myuri’s collar—she had gotten far too excited entering the town—and followed after Le Roi.

There were several well-known academic cities scattered across the vast mainland.

Some were places that developed after a local ruler interested in scholarship gave a town special privileges, while others were originally small communities that became a destination for those who wished to study and put distance between themselves and secular power.

Though their histories and roles differed, all the places considered academic cities often had a few things in common.

One was that the percentage of the population who could read and write was higher compared with other towns and cities.

Another was that there were many people who came to these places to study, which meant they were very tolerant of travelers and outsiders.

The last similarity was the root of what Col found most abhorrent.

“Ambition? Is that different from just being adventurous?”

On the way to Aquent, Col had told Myuri a few stories here and there about the academic city, and what she had latched onto the most was that word—*ambition*.

After leaving Rausbourne and making landfall at the port city on the mainland, they boarded a ship filling itself with people and goods before departing for another port farther south. Even the most difficult journeys over land were made in the blink of an eye on a ship. On the fourth day of travel, they already found themselves gazing from the deck of their ship out over the famous mountain range that separated the north from the south. When Myuri was told that snow did not fall in this region of the world, not even in winter, she was shocked.

After stopping at their seventh or eighth port, they started following a river on horseback as they headed inland. Before long, the river met a canal that diverted the water south. There, they boarded a riverboat.

Their journey was apparently following the exact same path that woolen goods took after being exported from the Winfiel Kingdom—several packaged woolen sacks embroidered with the logo of Eve’s company sat on the same

riverboat.

It was impossible to tell if Eve believed having someone she could trust traveling with her goods meant that she could have them guard against theft for free. What was certain was that the reason they were able to hitch a ride on the cargo ship for free was all that wool cargo. And Myuri was pleased they did not need to worry about pillows or bedding.

At that very moment, she was snuggled in sacks stuffed with wool, munching on dried raspberries as she weaseled stories of the nearing academic city out of Col. In the meanwhile, Le Roi had boarded the boat in front of them, and he, too, had comfortably nestled his larger frame into the cargo.

“Yes. Ambition. I believe I’ve told you many times the story of when I met your mother and father.”

“Yeah. Mother and Father were on a riverboat just like this one when they picked up a sniveling baby.”

She spoke as though she was talking about a lost little child, but she was not far off the mark.

“The very reason I had been sitting by the river on the verge of tears was because I’d had such an awful experience in the academic city of Aquent. And *that* was because I had been ignorant of the ambitious spirit that inhabited the city.”

“.....”

Myuri stared hard at Col for a moment as she continued to pop raspberries in her mouth.

“Do you need me to bite the people who bullied you?”

That sounded very much like something the girl who served as the leader of all the children in Nyohhira might say.

“I appreciate the sentiment. But I believe most of the people involved at the time would be gone now.”

“What...?”

The hand minding the raspberries froze. Someone who had been raised in a

village that had little to no change in population over the years could only arrive at one conclusion.

“Plague...?”

Most people in the world tended to live their entire lives in one place—only a fraction ever left home to travel abroad. As unsophisticated as she seemed at times, Myuri was always appropriately sensitive to darker topics. Col reached out to pat her head.

“An academic city is a lot more like these rivers than you might imagine,” he said.

Myuri tilted her head.

“The flow of the river never ceases, yet the water in the river is never the same.”

An ancient philosopher once wrote that poem.

Myuri did not quite understand what that meant, but she grasped it was not a sad thing like she had imagined. She reached over the edge of the boat to drag her fingers, sticky from the fruit, over the surface of the river.

“But a lot of people come and go from Nyohhira, too.”

“Yet the guests who do come are not very different year to year, and those who own the bathhouses and work in the village are almost always the same.”

Even the bards who could be considered wanderers visited Nyohhira regularly every year, like migratory birds.

“The number of people who come and go through academic cities is much, much higher. It’s a torrent.”

When he opened the door to his memories, he stumbled upon a flash of scenery in the back of his mind, illuminating like a bolt of lightning in a nighttime storm.

“Those who go to these places are confident, ambitious people who have willingly given themselves over to the torrent, hoping to venture to new lands, or...”

He looked at Myuri, and the sharp girl narrowed her eyes teasingly.

“Stupid little boys who don’t know anything about the world?”

“Yes. I truly knew nothing of the world. It was almost a miracle that I managed to get to Aquent safely. You know I left on that journey not knowing how far it would be, or how I would get there.”

When he said that, Myuri closed the bag of raspberries and sat up.

“The village you were born in wasn’t as remote as Nyohhira, but still rural, right?”

“It was, yes. I left on my journey with only a few dirtied silvers in my hand, not even sure how to put them to use, believing that I would be saving the village from danger.”

“You were more reckless than I am.”

As the very one who had attempted to hold back Myuri when she whined about journeying with him, that comment stung his ears.

“I arrived with God’s protection and the help of the kind people I met along the way, but what was waiting for me was not the city of tranquility and education I thought it would be.”

Col paused to look at Myuri; the errand boy’s outfit she wore for travel and the sword she had fixed to her hip made the rambunctious girl so much more suited for the city than he had been.

“Instead, I found a city where all the clamor and violence were steeped in ambition.”

Myuri’s red eyes blinked, and she tilted her head curiously at him.

“Really? But Canaan told me it’s full of people who love books and enjoy thinking about complicated things, like you.”

“That applies to Mister Le Roi, too, you know.”

The rambunctious girl stretched her skinny neck.

“And the city is...well, it’s young.”

“Young?”

“Those passing through are mostly boys or young men. Many of them come from rich families, and so they live away from their annoying families and the prying eyes of their parents while still receiving a healthy allowance.”

Myuri’s eyes grew distant as she stared into space. She was likely picturing what things would be like were it not for her nagging brother or the watchful eye of her mother wolf who she could never defy.

Though she likely first thought of fun and lively festivals, what Col was picturing were the frenzied parties of vicious young men who found confidence in the untethered feelings that came from knowing no one would reprimand them for their actions.

“Those who are from neighboring regions form cliques, go to taverns every night, and get very loud. They then go out into the streets, and if they happen to run into some fellow from a rival clique, they curse and swear and throw rocks. Then the fighting begins.”

Col did not miss how, despite her widened eyes, the corners of her mouth were pulled upward slightly in a smile.

“This is not the same as play war in the villages, which I know you are thinking of. This is much more insidious, and truly awful.” Col sighed deeply and looked out over the river. “And the professors who teach in the academic cities are the ones that instruct these packs of stray dogs. They are, you could say...” He looked at his palm and clenched his fist. “...the veteran mercenaries in the world of academia.”

Col doubted that verbally explaining it appropriately conveyed what they were like, but Myuri understood from his countenance that they were not just regular folk.

Canaan was very smart, but he came from a family of clergy—the type that produced popes. People like him had no need to mingle with the stray dogs at an academic city for their lessons, so Col would not be surprised if he genuinely thought it was simply a place for those who earnestly wished to hone their minds. And even if Canaan had heard of the evils in the city, he likely thought it nothing more than a few youths cutting loose.

In contrast, Le Roi knew perfectly well what these cities were actually like and

had not refuted Col's worries.

And this was the same man who did not so much as flinch when Myuri leaped at him to play with him.

"What worries me about Archivist Canaan's plan isn't... It isn't the lack of self-confidence the rest of you mention, like it has been before. The thought of associating with those packs of strays and their leaders weighs heavily on me."

These were the sons of great merchants who had accumulated their wealth in one generation and believed that all their problems could be solved with money, or the prodigal sons of nobility, whose sordid lifestyles had become too much for their parents to handle and were sent away on the prayer that they would at least learn a thing or two.

Among them were a few children from poor families, who wanted to excel in academics for decent reasons.

And then there were their professors, their teachers who, in their quest to achieve status and influence, armed themselves with facts and logic.

A famous saint once said that if there really were such thing as a witch's cauldron, it would look exactly the same as a university town.

And when he considered the Church's ecumenical council, Col could already imagine it would be a place where the most ruthlessly ambitious people of all would gather, and he doubted he could hold a candle to any of them.

He was just a sheep with his head in the clouds, one who only saw half of one half of the world.

"But there are several practical reasons why we must go to Aquent, and so we go."

He gave a tired little sigh after saying this, because he could predict what would happen at their destination. He knew it would only bring back painful memories once they reached the city. And he knew that the rambunctious girl in front of him would not heed his warnings; she only found them fascinating.

The girl was clearly suited for that type of place.

Myuri had been in a good mood since leaving Rausbourne, thanks to the

promise of a new journey's beginning. And he knew that even if he told her to behave herself once they arrived in the violently bustling city of Aquent, she would not listen.

As he considered the problems on his plate, Col's brow stayed in deep furrows with Myuri occupying a good half of his mind. This was because Col had a duty to see that she grew up into a proper young lady.

And after some time, Aquent came into view.

If he wanted to rein her in, then he would have to show her his tricks now.

"However, the reason I made this decision was out of a sense of obligation as a participant in the conflict between the Church and Winfiel. If the ecumenical council is held and if I am summoned to attend, then I will have to follow my faith and go."

Myuri looked at him, confused, unsure about the reason behind the sudden topic change, but her large red eyes waited patiently for him to continue.

"We need to admonish the Church's tyranny for the sake of Winfiel Kingdom—no, for the sake of a righteous world. And for that, Archivist Canaan's plan of collecting allies to bring along with us, as opposed to shouting myself hoarse at the council, is in fact the correct strategy."

Myuri loved all things war; she nodded eagerly.

"Additionally, for the purpose of investigating the new continent, it is correct to assume that an academic city is the most likely place to find someone who is an expert on the ancient empire or the desert nations."

Myuri had heard plenty about that from Le Roi.

"We may also be able to secure some paper for printing the scripture there. It's not an exaggeration when I say we have plenty of reasons to go. However, considering how hesitant I was due to my past experiences, I would say the reason I managed to take this step was because of you."

"Me?"

She stared wide-eyed at him.

"There are scores of stray dogs and their pack leaders in these academic

cities. When I was young, they treated me terribly, and if I'm being honest, they still scare me. But now, I have a wolf with me—you. That means I don't need to fear the strays anymore. Isn't that right?"

Myuri had firmly rejected Hyland's offer of an escort on this journey. Col personally believed the watchful eye of an escort would probably make it very difficult for Myuri to use her strength as a wolf, and so he had not disagreed. Of course, Myuri had insisted that her escort alone was enough, simply because of her pride as a knight. In the end, with Le Roi's help, Hyland eventually gave in. And all that meant what Col had just said held extra significance.

Beneath Myuri's coat, her wolf ears and tail flicked excitedly.

Seeing his chance, Col said, "Please, do not leave my side."

And the rambunctious girl immediately interpreted it as, *Do not leave my side. This is not to make sure you do not get lost, but so that you can help your poor brother.*

Though she always grew furious when treated like a child, this time her eyes gleamed almost tearfully at such a direct call for help.

"Okay, leave it to me!"

"Good. I'm counting on you."

Col watched as her ears and tail flicked about beneath her cloak in open elation. This had gone rather well. If he was nervous about her getting swallowed up by the vortex of corruption and bad influences in the city, then all he had to do was honestly tell her that he wanted her to stay by his side.

He felt like he had read a fable like this once. Meanwhile, Myuri was exhilarated by what was to come.

"It's a knight's job to protect the weak!"

The longer he looked at her, the stronger it aroused a strange unease in him, but he considered this much better than being physically tied together by string.

With a small, wry smile at Myuri's dedication, Col leaned over to put the final touch on his work with a whisper in her ear.

“It is critical that my guard doesn’t stand out. Keep your voice down and put your ears and tail away.”

“Oh.”

Myuri immediately did as she was told and went expressionless.

But like grease oozing from meat, a grin spread across her face.

Though this was exasperating in its own way, Col was still relieved that at least one of his worries had been sorted out.

In all honesty, Col did not remember very well how he had managed to get all the way to Aquent as a child.

Captains let him board their boats out of the kindness of their hearts, or friendly merchant caravans let him ride in their carts, or he simply walked straight south as he threw the words “academic city” at any passersby, hoping for directions.

What surprised him when he arrived was that there were a surprising number of reckless boys. He had occasionally heard from priests that there were many who had lost their homes—be it to war, poverty, or plague—but the cleverest boys would receive financial support from their local churches and study at these academic cities in order to find success in life.

But no one would teach a penniless boy who wandered into the city without any connections for free. When these boys struggled to feed themselves, a kind older boy would appear and offer him food, a bed, knowledge on how to survive, and would even teach him how to read and write. As they settled in, thankful for the presence of such kind people, they would one day be asked to carry out a strange job.

They were dressed in tattered clothes, wooden splints tied to an arm or a leg, mud lathered over their faces, and made to go from house to house. It was, in essence, a scam. They would go around, pretending to be destitute while asking for handouts. Then the older boys who had acted kind would suddenly transform into demons, punching and kicking the victim while taking all the money he managed to collect that day, leaving him with only a few coins and a piece of bread.

Boys with nowhere else to go often suddenly found themselves on the lowest rungs of a gang of crooks.

There were mutually contradictory meanings hidden in the words “wandering student.”

Part of it identified a young person who dreamed of social success and worked hard on their studies, but it also signified someone who wandered from place to place wearing the thinnest guise of a student, scamming people as they went to make ends meet.

“Ah... This brings back memories.”

They had been on the road for a total of one week after leaving the Kingdom of Winfiel. On the map, they had traveled even farther south than Pasloe, the town in which Myuri’s parents met. Myuri seemed genuinely impressed that the land kept on going and going, no matter how far they traveled by sea and river.

At last, they arrived in Aquent. Where a normal city would ask them at the gates whether they were bringing in expensive items or determining if they were criminals, they were instead asked if they could read and write.

Since the city was always overflowing with people who claimed to be students, these questions managed to keep out some people. But there were also some sharp-eyed older students lurking about, looking for an opportunity to catch the very young students kept outside the walls and make them their underlings with sweet, honeyed words.

As Col watched on with a kind face, several boys approached, some young enough to peer up at him like he was a savior, and he had to fight the urge to take each of them by the hand.

“Master Col.”

Le Roi spoke with such a calm tone, one that Col rarely ever heard, and it drew him back to the present.

“If you ever feel like it, you could build an abbey that takes in the lambs who lose their way on the roads. We would have to prepare properly for such an undertaking.”

They could not save everyone from all the world's ails.

Though he was worried about their futures, Col peeled his gaze away from the boys, passed through the city walls, and set foot into the academic city of Aquent once more.

"Whoa... What is this smell...?"

Though Myuri always grew excited the moment she saw a lively city, this time she scrunched her face and pressed a hand to her nose.

"What smell?"

Both Col and Le Roi sniffed the air, but all they could smell was that particular dusty scent that came with lively cities, the smell of grilling meat from the outdoor food stalls, and the stench of manure left by horses and livestock on the streets.

Col did not think the smell much different than that of Rausbourne's, but Le Roi spoke up. He had a different idea.

"Ah. Could it be the musk of men?"

"Huh?"

"University towns are overwhelmingly male. When I escorted a nun from a convent who came to buy books for learning, I remember she had the very same reaction. And when I paid a visit to the convent myself, I thought the same thing."

Myuri stared in surprise at him. She looked back and forth between Le Roi and some passersby, then finally looked to Col and leaned in close.

"...Brother smells nice, though."

Le Roi chuckled suggestively. Col pushed Myuri away with as much calm as he could muster.

"More importantly, we should find an inn. One where those who drink debate how to spell the longest word in the world."

Myuri frowned while Le Roi beamed with delight.

They eventually found a room in an inn that Le Roi was familiar with, and they

decided that their cover would be booksellers' apprentices. It was unlikely their cover would be blown, considering they both could read and write and knew a thing or two about books.

They put all their things in their rooms, washed the dirt off their feet with the cold well water, then reconvened at the quiet tavern on the first floor.

"Now, the first thing we need to do is finish our errands before we meet up with Archivist Canaan."

Their most pressing issue was buying paper. Everything related to the new continent came second.

They could hold off on jousting with scholars until Canaan showed up.

"I will take care of the paper buying. There are several papermakers here that I have connections with."

"Then should Brother and I look up stuff on the new continent or find books on the desert? Is there a big library here like there is in Rausbourne?"

"No. It's best if you visit the bookstores instead."

"You mean they'd sell the books we're looking for there?"

The expression on Myuri's face suggested she thought that finding those books would make them terribly valuable.

"There are mountains and mountains of old books at the bookstores, often used as grammar books," Le Roi went on to explain. "Not even the shop owner will know every book in the store; you may be lucky."

Myuri twitched her nose; she had likely imagined the warring smells of mold and dust.

"And there are many, many bookstores here. Even general stores will keep books in stock. It will be hard work just going around and asking. I will help once I've purchased the paper, of course... Ah, why don't you work your way from the western side of the city first, Master Col?"

"I don't mind at all."

"How are we gonna find people who speak the desert language?"

“That search will begin with a visit to the professors’ guild. Those who wish to gather students and teach them need the guild’s permission, so they will have a roster.”

Myuri nodded with great interest at discovering the existence of a new sort of guild. But the intelligent girl suddenly looked up and to Col.

“But wait, then shouldn’t we go to the guild first and go to the bookstores later?”

Col and Le Roi turned to look at her as the red eyes of the wisewolf’s daughter rounded.

“If there are people here who know a lot about the desert, then wouldn’t they know where to find the books we need?”

Bread belonged to a bakery; meat belonged to a butcher.

She was correct. But there was one complicated twist.

“Do you remember when I told you about the packs of wild dogs in the city?” Col asked.

The wolf girl peered up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

It was Le Roi who continued.

“If the professor you find at the guild is honest, then that would be a good plan. But you would be in trouble if they are a quick-witted person.”

“.....”

The only daughter of the talented merchant and the wisewolf thought deeply for a moment, then swiftly arrived at the answer.

“Because they’d buy the book first, then sell it to us for a really high price?”

“Precisely. Books only pass through our lives once. And this city is full of people just like that.”

Myuri blinked, then looked at Col.

She had apparently assumed that everyone in this city was an eccentric who liked books and wanted to excel at academics—people just like her foolish and overly earnest brother.

But it seemed she finally understood that most of the people in the city were more like Le Roi or Eve.

“And that is why we will be going to the guild last.”

“Aha,” she breathed in understanding, finally seeing precisely what sort of trouble her brother had gotten into in the past. “Then should we act stupid at the bookstores?”

“And like you don’t have much money.”

Myuri giggled and turned to Col. “I think Brother gets more excited than I ever do when he looks at books, so maybe I shouldn’t be with him.”

He could not argue with that, but he could put it another way.

“I am only looking, not touching, because some flowers grow on peaks too high to reach.”

“Flowers?” Myuri murmured.

Someone had left a wax-coated board on a table nearby—not uncommon, as this was an inn where many booksellers gathered—so he spelled it out for her.

After staring at the new turn of phrase for a moment, she lifted her head.

“Then we just have to go flower picking!” she cried innocently.

Col had to scold her—no girl should be speaking in such a loud voice.

This was a city where many people came alone from places Col had never heard of.

This was a city where it was not unusual to find boys playing cards in the taverns during the daytime.

And this was also a city where one could see young men listening intently to elderly, bearded professors in disheveled brown robes giving lectures on logic as they sat on scattered straw on the ground beneath the eaves of company trading houses.

Aquent was a vulgar, corrupt city, yet it was also undoubtedly filled with intellectual passion—it was not uncommon to see all sorts of people wandering about, and that meant the city was perfect for Col and Myuri.

As they went from bookstore to bookstore, they spotted several boys around Myuri's age wearing swords at their hips.

Some were clearly children of noble families, and some were poor-looking boys, which made Col question what that sword was, in fact, used for.

He was more than certain Myuri would be thrilled to be in a city that was unlike any other they had visited thus far, but she was surprisingly quiet. Col wondered if his trick had worked better than he thought, but the real reason became clear when he was flipping through a copy of a well-known grammar reference book outside one of the shops.

"Watch your wallet, Brother."

There were so many pickpockets and petty thieves that she had no time to get excited.

"You were right when you said they were like packs of stray dogs. The streets that cross each city block are definitely lines in their territory."

Col had little understanding of this, but apparently Myuri could tell simply by looking at the boys standing on the street corners, or the boys absently petting actual stray dogs on the sides of the roads.

But while Myuri was on such high alert, to the point where she had not asked for a single skewer of meat, Col was enjoying Aquent quite a bit despite how hesitant he had been to come back in Rausbourne. And that was because there were stacks upon stacks of grammar textbooks and rhetoric reference books in the front of all the shops. This was an inconceivable sight in even the second biggest city in the Kingdom of Winfiel.

At the fifth or sixth shop they visited, Col noticed someone was giving a lecture on a commentary on the scripture in the alleyway beside the shop, by the well set back from the street. Part of his attention was stolen by all the familiar words he heard whispered, and another part of him was engrossed in the bundle of papers in hand—he was terribly excited.

Myuri made sure her sigh was loud enough for him to hear.

"You're like a kid, Brother."

Eve had told them they would most certainly find hidden treasures if they went, but he genuinely could not refute that he was more entranced by this city than Myuri.

“It’s fine, though. I’ll protect you. You can read as much as you want.”

When they had first started on this journey, Myuri would grasp his hand, even cling to his arm whenever she had the chance, but now she stood with her arms crossed, shoulders back, and legs apart to keep people away.

Though she was not tall, and her shoulders were not broad by any means, she looked exactly like a little knight.

“No, I would appreciate it if you scolded me a bit more.”

When he said that, she looked at him flatly, then chuckled.

But if he was allowed to offer an excuse, the reason he had been so engrossed in the books was to deliberately draw people’s attention.

“What sort of book are you looking for?” It was the shopkeeper of store seven or eight that finally talked to them. “Has nothing surprised you yet? I’ve been watching you pore fervently over every single book.”

He was about the same age as Le Roi. Col shrugged.

“He doesn’t care, so long as it’s a book,” Myuri replied with exasperation, and the bookseller smiled.

“I’m sorry, this just brings me back,” Col said. His awful acting most certainly made him seem more bashful than anything else.

But what he said was true. The book before him, for example, was but a rough bundle of paper, scarcely worthy of being called a book, and had been copied in a terribly idiosyncratic hand that reminded him of how Myuri used to write. But the margins were blackened from fingerprints, which meant it had passed through many hands before reaching here. When Col held it for himself, memories of a time past came flooding back to him.

He smiled vaguely as he recalled both painful and happy memories, and the bookseller gave him a look of surprise.

“Were you a student?”

“A wandering one, yes.”

The bookseller lifted his head slightly, then nodded in understanding.

“Then perhaps my father smacked your hands when you were a child to chase you away.”

There were a great many young, wandering students who would steal bundles of paper and sell them off, either because they were desperate for food, or because the older boys controlling them ordered them to do so.

“The city seems no different than it was when I was last here.”

“But the faces keep changing. Of all the long-standing booksellers in the area, only us and the guy across from us remain.”

Myuri was rather surprised to hear that. In Nyohhira, her hometown, the people who ran the bathhouses, stables, and even the riverboats always stayed the same. She had perhaps never even considered that a store could close down.

“I...suppose that means the textbook betting is still hale and hearty.”

Glancing at the shops along the street, it was apparent that many customers were fervently snatching up books that weren't even bound, fetching very high prices despite their obviously poor make. And that was unnatural.

As Col spoke while gazing out over the books lined along the busy street, a familiarity gleamed in the bookseller's eye.

“The way you speak makes it sound like you suffered at the hands of textbook gambling, too.”

Teaching via oral instruction was generally the most accepted method in academia, but using books where those teachings were written down was also unavoidable. And the greediest people always caused chaos in places where there was demand.

“I did. I ran away with a great debt landed on my shoulders, and it was her parents who eventually took me in.”

The bookseller looked to Myuri, who drew up her shoulders at suddenly being brought up in the conversation, and he gave a small smile before sighing, tired.

“Must have been God’s will, then. Sounds like He does his work sometimes after all.”

A member of the clergy would be shocked to hear anyone say that, but it was not unusual to see fledgling students up and vanish out of the blue.

“Then are you a private tutor, making his triumphant return? Or a priest from a private chapel? What sort of book are you looking for?”

It seemed the bookseller noticed Col was familiar with how things worked in the city.

The reason he had acted so deliberately passionate about the books as he went around and looked at them was to lower the guard of the greedy booksellers.

“In truth, we’re looking for texts on the desert nations.”

“Oh?”

“It would be even better if you had fairy tales or something of the sort.”

The bookseller looked between them with a knowing eye.

He must have thought Myuri to be a child of a long-distance trader. It was common practice for them to send an educated blood relative to a faraway place and have them act as their proxy in business. And it was normal to use storybooks as grammar textbooks.

“The desert, hmm? There was a rather well-known scholar on the desert in this city once.”

The bookseller pulled a rather thick notebook out from under the counter and began flipping through it. It was unlike the books lined up out front. It was an index of valuable books, those bound in leather, with pages of parchment, the kind bound to the shelves with chains.

“Old age took him quite a while ago. His collection circulated the city for a while afterward, but I haven’t seen any of them for some time—a professor from another city must have picked it clean.”

“Were no copies made?”

“I haven’t seen any. In cities like these, books that have no hope of becoming textbooks hold no worth—you should know this.”

“.....”

Col was not the only one who fell silent; the wolf girl, too, was quiet in the face of yet another topic she did not understand.

“Would you like me to use what connections I have to ask the other booksellers in other academic cities? We’d probably—no, we’d definitely find something that way.”

An encounter with a book was once in a lifetime. Even if copies could be made of a text, it took an awful amount of time and effort in order to make them—they were all hand copied, after all. And so books were a type of product for which prices could easily surge if the demand was there.

The violent fluctuation of prices easily lent itself to gambling—one could build up an entire lifetime of savings in a single night, or just as easily lose everything.

And since there was a constant need for books as textbooks in this city, everyone was always keeping an eye out for chances to gamble. Even butchers and bakers took part in the gambling, and it was normal for shops to shut down once they lost a bet.

Thus, books in a university town were like birds—they came close, then almost immediately flew off. Requesting a book from a distant academic city would mean being charged mercilessly high prices.

It was purely out of the goodness of his heart that the bookseller warned them of this ahead of time, and it was because of the bookseller’s dependability and honesty that this particular establishment had managed to survive for so long.

“Please tell me if you manage to find any of those books still remaining in the city. I don’t mind if they have a bit of...personality.”

The bookseller squared his shoulders and nodded.

Myuri, bored of the adult conversation and their meaningful looks, had been amusing herself by flipping through sheaves of paper out front, and had finally

reached the end of her patience. Not minding the number of people around her, she spoke up in a loud, loud voice.

“Excuse me, do you have any stories about knights in battle?”

The two adults turned to look at the girl dressed in boy’s clothing.

“Hmm? Do you mean chronicles?”

“Something like a war epic, even.”

Though she looked like a company errand boy, a sword rested on her hip.

The bookseller gave Col’s clothes a quick once over, perhaps guessing how much he had paid for it.

“And would you prefer land battles, or naval battles?”

He was a masterful merchant—Myuri immediately latched onto the bait she had not ever considered was an option.

“Naval battles?! Like fights at sea?!”

“Hmm? Have you come from the north?” the bookseller asked pompously.

Myuri’s eyes went wide and snapped to Col.

Their clothes alone said that they were not from the south, but his guess seemed like magic to Myuri, who was not familiar with the ins and outs of travel.

“When we think of big knight battles in this region, we always think of naval combat. If you head a bit farther south from here, you will find a calm and warm ocean, unlike the waters of the north. When the knights of the ancient empire set forth, dreaming of world domination, they set sail from the glittering jewel that is the ocean.”

Myuri’s eyes glittered like jewels themselves. The bookseller then brought out a book not from among those lined up out front, but from inside the store. It was properly bound.

“If you’ll be gazing out across those waters yourself, then you should at least know the stories that took place on them. And here! This is *The Ramad War Epic*, tale of the Battle of Ramad, said to be the biggest battle in the history of

imperial times. Ramad was a country of knights, and as legend would have it, they held out against the ancient empire until the bitter end, astonishingly facing an army of ten thousand with just five hundred soldiers.”

Myuri was so excited that Col was convinced her ears and tail would pop out at any moment.

“Ah, but that’s right. I forgot something very important.”

“Hmm?”

The bookseller briefly opened the book, closed it, then patted himself on the cheek.

“See, these are all being used as grammar books at the moment, and they’re all written in the ancient imperial language. Can you read the script?”

“.....”

Myuri turned to look at Col, and Col shook his head.

Her face fell in disappointment, but the bookseller grinned.

“Worry not! The ancient imperial script is essentially the same as the modern script of the Church! So you can learn the basics with the *Shradin Prayer Book*, then learn emotional expression through imperial poets in the *Tolan Book of Pentameter Poetry*, and that should make reading books from the imperial age a walk in the park!”

Myuri was simple when it came to things like this—she was fully prepared to do just that.

She tugged on Col’s sleeve and pointed to the thick books in the shopkeeper’s hand.

Booksellers were more or less all like Le Roi.

“I can teach her the script of the Church. However, it is much more difficult than the vernacular.”

She had been tied to a chair and forced to learn to read and write. She remembered what that was like.

A look of realization crossed her face.

“You’re a tough customer, mister.”

“Hmm?”

Myuri looked at Col, then to the bookseller. The bookseller suppressed a laugh.

“Many words are spelled the same, yes, but the grammar is very different. The meaning of the words have changed over a long period of time, so she would need dedicated study before she could start to read books from the imperial era.”

Perhaps the bookseller thought he could sell ignorant tourists freshly arrived from the northern countryside books at a high price, or perhaps it had been a little game to amuse himself.

That must be why, Col thought, when he realized the way the bookseller was looking at him.

Though there was a smile on his face, it did not reach his eyes.

“So you’re the real deal.”

“Huh?”

The bookseller gestured for Col to come closer while he leaned in and whispered, “Why not work for me?”

Myuri looked up suspiciously at the adults huddled together.

“I won’t let you trick my brother,” she said, putting her hand on the hilt of her sword.

The bookseller grinned. “If it goes well, then I’ll give you both books for free.”

Myuri’s eyes narrowed with a “Hmm...” and she turned to look at Col, troubled.

“I can’t agree to transcription work.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You think that work is enough to earn you those books? You know exactly what makes money in this city.”

He grinned.

Col had originally thought that the honesty of the establishment had lent to its longevity, but when he saw that poised smile he was genuinely astonished at how naive he had been just moments earlier. His assumption was far too innocent—the reason this store had survived was because it was exceptionally cunning in an already cutthroat city.

“The textbook market?”

Bingo. The bookseller nodded.

“To tell you the truth, this city is currently embroiled in a major uproar. The textbook selection has been seriously delayed, and it’s resulted in an unbelievably massive gambling scene. I’m having a terribly hard time gathering information, because everyone already knows my face. But you arrived yesterday, if not today. You could do it for me. *And* you seem to be looking for books on the desert nations. This opportunity might be just the lifesaver you need.”

This city was a spring of knowledge and academics.

“What do you think? Why don’t you at least hear out my proposal?”

And what lay sparkling at the bottom of the spring was greed and gold.

“The textbook market,” Myuri murmured, ripping three pieces of pork from her skewer at once and stuffing her cheeks full. It was like she was trying to swallow the word itself. “That’s all...you talked about...Brother...”

“Do not talk with your mouth full,” Col scolded.

Myuri prioritized her appetite and bit into the meat. Unlike the Kingdom of Winfiel, which tended to sell primarily mutton, Aquent had rows of stalls that sold pork, beef, and even rabbit and chicken—she was delighted to eat something that was not mutton for the first time in a long time.

After leaving the bookstore, whose owner was just as hard to pin down as Le Roi was, they came to the stalls at the central square to have lunch. But Col did not bother peeling his hardboiled eggs; he slowly spun one on the table with a finger.

“But Brother,” Myuri began, licking her forefinger and thumb, taking a break

after downing a portion of the meat. “If what that shady man says is true, then it’d line up with our goals. We don’t really have a reason to turn him down, do we?”

“Well, you are correct, in a sense.”

What Myuri was talking about was likely the two books presented to them as reward, but that was not all.

What the bookseller had proposed to them was essentially a tailor-made coincidence.

“So when a book gets chosen as a textbook here, everyone suddenly wants it, which means it suddenly gets super expensive overnight, right? But they haven’t picked any new textbooks in ages, which means the booksellers are all getting antsy. And the reason no new textbooks are being chosen is because there are two student gangs fighting in the city. Is that right?”

She reached out to pluck a few of the eggs Col was playing with and used them as standins for the two warring gangs and the booksellers watching on.

“And *then*, one of the leaders of the gangs happens to be the very last pupil of that scholar from the desert lands who died.”

At that point, she smacked one of the eggs against the table, peeled the shell, and popped it into her mouth.

“And then the bookstore guy told us to play nice with that leader and get info on the textbooks out of them, right? Since we’re looking for information on the desert, that leader is the only one in Aquent who knows anything. So we should pretend to want to learn from them. The bookstore guy said it’s—I remember! He called it a lifesaver!”

Myuri was proud to have used a phrase she just recently learned; she began to peel her second egg.

“...It sounds much too good to be true.”

The plain boiled eggs were too bland for her, so she produced a little pouch of salt from her belt and carefully sprinkled some over it. She had seen Le Roi do this once—a habit he had doubtlessly picked up on his travels—and was eager

to do the same.



“You mean he’s lying? But I’m sure we’ll find out the second we meet this leader person.”

“That is true.”

If the bookseller wanted to deceive them, he surely had better ways of going about it.

But in their search for someone who had knowledge on the desert nations that might lead to information about the new continent, they found the one person who had inherited that knowledge standing at the eye of a maelstrom surrounding textbook betting. It was a given they had to stay cautious.

“Maybe this is God’s providence, just like how my parents took you in.”

“Very funny coming from a faithless girl.”

Myuri giggled.

“We’ll know when we meet them. And if it’s all true, then Mister Le Roi would’ve found out the same thing, right?”

It was times like these that it was heartening having Myuri by his side, since her philosophy was that it was much better to act rather than stay still and worry. And when it came to the ominous matter that was the textbook market, they had a veteran specialist in Le Roi to call upon. Col’s anxieties were for nothing.

First, they had to reconvene with Le Roi, then get a grasp on what sort of situation Aquent was in... And as that thought crossed his mind, he reached for one of his eggs, only to find that Myuri had just put the third and final one into her stomach.

“.....”

“Hmm? Oh, Brother, do you think you could order a stew? I’m still hungry.”

She had apparently taken his critical stare as a question as to how hungry she still was and pointed to a stall where the keeper was busy stirring a big pot.

Upon returning to the inn, they found Le Roi had beaten them back, and he was eating lunch alone. The sharp-eyed bookseller, after having gone around to

visit papermaking and scribing workshops, had sniffed out the conflict, just as they expected.

“It’s quite serious,” he said. “The biggest problem are the textbooks used for canon law, you see.”

“What?”

Col could not help but ask in surprise, and Myuri, who was reaching out to sneak a piece of salted pike from Le Roi’s plate, froze.

“As you know, Master Col, great importance is placed on the laws of the Church, and there are a great number of books on it. There are quite a number of texts that are actually considered standard reading on the subject. It is not realistic to buy up all the books that could possibly be used as textbooks. And because of that, every bookseller has been stuck, unable to act. That I don’t mind, of course, but the scribing workshops would have already begun copying the chosen textbooks by now if this was a typical year. Instead, they’ve all been closed.”

Myuri, relieved they were not talking about her, dragged the pike to her plate, firmly pinched head and tail, then bit into it.

“But wait,” she said, taking a breath between bites. “Then wouldn’t that mean they’d have a lot of paper left over?”

“Yes, that they do. But it’s all material reserved for making copies once the textbooks are chosen, and I was told they could not sell it to me. If a rare book with few original copies is chosen, then they will have to transcribe that much more.”

“.....”

Myuri seemed to be thinking about something, much in the same way she seemed to be enjoying the crunch of the pike in her mouth. She closed her eyes, swallowed, and spoke.

“Then we should make friends with this leader person and ask them to pick a textbook that already has a lot of copies in town, right? Then there’d be leftover paper, and we can buy a bunch, right?”

It was sound logic—solid like the foundations of a building.

“Mister Le Roi, do you know anything about this leader? I don’t exactly understand how a student is involved in the textbook selection process.”

When Col said that, Myuri blinked her red eyes curiously.

He had no memory of the boys who had stolen his savings having any sort of influence over the textbook selection back when he was a young student in this city. If anything, those older boys were at the whims of their arrogant and greedy teachers, pleading with them to tell them what their next textbooks were until their eyes were bloodshot.

“The Wise Wolf.”

Le Roi’s words came out of nowhere.

Myuri, whose mother was a wolf spirit known as the wisewolf, froze in the middle of picking a bone from between her teeth, and stared blankly at Le Roi.

“That is the very haughty nickname for this leader. They apparently lead a gang made up of students from the northlands. I suppose that the nickname is meant to represent the wilderness of the north.”

Wolf crests, which had been in common use during the time of the ancient empire, had long since gone out of style. But unlike the well-developed south, things were different in the north—people still felt an affinity with wolves, where they still inhabited the deep forests that remained.

The wolf was the perfect symbol of savage defiance.

“All I know is that nickname, and that their gang is made up of poor students from the north. Their gang is fighting against student gangs comprised of wealthier students.”

That gave Col the general picture.

“So they’ve organized what is essentially a hometown association.”

This was not the sort of unorganized gang Col saw when he was a child, one meant solely for violence and scams—these people had come together with intent and purpose.

“Precisely. According to what I heard at the papermakers, they are like long-distance traders, protecting themselves in a foreign land where they have no one else to rely on, supporting one another, sharing expensive textbooks, tutoring one another—they are helping their people in this distant land.”

“They’re like a band of knights!”

Myuri’s eyes shone with delight. This was a traveler’s world, one that a girl who grew up in a remote mountain village had no way of knowing about. Col sighed, and Le Roi laughed.

“Yes, now that you mention it, the Knights of Saint Kruza are also organized in companies based on place of origin, aren’t they?”

“And that leader person knows a lot about the desert, right?”

It was indeed the ideal situation for them, but as always, Col felt something was odd about it.

“We heard about the same from another bookseller. He said this leader was the very last pupil of an old professor who used to give lessons on the desert.”

“Yes, yes, I heard the same. I thought that was a rather odd coincidence.”

It seemed Col was not the only one who thought there was a strangeness to this stroke of luck of theirs.

It was silly to think someone had orchestrated this in order to trap them, but there was a strange sort of inevitability to all this—why was that?

“That said, odd coincidences can be rather commonplace in one’s travels.”

Col knew that comment did not simply come from Le Roi’s easygoing attitude, because he, too, had encountered great strokes of luck on his own journey.

“And if I may be candid for a moment...,” Le Roi said, drawing a piece of rabbit meat toward himself before Myuri could take it. “Even if it did not align with our own goals, I believe we should help this Wise Wolf.”

That was a surprising suggestion coming from the man who seemed to always keep a safe distance from the concept of selflessness.

“What...do you mean?”

The corpulent veteran bookseller sat up straight and said, “This Wise Wolf has collected all the poor students and is supposedly trying to protect them from being fodder for the rich students. Most importantly, the betting around books chosen to be textbooks has bled many fledging students dry. How many have opted not to buy the textbooks and instead given up on their studies, despite what innate talent they might have? Too many students have been taken in by empty words, saddled with tremendous debt due to the betting, forced to copy books until their bodies fall apart, and then ultimately end up perishing with little ceremony. It seems this Wise Wolf is trying to take down the evil, old-fashioned practice where the few always end up with all the money.”

The reams of betting around the textbook market had also sent Col into the depths of debt.

And Le Roi loved books and knowledge.

As the bookseller spoke with a surprisingly earnest expression, the rambunctious girl licked her fish fat-slicked lips with a gleam in her eye.

“Then we know what to do.”

An intrepid smile crossed her face.

“Knights are always allies of justice!” Myuri exclaimed.

Something leaped to life in her expression, something that had not been drawn out in the jousting tournament.

As their room in the inn grew dark and the sun dipped beneath the horizon, the streets below grew brighter and livelier.

“There’s so many of them. Where were they hiding?” Myuri murmured.

She sat on the chair she had brought to the window, gazing down on the street below. It was packed with so many boys and young men that she could not help but comment aloud. This was an impossible sight in most towns.

“Alleyway wells, company storehouses, and taverns closed for the day typically act as lecture halls, so once it gets dark, they all come out to the streets.”

“Like worms after the rain.”

“Bookworms, you might say.”

Myuri turned to look at him, expression soured by the turn of phrase.

“But more importantly, Brother, why do we have to keep watch here while Mister Le Roi goes and takes a look around town? Shouldn’t it be the other way round if we’re looking for a fake wolf?”

There was an individual out there with the insolent nickname of Wise Wolf, who was gathering students who hailed from the north. Regardless of their objectives and motives, that nickname did not sit very well with the real wolf girl.

She deliberately called this person a fake as she rocked back in her chair. Col sighed.

“Because I’m very anxious. Children your age are easy prey for these older boys. It doesn’t matter if you are dressed as a boy or not.”

Myuri, who had been scolded for every little thing because she was a girl who would soon be a young woman, looked as though she had been ready to protest that she was dressed as a boy. But then she closed her open mouth.

“And I am not doubting your capabilities as a knight. If anything, should you find yourself surrounded, then our problems will only get bigger precisely *because* you are so powerful. I know you would beat all of them with ease.”

And that was why Le Roi was walking around the city looking for the rumored individual.

After a moment of thought, debating internally whether she was being treated as a child or not, Myuri ultimately decided his logic was sound. Though she had her arms crossed in dissatisfaction and she swallowed her words, she eventually spat out her discontent.

“Hmph. I can’t believe you actually survived in a place like this.”

All she could do was stare down at the lively city as she snapped at him. And he replied to her with a sigh.

“Because I earned quite a bit of money with donations and swindling, perhaps because I looked so weak and pitiful.”

“.....”

Myuri looked at Col, then seemed oddly satisfied with that answer.

“I bet everyone wanted to be nice to you when they saw you as a kid, not just Mother.”

That did not sound like a compliment. He politely pushed Myuri’s hand away as she reached to pat him on the head with amusement before turning his own gaze outside.

“And *look*, Myuri. At this time of day, the student gangs are putting on a demonstration.”

They were alone in the room, and Myuri, of course, had her wolf ears and tail out. Myuri, sitting cross-legged on her chair, reached for the pointed wood pen and waxed board, then looked at Col.

“You want to know what *demonstration* means in this context? It’s a...sort of march meant to assert a sphere of influence, I suppose.”

Having learned a new word, she quickly wrote it down.

“But this isn’t the territory of the people they’re attacking, right? All the boys at the table have really well-combed hair.”

There were all sorts outside—some bickering over cards, some drank and walked around with their arms around one another, and some sat on the roadside, already drunk, but all of them were dressed better than average.

“A good offense is the best defense.”

“Huh?”

Myuri knew her brother to be well-mannered, the sort to turn up his nose at any sort of conflict. And so she blinked when she heard an unexpected word come from his mouth.

“It is an old trick to attack the enemy’s territory in order to preserve your own.”

Candlelight spilled from shops and streetside torches burned brightly, illuminating the youths as they made merry outside, as though intoxicated by

nightmares. When Col continued to speak, he pictured finding his younger self among them, finally getting to eat his first meal of the day.

“On blocks where they’re still in control, young students will go around from house to house with near empty bowls, only a piece of dried herring or something of the sort inside. They then say, *Excuse me, today is my birthday, please could you at least give me enough change to buy bread so this herring tastes better.* But of course, every coin would be taken by those controlling them.”

At last, he spoke of a time he had never mentioned to Myuri back when they were in Nyohhira, not even when she asked.

When he was a student, he had been so desperate to survive that it did not quite register as an evil act to him. But thinking back on it now, everyone in town knew what was going on, which made it two, three times worse. Now, he better understood the expressions of all those people who were sympathetic and gave him coins and food.

Had he simply stopped by for a bit, he certainly would never have imagined this darker side of the world.

As he blankly stared down at the hustle and bustle below, he suddenly felt a warmth on his back.

“...Tell me more stories like that, Brother.”

Though he could not see her face as she plastered herself against his back, he could tell from the way her tail was moving out of the corner of his eye that she was angry.

She pressed her forehead firmly to his back and continued. “Even though I can’t be nice to the kid version of you anymore.”

Though she was always critical of him, calling him a fool and an idiot, Col wondered for a brief moment if she regretted doing so, now that she knew how much he had been through.

But he corrected himself, as that was not quite it. He could tell by the faint anger in her tone.

Myuri wanted to be equal to him—someone who was not always being protected, but someone who did the protecting sometimes, too.

When he considered how he would not have told her about this when they were in Nyohhira, even though he did occasionally share his stories of hardship from his travels with her, he realized he had come to recognize Myuri as a partner on his journey, more than he realized.

“I know. Now, I can tell you these stories, and you can perhaps accept what happened with me.”

“Exactly. Because I’m a knight.”

She lifted her head from his back, so he could finally turn to look at her. And there, he saw a version of her that was much more gallant than how he remembered her in Nyohhira.

A knight’s spirit was also the spirit of companionship, to be considerate of one’s comrades.

“But you need to be a bit more of an adult if you’d like for me to think of you as reliable.”

The reason he reached out and placed his hand on her head was partially to admonish her for trying to act too grown up, but also partly because of a faint feeling of ruefulness after seeing firsthand the dazzling process of her growing up.

Myuri smacked his hand away and thwacked his back.

“You’re so mean, Brother.”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry.”

As he soothed the pouting girl, she looked away from him in a huff, but her fluffy tail wrapped around his leg. It was much more difficult not to laugh at this, but once the little knight had cheered up a bit, it was her wolf ears that reacted first.

“Someone’s making a commotion.”

She lurched toward the window, searching for the right direction.

“There.”

She pointed. As he reached to pull up her hood to hide her ears, the noise soon reached his own ears.

A wave of excitement rippled through the crowd of students.

“Perhaps the students they’re looking for are here.”

The city was apparently divided in half—on one side, the poor students from the north, and on the other, the rich students from the south.

Patrons of this particular inn were booksellers, and they typically sold their books to rich clients.

Which meant the district this inn sat in was right in the center of the southern students’ territory; all the students gathered here stood on their chairs and looked toward the source of the commotion like wild dogs.

Was this an attack on their base by an enemy?

They were uncharacteristically quiet, holding their breath as they watched the people in the street below.

And then, like a signal fire, someone shouted.

“He’s getting away! The kid’s running!”

Myuri’s ears pricked up—she had just learned what sort of connotations came with the word *kid* in this city. Col watched as she immediately grabbed her sword and stuck it in her belt. He hesitated but did not stop her because he eventually grabbed his own cloak. And it was not due to a wise analysis or a considered thought that he should look deeper into the darkness of this city if he wanted to know more about it.

He was simply spurred on by the memories brought back from hearing “*The kid’s getting away*,” and the anger that bubbled up with it.

“Myuri.”

“I know!” said the silver knight as they dashed from the room.

The kids were younger students, their boyishness still apparent in their faces. They were the property of older boys before they were anything else, including

being students. They typically had no relations, so when they came to these academic cities in search of help, they often ended up in the clutches of the devil.

While some of the older boys had been hapless kids themselves, most of them were princelings whose parents were members of the nobility or rich merchants. As such, they used people without a shred of guilt, likely stemming from having grown up watching their parents do the same.

They had either used up all of their allowance sent to them, or had been abandoned by parents who could no longer stand their excessive debauchery; and so, by keeping children under their control, they wielded power and wealth like petty kings.

And that was likely the reason why the Wise Wolf had taken a stand and formed a group for students from the north, who were often fodder for these schemes.

“He’s biting the hand that feeds him! He’s gonna bilk his debt! Find the kid, now!”

The boys grabbed whatever sticklike objects they found around them, and with undaunted smiles and excitement, as though heading out for a hunt, they began crawling through the streets. Those who remained seated, quietly drinking their booze, were either boys who were much better dressed than the rest, or young men who were all too used to the commotion.

The stray dogs were howling in the excitement, and the roaming pigs and chickens that had been snoozing on the side of the road began to run about in confusion. Taverns quickly began to put away things they did not want broken, and the company houses put menacing-looking bouncers outside of their buildings, perhaps wary of looting. Local residents were the ones who tightly shut the windows they had opened for some fresh air—they were sick of the noise.

“Brother? Does this happen all the time?”

Col was shocked to see how well-behaved Myuri was in contrast to the scale of the commotion.

“They say that even kings give up trying to govern academic cities.”

It was often accepted as truth that one of the reasons why many of these academic cities were independent was precisely because of the students’ reckless behavior.

“Nothing good ever happens when there are too many boys.”

Myuri was like the brackish waters where the river met the sea. Despite being such a tomboy, she occasionally spoke just like any other girl.

“You said you knew where the territory lines were. If this kid were to run, it would probably be toward an opposing gang’s territory. If we want to help, then maybe we should wait there.”

“Like how an enemy of the enemy is a friend?”

“Like how a chicken escapes to the house it belongs to.”

Myuri frowned, craning her neck as her ears flicked under her hood. “This way,” she said, and ran. The local students likely knew where the kid might hide, and they would likely be gathering there. Myuri latched onto the sound of the boys running, then matched it against the map she had made in her mind when they had taken a look around earlier in the day.

“But more importantly,” she said, running down an oddly quiet alleyway that had no light to guide them. “Should I say that I’m a knight when we save the kid?”

“.....”

The rambunctious girl was, at heart, not much different than the boys causing the commotion.

“Absolutely not.”

He could see her irritated expression in the darkness, and just as he felt the frustration at her typical attitude bubble, there came a yell from someone young nearby.

“Myuri?”

“This is bad. I think they found the kid that ran.”

With mounting nausea, Col could imagine exactly why the kid ran just from hearing the words *escaped* and *debt* alone. He could already picture what sort of fate awaited him if he were caught.

“Brother, if you can’t keep up, just keep running with the moon on your right-hand side!”

The wolf girl, who could run through the mountains without getting lost on nights of the new moon, sped up and vanished into the dark of the alleyway. Luckily, Col knew the direction from which the commotion was coming, and at the very worst, he could wait until dawn, but of course, he had a thought or two on the ungainly way he plodded after Myuri.

“I should have...joined her...in sword training...”

And when he thought about it, he had recently felt how lacking he was in physical fitness. Daydreams alone were not enough to allow him to fight against reality. He breathed raggedly as he ran, and the indistinct yelling of the tumult soon became discernable words.

“He ran to Tarant Street!” came a shout, loud and clear, from the other side of the building to his right.

Col was apparently in the back of a tanners’ workshop. He gawked at a large, drying bear pelt and sidestepped it, scrambled over wine barrels and broken carts left in the alleyway, cursing his knees when they threatened to give out from running too much, and eventually spilled out onto a large street.

“Good grief...”

Fed up with his staggering legs, he lifted his head, and then held his breath. It had been quiet, so he had completely let his guard down.

He had not paid any attention to the high tension in the air and had stepped right in the middle of a battlefield, right between the two camps as they stared down each other.

“Brother.”

He heard a whisper and was suddenly pulled into an alleyway.

As he was about to open his mouth to say Myuri’s name, she covered his

mouth.

The street, which had been lively and crammed with stalls during the day, was now practically empty and served as the spot for the two forces to confront each other. On the right were boys so well dressed they were easy to see in the dim, and standing opposite them were boys dressed in cheap clothes, the sort Col might see children in Nyohhira wearing.

Many of those on the right held swords in their hands, and on the left, many held sticks or rolling pins, and some wore pans on their head.

A voice came from the gang on the right.

“Why don’t you give our boys back?”

At last, Col faintly spotted two children at the very back of the gang on the left being cared for. In the torchlight, they were clearly emaciated and lay limp, thoroughly exhausted.

“Bold of you to call them ‘yours’! You were just milking ‘em for money!” the opposing voice spat.

Both sides leaned forward, ready to advance toward their opponents.

“Not true. All we do is save the people collapsed on the street out of the mercy of our hearts, and then we help one another learn. And their hands stained with ink? That’s obviously because they were indulging in the joy of learning with us! You’re the ones that tricked them with your sweet talk and pulled them away from all that.”

The drawn swords gleamed menacingly.

“Listen up, you filthy northern wolves. Don’t think your hides will always be safe if you decide to provoke us southern eagles.”

Col could tell by his pronunciation and word choice that the speaker was upper class.

His attitude showed he was used to ordering people around and believed it was his right to act arrogant.

It was now Col’s turn to grab Myuri, who had pulled her foolish brother back into the alley after he had stumbled into the fire, to keep her from leaping out.

“The joys of education? Is that what you call kidnapping them in your territory, tying them to a chair, starving them, and torturing them by making them hand-copy grammar books forever and ever so you can make a pretty penny? Is that why so many of them don’t have any light in their eyes? Can’t hold a pen anymore? You should be ashamed of yourselves!”

Despite the disadvantage they were at, wielding wooden clubs and pans against swords, those called the northern wolves had a clear advantage in numbers—their own territory must have been close.

But it did not seem as though either side was calmly weighing their odds. They were all filled with ominous resolve, ready to crack open the skulls of their enemies after a long, long time in conflict.

But it was not just one individual arguing back from the camp on the left, so Col could not tell who the leader was. As he held back the quiet rumble of thunder that was Myuri as she growled in his arms, he strained his eyes to see who the Wise Wolf might be, when—

One of the people caring for the poor younger boys in the back suddenly stood.

They were small, perhaps recently graduated from being a kid themselves, but something about them drew Col’s eye. That was perhaps because, at a glance, he saw that this figure wore a white robe, one reminiscent of traveling priests, and walked full of confidence.

Myuri, who had her teeth bared at the arrogant students from the south, suddenly went quiet as well.

As they walked, their robe fluttering in the wind, they were handed a sword, a gauntlet, and even a metal helm from their gang, and deftly donned these pieces.

“Wait... That’s the...,” Myuri murmured.

Col was certain she was not shocked by the way this person put on their armor like a knight readying for battle. Unease rippled through the southern students—they, too, had noticed the same thing Col and Myuri had.

“Damn it! You again, Witch of the North?!”

Someone from the southern camp yelled, but the small figure, clad in a metal helm much too big for them, continued to calmly press forward. From behind them came a torrent of stray dogs from around the city, following closely behind.

“You are parasites of this city—you have no talent beyond scheming how to get rich! In the name of my lord, you will be punished for your crimes!”

This kid’s voice was high—clearly, puberty had not come yet—but its energy roused the stray dogs.

“I am Lutia, the Wise Wolf! Go! Crush these—”

The camp of rich students reeled, and some in the back were already turning heel and running. The reason the poor students had managed to fight back thus far was due to this Wise Wolf’s mysterious power.

The students armed with sticks and pans rushed ahead with the flow of dogs.

Col watched on with wide eyes—not because of the revelation that the one leading from the front was a girl, and not a young boy. It was because he finally understood why the girl had called herself the Wise Wolf.

With Lutia’s final order, the front lines were breached.

In that moment—

Lutia’s head snapped to Col and Myuri.

Her expression was that of shock, as though she had seen a dragon in broad daylight.

“A-attack! Don’t be afraid!”

The one who gave the order was someone else, someone who was surprised by the way Lutia suddenly came to a halt but understood they could not afford to lose their momentum. It was just the same as waiting for the water in a washtub to overflow. A huge fight immediately broke out.

That said, the real fighting lasted only for a brief moment, because those being chased by the stray dogs started to run not long after. It is said that even the most skilled mercenaries have trouble with stray dogs on the road.

Who could deal with dogs being commanded by a wolf?

With Myuri in Col's arms, he could clearly feel the way she sucked in a breath and held it, like a hiccup, once the street fell silent, as though after an avalanche.

"Wh... Why?"

Col was not sure which of them said that.

The girl, her rich brown hair pulled back like a wolf's tail, turned to peer at them from under her helm.

To be more precise, she was looking at Myuri.

"...Pardon us. Could you be...?"

Myuri could not move in the face of what she was seeing. Instead, Col spoke up.

Lutia finally noticed his presence and her eyes snapped open.

Or perhaps that was because she felt guilty for noticing them too late, despite the whistles of the guards who threatened to put an end to the scuffle.

"Lady Lutia! The council is coming! We need to run!"

Though the student gangs seemed as though they arrogantly ruled the city, they were not totally free from order.

And it was very likely that the council was receiving plenty of donations from the parents of wealthy students, which meant they were twice the enemy for the northern wolves.

"Take the kids we saved to the inn. Make sure no one's hurt."

Upon receiving his command, the boy rushed off like a bird.

Perhaps the reason Lutia stood staring at his retreating figure for so long was because she wanted to give herself a little time before entering another reality.

But looking away would not change anything.

"....."

Lutia turned around and stared straight at Col, then Myuri.

“I’ll be at the Green Gourd,” said the girl armed with a sword and clad in a metal helm before she slipped into the flow of her retreating compatriots and vanished into the night. The whistle grew louder; if Col and Myuri stayed here, they would be considered participants of the street squabble and possibly thrown in jail. Col pictured himself writing a letter to Hyland, begging to be let out of jail, and he shivered.

Col urged Myuri to stand, and just as she had done to him, he pulled her into a dim alley.

As they took a few staggering steps forward, Col finally asked, “She was...a wolf, wasn’t she?”

Any typical avatar would not cause Myuri this much shock. They had met whales, sheep, birds, and mice. But thus far, they had never come across a wolf. In fact, since Col had caught glimpses of the avatars’ history, he could phrase that more accurately.

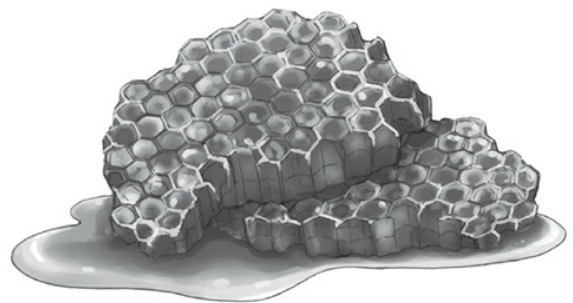
They never encountered any beings with fangs or claws out in the world. This was because they had fought in the ancient war that put an end to the era of spirits, and had vanished into the darkness of history.

Myuri’s face was blank and tense as she turned to look at Col.

“...She was.”

Her face was that of a young child who had seen herself in the mirror for the first time.

CHAPTER THREE



CHAPTER THREE

Col and Myuri briefly returned to the inn to find Le Roi waiting out front for their return, worried.

They gave him a brief recap of the incident, then informed him that they did, indeed, meet the Wise Wolf. They mentioned how she told them to meet her at the Green Gourd while skimming over the details, and Le Roi told them furriers from the north typically gathered at that inn.

Col wondered if they should head over there right away, but the state Myuri was in told him it was likely best to give her a night. Myuri was so particular about her wolf blood, even more so than Col had ever thought when they were in Nyohhira. She had so many things she wanted to ask, so many things she wanted to talk about after coming face-to-face with her kind, and he knew she needed time to get her thoughts in order.

And so the night passed.

Despite how Col assumed she would be lacking in appetite, Myuri scarfed down more bread and meat than she normally did at breakfast. She strode through Aquent with long steps—not a single shadow of last night's unrest apparent in any facet of the city—and stood boldly when they reached the Green Gourd.

"...No fighting," Col could not help but say, getting the sense she might challenge the other girl to a duel.

Myuri, however, ignored him and pushed open the shuttered door.

"The tavern's open after the noon bell," came the innkeeper's voice, thinking she was an overeager customer. His tone was strained from a hangover.

"Is that wolf girl here?"

The innkeeper could tell this was no ordinary guest—he looked at them dubiously.

“Are you—?”

“A friend,” Myuri cut him off.

The innkeeper glanced at Col in bewilderment. Col found himself offering him a polite nod, and he gave a little sigh.

“She’s on the third floor.”

Either he decided they were not the sort to cause trouble, or their obvious lack of refinement typical of northerners had earned them his trust.

There were stairs on the far side of the tavern. When they reached the second floor, they found poor-looking boys sitting in the corridor. They were all fervently studying with wax-coated wooden boards and spared neither of them so much as a glance. Though Myuri recoiled at the sight, she made her way up to the third floor, skipping steps on the way.

There were older people milling about the third floor—some had books open for copying, and some were doing scrivener work. The door at the far end of the hall was open, with people busily going in and out. And inside was the girl they saw yesterday.

“So you’ve come.”

She must have been aware of their arrival long before they saw her. She spoke quietly before either of them could greet her, and she stood from her chair.

“We’ll be on the fourth floor. Leave us in peace,” Lutia said to the boys, then brushed past Col and Myuri to head up the stairs. Seeing her in proper lighting showed she was relatively small. She was only about one half of a fist taller than Myuri; if they were to compare heights, the rambunctious silver wolf would surely insist that she was taller.

Lutia wore the same robe she had the day prior, but with a rustic sash keeping it shut and a dagger tucked into it, she looked more like a priestess who wandered the deep mountains of the north and less like a nun. If her clothes had perhaps been a bit more pedestrian, she might have looked like the only daughter of a village mayor who was expertly doing business despite her young age.

Trailing after her, they came to a room at the far end of the fourth-floor hallway.

“This is our vault,” she said as she stuck a key into the door’s large lock.

The door swung open, and they were greeted by a familiar, musty scent.

“Are these books used as textbooks?”

“Yeah. These are the seeds that keep us alive in this city.”

The books were *indeed* seeds—they were not used for one-time purchases, but were instead copied, drilled into the minds of students, then passed down to subsequent generations of new students.

As Lutia spoke, she opened the shuttered windows.

Once the room filled with fresh air, she turned to look at them.

“I was shocked yesterday.” Only one corner of her mouth tugged upward, either in bemusement or to hide her bashfulness. The next thing Col knew, Lutia had large, triangular wolf ears the same color as her hair and a fluffy tail out and visible. “I’ve been searching for my kin for a long time.”

Col glanced at Myuri. Despite how eager she had been earlier, to the point that Col had to warn her not to pick a fight, she was silent, and her head was drooped. Her ears and tail were still put away; perhaps now that she stood before one of her own, she did not know what to do with herself.

“I am sorry. She was rather eager earlier.”

Lutia smiled and turned to Col.

“I know how that feels. If I hadn’t had the boys around me yesterday, I probably would’ve fallen apart.”

Lutia had clearly been shocked in the moment; it was hard to know if she was only saying that to make Myuri feel better.

“Either way, it’s good to actually meet you. I’m Lutia.”

She held out her hand. Her movements were sharp and collected; it was her job to lead people.

Col grasped her hand to shake it in turn—it was a lot like Myuri’s own slender

hand—and wondered if he should use the fake name he chose before arriving in Aquent. There would doubtlessly be trouble if word got out that the Twilight Cardinal was here in the city.

But here he stood between two nonhumans who were otherwise very elusive characters.

And so, he decided to use his real name.

“I am Tote Col.”

Lutia only gave a polite smile—it seemed she did not realize he was the Twilight Cardinal. Though he was relieved, he was a bit astonished at how disappointed he felt.

Lutia naturally extended her hand to Myuri next.

“Come on, Myuri.”

Col patted her back—she was unusually meek today—and she finally found the resolve to move again.

“Myuri.” She gave her name.

There was an odd antagonism in her voice, and Col had a feeling it was not his imagination.

“...Why the Wise Wolf?”

Myuri’s mother was also known as the wisewolf.

Lutia smiled shyly.

“I didn’t think that would be your first question. What, didn’t you hear what the guys from the south said? They called themselves the southern eagles first and tried to rule over all the students in the city.”

“And is that why you called yourselves the northern wolves?”

The boys clad in pots and armed with rolling pins had said as much.

“I doubt pigeons and sheep can win against eagles, after all,” Lutia said with a shrug. “That, and I’d heard a rumor.”

“Hmm?” Myuri’s gaze flicked up to Lutia.

“That there is a great kin of ours far, far to the north also called the wisewolf.”

Myuri’s triangular ears popped out of her head at the unexpected statement.

“And she apparently has a great territory of her own within land ruled by humans, and she lives boldly within a village. I mean, I have a feeling that’s a story that’s been exaggerated at some point, but I happened to hear about her from a deer spirit passing through Aquent just after I arrived in the city. Even if it is just a rumor, hearing that one of our kin has found her footing in the human world was reassuring to me after all I’d been put through in the city. Ever since then, I’ve been calling myself the Wise Wolf after her. Kind of like how weak little human hunters call themselves wolves and bears when they’re out in the forest.”

“.....”

Myuri’s attitude had suggested to Col that she had been wondering if Lutia was a fake, deceptively using the title of wisewolf.

But Lutia was not trying to dress herself up as something greater than she was; all they found here was an innocent, bashful smile.

Myuri stared at Lutia for a moment before quietly breathing a sigh of relief. Had she really been using the title for nefarious purposes, then there was a chance Myuri would have insisted on fighting for her mother’s honor.

The most surprising thing, though, was that Myuri did not immediately reveal her origins. Because the person Lutia was talking about was very obviously Myuri’s mother.

Col had assumed she would be happy to brag, but things were complicated at her age, and perhaps she was not too keen on boasting about her parents.

Especially as the tired daughter of a couple who were still in their honeymoon phase.

“Then I hope you don’t mind me asking you a question in return,” Lutia began. “What is your relationship?”

Col could tell that this was not a serious question, but more of a warm-up from the way the faint wisps of a smile remained on her face.

But the reason he hesitated was because he felt like no matter what answer he gave, Myuri would be angry with him.

“He’s my brother.”

Myuri’s reply was blunt.

She did not boldly proclaim they were in a romantic relationship, of course, but he had a feeling there must have been a reason why she did not call herself a knight. Perhaps she felt that if she were to say it without thinking beforehand, that word would limit their relationship.

Though it was unlikely Lutia noticed that complicated swirl of motivations, it was probably quite obvious to her that they were not simply blood-related brother and sister. She nodded with worldly understanding, yet wore a pessimistic smile on her face.

It was as though she had seen relationships like theirs countless times in her life, in a world where nonhumans like themselves could not live freely.

“Then my next question I ask you as the Wise Wolf of Aquent. You’re staying in the Steel and Sheep, right? That’s an inn for booksellers—does that make you one of them? That round companion of yours has been going around to scribe workshops and the papermakers. And sniffing me out, too, for that matter. And all of you have been going to every bookshop you can stick your nose in.”

She knew Le Roi was with them *and* the extent of their activities—that meant she likely had students working for her throughout the city.

There was a cautious light in her eyes; she was just as determined to protect everyone in this inn as she was delighted to meet another one of her kin in this wide, wide world of humans.

Because those who dealt in the book market in this city always cast ominous shadows.

“Our traveling companion is indeed a bookseller, but we have not come here for the book trade. We are not booksellers—we have a different objective. We had been looking into you, Miss Lutia, as a part of that objective.”

Lutia gave a jerk of her chin, encouraging Col to continue. He glanced to

Myuri, just in case, because in order to elaborate, he needed to pull back the veil of their secret.

Myuri seemed as though she had no remaining concerns at this point, judging by how she had her fluffy tail out in the open, casually whipping it back and forth. So she instead spoke for her worrywart brother.

“You know about the fight between the kingdom and the Church, right?”

“The kingdom...? You mean the Winfiel Kingdom? I guess I do.”

Lutia had been caught off guard, the conversation heading in a direction she had not expected.

She turned her gaze to Col, bewildered, but he knew that hiding their objectives from her in order to earn her cooperation was not the optimal strategy here, and he made his decision.

“We have come to Aquent for that fight.”

Lutia regarded him curiously, before she suddenly murmured his name again.

In the moment immediately following, the hair on her ears and tail stood on end, just like Myuri’s sometimes did.

“The Twilight Cardinal?!”

A torrent of people came and went through academic cities, and spirited theologians and Church scholars were a dime a dozen.

News about the conflict between the kingdom and the Church likely reached this city at a rate that was rivaled only by Rausbourne.

“No way... Are you kidding me...?”

Speechless, Lutia ran a hand over her twitching, uneasy ears as if that was supposed to help her get a handle on them.

Col felt more awkward the harder she stared at him, but when he averted his gaze to Myuri, he found her looking somewhat proud.

“Hmm? No, wait, but—but hold on,” Lutia, still at a loss for words, put her hand to her forehead, collecting her thoughts.

“I’ve heard of a nation of sheep within the kingdom. Does that mean you’re

—?”

“Oh, are you talking about old man Huskins? No, we’re not affiliated.”

Huskins was the golden sheep who had helped establish the Kingdom of Winfiel and fought alongside the first king.

The old man used a monastery with wide-open fields within the vast kingdom as cover for him and his fellow sheep, creating a home for themselves.

“Wait, really? No, but, if you’re fighting on behalf of the kingdom, then...does that mean the kingdom is on the nonhuman side? Is *that* why they’re fighting the Church?!”

The Twilight Cardinal sided with the Kingdom of Winfiel. And if he was traveling around with a wolf, then normal logic would lead most people to the same conclusion.

“Uhhh, that is a little complicated,” Col said, wondering how to answer. That’s when Myuri cut in with a sigh and explained.

“My stupid brother, always reading books and going on and on about faith, said one day that his precious Church had become evil and that he was going on a journey to fix it. And since I knew it was going to be dangerous, I couldn’t let him go alone, so I tagged along. I’m hiding my ears and tail as we travel, though.”

There were a lot of little points Col wanted to argue, but he had enough composure to instead turn to Lutia’s shocked expression and nod reluctantly.

“I...I think I see now. But, right... I guess that’s one way for a pack to be.”

Lutia swallowed a large chunk of bread and suddenly flashed an awkward smile.

Col knew why by the way she huffed.

“Brother and sister, hmm?”

The reason he felt so uncomfortable under her gaze was because her wolf’s nose could tell exactly how Myuri clung to him every night when they slept.

The expression Lutia wore on her face was as though she had bitten into

perfectly roasted meat that melted in her mouth—affectionate, embarrassed, and astonished.

“I really wish he’d make me his wife, though,” Myuri said, however, with no shame whatsoever, and gave an unsatisfied shrug.

“You need patience when hunting.”

Myuri glanced at Lutia and grinned back. They were essentially the same height—it made them look like lifelong partners-in-crime.

“*Ahem!* Myuri aside, as a part of our fight against the Church, we came here to accomplish several objectives.” Col interrupted the wolves’ snickering, and Lutia turned to look at him. “First, we are hoping to distribute copies of the vernacular translation of the scripture, so the people can know exactly how far the Church has strayed from God’s teachings. And for that, we came here to secure paper. Another reason is to find professors in ecclesiastical law or theology who will join our cause. And another reason is—”

“—To find someone who knows stories about the new continent and the desert!”

Lutia looked between Myuri, who had absolutely no interest in the first two reasons, and Col, who was annoyed by Myuri’s easygoing attitude, and she gave a cautious nod of understanding.

“The vernacular scripture and professors for allies... That I understand. People have been talking about the translation project and the conflict with the Church plenty out here. But...” Lutia’s tail twitched side to side. “A new continent and the desert?”

“Yes, exactly! We’re going to find the new continent and make a country just for ourselves!”

Myuri’s ears and tail flicked in excitement. In her shock, Lutia only gave a lopsided smile.

Col had a feeling she might get the wrong idea hearing Myuri’s big dreams alone, so he added his own explanation.

“The new continent may prove to be the key in the conflict between the

kingdom and the Church.”

“It...will?”

“Both the kingdom and the Church fight for their own reasons. However, the problem has grown more complicated than we’ve anticipated, and it’s come to the point that further escalation in the conflict will prove to be a benefit to no one. And even though both sides understand this, they still need a proper justification to lower their fists.”

“And it’s a lot more fun if they both reached out for a treasure across the sea instead of bringing those fists down on each other’s heads, right?” Myuri chimed in. “And that’s why we’re going to join in and make a country for ourselves.”

She was speaking as though Ilenia’s plan was her own, but the fellow wolf spirit seemed to understand the situation with surprising ease.

“Aha... So you’re killing two birds with one stone. But I don’t see how the desert fits into all this. Don’t tell me this new continent’s at the end of the river of spices?”

An ancient erudite sage once said that spices such as pepper and nutmeg flowed in from a river that ran through the desert. They understood this was a ridiculous statement in the modern day, of course, now that long-distance trade flourished, so Lutia had likely brought it up as a metaphor.

But Myuri, who was earnest and loved adventure, took it as fact. She was shocked.

“There’s a river of spices?!”

Col decided to explain it to the girl later—she was acting like a puppy being given a bone—and neatly summarized all the information they had for Lutia.

“Tell of a new continent seems to originate in the time of the ancient empire. But considering the Church’s influence, we decided it would be more fruitful to search for any information that would’ve been from that time period within the desert nations.”

A new light appeared in Lutia’s eyes, as though the final stone had been laid

in the path before her.

“Which means...I see. I’m the perfect person for the job, then.” She giggled. “What do you know? I think we were supposed to meet.”

“Huh?”

It was not just Col who replied in shock—Myuri did, too.

“It wasn’t a whim that I decided to learn the language of the desert. I had my own reasons, and that’s... Well, I guess it’s a lot like Myuri’s ridiculous story.”

The moment she heard her name, Myuri made a face as though water had been splashed over it. Perhaps having her name spoken by a wolf that was not her blood relative was that fresh of an experience for her.

She flicked her ears and tail, as though shaking the water from them, and then said with a smile, “I want to know your story, too, Lutia!”

Myuri was determined to say her name in return. Lutia gave a small, calm smile in response, much like the kind an older sister might make. She sat down lightly on a worn desk, glanced out the window as a breeze danced in, then spoke.

“I lived for a very, very long time in the woods. I had no name. I was alone. I knew there was something different about me compared with the other animals around me, but my life was a happy one. One day, though, I found a lord who had gotten lost in the woods and was on the brink of death. When I saved him, he gave me a pretty name: Lutia. He brought me to his castle, and his wife took a liking to me, too. And that’s when my next life began, one where I’d have my hair brushed in front of the fire.”

It sounded like a fairy tale, but Col could picture her easily taking to life in a castle after life in the woods.

“Living with them suited my personality, but...it only made me realize how lonely I was as a wolf. I’d made irreplaceable human friends, but they weren’t wolves. Even though it had never bothered me before, it started to hurt when I never received a howl in response.”

Lutia smiled, self-deprecating. Her gaze was fixed on Myuri’s sash.

It was as though she was talking about her past to the wolf embroidered on it.

“And so the lord helped me search the entire world for other wolves, but we couldn’t find any. And that was when I learned about wolf crests from a very old book. I believed families who inherited those crests must have known about people like us or had wolf bloodlines themselves.”

Myuri looked at the wolf crest embroidered on her sash, then looked to Col’s sash.

She, too, had come to the conclusion that most families who used wolf crests were old lineages that could trace their origins back to the ancient empire.

If the wolves were to search for their kin in this day and age, the only real leads they had were these wolf crests. And to earnestly follow those paths would naturally lead them to the ancient empire.

“That means you beat us to it,” Myuri said after glancing at Col. She turned to Lutia again. “Did you come to this city to learn the language of the desert?”

“Er, well... I guess you could say that was more like an extracurricular.”

Lutia gave a small, troubled smile. Myuri mouthed the word *extracurricular*, then turned to Col.

“It’s something that someone does that is separate from their primary discipline, but not necessarily to the point that it would be considered another full subject of study.”

Myuri nodded. She then looked back to Lutia, her eyes brimming with curiosity and the obvious questions.

“I came to this city to study ecclesiastical law.”

Myuri’s eyes rounded.

“Wait, does that mean you’re...on the Church’s side?”

Lutia gave a troubled smile when she saw how bewildered Myuri was.

The moment Col found himself shocked at the thought they might be on opposing sides, another idea came to him.

“You did it to protect those you care about... Am I correct?”

Though it was not as intense as it was last night when she saw Myuri, the look of surprise on Lutia's face was still obvious.

"How...did you know?"

"I thought the very same when I was young. I knew I had to use the Church's power in order to save my village from their aggression—we'd been deemed heretics. And so I came to this city alone."

Lutia looked to Col in astonishment. And once his words sunk in, she gave a surprised smile.

"I see... Everything you had told me thus far didn't answer one question I had: Why you had been there last night."

"Of course. My younger self could have been the very one who broke and ran through the streets last night."

Lutia chuckled softly, planted her hands on her hips, and sighed deeply.

"Yeah. The lord and lady didn't have children. And the lady was a dilettante who chose to marry the weirdo who thought it was funny that a wolf avatar saved him from certain death in the forest and brought her home. Both of them adored me. Adored me to the point that my mind went numb."

Her lowered gaze and ears were due to memories of life in the castle, one she had long left behind.

"Time passed, and the lord died from illness. Since the lady had no children, she found herself troubled by the question of who would inherit their land. Nobles from far away who I'd never seen before were working with the local church, and they were licking their lips with their eyes on the fresh prize. Had their plan gone as they wanted, the lady would have been chased from her home full of memories and probably exiled to a remote nunnery with just a bit of pocket change until she died. I had a duty to repay the kindness her pack had showed me on my honor as a wolf, but..."

She turned to Col with a precocious look.

"*These* aren't much use in this day and age, are they?"

She pulled open her mouth with her finger to show off her sharpened

canines.

If Lutia looked like more of an adult than Myuri did, it was not solely because she was taller.

“If I could learn how the human world worked, then I could find weapons that would be of use in the human world. And ecclesiastical law is one of the greatest weapons.”

The shape of the world was generally set in stone; were anyone to cast water over any point, it tended to run and pool together.

There were several odd coincidences to Lutia’s situation; she was like a combination of Col and Myuri.

“But there are a lot of people who want to learn ecclesiastical law for that very reason, and those who have the things that everyone wants keeps all those benefits to themselves.”

With that, Col recalled why they came to see Lutia in the first place.



“So when I heard this Twilight Cardinal guy was translating the scripture into the vernacular, I felt so relieved. Those who know anything about the language of the Church keep that knowledge to themselves, are stingy about sharing it, preferring to profit off it. So you have no idea how good it felt to watch them get their knickers in a twist when word got out that soon anyone would be able to read the scripture.”

The carefree nature of Lutia’s smile only showed Col how tough things were in the city.

“You said you’re looking for paper to make copies for the scripture, right? That’s fantastic. I give you my unconditional support,” she said, her tone brighter than it had been, as though shaking off the gloom that came with the story of her past. “Which means you were searching for me because of all this nonsense about the textbooks. You want an ordinary book to be chosen as the textbook so the copies don’t use up all the city workshops’ paper, am I right?”

“Precisely.”

“That’s not a problem. We want a regular book to be chosen as well. It’d be more difficult to raise prices on a book that’s everywhere, and that means fewer poor kids who’ll be forced to copy those books so there are more to sell.”

The boy Lutia and her group saved the night prior was one of those victims. It was likely he had been locked in a room and forced to repay a “favor” by copying books until his arms could no longer move.

“And I think I’d be able to help the Twilight Cardinal find allies. We want to do something about how it costs so much to get an education now. Unfortunately, that means we don’t really have money of our own.”

“I understand all too well.”

Students needed textbooks of ever-fluctuating prices in order to request lessons from a professor. Those students paid for the professor’s basic needs, and were even required to send them gifts of appropriate value once their degrees were granted. The professors were not altruistic clergy—they formed guilds, sold their knowledge, and were, in a way, merchants in their own right.

“We want to do away with the textbook betting and the expensive gifts

needed to secure degrees. That would mean doing away with vested interests; there are eccentric students out there who agree with us. I bet those people would be sympathetic to your fight against the Church.”

Lutia looked to Col, then smiled at Myuri.

“And the language of the desert, right?”

Now that she knew why Lutia was here and why she was studying, Myuri seemed a little overawed.

Lutia continued in a collected tone that suited a girl who looked older than Myuri.

“Your brother’s objectives don’t sound bad at all, of course, and neither does your wild idea of making a country just for people like us. Which means our interests align.”

The look on her face was that of the Wise Wolf of Aquent.

“Our enemies are the rich students who love making a quick coin and the professors who collude with them.”

With a defiant smile, she turned her gaze back to Col.

“The professors favor the rich students because they want those tuition fees and the gifts that come with degree conferment. With their financially powerful backgrounds, the rich students can influence the professors with the textbook selection. With the information they get, the rich students milk profit from the textbook market, and then turn around and offer the professors even greater tuition and gifts. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties.”

The poorer students’ role in all this was simply being stripped of what little money they had.

“If we don’t dismantle this mutual relationship, then we’ll only be given failing marks, no matter how good our grades are. Those gifts, especially, are a problem. Ecclesiastical degrees demand greater gifts than any other subject. And the present professors’ guild is controlled by a particularly greedy bunch. If we don’t change things, then all the paper stores that you need will just end up as needlessly expensive learning material so those guys can make a quick coin.”

She was like a lord who had looked across the battle lines and was giving orders to her soldiers.

She had called the place in which they stood a vault. That was incorrect.

This was an armory.

The mismatched sheaves of paper crammed into the misaligned shelves were weapons that had been scraped together by those who could not rely on cash to survive an unfair battle.

“Will you help us, Twilight Cardinal?”

This lone wolf was trying to change the torrential tides in this city consumed by greed.

Lutia extended her hand, but it was no mere entreaty for help.

It was as though she was gesturing to the exit, telling him that if he decided not to, he was encouraged to leave. But it was Myuri who reached out and grasped her hand, as though she was taking it from him.

“We’ll help you, Lutia. Our interests align after all.”

She spoke as though reciting a line from a war epic, but her mind was mostly filled with tales of swords and knights anyway. And she was the main character.

“Heh-heh. Not bad for a temporary hunting pack,” Lutia said, and smiled brightly.

Myuri turned and looked at Col expectantly.

He did not handle theatrical situations like this very well, but he placed his hand over the wolves’ regardless.

Because it was as they said—their interests aligned.

“So whose rear are we sinking our teeth into?” Myuri asked, her tail swishing and eyes shining.

Their main goal was to break down the alliance of the rich students who called themselves the southern eagles, and the professors guild that monopolized knowledge to make themselves rich.

This was not something that could be easily accomplished, and they had seen

a part of that in the scuffle the night before.

“It’s not only those with benevolent hearts who reach out to help the kids, of course.” After they had shaken hands, Lutia continued to speak calmly, like a wolf. “All the southern eagles have loose purse strings. You’re staying at the Steel and Sheep, right? You’ve seen the racket they cause at night.”

Alcohol and violence suited hot-blooded boys very well.

“It’s the allowances sent to those guys by their rich families and the earnings they take from those poor kids that fund the parties, and the city council wants to do something about this pseudo–slave trade they’re conducting—they want to keep the peace in the city, after all. But their wanton spending habits are also supporting the city’s merchants, artisans, and the region’s farmers.”

That left the city council in a dilemma. The most they could do was step in whenever a fight broke out.

“In that regard, if we, the northern wolves, can save the kids, then the southern eagles lose a major source of income while we gain allies and can strengthen our presence in the city. Even the professors who won’t teach us when we give them our dirtied coins will eventually cave when they see just how many coins we have.”

Academic knowledge was traded like a product in this city, too.

At this point, Myuri spoke up.

“It’s obvious what we need to do, then.”

Col was only unsettled by the way her eyes shone and her tail whipped happily. But what she suggested was something they could, in fact, do right away, regardless of Col’s apprehensions.

As the excited Myuri and Lutia ironed out the details of what to do next, Col returned to their inn to tell Le Roi about their plan to work with Lutia, but he was not there. Col left a message with the innkeeper, asking Le Roi to come to the Green Gourd when he had a chance. When he returned to Lutia, the two swift hunter wolves had already gone, leaving him with a message.

He followed Myuri’s poorly drawn map and somehow managed to reach the

destination, where he found Myuri fully ready for battle.

“...I would *like* to believe this is going to be okay...,” Col murmured as he watched her hurriedly hide her hair beneath a hood, then cover her mouth and nose with a cloth. The silver wolf girl wore frayed, moth-eaten clothes that made her look like a traveler from a faraway land. The red eyes he could see in the gap between her hood and her face covering shone brightly. Lutia explained her disguise.

“In the desert, there is a family of assassins whose sole job for generations has been to take out those in power. It’s normal practice for them to inhale the smoke of a certain herb that helps them erase their fear before walking straight into the jaws of death. They’re named after that herb, and they usually dress this way.”

Lutia immediately saw how much Myuri liked adventures. When she said this in the manner of a professional storyteller, Myuri likely insisted that she wear the outfit, no matter what anyone else said.

And since they could not get their hands on an herb that could take away the fear of death, Lutia instead suggested that she hide her wolf ears and tail beneath the cloth. Because if she did that, then no group of students could ever defeat a girl with the blood of wolves in her veins, just like the ancient orders of assassin.

“The southern students keep the kids locked away somewhere and make them write and write and write. Those books they’re writing are their primary source of income. So we have to save the kids, but first we need to find out where they are.”

“That is right. You are only finding out where they are. Do not try to save them on your own. Do not resort to violence,” Col said forcefully. He knew that if he did not say anything, Myuri would do anything to save the trapped boys, even take down the older ones left on watch. But this time, her worrywart brother was not alone—Lutia was the same.

“The most important thing is finding out *where* the kids are, and that our companions use human means to get them out. That way, we chip away at the enemy’s forces while also building the pack’s teamwork. I’m sure that must be

frustrating for you, though,” Lutia said while checking to make sure none of Myuri’s distinctive hair stuck out from her hood.

Even if Col’s scolding fell on deaf ears, Myuri let Lutia’s thoughts sink in.

“The reason I don’t go around biting all of my enemies is not only because I want to keep my true nature hidden, but because I want to stand alongside the students as a human, not a wolf.”

Though Lutia had used the word *pack* several times, she was not commanding a pack of wolves in the city. The pack would not stay together if the one who stood at the front was a wolf.

“I’m *fine*. Both you and Lutia worry too much,” Myuri said, clearly losing momentum. Lutia smiled at her like an older sister.

“I trust you.”

Myuri huffed at her words, then turned to Col to scold him while that remained the theme.

“And *you* need to do your job, too,” she said. “Don’t get lost in your thoughts the moment you see a book.”

Myuri stuck the dagger Lutia gave her into her sash, punctuating her sentiment and refusing to entertain any other arguments.

“I know.”

Myuri raised her shoulders, skeptical, and Lutia laughed again.

“Once the noon bell rings, students at lectures will come back to their bases for lunch. Those sleeping off their hangovers will wake up around then. It’s the perfect time for reconnaissance.”

“Okay. But shouldn’t I ask the mice I know? They’d get this job done super quickly.”

The mice she knew were Vadan and his crew, whom they had met during the ghost ship incident. They were mouse avatars who constantly hitched free rides on ships, and they could handle this sort of work with ease.

“This is an academic city. You can bet there are countless mousetraps

everywhere to keep pests away from the books.”

And unlike ships, the city was filled with the natural predators of mice—cats and stray dogs.

In the end, perhaps the safest offense and defense was to have wolves take human form and sneak in.

“But if this job is too difficult for you, Myuri, we’ll consider it.”

Lutia knew what made people tick. Myuri took offense to the suggestion; she would hold on to her pride and see this through without Vadan’s help.

“People know me. I can only work at night, so I haven’t really been able to get results. But having someone on my side that can sneak in during broad daylight will bring me more than good enough results.”

The thought of working at night sent a shiver up and down Myuri’s spine.

She shuddered, and beneath the thick cloak wrapped around her waist—a very northern thing to do—she wagged her tail.

Perhaps it would be best to keep her on a leash so that she would not sneak out at night.

“I’m counting on you,” Lutia said, and Myuri nodded.

“May God watch over you. But please do not overdo it.”

Myuri turned a cold eye to Col’s prayer and scolding. And he watched as she dashed off, entranced with her mission.

Col idly thought about how the reason he had been neglecting to send reports on this journey to his second home of the Nyohhira bathhouse was because there was too much he found impossible to write down.

“I guess it’s time we also get to work.”

The two of them saw Myuri off to the districts controlled by the southern eagles from a miserable, neglected chapel at the end of an alleyway. Its benefices had long since run dry; it was cared for by a blind, local old man, and Lutia used this as a secret base. Every night, she let her wolf tail loose, searching for the whereabouts of poor students.

She occasionally shared weak ale and a chat with the old man, but he was blind—she did not have to worry about him seeing her ears and tail. This was a valuable place for her to catch her breath as a wolf.

From what Col had heard, during the day she complemented her studies with work as the Wise Wolf, and at night she helped her fellow wolves who were assaulted by the southern eagles in the drinking districts and worked on resolving conflicts with other gangs. He had no idea when she slept.

That meant she had very limited time to find where the captured kids were, and even Lutia and her wolf nose could only carry out her strategy at a snail's pace. That was why it was invaluable having a silver wolf on her side who could dedicate all her efforts to searching for the kids and *was not* being watched by the southern eagles.

Myuri was enthusiastic about finding the captured boys; Lutia found her enthusiasm reliable, yet did not seem particularly pleased when she smiled.

There was a reason for that, of course.

“There are generous nobles who give us donations, but we'd go bankrupt if we suddenly took on more people than we can care for.”

Lutia and her boys had set up camp at the Green Gourd, but they reportedly did not keep everyone there. There were a considerable number of boys who slept on the streets, saying it was much better than the villages from which they came, where starvation was rampant. But those who lived this way were much more likely to fall prey to the southern eagles.

Even if Myuri somehow managed to find all the captured kids, the ones Lutia could not provide for would simply end up back in the hands of those awful older boys before long.

So Col suggested selling the books slumbering in her armory at a high price, and to enlist Le Roi's help as well. But the weapons being kept in the Green Gourd were actively being used for studying, and the number that could be sold without too much trouble were few in number.

Lutia, who would agree only if they had the knowledgeable bookseller's help, then pointed out one more secret to this secret base.

“Hold that board. Yes, now lift,” she said to him, and they pried open the floorboard.

In this small, run-down chapel, forgotten by even the humans of this city, an old man who had lost his sight due to excess reading had hidden away all the books he had transcribed over his lifetime.

But these were not books that were battle-ready weapons like those in the armory at the Green Gourd—they were all old, obscure books, with a value unknown to most students. But one of them could prove to be a rare gem; so when the blind old man heard Lutia’s story, he offered them up, hoping they might be of use to the students.

“But who is this bookseller Le Roi?”

They peeled back the wooden board, and as Col flinched in the whirl of dust and smell of mold, Lutia asked her question and pulled out the bundles of paper from beneath the floor; these could scarcely be called books.

“When we first met, he had been dealing in books like technical texts detailing how to develop mines—the sort the Church might ban. And when we reunited over a decade later, he asked me if the Twilight Cardinal would pen a book criticizing the Church. I hope that tells you what sort of person he is.”

Lutia paused and gave a smile that made it seem she was about to sneeze.

“He loves dangerous books.”

More than his own life, on occasion.

“I see. Someone like him might be able to find a treasure among all this stuff.”

“The Church’s list of banned books changes daily, and the ignorant public’s interest is fickle.”

And so there was a chance there was a ripe treasure among all these copied books that had been shut away.

“...His knowledge and connections with buyers could earn him so much money.”

Had Lutia and her gang asked the booksellers of Aquent to take on the same job, they would take advantage of their weakness without a second thought,

because they knew the troubles that plagued the students from the north. But if they were to tell Le Roi, it was very likely he would fairly offer his help.

And Lutia, who had become far too accustomed to living in Aquent, was obviously wary of a bookseller who might not be wholly avaricious.

“I have a feeling that what he’s most interested in is reading these books. We had come across an old ruin for unrelated reasons not long ago. There, he fell head-first into a hole that led to a canal, because he thought it might then lead to an underground storage room.”

“...I guess not everyone’s normal.”

“Some people live their lives hiding their wolf ears and tail, don’t they?”

Lutia lifted her brows and drew a smile taut across her face.

“I guess he’s a lot like them, whose eyes were shining with curiosity when I found them, despite being on the verge of starvation. That they didn’t fear my fangs or claws made them look like idiots.”

That was the noble couple who had given Lutia her name. They must have been kind, big-hearted people, if a bit childish.

“Well, let’s hope we find something just as interesting as a forest spirit in here.”

Lutia folded her arms before the stack of books they pulled from beneath the floorboards.

Then together, they wrote down any titles or author names they could find, noted the contents of ones they could not find names for, and wrote down anything that might seem like a lead.

The old man had been slowly accumulating these copies over a lifetime. He had come to Aquent as a child, and had remained here in the academic city ever since. One could call this collection a compilation of one student’s lifelong learning, but most had not withstood the test of time.

New professors arrived in this city every day and many expressed their views as facts. In the margins, beside the crammed text on the poor-quality paper, were notes made by the old man when he was young.

They noted what was a new theory, what contradicted what footnote—at this point, ten, twenty years later, even longer than that, all of these notes were considered disproved facts. The people the author was firmly insisting would one day be candidates for cardinal were names Col had never heard of.

As they did this, he understood that all the books that sat on the shelves of the city council's library were ones that had been carefully selected. And because of this selection process, most books, written by very smart people who shed blood, sweat, and tears to put them together, would fall into oblivion and fade to dust without ceremony.

It was a rare thing for a book to survive into the future.

This was the moment Col suddenly recalled what Lutia said, about the sadness she felt upon hearing no response to her howls. The reason Col thought of Myuri enthusiastically rushing off every time he closed an unbound sheaf of paper was because he was glad she was not here.

Perhaps he was being overprotective, but he thought it would still be too painful for her to see adventure stories that never came to fruition.

It would only be when she was old enough to drink ale that she would understand the appeal of such tales.

“Anything stand out?”

After going through them, Lutia brought back a handkerchief she had wetted at the well near the chapel.

“Not to my knowledge, no...”

“You’re so nice.”

After wiping off the mold and dust stuck to his face, Col wet his fingers, dried from handling paper. Lutia stood nearby, gazing at the mountain of texts that represented an entire lifetime.

“The people who come here are wanderers.”

Even those called professors, who shared their knowledge, were seen as drifters in society.

Very few received benefices in churches and abbeys; nothing was better for

them to make a living than being an adviser to the nobles and great merchants who paid for their knowledge. Not many could speak of what happened to these people after their long days spent in contemplation. Only a handful of scholars were stellar enough to leave behind biographies or other works.

“They come to this city one day, and howl to let everyone know they’ve arrived. And sometimes, surprisingly, their howls draw people in. But that can’t last for very long.” Lutia closed her eyes, brushing her finger over the faded paper. “What I really learned when I first came to this city, was that the wolves aren’t the only lonely ones here.”

“.....”

Spirits with fangs and claws were mostly said to have died out in the battle against the Moon-Hunting Bear. Col considered telling her about the wisewolf in Nyohhira, but he decided that would have to be Myuri’s job.

And perhaps, he thought, the reason Lutia was commanding this group of students from the north was not solely because she was being spurred on by indignation.

It was also because she had learned what loneliness was during her life in that castle.

“But putting an end to it is not easy, either.”

“...I once heard from a poet that finishing a story is much more difficult than starting one.”

Lutia’s shoulders shook as she laughed. And that reminded Col of how Myuri, when she was young, would retrieve toys from her storage, then get upset when they did not fit back in place when she tried to put them away.

“Memories only grow in proportion when we look back on them.”

Lutia turned to Col, the corner of her eyes crinkling, just as there was a knock on the cathedral door and the bookseller poked in his head.

As the bookseller looked over the list Col and Lutia had put together, his expression grew sullen.

“Hmm...”

“None seem to be viable products, I suppose?”

Col had figured as much, but he had the faint expectation that one of them could have been a rare gem that he was not aware of.

But that small hope was quickly snuffed out by reality.

“The one who collected all these copies must have been a very diligent person.” What Le Roi said was not necessarily a compliment. “There are some here that *could* be sold, but when taking into consideration the cost of copying and transportation, I believe the sale would just break even. None of these are the sort the eccentrics would salivate over and spend all their savings on. But I do see some that are not in circulation, yet could make for good textbooks. It would not be impossible to turn them into treasure maps.”

If they could turn the original texts Lutia and her gang were hoarding into textbooks, then the copied manuscripts could fetch them a pretty penny.

“But that would be...”

“Yes, the same as the dirty textbook trade you are hoping to do away with in this city.”

Bards often wryly sang that the main difficulty of living a virtuous life was that lofty ideals often became an ever-tightening noose.

“Then...we don’t have to sell these books, right?” Lutia said, her tone not disappointed, but relieved.

While that could be seen as consideration to the bookseller who came all this way to help them, it was clear that she did not want to believe that a student’s lifelong learning should be measured in coin.

“I believe we should allow these books to remain in their slumber,” Le Roi agreed, and Lutia laughed. But her laugh was a dry one, meant to encourage herself.

“But that leaves the problem of our keep.”

While they were having this conversation, the agile Myuri was dashing between alleyways, writing down where the young students were being held on her map.

“How do you normally earn money, besides donations?” Le Roi asked.

Lutia replied tiredly, “In the end, most of it comes from manuscript work. It’d be nice if we got more scrivener work for letters and contracts and the like, though. Some are teaching the children of poor merchants who are hiding in the professors’ guild how to read and write, but the rest of the students are earning their keep through regular day jobs. Apprenticeships at the bakers, persisting through awful smells at the leather workshops as they help with tanning, and the like.”

The reason they wore what they did when they faced off against the southern eagles was because they had rushed over from their beds at the workshops.

“If we can keep the kids safe, then the townsfolk will hire them, but that would leave us strapped for cash in the end. A lot of these kids really want to learn...”

“Hmm. That’s a pity. Earnest students who can read and write would be in great demand in any other city.”

But one needed to go to a city where professors gathered in order to get an education, and it was precisely because this *was* a city where so many people were able to read and write, so it was difficult to turn their specialties into money. There was no point in memorizing a logic textbook while working at a bakery.

And that was why, even if they were to save all the kids at once with Myuri’s help, a very realistic problem stood in their way: they still did not have the means to feed them.

Solving one problem only created another—this was beyond their control.

But as that thought crossed his mind, he suddenly recalled their nickname: the northern wolves.

And that inspired him—had he not solved a similar problem in the past?

“We may be able to solve the question of money.”

Both Lutia and Le Roi turned to look at him. He had once come under the tutelage of a former traveling merchant, and the basis of their trade was to

align the goods and demand of those who had traveled from far away.

“Not every student here wants to be a high-ranking member of the clergy or a theologian, correct?”

Not long after Lutia and Le Roi looked to each other, the noon bell rang in the distance.

Myuri had certainly been excited. Of that, there was no doubt. It was after noon before she finally returned, her body covered in soot, with cobwebs still clinging to her here and there.

She had likely squeezed her way through tiny gaps in the walls that even the stray cats would refuse to crawl through, and snuck into dirty attics that even owls would avoid. The map she handed to Lutia was crammed full of charcoal writing, and Lutia, too, almost felt awkward praising her.

“But the kids weren’t being treated as badly as I thought they were, so I’m a little relieved, I think.”

They received hot water when they returned to the inn, and Col wiped Myuri’s face with a damp cloth. He then cleaned her hands, feet, and—since she pestered him—he combed her hair, and finally the tension of her infiltration mission drained away.

She had been tense moments earlier. But when she spoke, she did so with a sigh.

Hearing this about the kids was good news; the boys controlling them were likely also wary that treating them too harshly would cause them to run straight to Lutia and her gang.

“I think I was treated a lot worse when you were teaching me how to write.”

Col had had his hands full with Myuri, considering she would always slip away when she had the chance. He had literally had to tie her to the chair.

“But it is *because* of all that, that you can now write all the stories you like,” he scolded her, and she thwacked his hands as they gathered her hair with her wolf ears.

“You’re not kind enough, Brother.”

“.....”

Then why have I washed your hands, feet, combed and braided your hair? It was tempting to ask this, but when he saw how delightfully her tail swished, he knew she simply wanted to play. She had concluded her first adventure in a long while, and she was in high spirits.

He sighed—she was the rambunctious girl she always was—then took the ribbon draped on her shoulder, and tied her hair. She had apparently gotten this from Hyland. It was red to show one’s noble status, and it reflected boldly on her silver hair.

“There, done.”

“Hee-hee.”

Myuri cheerfully ran a hand over her braid, like a pup who had noticed their own tail for the first time, and stretched.

“And you sent a letter to Mister Hilde, right?”

When Myuri handed the map detailing the locations of all the kids to Lutia, she insisted they save them immediately. But Lutia then explained to her the problem of feeding them all.

Though Myuri typically wanted to do things right away, she accepted reality fairly easily, because she knew how difficult it was to manage Sharon’s orphanage. The trapped children easily numbered around thirty, and it would cost the same amount as building another small orphanage in order to feed, house, and clothe them all.

Lutia was the one fighting in the city; though she lamented just how powerless she was, Col and Myuri had connections and experiences they had gathered over the course of their journeys, and they could support her.

“The problem of feeding, clothing, and housing the orphans is a lot like how we solved Miss Sharon’s problem. Honest boys who left their poor villages and came to Aquent on their own to learn how to read and write should be spoiled for choice when it comes to employment.”



The first thing Col thought of when he heard the phrase “the northern wolves” was Eve and the Debau Company.

When it was agreed the monastery would be built as an annex to Sharon’s orphanage, they had struck a bargain. Since they would be borrowing money from Eve, Eve would get priority when it came to hiring out the exceptional children from the orphanage who could read and write.

Col thought that if Eve’s company was big enough to support Sharon’s orphanage, then the even bigger Debau Company could give money to support even more boys.

“Mister Hilde and the Debau Company originally worked with Heir Hyland in order to widen their market. They must always be in need of talented workers.”

“You’ve gotta station new soldiers at a new fort, after all.”

In her mind, Myuri was picturing a war of encampment or something of the sort, and companies establishing branches in new regions in order to take over was, indeed, very similar.

“Was Lutia shocked?”

Col wondered if she was referring to the skill he had that brought them straight to a solution for a problem that could not be solved within the bounds of the city. Regardless, Myuri must have felt some sort of rivalry with Lutia, and she asked because she wanted to know for certain just how well she had done in this battle.

“She was impressed.”

In truth, Lutia had been so bewildered by the idea that Myuri would certainly jump for joy if she knew, but Col said nothing to preserve Lutia’s honor.

And just because Lutia herself had not been able to find a solution, that did not mean Lutia was lacking. Col and Myuri had simply traveled a different path.

“Hmm. Then the problem should be solved for the minute, but...”

Satisfied they had been able to show Lutia just how amazing they were, Myuri sat on the bed to relax.

But when she lifted her legs to fold them in front of her, she crossed her arms and pouted.

“We didn’t get Chicken’s friends to bring the letter to Mister Hilde, did we? It’s gonna take so long to get there.”

Aquent was very far from the northern city in which the Debau Company made their home. Following the human systems that made up society, it would be a very long while before the letter reached Hilde and they received a response.

“We have Mister Le Roi’s eyes.”

“Mm-hmm... I don’t think he would be very shocked if he learned what Mother and I really were.”

Col had the same impression; he was more likely to pen an account with great fascination instead.

“Never mind us. That might expose Miss Lutia’s true nature, and it might get Miss Sharon involved in all of this as well.”

In the face of all of society’s red tape, Myuri shrugged her slender shoulders.

“Okay, then next we need to find friends for you.”

Originally, Col was going to search for scholars in the city, but Lutia and her gang were looking for scholars who would be willing to grant them degrees gratis. And those were likely people who made it a principle to live in honest poverty, so their ideals probably ran close to his and Hyland’s.

“Lutia said she would put us in contact with any scholars who come to mind.”

“People who don’t want money, right? I’m sure they’ll help us. There’s a surprising number of weirdos who you’d get along with, Brother,” Myuri said, astonished. The reason her skin had such a lustrous glow was because she was bursting at the seams with worldly desires.

“But Lutia said those people had some kind of complicated problem of their own, right?”

She stretched over the bed like a cat, perhaps as a reaction to having crawled through tight spaces.

“No matter the sort of professor, calling them to the city still costs money. We would need to pay for their food, their housing, and the minimum tuition fees. And we would have to come up with the joining fee for the professors’ guild when they do join.”

“.....”

It was plainly written all over Myuri’s face that she thought the whole thing was a bother.

“So even if they do sympathize with Lutia’s plight and ideas, it would not be easy to bring someone over who has already established roots in another city.”

Not only that, but if they were to come to dismantle Aquent’s professors’ vested interests, then they would have to be more than ready to make the change. Lutia and her gang had apparently been in talks with a few candidates, but Col could understand exactly why these talks were going so slowly and nothing was happening.

“If we find people who are full of that same sense of justice that you have, then we just need to tell them they’ll be raking the evil Church over the coals with the great Twilight Cardinal and the Silver Knight.”

She had deliberately added *great* to his title, and it would be foolish for him to ask who the “Silver Knight” was referring to.

As much as he wanted to tell her there was no one as reckless in the world as she was, he figured it would be a little too difficult for her to understand that.

“Oh, why don’t *you* become a professor, Brother?”

“I’m sorry?”

He gave her a cold look, unsure of what sort of nonsense she was going on about this time, but it rolled off her back.

“Oh yeah, that’d be a great idea! That way you could also give Lutia a... degree...thing? And then she could use that to solve her house problem, and then she could come with us to the desert!”

The adventure-loving Myuri turned her gaze to the horizon from which the sun rose, dreaming of the far-off desert lands.

“Oh, but then that would make you Lutia’s teacher...” Myuri’s lips and wolf ears abruptly turned downward. “I don’t think I like that.”

Col was not sure what Myuri thought a student-teacher relationship entailed, but regardless, it seemed she was uneasy thinking about another wolf intruding on her territory.

“I’m not sure how I’d feel if Canaan was learning from you, either.”

Canaan had nothing but praise for the Twilight Cardinal, and Myuri did not seem to like that very much. She was just like a child who wanted to stake her claim on a toy the moment someone else showed interest in it, even if she did not normally care very much for it.

“Oh yeah, did you send a letter to Canaan? He’s looking into that battle you’re going to have with the Church, right?”

“Not battle. Ecumenical council.”

The eye roll was always palpable in Myuri’s tone when she said *Church*, so perhaps picturing herself swinging her sword about at the council was her way of making herself feel better for not being able to take part in the jousting tournament.

“I left Archivist Canaan a letter detailing the reasons why we will be going to Canaan before we left the Kingdom of Winfiel. I believe he should have the letter by now, and he should be putting together a reply.”

Considering how important the ecumenical council was, that it took place only once every century, Canaan likely had his hands full looking into it.

Col prayed that God would watch over Canaan as he worked, and Myuri gave him a flat look. She ran her fingers through her tail, pulling out a clump of fur, and picked at it.

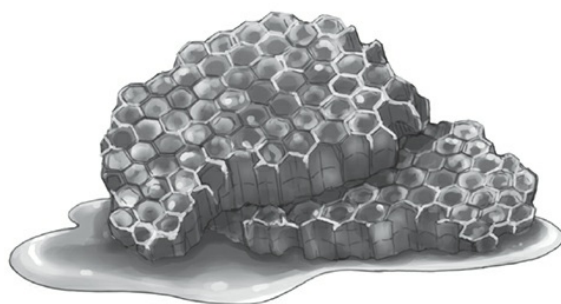
“A reply, hmm?”

Col looked to Myuri, unsure of what she meant by that, but the wolf was completely relaxed, having bathed after a bout of work, and she was already under the covers.

She began snoring softly before long. And with a sigh, Col started picking up

the clothes she had strewn about the room.

CHAPTER FOUR



CHAPTER FOUR

Myuri had found a good number of the captured boys, and Col was confident he could figure out how to feed them. And professors, once slow to act, might even come to the city if they knew they had a chance to fight the Church alongside the Twilight Cardinal.

And Myuri had been excited, thinking that would mean Lutia's fight would grow rapidly in scope instead of remaining a stalemate. That, however, was ten days ago.

"How long are we gonna be doing this?!"

In the run-down chapel cared for by the blind old man, Myuri's voice echoed loudly.

It was forceful enough that it almost brought down a cloud of dust on all those present, but at least Lutia remained calm.

"We still haven't gotten a response from the Debau Company. If we can't give the kids satisfactory food and shelter after we've saved them, they'll just end up back in the hands of those other boys, and that would damage our reputation. And saving only one or two at a time would only heighten the southern eagles' vigilance. We must save them all at once, otherwise there's no point."

"But we've waited *sooo* long already! We've found them, but they might've moved them by now! Or maybe they've captured new kids!"

Ten days was a very long time for Myuri to wait, considering how impatient she was.

What's more, Aquent was considered a part of the south; every day, they could feel on their skin the impending summer season. Myuri was the sort of girl who jumped for joy when it snowed; the advent of another exciting season on the horizon would only make it harder for her to sit still.

"Then we just need you to find them again. I know you can do it, Myuri. Isn't

that right?”

Lutia was adept at calming others. It was a crucial skill for the leader of a band of impetuous boys.

She spoke slowly and carefully, but sound arguments were not enough to calm the rambunctious girl’s passion.

“You’re so stupid, Lutia! Your tail is full of mites!”

“Y— Wh—”

“Myuri!”

Col shouted at her, but Myuri was already out of the old chapel and gone.

Lutia was dumbfounded by Myuri’s outburst, but when she snapped to, she quickly started combing through the fur on her tail—that insult must have stung especially bad for those with fur.

“I will scold her later...,” Col said.

Lutia let go of her tail, flustered. “No, we’re the ones at fault,” she said. She checked her tail one more time, then hid it. “If you hadn’t shown up, I probably wouldn’t have even considered the possibility of getting so much help. That, and you have a nonhuman by your side. That must be frustrating in the fight against the Church, right?”

If anyone was frustrated here, it was Myuri.

And as the one who was aiming to be a member of the clergy, he had a sure response.

“All we are really doing is reading the scripture—that, I am used to.”

God was only words on a page—not once had he ever saved someone.

Though it could easily be construed as an expression of spite or hostility, this realization had likely shaken the faith of everyone who had ever read the scripture.

Lutia’s eyes went wide, and her shoulders shook with laughter.

“I’m pretty sure I’m just going to end up talking about how I disagree with your god if we keep talking about this, so let’s not say anymore,” the Wise Wolf

proposed, and Col nodded with a smile.

“But there’s an important reason why I called you here today. Remember when I sent out a letter to one of the scholars that work with us by fast horse? We got a response.”

Excitement stirred in Col’s heart, but he could surmise what the letter said by the expression on Lutia’s face.

“It was too dangerous to mention you by name, but I worded it in a way that asked if they would help fight the Church’s injustices.”

He unfolded the letter to reveal writing that was rushed and restless, as though they’d been trying to avoid the prying eyes of others.

“While they were willing to fight the greedy people who wielded their knowledge to exploit good but poor students, they have no intention of challenging the Church.”

In short, the letter was filled with longwinded excuses.

“Those who’ve worked hard to master the liberal arts and then chosen to pursue the route of ecclesiastical law are likely either aiming to become high-ranking clergy, or to be a priest in a noble’s private chapel. Even if they perform at a level where they could proudly join the professors’ guild, fighting the Church would only tarnish their reputation.”

Lutia leaned back in the pew, tired. Col folded the letter and gave a little sigh.

“The whole reason the Church’s obvious injustices have persisted for so long is because all those little sorts of situations have grown unchecked over time.”

“And you’re desensitized to that frustration?”

“Unfortunately,” Col replied. His eyes fell to the letter again because he had continued his journey despite those frustrations and sank his teeth into whatever hardships they encountered, resolving them along the way.

“But I have an idea,” he said.

“You do?”

“I can tell this scholar is quite young.”

Lutia shot up straight in her surprise. “How did you know?”

“Their word choice bears a resemblance to the notes I see in modern annotated versions of the scripture. I have a feeling this person might be trying to loudly discover the truths of the world so their name will be known. In that case, there isn’t much we can do if they choose to prioritize their benefices.” Col paused, looking at the writing on the paper, which he believed even Myuri would be able to understand. “And that is why I think we should speak to an older individual. The sort who has spent more time gazing up at the heavens than paying attention to the vulgar world. An older scholar who already has a gray beard and speaks with simple language, as opposed to a hot-blooded younger scholar, would be much more easily accepted into the city’s professors’ guild.”

Perhaps they should start not by attempting to overturn the academic wrongs that ran rampant in Aquent all at once, but by sending in a scholar who could act as a wedge. Then slowly, they could take that small gap and widen it.

“I see... I was thinking about someone who would eagerly challenge these vested interests for us, so I was looking for someone with a backbone. But I didn’t realize it might be easier to send in someone who’s meeker,” Lutia said and smiled faintly. “You’re a lot more discreet than I’d expect a brother of Myuri’s to be, but you’re right. I guess I only ever equate fights with swords.”

“If anything, I wonder why my little sister turned out the way she did.”

Lutia barked loudly with laughter.

Glad he could help, Col reached to return the letter to Lutia, but he paused.

“What is it?” Lutia looked at him curiously, paused to receive the letter.

“Do you think you could send a reply to this letter?”

Lutia, in her blank stare, looked surprisingly young.

“One of the reasons I was sent to Aquent was so I could debate one of the world’s great scholars, so that I may test my skill.”

In that regard, the high-spirited author of this letter would be a most satisfactory debate partner.

And in the nonsense knight tales Myuri was writing, there were plenty of examples in which a fight turned out to be the seed of friendship.

“I...don’t mind, no.”

Lutia seemed to be at quite a loss, but that was only natural. Regardless, Col gave his thanks for her agreement, and put the letter back in his pocket.

And then the noon church bell rang. Lutia looked to the ceiling, then to Col.

“I’ve got something I need to do, so you’ll have to excuse me. I’m going to look into a different route for finding you allies.”

“I will notify you the moment I get a response from the Debau Company.”

Lutia nodded, told Col to apologize to Myuri on her behalf, then left the ruined chapel. Just as Col was thinking about leaving, too, Le Roi entered.

“Goodness, pardon my tardiness.”

Col had notified Le Roi of the day’s get-together, but he had apparently had a meeting with one of the booksellers in town, so had been unable to come.

“Oh? And where is your sister?”

“She was frustrated that we could not solve any of the problems immediately, so she ran out.”

Le Roi placed his hands on his large belly, as though making sure it would not fall off, and laughed.

“The Wise Wolf has been fighting for a long time, you know. Nothing is solved overnight.”

The knight tales Myuri was obsessed with writing were all stories where the most difficult problems were solved swiftly and decisively—in an absurd manner, even—over the course of the adventure. Perhaps that was turning out to be a bad influence on her.

“That said,” Le Roi continued, “the people of the city are growing rather impatient as well.”

He had likely been making enthusiastic rounds about the city since the early morning. With a grunt, he sat in one of the pews.

“All the companies and workshops involved in the bookmaking process are at the ends of their ropes. The city has not chosen a book to be *the* ecclesiastic law textbook yet, you see. They are starting to look rather unfavorably upon the northern wolves’ resistance.”

Lutia and her gang were not the only ones who wanted to do something about the tyrannical behavior of the southern eagles. There were some in the city council who wanted to curb their violence for the sake of public safety as well as powerful nobles who were expecting great things in terms of academic development, and Lutia had accurately determined that those sorts of people supported her cause. But now that spring was growing late and summer was on the horizon, the fact that a textbook had yet to be chosen was certainly beginning to cause discord throughout the city.

“Even the merchants and artisans fed up with the betting cannot make any money if a textbook is never chosen, you see.”

If they were to fold under the pressure and existing faculty gradually resumed their lectures, another textbook would yet again be arbitrarily chosen, and then they would demand expensive gifts in exchange for degrees. If that were to happen, then Lutia and the other poor students would once again be forced back into submission.

Col wanted to help Lutia, and not simply because she was a wolf like Myuri. It was because justice was clearly on Lutia’s side.

After a brief silence settled over the chapel, Le Roi spoke up again.

“We mustn’t lose sight of our goal, Master Col.”

This was not the first time the graying bookseller had paid him a bitter reminder. He was starting to say this more often, when Myuri was not around, as though reminding him of his responsibilities as the elder of the two.

The problem Lutia and her students had was indeed something that needed to be fixed, but if they got too mixed up in it, they would lose sight of their bigger objectives. They were only here to secure paper for the printing of the scripture, which would help them right the Church’s wrongs and find allies who would fight alongside them at the possible ecumenical council.

It might even be faster to give up on Lutia and find someone else in a different academic city in their search for someone who knew anything about the ancient empire and the deserts where its stories lived on and might lead to the new continent.

And so what excuses they had to remain in this city without immediately packing up were that they were waiting for a response from the Debau Company, and they were waiting for a response from Canaan, who would be meeting them here.

“...What about the booksellers? Have they gotten any inkling that the council might be happening?”

Col did not acknowledge Le Roi’s reminder directly; he had simply brought that up if only to keep the conversation going.

“They are typically the first to know about things, but it seems things have not reached a point for them to learn of it yet. But all of them feel as though there is an overabundance of books written in the script of the Church in their stores. If the scripture were to be translated into the vernacular, then there would be little reason to learn the script of the Church, and that would be the greatest textbook to teach the script for those who want to learn. That news is clearly causing waves in the monopoly over the knowledge of the script.”

In short, proliferating the vernacular scripture throughout this region would, in one fell swoop, bring down those who hoarded all knowledge of the script of the Church to wield the Church’s authority to their liking while also dealing a heavy blow to the Church’s authoritarian attitude.

Le Roi, who was collecting information from Aquent’s booksellers every day, was a lot more sensitive to this atmosphere than Col was. And that was why he believed that they needed to spread the vernacular scripture as soon as possible, and secure paper for that very purpose.

Col was but a traveler who just happened to stop in this city to begin with, and he could not stay here and help Lutia forever. If he had to set off for his next journey soon, that would mean abandoning her.

Though Le Roi was furious about the kids’ plight, his sharpened merchant’s sensibilities saw just how deep, how cumbersome, this problem was. From the

point of view of the one who was calculating their journey with regard to the way society flowed around the Church, these past few days clearly leaned in favor of his mercantile sense of righteousness, though he would never say such out loud.

Of course, Col would not say he was wrong, but he could do nothing but sigh heavily.

“I volunteered to support your journey, Master Col, and I will adhere to whatever decision you make... But time plays no favorites. And not even God can bring back lost time.”

“...I know.”

Even when Col was a child and had traveled with Le Roi, he vaguely recalled being given similar advice along the way.

Le Roi must have been thinking the same; he suddenly gave a kind smile, then spoke brightly to change the mood.

“Now, I hate to be in and out, but a caravan of traders will be arriving soon and I am planning to meet them.”

Perhaps the reason he decided to go out of his way to drop by the old chapel was to warn Col not to get too involved with Lutia.

“I’m going to ask about how things are inland.”

Le Roi did not force Col to make a decision, but he was clearly changing tack to begin preparing for their next journey. He was the sort of traveling companion that was hard to come by—reliable, trustworthy—but he did not make the same sort of decisions Col did. Col felt his decision was a cold one, that he was being betrayed. And that meant he was still a child.

“Yes, all right.”

Col rose from his seat, trying hard not to let the frustration he felt over only being able to wait show on his face, and saw Le Roi off. Once he could no longer see the man squeezing through the small alleyways, a familiar girl poked her head out from the alley diagonally opposite. Considering how angrily she had fled the chapel, he wondered if she perhaps felt awkward about coming back in;

there was certainly some displeasure still lingering in her expression when she spoke up.

“What about lunch, Brother?”

“.....”

Col was unable to give Myuri a response at first. He looked at the empty chapel.

“Have you not eaten enough already?”

When she approached, even he could smell the scent of smoke on her. After leaving the chapel, she had most certainly rushed to the main street where she had bought her fill of food from the stalls in her anger.

“I’m worried about you, Brother!”

“I know.”

Col knew Myuri’s anger toward Lutia was partially out of worry for Col. Anyone as smart as Myuri would know he was caught between Le Roi’s logical reasoning and the burning desire to help Lutia.

And she knew that once he started worrying, her pathetic brother stopped eating.

Col did his best not to let the effects of his conversation with Le Roi just moments ago show on his face in Myuri’s presence, but not long after they set off, he realized that he was walking hand-in-hand with Myuri.

He looked back and forth between their hands and Myuri’s face; Myuri was glum, which told him that he had unconsciously taken her hand.

“You’re such a spoiled child, Brother.”

A tense smile leaped onto his face. To think he would finally see the day in which Myuri said that to *him*.

“I am worried you will run off again,” he stung back, also reminding her of how she had insulted Lutia’s tail by calling it mite-ridden. Myuri immediately nudged her shoulder against him, but she did not let go.

“Not only are you spoiled, but you’re so *mean*,” the furious Myuri spat, like a filled water skin. “When I look at Lutia, I kind of get why Mother stopped

traveling around with Father.”

“Huh?”

As she walked beside him, she looked less despondent, and more aged.

“Because if Lutia or I decided to hold nothing back, then we could put an end to the problem in this city in an instant.”

If they did not mind the details, then that was the truth.

“And Mother’s the same. If she’d put in everything she had in her old journey with Father, then she could’ve made that silly man king, just like old man Huskins did. But she didn’t. Right?”

Lutia had pulled away her lip to show her fangs and said they had no use in this world anymore.

And so the most she could do in this city was set the stray dogs that followed her on the southern eagles. Her excuse was she knew how to handle dogs, since she used to go on hunts with her lord.

If she used her wolf powers to the fullest, then it was more than possible to eliminate every last one of the southern eagles and eradicate their influence entirely. If she was willing to go that far, then she could have also turned her fangs on those who were eyeing the territory of the lord who named her. There would have been no need to take the roundabout route of studying ecclesiastical law at all.

But she did not take that route. Instead, she chose to issue orders from the Green Gourd.

This was because she knew that, if she decided to single-mindedly pursue the bloody path as a wolf, there were only so many possible outcomes. She knew if she were to reveal her sharp fangs and claws, she would never be able to sit in front of the warm hearth with her lord and lady.

She had mentioned “frustration” several times now.

It was she who had hidden away her fangs, closed her mouth, and endured.

“There’s such a wide world outside of the village, and Mother and Father were having fun adventuring throughout the whole world, right? So why did

they decide to hide away, deep in the mountains? I've always been wondering that. But when I look at Lutia, I think I get it."

In a surprising twist, it had been Myuri's mother, the wisewolf, who had encouraged her to force Col to take her along on this journey.

Myuri thought of the arrangement as her being the smart little sister who needed to stay by her foolish brother's side to make sure he did not face too much hardship out in that harsh world, and Col, too, had assumed that Holo the Wisewolf was doing the exact same.

But Col had a feeling he finally understood the truth hiding in that flaxen fur.

If Myuri were to stay by his side, perhaps she would learn there were only so many things that her fangs and claws could do. She would have to learn that no matter how fast she ran, there was no point if her companions could not keep up with her. She had no one to run alongside her in this world, so relying on her natural weapons would only win her solitude.

"But..." Myuri squeezed his hand. "How can Lutia hold back like that?"

Considering Myuri had endured ten whole days of not going to save the kids, and then eventually ran from the chapel shouting insult, her question was genuine.

They had met plenty of nonhumans on their journey thus far. They were all firmly entrenched in the modern human world, but part of them always seemed to be hiding something.

But Lutia had firmly submerged herself into human society, and she was fighting hard against a storm within its confines.

She must have gnashed her teeth countless times at how powerless the human body could be; for Myuri, who was quick to growl and bare her fangs when she was upset, that patience was almost terrifying.

"It is because Miss Lutia is kind."

"....."

Col understood that in the hard struggle to obtain a degree, there were deep-rooted social injustices throughout the city. But Lutia, who knew a life where

her hair would be combed for her by the fire, where people treated her with kindness, believed that solving problems by force was misguided. And that was why she was trying to pass on how her lord and lady had treated her to the people she had come to know, and why she went around helping the poor students.

Lutia had often called them her *pack*.

She was only one half of a fist taller than Myuri, but she could see much farther.

Col wished Myuri would watch her and learn a thing or two.

And Col himself wanted to do all he could to help her.

As that thought crossed his mind, he realized Myuri was looking up at him.

“I think you need to learn not just kindness from her,” she said. “But strength, too.”

“Ah...”

Dumbfounded, Col could say nothing in return, and he immediately regretted what he said. Now was not the time for him to wish Myuri would learn—he, too, was rather inexperienced.

The difference between his way of thinking and Le Roi’s was proof of that.

“...It is thanks to your point of view that I feel as though I have learned many things.”

The reason Myuri’s eyes went wide was perhaps out of surprise that he had taken her comment so earnestly. The wolf pup grinned, rubbed her cheek on his arm, then squeezed her arms around him.

“Okay, so on the really big street, there’s a place that serves really tasty-looking chicken.”

Had they been alone, her tail would have been out and wagging eagerly.

Col gave an exasperated sigh; he was relieved, though, that she did not draw out the issue of Lutia.

“Do not overeat.”

“Okaaay.”

Col donned a weary smile—it was always her acknowledgments that were above par. But Myuri’s head suddenly snapped to Col’s chest.

“Hmm... You smell like Lutia.”

She was like a city gate guard who would not tolerate smuggling under any circumstances.

“Oh, it’s a letter. A response came from one of the scholars from whom we are asking for assistance. I’ll be penning a response to try to convince him.”

Others had told him before their departure that he should fight and test his skills.

Myuri, too, recalled how he had been encouraged to do so; she sniffed the letter through his clothes, then huffed.

“It doesn’t seem I’ll be able to hide anything from you, will I?”

Even back in the Nyohhira bathhouse, the wisewolf was constantly hounding the former merchant for answers.

“Hmph.”

The little wolf gave one last proud sniff then puffed out her own chest. And then, once they returned to the Steel and Sheep after finishing lunch, Myuri came to a stop at the entrance.

“What’s the matter?”

Myuri stared hard into the building beyond the door, her expression twisted. She drew back her hand, which had been unusually glued to his this entire time, then folded her arms across her chest in objection as she looked to Col.

“See? We didn’t have to send a letter after all.”

“Hmm?”

He was not sure what she was suddenly on about, but he had a feeling that Myuri had said something similar not long ago.

“And...hmm. It smells like excited puppy in there.”

Her nose twitched as she sniffed. Col wanted to ask *her* if she was talking about herself, but he swallowed it, pushed open the door, and then immediately understood what she meant.

“Master Col!”

The person sitting at a table in the quiet first-floor tavern stood with such energy that the chair almost fell backward.

The escort, who they had gotten to know in their search for Jean, silently nodded in greeting.

“Archivist Canaan...?”

“How are things proceeding here? Oh, perhaps I should first—”

Canaan was about to gleefully begin his rant, but his taciturn guard stopped him.

“In the room.”

Canaan, his face covered in the dust of the road, snapped back to reality. He cleared his throat in embarrassment, then adjusted his posture. Hyland had said that Canaan put on quite a show whenever he was in Col’s presence.

And he had a feeling he understood why Myuri was always on edge when Canaan was complimenting him.

“I have good news. Let us hurry to the room!” Canaan exclaimed, his eyes shining.

Despite how overwhelmed he felt, Col thought he understood why Myuri called him a pup.

The dirt of the road was clear on Canaan’s face, and as they made their way to the room, Col noted he was covered in mud up to his knees. They had likely made their way straight to Aquent despite a little bad weather; if anything, it was the stalwart guard who seemed to be more tired from traveling.

They entered the room, and once Myuri opened the window, Canaan spoke.

“The ecumenical council!”

His energy reminded Col of when a horse-drawn cart almost ran into him on a

street corner.

The shine in Canaan's eyes perhaps was a result of the exhaustion of travel turning into giddy excitement.

Behind him, Myuri offered the guard a seat, and the guard accepted it, tired.

Col likened himself to the man after Myuri had talked his ear off about her absurd stories, but Canaan's gaze remained fixed on him.

"The ecumenical council, Master Col," Canaan spoke feverishly, making him seem all the younger. Col believed if Myuri had a twin, he would have been a lot like this.

"...This does not sound like bad news," Col said, in an attempt to calm him down first.

But a broad smile crossed Canaan's face. "Yes! It's great news! I wanted to tell you as soon as possible!"

Though they had traveled far southward from the Kingdom of Winfiel to Aquent, the distance to the land of the Holy See was much greater. It was not a distance to take lightly, so Canaan must have gotten quite a lot of information when he was over there.

"The ecumenical council is really happening. It is almost certain to be held."

The ecumenical council made the biggest and most important decisions regarding the Church's direction, said to be held only once every century. They would most likely be discussing the conflict within the Kingdom of Winfiel and how the Church was unfavorable in the public eye.

But when Col thought about how he would be considered an enemy on such a stage, he knew that there was no such thing as being too careful.

"I will need to confirm for myself it will not be bad news for me personally, however."

An ominous traveler came to the city of Rausbourne one day, invited the Twilight Cardinal to the ecumenical council, then refused to speak of anything else. For what reason would they invite an enemy to such an important meeting?

No matter how much of a softhearted fool he was, Col did not expect those talks to be friendly.

Canaan said, “The core of the Church is on the verge of collapse.”

He himself was a lamb of God who sat within that core, and yet he spoke of its downfall with such delight.

Col knew Canaan’s earnestness too well to think it a sinister, heretical thought.

“As the scripture says, neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. As evil crumbles away, God is giving us the perfect chance to rebuild anew!”

“Ah...”

Col’s gaze settled on Canaan’s calm guard. With his drink from Myuri in hand, he noticed Col looking at him, and he nodded.

Col then heard something lumpy and hard move and give way—perhaps it was the sound of the wheels of fate beginning to turn. No—it was when he unconsciously gripped Canaan’s hands that he realized it was the sound of himself gulping.

“Your struggle is bearing fruit, Master Col. The echoes of what you say is right has undoubtedly resounded across the mainland and struck a chord within many hearts,” Canaan said, and pulled a thin booklet from his breast pocket.

It was a sheaf of paper, worn and tattered from constant reading and rereading.

“This is the abridged version of your common-language translation of the scripture, one you were said to have so bravely distributed in town. I found countless copies of these on my various stops on the way back to the Holy See.”

Strangely enough, information occasionally traveled faster than travelers themselves.

The book was one that Col and Myuri distributed in their first fight against a local church, alongside Hyland and her help.

The reason it had found its way so far south had to be because there were so many who truly believed the Church’s tyranny was wrong.

Col had thought that perhaps his dream of fixing the Church was too big, that his fight could even be called reckless.

But this journey has not been a waste.

“Ahem!”

As he and Canaan held hands, there came a loud and obvious cough. Col glanced over to see Myuri, wearing the face of a girl fed up with the boys, now of all times, leaning against the wall with a pout.

“You must go to the ecumenical council, Master Col,” said the pious believer. “And you must be God’s iron hammer.”

To destroy evil so that they could create something new and pure.

“But we must be thorough in our preparations. If we let this chance slip away, it is unlikely we will ever get to rebuild the Church again. We cannot afford to fail.”

Col turned to face Canaan, as though shaking off Myuri’s cold stare.

“Yes, I know.”

“And when will you be leaving this city?”

There was plenty they still had to prepare for this battle.

What Canaan said was essentially telling him this fact. Col, however, began with, “Actually...” And proceeded to tell him their situation.

The idea was to end the codependence of affluent students and greedy professors, and then pull up the entire academic system of Aquent by its roots. To do that, they would have to push new professors who sympathized with the idea of honorable poverty into the city’s professors’ guild.

Though many people empathized with Lutia’s ideals, it was not so easy to implement in reality. How many out there would boldly make an entire guild their enemy, then teach poor students for free purely out of the selflessness of their heart? Especially when they could do the exact same job with rich students in exchange for generous remuneration for their lectures, receive large gifts upon conferment of degrees, and once their students inherited family estates or positions of import, there was a chance to be hired for a position that

came with a high salary and even greater renown.

Once Col was finished explaining everything to Canaan—besides the fact that Lutia was a wolf—Myuri brought up the food that had been made in the tavern kitchen for Canaan and the others. As Col was about to bite into the pork, still dripping with fat, Canaan slapped his hands to his knees and stood.

“It won’t be a problem,” he said. “It shouldn’t be a problem,” he repeated, and then continued. “I have heard that there are rampant problems that hamper learning somewhat in these academic cities, but to think they have been so poisoned by such lowly ideals.”

The way he placed his hand to his forehead and sighed came with an elegance that only those of noble birth had.

That said, Col did not know why Canaan had the confidence to declare it not a problem. As he sat and worried if the gist of the situation truly gotten through to him, the boy said to be labeled a boy genius elaborated.

“In that case, my colleagues would be more than happy to help.”

“What?” Col asked before he caught himself, but he immediately understood what Canaan was thinking.

That was because the boy who rushed on his journey, sullying his face, all so that he could deliver the good news as soon as possible, was on a family tree possessing boughs dotted with the names of past popes. And his job in the Curia was one where most of the academic knowledge collected.

“You want someone who is willing to lecture without asking for payment instead of a professor sullied by greed, yes? In that case, there are plenty of candidates in our place of work. We need no payment for our lectures, much less any sort of gift. If anything, so long as we can speak freely of theology, and have students listen with an eager ear, there will be no problems.”

Canaan and the other archivists worked in the Curia’s labyrinthine archives, where they handled all the texts the Church managed. It was an inconspicuous branch within the Church, and all of them genuinely wanted to promote God’s correct teachings, perhaps because they were all so well educated. And so even within the Church, where money often spoke loudest, the lure of pay had no

power over them.

Of course, most of them were of noble birth, so they were not desperate to make money for their daily bread or wonder what sort of work they might have in the future.

Not only that, but they were all brave; every last one of them was ready to face death when they sent Canaan to the Kingdom of Winfiel, since they believed that was a necessary step to right the Church's wrongs.

And just like Myuri said, if there was a group that would be determined to come to this city and delighted at the prospect of rebuilding the Church, there was no other group than the archivists.

"I will send for them right away. By the way, do you know how the professors' guild here is structured? I heard there is an oral examination upon joining, but do you know what sort of thing that entails? We must move with precision here."

Col gave a tense smile when Canaan said that; Canaan's associates were the very ones who would author theology books that would be chosen as textbooks here. Even if not, the theology and ecclesiastic law professors who wandered from academic city to academic city ultimately wanted high-ranking benefices from the Church.

Since people from the heart of the Church would be sent here, who would dare object to them joining the guild?

"Please tell this to the noble maiden who fights on behalf of the poor students. On behalf of the Curia archival department, we will share all the academic knowledge we can."

It was hard to think of a better solution than this, to the point that Col was uncertain if this was the right choice.

"And the southern eagles? Their misconduct is outrageous. I will inform their parents of their savagery. Good grief, to capture wayward boys and force them into labor is an act of the devil himself! Not to mention gambling on textbooks, the seed of education!"

Col thought of the parents who would be informed of their sons' violence

from the Holy See and he winced, though he knew he had nothing to do with the matter. He almost urged him to do so peacefully.

“As for possible textbooks, we have plenty of copies of various versions of the most famous books in the papal archives. Too many, in fact—we have nowhere to put them. I am certain God would be delighted if they were to be of some use to the students, so that is another problem solved.”

Col recalled the conversation he had with the bookseller as he was searching for books in the streetside bookstore in Aquent.

He had asked Col to tell him if he ever learned anything about textbook selection, but he wondered if the bookseller would believe him if he told him this.

He would surely give Col a little tip and send him on his way, and not give him a valuable book on the desert.

“However, with regards to recruiting as many allies as possible for the ecumenical council, we will need to investigate. Her name was Lutia, yes? We can ask for the names of the scholars who sympathize with her ideals, then use my connections with the churches around the continent to find them. With Master Le Roi’s help, we should be able to find powerful nobles who will show strong interest in the vernacular version of the scripture. We should be able to assemble a great host for our battle!”

There were several times in the Kingdom of Winfiel where Canaan seemed helpless, but on the mainland, he was like a fish in water. This was what it meant to be a part of an organization that wielded authority and influence.

“Let us go together, Master Col!”

Canaan smiled brilliantly and held out his hand.

These past ten or so days had only caused Col frustration, but a panacea had come to them all at once.

This was most certainly a valuable asset that he had gained on his journey, and it shocked him to see just how lucky he had been on his travels.

Canaan was so excited, his eyes glistened with tears; Col grasped his hand

firmly in turn.

And the reason he felt something familiar about his excitement was because the hand in his was clearly much too hot.

“—Oops.”

And so he had a feeling, and his body reacted honestly. He wrapped his arms around Canaan to hold him in place before he fully collapsed, and it was then clear that the fervor was coming from an elevated body temperature.

“Pardon him.”

His guard, who had been snacking with Myuri, stood up in exasperation. He was a lot like a hunter, unable to get close to the boar caught in his trap due to the way it thrashed, and was waiting for it to calm down. The guard took Canaan from Col and hoisted him over his shoulder. It was most certainly resulting from that no matter how much he had reminded him to watch his health, Canaan had rushed and pushed himself all the way to Aquent.

“It’s not so bad to see him being so lively,” the taciturn guard said and flashed an awkward smile. Perhaps he was comparing that to how gloomy Canaan was back in the Holy See. He then became expressionless again and gave a silent bow.

Once Myuri opened the door, the guard shuffled away, carrying Canaan as his fever led him to believe he was still continuing the conversation. Myuri exited into the hallway to see them off, but when she returned and closed the door behind her, she did so with a sigh and a shake of her head. She looked to Col.

“Are we sure he’s not a girl?”

Though she had stopped insisting he marry her, it seemed as though she had not given up completely.

She leaned into Col’s chest—he had caught Canaan in his arms to keep him from falling, after all—and sniffed, then clung to him and buried her face into him, as though she was keen on replacing the boy’s scent with her own.

Once Myuri was finished reestablishing her territory, she started to worry for Canaan and visited his room to check on him. She asked if he needed anything,

and she seemed rather displeased when the guard told her he would likely get better with some rest.

While she saw Canaan as a threat to her territory to the point that she doubted if he was a girl or not, he was still a friend who looked at the map with her and spoke merrily of adventures at Eve's manor before they departed for Aquent. It seemed Myuri understood how valuable it was to find a friend who she could share her passions with.

Myuri kept giving Col pointed looks, and so he went to the innkeeper to ask for honey and fruit and other things that helped fevers resulting from hard travel.

Myuri, who wanted to eat greasy meat even when she was sick, complained that such bird food would never bring anyone back to good health, but when the innkeeper handed her not a bill but a letter, she fell silent.

"This just came in for you."

She took it in hand and they saw that the emblem on the wax seal was that of Eve's company, but the paper was of fine parchment, which meant it was from Hyland. Myuri was excited to open it right away, so together they returned to the room and opened it to find the paper crammed with Hyland's writing.

"Let's see... This is about the printing of the scripture."

Despite the expensive paper and the amount of money it had doubtlessly taken to send, the first half of the letter was filled with worry—is their journey comfortable, are they healthy, do they have enough money for the road, is Myuri eating enough delicious food. In the latter half, the point of the letter was tacked on almost as an obligation.

"It says the test prints are going well and we should send paper as soon as we can."

Myuri peeked over Col's shoulder and roughly tied it all together.

"See? This is why we should just kick down the southern eagles as soon as possible."

Col thought Myuri had learned from Lutia's perseverance how a nonhuman

would live in the human world, but he could still see glimpses of her tail.

That said, though Myuri hated tedious procedures, she was not the only one; Le Roi, too, had candidly warned Col that they could not help this city with its problems forever.

“You heard Archivist Canaan’s suggestions, yes? This could be a big step for us, and the Debau Company’s response should be coming soon. Then Lutia will make her decision shortly after, I believe.”

“Rrrgh...”

Myuri’s mind was full of quick solutions to their problems—taking on her wolf form to chomp on everyone in their way, to tie letters to birds’ legs or a whale’s back to send them far beyond the mountains in an instant. In truth, she was very likely constantly suppressing her desire to run free and fast and wild—her nightly writings had gained a rough penmanship as a result of her displeasure, and she had grown just as restless in her sleep.

“And, more importantly, I think we should inform Lutia of Archivist Canaan’s proposal once he has recovered... But we should look into whatever we reasonably can beforehand.”

First, they would investigate the structure of the professors’ guild and their movements. It might also be a good idea to see just how corrupt Aquent’s church was as well. If it turned out the church was a den of evil that sought to make itself rich, then they may be overly suspicious and think they were the inquisition when they found out that Canaan and the other archivists began teaching in the city.

As ideas on how to deal with these things, such as asking Le Roi for help, came to mind, Myuri remained staring at Hyland’s letter.

“Are you upset it did not come with a tasty snack?” Col asked with a sigh.

Myuri’s ears piqued and her tail rustled. “No! It just smells...”

“It smells?”

He recalled how she had tried to overwrite Canaan’s scent on him.

He wondered if she would begin to pout again if she smelled Hyland’s

excitement on the letter, but that did not seem to be the case.

Myuri briefly rubbed her nose, brought it up to her face again, and inhaled deeply.

“It smells like the sea...and wood that’s about to rot.”

“Hmm?”

“And like horses, and dry wind,” she murmured as her eyes closed, savoring the scents as though tasting fine wine.

“It smells like...adventure.”

The letter had been penned in Rausbourne, Winfiel, then sent on a boat, from which it was then packed onto a horse’s back, and subsequently traveled all the way to Aquent. Each step of the journey imbued it with a different smell, and Myuri could tell those complicated scents apart.

“I wish Canaan had sent us a letter instead.”

It was as though to say that her displeasure came from not having a letter that had made the journey from the Holy See to Aquent, carrying scents she could have gotten a whiff of.

“Can you not tell from his scent?”

“He smells like he’s been hunting deer for three days.”

Excitement and exhaustion.

“This is what letters smell like when they come from far away, huh?” she said, deeply moved. But then her ears suddenly flicked separately.

“Hmm? But then... Wait a second...”

She tilted her head, as though trying to recall something, but struggled.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing...”

Col wondered if she had noticed the scent of a food she had never tried before on the letter, but Myuri quickly shook her head and assumed her usual attitude.

“More importantly, we need to get going! I have to know what the desert smells like, Brother!”

Though shocked by the sudden smile and declaration, Col’s calm judgment prevailed.

“We are not going to the desert.”

“.....”

Myuri froze, smile still on her face. He knew she was a dreamer, yet he collected his thoughts and nodded, knowing this was the only correct conclusion.

As he kept his eyes on Hyland’s letter, he pulled out his quill, knife, and ink pot.

“You were there when Archivist Canaan spoke, yes? The core of the Church is more unstable than we imagined, and I got the impression they are holding the ecumenical council as a last resort. Which means...” Col thought of what he might say to Hyland in his response as he carved off the tip of the quill with the knife. “It’s very likely we may be able to put an end to the conflict with the Church at the ecumenical council.”

Since the Pope, too, had to obey the decisions made at the council, this was the perfect chance to put all the fighting to bed. That was why they had to spread the vernacular translation of the scripture far and wide, in order to put pressure on the Church, then head to the council fully prepared. If everything went well, they could end this conflict and force the Church to accept reform.

They had no time to grasp at the nebulous idea that was the new continent, nor was there any need for them to go to the desert—not even Eve herself had been there in person.

They had more immediate concerns.

“Once we see a resolution to the problems in this city, we must secure the paper right away and return to the kingdom. There are signs that this drawn-out conflict with the Church is finally coming to an end. Many people will be expecting Church reforms. And that would mean our journey, too, would finally come to an end—”

But he could say no more.

“Our journey’s ending?!”

The volume of her voice was surprisingly loud for how small her throat was, and Col could almost see sparks.

He turned around to see Myuri staring at him with rounded eyes, shocked.

“Our journey...ending...”

The rambunctious girl was reacting as though the world itself was ending; Col was astonished at first, but he eventually gave her a grimace of a smile.

“Not anytime soon. You’ll be all right.” He dipped his quill into the ink. “The ecumenical council is a large-scale thing, and it cannot be held today or tomorrow. And we’ll have to print many copies of the scripture, after which we’ll have to distribute to towns across the mainland. On top of that, we will need to recruit as many powerful allies as we can find to aid us at the council itself. You need not worry about our journey ending for a very long time. Our goal is in sight now, that’s all.”

Despite laying it all out for Myuri, her reaction was still dulled.

Perhaps this was the first time the young wolf had considered the truth not of when their journey would end, but that it *would* end one day, full stop.

Despite how much more quick-witted she was compared with Col, she occasionally showed that she had a very simple view of the world. Everything was new to her when she first left her village of birth, and she had believed her fun adventure would last forever.

Though her innocence was heartwarming in a way, Col felt a faint bitterness in his mouth, knowing he had thought similarly when he was a child, too.

“Come now, we don’t have time to stand around gawking like that. First, we need to work with Lutia and the other wolves to save the children while we wait for the response from the Debau Company. We have a lot of important things left to do on this journey.”

At that point, Myuri finally returned to the reality before her and away from the prospect that this journey might one day end.

“But...what about the desert?”

“Hmm?”

“You said we’re not going to the desert.”

Her resentment took the form of tears in her eyes and glinted faintly in the light.

Just when Col thought her senses had come back from the distant end to their journey, now she was not happy with the direction their journey was going.

“The desert was somewhere we would go if we were to earnestly pursue the new continent, but if the ecumenical council really is the—”

“You *said* we’d go to the desert!” Myuri yelled, her voice loud enough to hurt Col’s ears, and erasing his voice in an instant. “*Brother!* You! *Said!* We would go to the desert!!”

She grabbed his shoulders and began to shake him, the start of a very rare tantrum, the kind he had not seen in years.

“The desert! The *desert!*”

“Please, calm—calm down...! I cannot promise—if we’ll go, but as insurance for the ecumenical council, we’ll continue investigating the new continent... So please—stop—shaking—stop shaking me!”

“Brother! The *desert!* You said we’d go! We *are* going! Okay?! *Brother*, please!”

Myuri’s ears were visibly tense and the fur on her tail stood on end to the point that she looked as if she had been struck by lightning—and for the first time in a long time, it reminded Col of what she was like in the Nyohhira bathhouse.

Once she was like this, his only choice was to let her burn herself out. And so he withstood the wolf pup shaking him and digging her nails into him and pulling him with the power of his faith alone, and he wished that she would grow up sooner than later.

Just in the way Myuri was acting, as though nothing had happened after throwing such a tantrum the day before, Canaan, too, was reportedly full of

boyish energy again, despite how feeble he had seemed.

In the morning, his face was just as smooth as a freshly peeled egg once again.

“I apologize for my disgraceful behavior yesterday,” Canaan said sheepishly, recalling the way he had been acting in the elation that came from his exhaustion, and his ears were red.

That said, when compared with the way Myuri was whining, Canaan was the perfect picture of an upstanding gentleman.

“Oh, no, please don’t worry about that... How are you feeling?”

“Perfectly fine.”

Canaan held himself proudly, as though to say he was ready to work at any time. Col glanced at his guard standing behind him, just for good measure, and the man gave him a defeated nod. He almost felt like the glum look on his face was looking for agreement, like a fellow puppy owner seeking sympathy for often facing a similar predicament.

“Okay, then Canaan, you come with us to Lutia’s place, and we’ll kick the evil out of this city!”

Col’s own puppy barked in excitement at the other puppy.

“Yes! That is a wonderful idea. This is a place where one is meant to learn about all of God’s creations. It is unforgivable to think such evil that even He would look away from is taking place here!”

This fanned the embers left over from yesterday, and Myuri’s coals burned hotter again.

Despite how meek this boy looked, he had embraced a plan that others thought was impossible and left the dim archives to rush headlong into the outside world with nothing but courage in his heart. Not only that, but he never let the helplessness of his journey drag him down, and he kept walking. That was how he won his bet.

Canaan’s enthusiasm came from an absolute confidence in what the future held, the kind only knights who won their battles had.

“Archivist Canaan, I have something to tell you,” Col interjected before the two excited puppies. “A letter came from Heir Hyland. She told us the test printings of the scripture are going well.”

Canaan was not surprised to hear the good news.

He smiled broadly, as though the plan going smoothly was a predetermined outcome.

“That is proof that God is on our side. Now, let us get going!”

Col exchanged glances with the guard, and they both sighed, tired. That said, they had no reason to stop the elated Canaan, and the four of them made their way to the Green Gourd, where Lutia was staying.

The reason Le Roi was not with them was because when they went to check on him in his room earlier, they found him conked out with a terrible hangover. After Hyland’s letter arrived the day prior, Col had penned the response right away while ignoring Myuri’s whining. He had gone to Le Roi’s room to ask him to send the reply using Eve’s commercial network, only to find the place stinking of alcohol. Myuri, with her keen nose, ran away in shock, and when Le Roi had realized he had visitors, he greeted them from his bed with a groan.

He had apparently been done in at the caravan feast; he had attended the traders’ get-together, who had been traveling together for a very long time, to get information on their travels across the mainland. They traveled greater distances than any regular peddler might, which meant they were sturdier than bears, and ate and drank more than horses. And Le Roi found himself in such a state after taking part in their incessant drinking.

Col left the letter with him, left the honey and fruit he had been planning to give to Canaan in his room, gave him a bucket of cold water, prayed for God to watch over him, and then closed the door to his room again. That had not been not long ago.

The four of them headed out into Aquent. As always, it was a chaotic mess even first thing in the morning. There seemed to be young men rambling drunkenly, probably after drinking through the night. But in the commercial loading dock beside them, there was a white-bearded professor and his students, who had doubtlessly rented out the space, studying high-level

theology questions and strict logic.

Canaan had only ever known academic cities as things in books; his expression was constantly changing, from the shine in his eyes to the way his brows furrowed, and Col could not help but look on warmly. But he soon felt eyes on his cheeks, and he turned to see the rambunctious girl, sword at her hip, staring at him coolly, as though to say *he* was once like that.

When they reached the Green Gourd, they found Lutia seeing off the boys heading to work to earn their keep, or those cheerfully rushing off, their study tools bound with twine and hanging from their shoulders.

“Oh, it’s you,” she greeted them. “Who’s this?”

Just as Col was about to introduce them, Canaan stepped forward and extended a hand.

“My name is Canaan Jochaiem.”

Lutia stared at him blankly, but then deftly grasped his hand in turn.

“Lutia. Are you...a colleague of Col’s?”

Anyone could tell at a glance from the way Canaan carried himself, that he was either an academic or ecclesiastic.

“I work for God as a part of the Curia’s archival department.”

Lutia’s eyes went even wider at the rest of Canaan’s self-introduction.

She then turned to look at Col, as though warning him not to do anything malicious.

“I was terribly shocked when I met Archivist Canaan for the first time as well.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve found delight in seeing others’ shock ever since then.”

Lutia took one look at Canaan’s innocent smile and sighed.

“I still don’t understand why boys think that way.”

Canaan blinked, and Myuri laughed.

They were invited to the armory on the fourth floor of the Green Gourd, and Canaan’s attention went straight to all the bookshelves, just as Col’s had.

“Wow... So these are the books people use as textbooks, I see.”

“It can’t be much of a surprise to you, since you came from the library of legend.”

“But it is! We have plenty of books on our shelves, of course, but they’re dark, and most of the tomes remain sleeping. It is hard to tell which books still live on in society and which ones are dead. So to interact with others and learn which books they read brings me the same sort of joy one feels when laying eyes on new growth peeking out from the snow, knowing there is still life in this world.”

Lutia gave an awkward smile when he offered that astonishingly purple metaphor, and Myuri began to mumble it in repetition, as though trying to memorize the turns of phrase.

“Well? Seeing the Twilight Cardinal standing next to someone from the Holy See makes me feel like I’m looking at a bowl of ice-cold water sitting next to boiling-hot oil.”

To mix them together would be disastrous. They needed to be careful how they handled them, and they needed to ask the chef exactly why they had been put together.

“Please rest easy on that regard. Those of us working in the archives are not well-liked within the Holy See. We like every word and every phrase to be precise as a part of our work, which should help you understand our positions.”

While honesty was a virtue in God’s eyes, it was not necessarily so within the structure of the Church.

“I see. And that’s why you’ve chosen the Twilight Cardinal to be your ally.”

With a dry smile, Lutia jerked her chin up, urging Canaan to continue.

A person from the Holy See had appeared with the Twilight Cardinal; they were clearly not here for fun.

“Master Col has informed me of the widespread problem regarding the framework of academic instruction in this city. This outrageous practice has gone on for too long. I am certain God would be delighted to see your spirit in this fight against evil, Miss Lutia.”



Lutia was slightly embarrassed to be greeted with such passionate praise.

“If you are in need of assistance, we would be more than happy to assist you, too.”

“*You* would?” Lutia asked.

Canaan nodded, full of confidence.

“We are but powerless bookworms, but we each have the strength of one hundred in the world of books and academia. By joining the professors’ guild here, we may be able to offer classes and degrees to the poor students.”

“.....”

Lutia must have been ready, to a point, for some sort of surprise.

But it seemed Canaan’s proposal far surpassed what she was expecting.

“Though I am not entirely clear on the details on how to join the guild, many of us have plenty of academic training and knowledge. And of course, we have no use for expensive tuition fees or gifts in exchange for degree conferment. You need not worry about textbooks for us, either, since we have plenty of idle tomes in our archives. We would be happy to be lodged anywhere—any place is nicer than that dark archive. We may even give out benefices if it turns out our long history of academic studies turns out to be a help to others.”

Canaan spoke confidently and quickly, and Lutia stood there, listening, with bated breath.

“What do you think?” he asked. “I believe we can help you, Miss Lutia.”

He smiled. Not the sort of smile that seemed fake when Col had first met him in the Kingdom of Winfiel, but one that genuinely believed in the future.

Col could easily understand why Lutia was perplexed. Col had to admit he also felt a bit overawed.

“Lutia.”

Lutia’s head whipped around to look at Col as his voice brought back her to reality.

“You may think this to be an extravagant suggestion. Even I wasn’t sure if we

should solve all your problems with such a feat of strength.”

Despite how much they had run about in confusion in search of a way to solve these problems, a solution he had not even considered had arrived at their doorstep in one neat package.

He somewhat recalled a fable of a rabbit being thrown to a hungry wolf; Lutia made the same face as the wolf did in that tale, and nodded vaguely once, twice.

“Lutia.”

He called the bewildered wolf’s name again.

“And in the meanwhile, would you mind if you shared with me the names of the pure-minded scholars who sympathize with your cause, the ones you have been in communication with? I would like them to assist us in our fight against the Church, and would welcome the chance to convince them to join our cause.”

He was not going to invite them to teach in Aquent, in the slim hopes they were ready for the trouble, but to instead fight alongside them when they faced the Church.

“Of course, we will be careful not to cause you any trouble, Miss Lutia.”

Lutia was, ostensibly, here to study ecclesiastical law, and she could not join in the fight against the Church. They had to avoid the Green Gourd being seen as a secret base for those fighting against the Church, for the sake of the other students’ futures.

“Oh, there is one other thing I’d like to share with you.”

Lutia seemed dizzied by the way all the new information came rushing at her, but Canaan added even more to the deluge.

“Master Col has seen the immoral conduct by the boys that call themselves the southern eagles. I recommend contacting their parents with regards to their behavior. Since I believe they are the sons of high-ranking clergy and well-known nobility, I believe a letter with the Holy See’s seal would have an immediate effect.”

“.....”

It was like skinning a rabbit with a butcher’s knife.

Col almost felt bad when he thought about the parents receiving reprimands for their children’s misconduct coming directly from the center of the world’s faith.

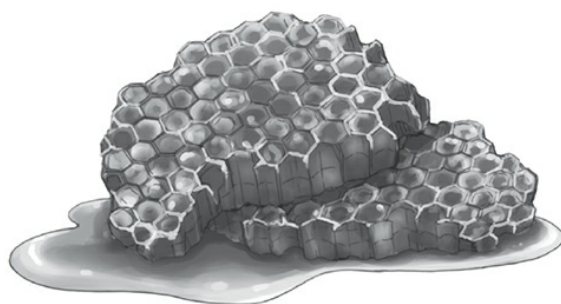
“Miss Lutia.”

Col called her name for the third time, and she looked to him like a lost girl caught out in a sudden downpour.

“I was shocked, too,” he said.

Lutia no longer had the strength to even pretend to smile, and she only gave a weak nod.

CHAPTER FIVE



CHAPTER FIVE

Lutia's mind was filled with the sudden revelations, and since she was in contact with a diverse array of scholars, she said she needed a little time to gather herself—and her list.

And so Col and the rest of his entourage decided to return to the inn, but Myuri suddenly declared she had something to discuss about saving the kids and noted she would be staying at the Green Gourd.

Col knew he had forced her to wait for quite a while already, and he could no longer hold her back by saying it was too early. And since Canaan was here, it seemed as though many problems would be solved at once, so he figured she wanted to put together a wild plan sooner rather than later.

“Don't ask too much from Lutia and cause her any trouble, okay?”

When he reminded her, she turned away in a huff, but he thought this was perfect—he had plenty to talk about with Canaan on how to approach the upcoming ecumenical council and the vernacular scripture. If the two of them grew excited over things Myuri could not appreciate, she would doubtlessly become grumpy.

After reminding her one more time not to cause Lutia too much trouble, they left the Green Gourd and were greeted by the brilliant sun at its apex in the sky. Canaan's face beamed even brighter.

“Master Col, we must thank God for the gorgeous weather!”

As Col watched the way Canaan's positive emotions overflowed from him, he was slightly—just ever so slightly—thankful he was not a girl.

And so they returned to the inn. He and Canaan spoke at length about the scripture, and around the time they were adding new ideas and better interpretations for the translation to their letter to Hyland, the evening bell rang, signaling the closing of the markets. The sun was red and sat on the

horizon, waiting to dip below it.

They still had to send the letter, so they went to check on Le Roi, only to find the bookseller sitting in a daze, much like Myuri was after her second nap of the morning, and he wore a shameful expression.

Since it seemed as though he had finally sobered up, they handed him the letter they had penned together. Canaan still seemed like he had a lot more to say, so Col thought about having dinner with him, but Myuri was still not back yet.

She was not the sort of girl to worry about bothering them, perhaps on the thought that they were still busy talking, so it was unlikely she came to the room and then turned back. If she were still playing military general with Lutia, then it was perhaps about time to go drag her away for food.

Those thoughts roamed his mind as they made their way down the stairs. At the bottom, the innkeeper, who seemed to be talking to a guest, turned to look at them.

“Perfect timing. There’s a message for you.”

“For me?”

The one speaking to the innkeeper looked like one of the youngest students. He rushed over, his expression tense, and Col was shocked when he said familiar names.

“Is this a message from Myuri and Miss Lutia?”

Col turned to look back at Canaan, wondering if this was on purpose.

“Sh-she says they have a plan, so please come to the old chapel.”

When the child said that, Col had a general idea of what he was talking about.

He could imagine Myuri being so engrossed in talking about saving the kids that coming to tell Col herself felt tedious. At worst, there was a chance she was causing Lutia all sorts of trouble, like saying she wanted to put their plan into motion that evening.

Col looked to Canaan, and Canaan nodded.

“Very well. We will go there at once.”

The young boy relaxed, relieved, and rushed off into the darkening city.

“Good grief... I never know what to do with that tomboy and her lack of patience,” Col said with a sigh.

Canaan smiled, clearly sympathizing with Myuri. “Perhaps when she heard the boys were captured, she must have remembered how she felt when you were kidnapped, Master Col.”

Though it did make sense when he pointed it out, Col had to wonder if part of all this was because the search for the children had stimulated her wolf instincts. She had always loved hunting.

“Personally, I would prefer if she refrained from doing anything dangerous,” he said, his shoulders dropping.

Canaan gave him a considerate smile and then turned to his personal guard.

“Could you look after Master Le Roi for a little while? I believe the city may grow dangerous.”

The taciturn guard looked between Canaan and Le Roi, somewhere above them, and then shrugged in compliance. Though the bookseller could be right in the middle of all the action and still emerge unscathed if he were in his usual spirits, he was more of a concern when he had just sobered up.

But Col also wondered if there was another reason as to why Canaan had assigned his guard to Le Roi. Canaan was slowly showing Col his true colors, and Col now knew he was a lot like Myuri. And he was sure the young archivist thought that, as a man, having his guard stay close the entire time made the excitement all the less satisfying.

And so they set out onto the streets of Aquent as it transformed into a turf of drunken students. Col and Canaan chatted about academics in a manner more like a student than any other student in the city, and eventually neared the ruined chapel that served as Lutia’s hideout. However—

“Hmm?”

They made their way down the dim street and came to the old chapel, only to

find the door was still locked.

It was not a problem, since Col had received a key from Lutia, but that meant the ones who had summoned them here were yet to arrive. And that was strange. Perhaps they were still running around the Green Gourd, preoccupied with planning their rescue mission.

As Col knew he would be scolding Myuri later tonight, he unlocked the door and stepped inside.

“This is a very old kind of chapel,” Canaan remarked.

The boy stood by the altar and squinted up at the faint shadow left behind on the wall where the crest of the Church once hung, the rest of the wall around it bleached by the sun.

“It was apparently originally the small church for this parish. It was abandoned long ago, however.”

“This reminds me of the archives at the Curia. I can smell books, but only faintly.”

Canaan inhaled, as though recalling a distant memory, and this shocked Col.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised... There is a repository of books hidden here, in fact.”

“Hmm?”

Canaan blinked, and after a few moments of hesitation, he turned around to look at Col, eyes wide and pleading in his request to see them. Col could not help but smile wryly, because he seemed quite a bit like a more ladylike Myuri.

“Do you see the indent in the floorboards?”

As Col thought about how he could never really scold Myuri when she snuck into the pantry to sneak bites of honey, he and Canaan peeled back the floorboard. Though Le Roi had deemed the books practically worthless, that did not seem to be much of a matter to Canaan. The moment the books appeared, he sat on the floor and began reading.

The sun was setting by the second, so the inside of the chapel had grown rather dark. Col laughed—he could at least wait until he put on a light. He found

candles in the corner of the chapel.

But as he was about to light them, he realized he had nothing on hand to do so. That, and the candles were made of cheap tallow, which meant the soot would give off a particular smell that might cling to the books, especially since the windows were closed, so he decided to not light them after all.

Col placed his hand on the window, figuring they could get a bit of moonlight if they opened it, but he stopped.

“Myuri?”

But it was not. There were one, two unfamiliar figures deep in the alley. More he did not recognize.

He left the windows open a crack, as they were, then silently made his way back to Canaan.

Canaan was pulling out one book after another and flipping through them—all of them deemed nigh worthless by Le Roi. He must have found something good, because he turned to Col with a beaming expression and opened his mouth to speak.

Col pressed his finger to Canaan’s lips to silence him and looked around the old chapel.

This was not a very large building, and there was only one small connecting space. Buildings like these had high ceilings, and the skylights were often out of reach. The sun had long since dipped behind the horizon, the alleys were dark, and Col was not a wolf.

He regretted leaving Canaan’s guard back at the inn, did his best to suppress the loud beating of his heart in his ear, and put his mind into motion.

“Master Col?”

Canaan was perplexed. Col nodded and pointed.

“Stand down!”

The door was kicked open and people flooded in.

“We received reports of a heretic! In the name of God—”

Those that marched in suddenly stopped, as though swallowing their words.

“...Where did they go?”

The poorly built chapel creaked and rattled as feet fell onto the warped floorboards.

There were three, no—four, of them. Something heavy and hard jabbed the chairs, and there came the sound of something dragging along the floor. One of them was armed with a spear.

Col briefly wondered if they were soldiers from the Church, or perhaps the city, but quickly realized their voices were much too young for that.

Whenever the reddish flame from the candle moved, their shadows moved.

“They’re not here...”

“But the door was unlocked, right? Maybe they escaped from one of the back windows?”

“No, no one came out from the windows.”

After the conversation, one who must have been the captain of the small squad stamped on the floor.

Canaan started to cry out, but Col clamped his hand over his mouth and waited still, silently.

“Damn it! Are they pulling our legs?!”

“No, first we should go back and check the nearby roads. Even if they did escape, the sun is down. They can’t have gone far.”

The ones who had strong-armed their way into the chapel quickly left, and their footsteps grew distant.

Even after he could no longer hear their footsteps, Col waited there as he counted to three hundred. There were scenes just like this in the knight tales Myuri wrote every night.

“...I think we’re all right now,” Col whispered to Canaan, and he pushed up the floorboard.

He sat up from his horizontal position in the small storage area beneath the

floorboards. It was good to know they were safe, but when he saw that the books stacked in a pile in the corner were untouched, he was relieved. He had been nervous, wondering if the soldiers had kicked and scattered the papers in their frustration, but he supposed that was because this was an academic city.

He crawled out of the hole, but Canaan remained lying perfectly still in the space beneath the floorboards where the books had been hiding.

“Archivist Canaan,” Col said to get his attention.

Canaan’s wide, unblinking eyes suddenly squeezed shut, then cracked open a sliver.

“I forgot to pray to God...”

Just a few months ago, it would have been Col who would have remained curled up in the hole, and an exasperated Myuri the one to try to drag him out.

Col extended a hand to Canaan to help him up and brushed the dirt from him.

“It is simply experience.”

Since he had done the exact same in a burning room, he had been able to act immediately.

Canaan looked up at him with an odd expression, one of both fear and respect.

“But more importantly,” Col said, “they mentioned heretics, didn’t they?”

Though he had not been able to see well what they wore, they had been on the lookout from the report of one person or another.

“Do you mean that you’ve been found out, Master Col?”

That was the first thing he thought of, too. If Aquent’s church was corrupt, then the Twilight Cardinal was nothing more than an unwanted guest, and capturing him would give the Church a surprise victory.

But that group seemed a little inadequate if that was truly their task, and their raid felt awfully unofficial. That their voices sounded so young also stuck with him.

“Either way, this means that both the inn and the Green Gourd are under

watch. I believe we should separate ourselves from the city for the meanwhile.”

“B-but what about Myuri and the others?”

If Myuri were to be captured, then Col, too, would meet a similar fate, no matter how much he struggled. Luckily, despite how Le Roi was debilitated from his hangover, he had a powerful guard at his side, so they did not need to worry about them.

“If we leave the books there, then they will certainly figure out we’ve escaped an enemy attack.”

If they follow the scent and come here, then they could follow right after them.

If worse came to worst, then all he had to do was give a message to one of the birds helping Sharon, who were doubtlessly silently watching them.

“We should leave the chapel for the time being. They may come back.”

Canaan nodded, his face visibly pale even in the dark, but together they quickly returned the books back to their hiding spot beneath the floor and left the chapel.

It was dark, Col’s hand just barely visible to himself. With his left hand, he grasped Canaan’s, and with his right, he groped through the darkness.

Canaan swallowed his nerves, holding back several of his hiccups, and his steps were unsteady; he held on to Col so tightly it almost hurt his hand. He recalled how Hyland mentioned that Canaan had been putting up quite a front before.

Now, Col was the opposite. It was thanks to Canaan that Col was able to remain calm, much like how responsibility forced people to mature quicker. And much in the same way, he could easily imagine a certain knight walking before him, and that gave him the strength to shove aside any feelings of weakness.

He pressed forward, feet digging firmly into the ground as he walked so that the imaginary Myuri in front of him would not laugh at him, all while letting the gears in his mind turn, wondering what this commotion was all about.

First, that meant the little boy who brought the message from Myuri and Lutia was being manipulated. His initial assumption was that the local church had discovered he was the Twilight Cardinal, but he had a feeling that people who were primarily worried about being exposed for their corruption would have chosen a slightly different method.

Once that thought crossed his mind, they came to the well at the far end of the alleyway. It was a little wider here—in the daytime, women would come here to draw water, and the elderly would come here to bask in the sun.

Since this was a slightly open space, Col figured there might be people on watch here, so observed from the shadows. And as he did so, a couple possibilities suddenly came to mind.

Perhaps this was a scheme concocted by the southern eagles.

Maybe one of Lutia's boys had betrayed her and secretly told them she had someone on her side wanting to dismantle the southern eagles' special interests. Upon receiving the report, they decided they must be a heretic of some sort, and decided to pressure them to make sure they would not stay in the city.

If that were the case, then it made sense to Col that they would send a paltry, inexperienced force into the chapel without even surrounding the building to ensure their target could not escape from a window, and without bothering to even think about someone hiding under the floorboards.

And if *that* were true, then Myuri would be surprisingly ignorant of this plan, and was likely still busy putting together her strategy at the Green Gourd. *Then perhaps it would be a good idea to head there first to check on her.* Once she and Lutia were aware of the situation, they could easily turn things in their favor.

As Col stood in the shadows, thinking, Canaan poked him in the shoulder. He looked at him with uneasy eyes, silently asking him what was wrong. Col smiled back in reassurance, poked his head out from the shadows to check the space, then gestured for them to go. They were fortunate the moon was not out, and there was no one else wandering the streets.

Just as he began to think about which way led back to the Green Gourd, he

suddenly heard footsteps from behind, and all his hair stood on end.

Just as he tugged on Canaan's hand, thinking it was a pursuer, he realized there was only one set of footsteps, and the way they hit the ground sounded familiar. The voice he heard confirmed it.

"Brother?!"

It was Myuri—she had likely followed their scent here.

"Myuri!" he called.

From the darkness emerged the small, silver figure, and she leaped right into his chest.

"Don't tell me you managed to escape on your own?" she said, pressing her face into his chest.

Col could not help but check to see if her ears and tail had suddenly popped out, and he was embarrassed she was doing this in front of Canaan.

"I've done my fair share of traveling, too."

As he lifted his arms to hug her in return, he realized his left hand was still firmly holding Canaan's.

Suspicious that her brother was not hugging her back, Myuri lifted her head. She narrowed her eyes when she saw their hands entwined.

"More importantly, what about Miss Lutia? Has there been an attack on the Green Gourd, too?" Col asked, and Myuri snapped back to reality.

"Oh, uh, no... Well, I mean, I don't know about right now." Myuri stepped back from Col and chose her words. "When I got back to the inn, I heard that you apparently got a message from us."

Myuri was sharp. That alone was enough for her to sniff out that someone was plotting something.

"Is the inn being watched?" Col asked.

Myuri shook her head.

It seemed whoever was doing this did not have the people to carry out a large-scale surprise attack.

“Then let’s inform Miss Lutia of the situation back at the Green Gourd. This is most certainly a plot concocted by the southern eagles. Unfortunately...I believe there may be a traitor among her people.”

Myuri’s eyes went wide.

“I believe someone may have leaked the operation to save the kids.”

With Lutia taking command, it was unlikely they would be beaten back by a simple ambush, but the boys in captivity might have been moved, and the operation would end in failure.

“A...a traitor among Lutia’s people...”

Myuri groaned, as though in some excuse, but Col patted her head to let her know that she need not say anymore. Because this girl knew just how much Lutia cared for her people, and just how hard she was working.

“Is Mister Le Roi and the guard still back at the inn?”

Col could not predict how reckless the southern eagles might get, so he could not make the decision on his own as to whether it was safe to remain in the inn or go somewhere else. But the reason he wanted to meet up with them again was because Canaan, much gloomier now than he was earlier in the day, might find a little relief having a bodyguard he was familiar with by their side.

But when he asked this question, Myuri looked as though she was desperately trying to think of an answer.

“Myuri?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah.”

Though she seemed more carefree than in the other times they had encountered danger, a part of her attitude did not seem like Myuri at all, and Col even thought she was lacking a bit of her typical composure.

But not a moment later, she returned to her usual self and said, “I told them to leave the inn before more trouble showed up. Canaan’s guard was there, and I figured old man Le Roi could get through this anyway.”

Col nodded, and he felt a tug on his hand. Though Canaan was still uneasy, a degree of strength had returned to his gaze.

“I-in that case,” Canaan began. “I believe we will be able to meet up with them at our emergency rendezvous. Just on the way to the western highway.”

This thorough preparedness likely came from how he used to work under the same roof as the inquisitors. Col looked to Myuri to see the scales in her mind tipping, and she opened her mouth like a ringing bell.

“Then should I take you both to where Canaan’s guard and old man Le Roi are?”

“Should we not make contact with Miss Lutia first?” Col asked.

Myuri shrugged. “Lutia has a good hold over the strays in the city.” And she gave him an awkward wink.

That must mean that when she had gone to the inn and found out they had been falsely summoned by a young messenger, she had given the message to one of the dogs.

After reviewing the situation once more, Col determined he had overlooked nothing.

“Very well. Take us to where we need to go.”

“I sure will!”

Myuri was enthusiastic in situations like this, which meant she was very reliable.

A few students putting on a tough act with their little attacks were nothing to her.

“We’ll be enjoying this adventure for a little longer, Archivist.”

Col was not entirely sure if he managed to give him a good smile, but Canaan took great efforts to return the gesture. Col squeezed his hand to reassure him further.

“You’ll be fine because *I’m* here!” Myuri said suddenly, sour. She looked at Col and Canaan’s clasped hands, then promptly grabbed Col’s other hand even more tightly, as if she was snatching up the last item a street vendor had for sale.

Even in Aquent, where students were causing a ruckus all night long, there were plenty of streets that were totally silent in the night. Myuri cleverly made her way down these roads, pressing forward as she guided the two totally lost lambs.

The reason Col felt less fear than he had anticipated was either because avoiding an attack of his own power had given him confidence, or because he had experienced this plenty of times before, or because he had his reliable knight with him.

It was likely all of the above. And when he was aware of his calm that came precisely from the tension, he understood, for the very first time, why Myuri would be so obsessed with this feeling. One could never experience tension and elation like this in the deep mountains of Nyohhira.

He and Canaan followed Myuri as she led them down dark alleys. And nothing felt so good as the freeing feeling they experienced as they arrived at the wide-open farm fields.

He thought about how he could no longer laugh at Myuri for how much she whined about going to the desert. Considering how excited he was feeling at this very moment, he could only imagine how he would feel seeing the sights of an unfamiliar land beyond the horizon.

“Okay, we’re here,” Myuri said casually, straightening out her slumped shoulders. The road leading to the western highway, typically crowded with travelers and nearby farmers and students in the daytime, was only occupied by two other figures.

Both had unique silhouettes—of course, they were Canaan’s guard and Le Roi.

“Are you all right?!” Canaan’s guard rushed to them and grasped both of Canaan’s shoulders, almost as though he was about to lift him up. He looked him over, making sure he was unharmed. It was funny to see Canaan look a bit annoyed, much like Myuri would be, as he was fussed over.

“You are quite the seasoned traveler at this point, Master Col,” Le Roi laughed, his belly shaking.

“It’s not something I wished for,” Col replied. “But I’m glad to see everyone safe.”

“Nothing happened on our end,” Le Roi said. “That you were the only ones unfortunate enough to be attacked means it must have been the students from the south who planned all of this.”

Le Roi seemed to have come to the same conclusion, and the situation as it was seemed to be like a nighttime stroll for him. Perhaps he had managed to avoid the bloodcurdling attacks by inquisitors in the same easygoing way.

“What shall we do about our lodgings for the night? If this is the work of the students from the south, then it’s very likely their goal was to chase us out of the city. I believe any tavern or inn outside of the city walls should be no problem.”

“A good point...”

Col agreed, but he knew that they could be in deep trouble if they let down their guard.

And perhaps the first order of business was to get a clear grasp on the situation.

With that thought in mind, his eyes roamed in search of Myuri, only to find her standing apart from them, alone.

“Hmm?”

Perhaps she was standing alert of their surroundings, but there was something...lonely about her.

And he felt like something was missing from her silhouette.

He wondered why for a moment, and he thought that perhaps her mind was distant because of her worry for Lutia. Because it was clear there was a traitor among Lutia’s ranks, despite how hard she was working to keep the pack together.

Myuri’s kind spirit was doubtlessly pained by this fact.

“Myuri,” he called for her. He almost thought he saw her wolf ears, currently hidden, stand on end. “We’ll be all right. Please go back to Miss Lutia.”

If she were really busy with the operation to save the kids, then there was a possibility the messages from the strays were going astray somehow.

“Or would you like me to go?” Col asked. He was offering to take up the role of informing Lutia about the fake message and the attack. Doing so would also mean having to inform her of a traitor among her ranks, and he was certain that would not be a pleasant job.

But Myuri shook her head, took a deep breath, and said, “I’ll go. You’ll just get lost and end up captured.”

Despite her spiteful words, there was still no spirit in her tone.

Col thought that perhaps he should insist, force her to stand down, but Myuri was a proud wolf.

Being kind was not enough to show love for her.

“The problem Miss Lutia has is one that we can help with, even if we are not in the city. Please tell her that, and that while we may be leaving the city, we will never forget her.”

Even if there was a traitor hiding among her boys, Col knew he and his allies could help her. Lutia was a wolf that would not easily give in, much like Myuri.

Myuri, in her faint gloom, looked at Col with eyes wide in surprise.

Perhaps she thought that he would say something overprotective to her again, much in the way Canaan’s guard would to Canaan.

His smile and nod told her that he trusted her, and Myuri smiled in relief.

Perhaps the reason she seemed so uneasy was because when they had to leave the city in order to prepare for the great climax in their fight with the Church that was the ecumenical council, they might forget the wolf fighting her own battle in a distant city of learning. But Col would never do such a thing.

And so Col made a slight jab in order to reassure her.

“Also, you may absolutely *not* rip into the southern students simply because you are tired of them.”

Her reddish eyes rested on him, and she gave him a small, tense smile.

“I know.”

She then whirled around and dashed away through the nighttime city.

Though she did not seem to be entirely herself yet, there was nothing else Col could do for her.

As he watched her go, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Don’t lose heart, Master Col,” Le Roi said in his consideration. “Miss Lutia deals with a very deep-rooted problem.”

Vested interests, exploitation of the weak, abuse of the system, greed.

This was not a problem limited to Aquent. These things were layered like sediment and stuck fast to the modern Church as well.

“Let us go, then. The night is still cold,” Le Roi patted Col’s shoulder again.

Col turned around to see Canaan and his guard looking at him with concern. He thought the ones they should really be worrying about were Myuri, who would be returning to a city full of the enemy, and Lutia, who was fighting injustice even now.

It seemed he was not suited to being a dignified veteran priest.

But he did not feel particularly broken up about that. While everyone else began to readjust their bags, Col looked toward Myuri as she walked away.

Though he did feel the urge to rush after her, he knew he would be no help following her, and he told himself that he let her go for the sake of her own maturation.

He turned around once more, shaking off his worry, and he reached for his and Myuri’s bags that Le Roi had brought from the inn. And that was when he noticed something strange.

No—Myuri’s things alone should not be all that strange, yet that was all he could describe it as.

“Why is this...here...?”

A thought from a moment ago suddenly came back to him. He recalled how lonely Myuri had looked as she stood a short distance away from them, staring

at the heart of the city.

The reason he had felt like something was missing from her silhouette was not because of her expression. Something that should have been there was gone.

“Master Col?” Canaan called, rucksack on his back.

Col had no energy to respond with a smile this time. Instead, he pulled open Myuri’s sack.

The first thing he noticed were the knight tales she was always so busy writing. Then he saw the quills Hyland had given her, and then the leather pouch meant for her other writing implements. Beneath that she had her disguises, another small pouch stuffed full of candied sweets Hyland had also given her—her bag was an accurate representation of what normally filled her head, a mix of real and imaginary adventures.

But what he found at the very bottom of the bag, as though shoved down deep to hide it, evoked a feeling of doubt so intense that he could feel the sweat beading on his head.

Something must have happened for Myuri to have done this.

He swallowed the awful, awful feeling, akin to nausea, that welled up in him, and he thought desperately as to what this could mean.

His thoughts snagged on a memory of when Myuri had done something similar not long ago.

It was the night when talk of the ecumenical council had first come up, and Col was discussing whether or not they should go to Aquent. It was right after Myuri had finally convinced her foolish brother, hesitant from the painful experiences he had had as a boy, to go.

Myuri was thrilled to have a new adventure in an academic city; like a child, she had crawled under the same blanket as him. She had clung so hard to him, as though making up for the recent weeks where she had been holding back.

What had Myuri done then?

Before crawling into bed with him, she would casually reach for her sword,

resting against the wall, and then turn it around.

Why had she done that?

She did not want her wolf crest to see her acting in a manner not befitting a knight.

“Which...means...?”

Her sword had been left with the rest of the luggage, and her sash embroidered with the wolf crest had been stuffed to the very bottom of the sack. She had deliberately not worn either of those things to come and search for Col and Canaan at the chapel, even though her silly brother might find himself in trouble once again.

She often said that he only saw half of half the world.

Because her silly brother was not very good with women, and he was oblivious to those with less-than-savory motives.

And that meant if his little sister wanted to hide something from her big brother, then that would fall perfectly into his blind spot, and he would never find out.

The way she had acted on her way to see Lutia was perfectly preserved in his memory, and he mentally reviewed every detail. Even the most minute movement she had made took on a new meaning.

“Archivist...Canaan...?” he called.

Canaan peered at him curiously.

“When Myuri caught up to us, she appeared from behind, didn’t she?”

“Er...”

That must have been an unexpected question.

After a moment of hesitation, Canaan nodded.

“I believe so, yes. We suddenly heard footsteps behind us, which was quite surprising.”

Her footsteps were *sudden*.

She was a wolf. She could approach in total silence until her breath was on his neck. Perhaps she had done so to not to scare them, but that, too, was odd.

Since when did Myuri have such composure and thoughtfulness?

This girl had earnestly bound him with string because she could not stand the thought of her older brother getting kidnapped again.

Yet he had been drawn out by false information. If she knew that he had barely managed to escape danger in that old chapel, she would not have been acting like that.

The moment she saw they were okay, she would have lost all rational thought and chased after his attackers, her eyes blazing.

“Mister Le Roi.”

The seasoned bookseller stood silently.

“When Myuri came to the inn and found out about the boy’s false message, what was she acting like?”

Le Roi blinked and brought his hand to his chin in thought.

“She acted like she had quite the experience, yes. She gave her orders and then dashed from the inn at full speed. She flew into a total panic last time, so perhaps she learned from that.”

And then, in her calm, Myuri had left the sword with her wolf crest in her room, and then carefully pushed her sash all the way to the bottom of her sack.

Col could say, with total confidence, that this was *off*. That would be entirely out of character for her.

Myuri was doing something she did not want her wolf crest to see her doing.

As for what that might be, that conclusion, plus the way she was acting when she caught up to them in the little space in the alley, naturally led him to his answer.

Myuri had known about the attack ahead of time. If anything, she knew there was no danger to it at all. The only interpretation here was that, ultimately, Myuri was involved with both the false message and the attack.

The only thing Col did not know was her motive.

The first thing he thought was that she was putting on a show to tickle her desire for adventure. This girl had done nothing but write because she believed that the commotion with Nordstone should have had a more exciting outcome. And it was not long ago that her brother had been kidnapped by their enemies, so perhaps she wanted a do-over of that as well. But not on paper—in real life.

And so perhaps her plan was to gallantly dash in and save her brother after he had been lured into the old chapel, captured, and was being taken away by the enemy.

Now that he thought about it, that would easily explain why so few had stormed the chapel, and what they had been saying to one another.

Are they pulling our legs?!

The southern eagles who conspired with Myuri understood that they were just there to scare the outsider working with Lutia with a little show. Helping a little girl play knight at the same time was just a little extra fun added to their booze-filled days.

The logic was frighteningly straightforward. But the idea was unreasonable in a different sense.

Col could not imagine Myuri pulling off a stunt like this.

Because that would mean the traitor would be Myuri herself.

She had lamented Lutia's plight like it was her own. She hated the southern eagles' arrogance. She had been so desperate and passionate about giving them a good thrashing. He could not imagine any of that was just for show.

And here she was, throwing them out while they were in the middle of solving Lutia's problems. He could not imagine why she would arrange a situation where they would *have* to leave. Did all this mean she wanted to play out the danger itself?

For example, maybe she wanted a justification for using her wolf powers to get back at the southern eagles, especially if they played dirty to plot a kidnapping by using a false message.

That she could not use her fangs and claws vexed her. If she had all the right reasons in place, then she would be more than happy to physically rip into the greedy southern eagles.

This sounded much more likely for the cunning, rambunctious girl.

But this line of logic came with a caveat.

If the reasoning held that Myuri had plotted to give herself an excuse to use her wolf power, then that would require her trampling on Lutia's resolve to survive in the human world. In her fury, Myuri occasionally bared her fangs, knowing full well what she was doing was wrong, but that did not seem to be the case this time. She had been calm the entire time.

No—she was not calm. She was aware she was doing something unbecoming of her wolf crest. She was ashamed.

But then it made even less sense that she would do something to undermine Lutia's resolve. If she were crossing that line, then she would need fervor on the level of frenzy.

Why had she done something that led her astray from the path of a knight to the point where she wanted to hide from the wolf crests on her sash and sword?

And there was one thing Col simply did not want to believe.

Myuri was a mischievous, selfish, and wild child, but he thought she understood the difference between good and evil.

"Isn't this all...Myuri's plot?" he murmured, and everything fell into place. "Oh, that's right!"

When he exclaimed, Canaan flinched in surprise.

"Mister Le Roi," Col began. "If I may ask you about Miss Lutia."

"Yes, of course."

The bookseller, used to dealing with eccentric clients who tended to lose themselves in their own worlds, seemed somewhat eager.

"Do you know how long she has been in the city?"

Canaan stared wide-eyed and blankly. The bookseller, who had spent his days rushing about the city looking into one thing or another, spoke as though he was telling an old tale.

“A rather long time, I believe. I heard it’s been about four or five years since she began fighting the southern eagles, so...”

I knew it, Col wanted to say, but he swallowed his words.

“Due to how the quickly the population changes in the city, not many could say exactly, but I heard that she came to Aquent even before she began fighting. I heard she had been picked up off the street by an eccentric noble, so she must have been an orphan. Sent to the academic city as encouragement to find work, attempted to learn as a gesture of thanks, but instead endured terrible hardship... The story is quite well-known. I believe she’s fighting the rich students because of that bitter experience. Even if it means abandoning her studies, as it were.”

Le Roi’s eyes were calm and distant, unlike when Col or Myuri looked at Lutia.

“That is why I recommended we approach the matter of aiding her carefully. The roots of the problems in this town are deep, and despite how long Miss Lutia has been fighting, they are still yet to be solved.”

The reason Le Roi’s conclusion felt so cold was not because he had made a particularly heartless judgment. It was because Col and Le Roi had a difference in perception.

Le Roi knew that Lutia was devoting herself to a fight where she had very slim chances of victory. Furthermore, the bookseller was experienced in these sort of worldly affairs; it was likely he had noticed things about Lutia at the very beginning that Col had not even thought to consider even after all this time.

“May I ask you something?” Col asked.

“Anything,” Le Roi replied.

“I heard that Miss Lutia was learning church law so that she could confront the ones threatening to take her inheritance rights.”

From the way she spoke about it, it did not seem she was particularly intent

on hiding that story, and of course, Le Roi knew of it as well. And so he nodded generously.

“Who is the lord?” Col asked.

A curious look crossed Canaan’s face at the question.

Le Roi ran a hand over his closely shaved head, white sections of hair still visible.

“I see. So you didn’t know.”

Col was right.

“The lineage died out many years, and the land is now firmly in the hands of another. Which means that Miss Lutia is— Master Col?!”

That was enough. Col whirled on his heel to run after Myuri.

There was a reason Lutia was fighting for the poor students at the expense of her studies.

Lutia had said that after meeting the eccentric lord in the forest, she learned of a life where others would brush her hair in front of the fire, and she had come to understand the meaning of the word loneliness.

So many times had she said the word *pack*. And despite how it might have frustrated her, she vowed to hide her fangs and claws and pretend to be fully human, all for the sake of the pack.

And so the reason why Lutia had opened her eyes so wide when Col and his entourage had so easily squared away all the problems surrounding the poor students was not shock at how skillfully the Twilight Cardinal worked.

She had been dumbfounded at the naïveté of his actions as he tried to tear down the walls she had built up to shield her eyes from a reality she did not want to see.

Had the Twilight Cardinal never shown up, then the problems of this city would have lasted forever and ever.

But those very problems had created a home for a wolf who had nowhere else to go.

“And that makes me—”

Nothing like a savior at all.

Nothing but an unwanted guest.

And at some point, Myuri realized what was going on and offered her help.

Now everything was clear.

“I can’t *believe* this—!”

Not even Col was sure exactly who he was shouting at.

Though the curtain of night had fallen over the city long ago, the center of the city was still full of life—young men wandered about, singing together in groups; boys loitered on the street corners; street vendors and bards flocked to them in hopes of getting their business. Yet even there, some boys used the lights that lit up the nightlife to read books, to write.

It was an atmosphere unique to the academic cities that could not be found anywhere else. It was a strange city, like a mix of the spheres of children and adults, a world apart from everything else.

All of them spent time here that was neither strictly adult nor strictly childish, living in the daze of a temporary nightmare.

Col spotted a figure walking along the main street of the city.

It was Myuri—a figure he would never mistake.

“M—”

The moment he opened his mouth, he regretted his carelessness.

The wolf girl noticed his presence in the crowd immediately, and she whipped around to look at him.

The surprise lasted for only a moment on her face. She understood what was going on right away because the same thing had happened over and over and over in Nyohhira.

The tomboyish girl was tucking her tail between her legs, regretting the results of her latest antics.

But right now, she did not have the proof of her knighthood on her person, so there was nothing to reproach her for being unreasonable.

And so, despite being a wolf, Myuri dashed off like a fleeing hare. Col called after her.

“Sto— Please, wait!”

Myuri ignored his cries and fled into an alleyway. Col gave chase, but he could not keep up with her.

Just as he thought that, Col spotted Myuri standing in a brighter spot in the alleyway up ahead, as though she had swum through the deep darkness to reach the other shore.

“Oh, come *on*!”

He squinted into the dark, leaping over crates, stepping over piles of brick, crawling under doors removed from houses for repair, all in pursuit of Myuri.

The difference in their speed was so great that he quickly lost sight of her, but he knew Myuri well. It was times like these that she would alternate turning right and left in her escape.

Col carefully turned right, left, right, left, making sure not to lose track.

And just as he was starting to taste the blood in his lungs, he came to a dead end.

But Myuri was not there.

If this were a mountain bear, a creature who carefully retraced its steps to hide in the brush and craftily take up position behind its pursuer, he would be more wary of footsteps going the other way. But while he might not know what Myuri would do if she were calm, she had never once shown the presence of mind to think of such trickery when she ran away after getting in trouble for one of her pranks.

Col caught his breath and wiped away the sweat on his forehead as he stood waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, and that was when he spotted the tip of a white tail behind a crate at the end of the dead end.

The sight made him want to lose his patience, made him want to scold her,

even made him want to laugh, but he could understand bits and pieces of how Myuri felt from it—though she had genuinely wanted to escape him, a part of her wanted him to find her.

“Myuri.”

His voice was kinder than he was expecting. This was due in part to how tired he was, and partly because he knew it was entirely possible that she already regretted what she had done.

“You planned the attack, didn’t you?”

The ends of the fur on the tail stood on end, and the tail quickly pulled behind the crate.

“You didn’t wear your sword or sash because you *knew* you were doing something bad.”

Myuri remained silent.

Col sighed and stepped toward the crate. As he rounded it, he saw a sight he had seen one too many times in Nyohhira: a wolf pup trying to make herself smaller.

“Good grief.”

He had sighed so many times that he was certain God was fed up with him.

“If this were your plan alone, I would string you up upside down by your tail.”

All the hairs on her silver tail stood on end, and her tail whipped around to her other side to stay out of his reach.

“Despite how thoughtless you may be, you would never disrespect Miss Lutia’s feelings. And that means she knew about this attack, too. And that tells me that she has her motives. Because the lord and lady she so loved and respected already rest at God’s side.”

Myuri said nothing in return. Her hunched back betrayed her lack of spirit.

It seemed he had been correct.

Col’s ragged breath slowly calmed, and he took a deep breath and thought.

“What I don’t understand are your motives. Why would you facilitate such a

wicked deed?”

That was the mystery.

Regardless of whether Lutia had brought it up to Myuri herself, or if Myuri had picked up on Lutia’s thoughts at some point on her own, all she had needed to do was tell Col what sort of predicament Lutia was in. Even if she *wanted* to keep Lutia forever in this slumber, there was still no reason for her to hide it from him, or plot out an attack that went against her ideals as a knight. Her foolish older brother was generally softhearted, so she could have easily swayed him. Simply explaining what was going on as he innocently tried to solve all these problems, and asking him to pull back would have been a surefire way to resolve this.

But Myuri had not taken that option. Instead, she instigated the encounter at the chapel instead. And most likely, she did so with Lutia’s help.

So while Col on her tail along this line of thinking, the last piece of the puzzle did not fit. The answer lay deep in the darkness where he could not see his own hand.

And generally, in times like these, he would press forward only to fall into a deep, deep pit.

He needed to know everything so he could pick the correct path forward.

“Myuri,” he said, looking down at the girl huddled in the dark. “Please tell me. Aren’t you a—”

Knight?

Perhaps Myuri thought that if she let him finish his question, then she would never call herself a knight again.

Her drooped ears shivered, and the wolf’s weak voice cut him off.

“It was...Lutia’s letter.”

“Hmm?”

“I knew...from Lutia’s letter.”

As Col wondered when they received a letter from Lutia, he realized she

spoke of the letters she was exchanging with her allied scholars.

“Blondie’s letter came with the smell of travel. But Lutia’s didn’t smell like that. And that’s when I figured out she was lying about talking to important people who lived far away.”

Perhaps she had calmed somewhat as she spoke, or perhaps she found her resolve. Yet despite rising to her feet, she still did not look at him, likely out of guilt, and was turned to the side.

“What I didn’t understand was why Lutia would lie to us. She’s fighting for everyone, hiding her fangs and claws despite how painful that is, so why?”

The story of Lutia’s lord was necessary for answering that question. While the reason Le Roi looked into those details was because he felt no particular attachment to her, Col and Myuri did not question her at all because she was a wolf.

This was not a question of whether she was actively telling a lie, but whether she was telling the whole truth.

And while Lutia was not lying to them, she *had* very cleverly hidden her tracks.

“But I noticed something weird about how she was acting earlier. That’s why I knew she had to be hiding something.”

“What seemed strange?” Col asked in reply.

Myuri sighed, as though fed up with how slow-witted her brother was.

“She wasn’t happy when you were going to solve all her problems.”

“.....”

Her foolish brother believed that she was simply surprised from watching him solve those difficult problems in one fell swoop. At that point, Myuri’s own eyes had been shining.

“And so when I figured out the letter, a lot of questions started floating in my head.”

That was when she realized Lutia did not, in fact, want any of the problems in

this city to be resolved.

“...And so you already knew when I left with Canaan.”

Myuri had said she would be staying back to talk about saving the kids. Though Col noticed something was unusual about that, he figured she had simply been occupied with planning the operation, as she had been before.

But there was not a lot of time left to lead the benevolent sheep wielding powerful resolutions in their attempt to solve the city's problems far, far away.

Lutia and Myuri had no choice but to resort to their roughhewn strategy.

“Yeah. Lutia doesn't want any of these problems to be solved. She has nowhere to go home to. She said that if she stays here fighting forever, then it'd be like time stopped.”

There was no way to know if Lutia's lord and lady were already on their deathbeds by the time she came to the Aquent.

Regardless, she was far too late to master ecclesiastic law and fight for the preservation of their land.

There was no point in gaining a degree at this point. But at the same time, to leave the city without gaining said degree felt like she was betraying the expectations of the noble couple who sent her here.

And much like the boys who reached for the alcohol in a desperate attempt to make the night last longer, afraid of the tomorrow that would come as they slept, Lutia collected massive problems to keep right in front of her.

“I can sort of understand why you sympathized with her. But...”

She could have told Col what was going on, and then they could have given up on the problems in this city and moved onto the next city for Lutia's sake. There was no reason for her to orchestrate an attack, going so far to stoop to unknightly deeds all to hide Lutia's circumstances.

That was when Myuri finally looked at Col. The understanding she was doing something bad, coupled with uncontrollable irritation, bubbled up to the surface as tears brimming in her eyes.

“You're...nice..., Brother.”

Her words and expression did not match.

“That’s why, if Lutia’s problems were never solved, you would keep trying all sorts of things to help her, right? That’s...what I wanted...”

“What...?”

He was sure that even God would not blame him for his mind shattering from this development.

He did not understand what Myuri was trying to say.

Had they not conspired to make sure Col would never try to solve Lutia’s problems?

Yet here Myuri was, saying she *wanted* him to keep trying to solve her problems.

This was like the ancient logic question—does the snake that eats its own tail ever get full?

“What does this...?”

As Col began to ask in return, Myuri shook her head, irritated.

“It’s just like I said. You’re nice, Brother. Even if we left this place behind, you would worry about Lutia forever, and you would try everything you could to help her solve her problems. Right?”



She was right. After the incident at the chapel, when he met up with Le Roi and the guard and Myuri was about to go back into the city, he had said the exact same thing to her to pass on to Lutia, all in an attempt to comfort the uneasy Myuri.

“You were so close to finding out when you gave me the message for Lutia, just like I hoped you would.”

She had been so anxious then, but she had also been so relieved when he said they would not abandon Lutia.

The outlines of his world blurred.

“But if you and everyone else leave the city, it would be so easy for the bad kids here to stay a step ahead of Lutia. That’s why...”

The look in Myuri’s eyes finally helped Col realize, despite how dense he was.

Myuri and Lutia were the same.

“If we keep helping Lutia with her unsolvable problems, then my journey with you will last forever.”

Crystal drops spilled from Myuri’s eyes. Col idly mused how her eyes, inherited from her mother, were bright red even though her tears were clear.

“If Canaan’s telling the truth, then once this council thing is over, our journey will be over, too. So when I learned what Lutia was doing, it hit me right in the heart. I didn’t realize that was also an option.”

It was not simply that they were both wolves.

She was like Lutia in the sense that she understood, from the very depths of her heart, how she felt.

“But that would mean...tricking you. And then I realized I would have to get in your way forever, so...” She gripped the hem of her clothes with one hand and furiously wiped away her tears with the other. “But...if we could help Lutia...and my journey with you lasted forever...then I thought...maybe...”

That was why she had removed her sword, decorated with her knight’s crest, and shoved her sash into the very bottom of her bag, and returned to

wandering the chaotic streets of Aquent regardless of whether her plan would go well or not.

She was smart, attentive in many things, and she could see far into the future. Yet here she was.

Col looked down at her, sobbing after finishing her confession, and a memory of a time when the girl was no bigger than her own tail came back to him.

The power and vigor of her tail, roughly the same size of her body in those days, often meant that the rest of her was at its mercy. And even when she grew bigger, it still held considerable sway over her. Though she had logic and reasoning, it was never enough to suppress her ears and tail.

And Myuri's confession made such perfect sense, it was astonishing. There was nothing beyond Col's understanding, and all he could really say was it was completely understandable coming from Myuri.

The reason he felt disappointed, even, was because he sensed no malice from her.

And so he could not help his sigh, because it was not as though she was trying to deceive her big brother.

It was because the little black snowball she had tried to drop from the top of the mountain was rolled up in assumptions.

"Listen to me, Myuri."

Myuri shrunk into herself and her tears stopped.

Col winced to see Myuri so thoroughly frightened, but he collected himself and maintained the angry look on his face.

"I already told you about the ecumenical council, didn't I?"

Tears that had stopped from fear did not stay stopped for long, of course. They began to well in her eyes again.

Col tensed, steeling his emotions so he would not be swayed by them, and continued to speak.

"According to Canaan, the Church has decided to hold the ecumenical council

because they are left with little choice. And so if we attend, perfectly positioned to do so, then it is entirely possible they may accept our demands—that means there is a chance this fighting between the kingdom and the Church will come to an end. That’s what I believed.”

That was, in essence, what had led him to leave Nyohhira. That would also mean his dreams would be coming true.

“But that will not be easy. Printing many copies of the scripture and distributing it across the world to sway everyone to our side is one thing we have to do. And doing that alone means we will have to keep visiting cities like this and keep running around to complete various tasks. I told you that would mean we would have to overcome many trials like this in the future, didn’t I?”

When Col had explained all that to her, Myuri had instead whined about not being able to go to the desert. Col had interpreted her demands to go to the desert literally, but Myuri’s concerns ran deeper than that.

Were they not going to the desert? Did they no longer have any plans to visit places that no one she knew had ever been, places that only existed in books, like the desert? Did they no longer need the impossible dream of the new continent? Did that mean the journey she thought would one day reach its destination was actually no more than a trip with an unceremonious end?

Col had thought he had realized that was the way Myuri thought.

But he had not thought it was something so important that it needed solving immediately. Though he had not believed he did not need to play along with Myuri’s typical naive dreams, their clear misunderstanding had been born from this.

And that was why, as Myuri listened to him speak, resentment had slowly been building inside her.

Though tears still spilled from her eyes, she lifted her head to look at him. The look in her eyes told him she had something to say.

Col stared at her in return—he was ready to listen.

What was it that led Myuri to abandon her path of knighthood, to collude with Lutia, all supposedly for the sake of making sure their journey lasted

forever?

“When...”

As she spoke, her ears flicked about and the fur on her tail stood on end. She drew up her knees, lifted herself off the ground, and her pointed canines gleamed beneath her wet lips. Col almost could not help but glance at the pouch of wheat that hung around her neck, the one she received from her mother.

“When you defeat the Church...”

“When I defeat the Church?” he repeated, fully intending to maintain his dignity as her older brother.

“You’re going to work at Blondie’s place, aren’t you?”

“.....”

If this was meant to be a surprise attack, it was masterful and incredibly effective.

“What? Y-you mean...Heir Hyland?”

He forgot to maintain his angry posturing, and his question made him sound like a fool.

Myuri apparently found that reaction itself unpleasant—she bared her fangs and began to growl.

He flinched at her threatening demeanor; Hyland’s name had come up much too suddenly. He wondered, though, if her jealousy toward Hyland was the cause of all of this, but that didn’t make much sense. When he considered how much she had warmed up to her as of late, it was hard to imagine that would be the source of her anger.

So Col working under Hyland served as the key for something else.

When he realized this, he finally managed to draw something from the banks of his memory.

“Could this be about...if I were to become a priest, you mean?”

Similar to the students who drifted into this city, Col had a dream when he so

boldly set off from Nyohhira. Though it was not his primary objective, he thought Heir Hyland would reward him after they successfully righted the Church's wrongs.

Originally, he had been motivated by the selfish desire to use the Church's authority to protect the village he once lived in, only to find the teachings he had come to learn meshed so well with his personality. They were genuinely wonderful.

And that was why he thought it would be lovely if he could become a priest one day, so he could guide troubled people and lessen the hardships of this lamentable world. And it was his end goal of becoming a priest that had been his justification for why he could not marry Myuri.

But at some point on their dizzying adventure, he had completely forgotten about that.

Or, the other thing that had come to mind, was that perhaps she thought Col becoming a priest meant he would become an enemy of all nonhumans like her.

But Myuri herself, after all was said and done, seemed to have enjoyed dressing up as a saint, so she must have the intelligence to easily separate her true, inner feelings and what she showed to others.

In which case, what was it that Myuri thought about the prospect of Col becoming a priest?

Col held his breath as he stared back into those red eyes, and the silver wolf spoke.

"We won't be adventuring, and you won't make me your wife, but if you're working at a church that Blondie builds then I'll have nothing to do! You—you —" She leaned forward like a wolf ready to pounce. "You'd send me back home!"

"Oh, wait, My—"

He had no time to say the entirety of her name. Myuri rammed her head into his stomach.

The force alone sent him flying.

She had done so not to bite him, nor to get him out of the way so she could run.

She was just like a small child holding on with her skinny arms, refusing to let go, telling her brother that absolutely nothing had changed since then.

"I don't want that! I don't want to go back to the village alone!" she screamed.

Just as the words left her mouth, her tantrum began to build again, and before long she began to cry. It was a childish wail, unlike her crying from earlier.

Though it was a sight he had often seen back at the Nyohhira bathhouse, now it had been so long since he had last seen her like this that it felt surprisingly new. At the same time, he realized this showed just how much Myuri had been hiding her childishness, in the truest sense, for the entirety of their journey.

He looked down at her as she sobbed and clung to him, and he gave a deep, disappointed sigh. When he then wrapped his arm around her thin frame, he thought she might peel it away, but she only clung tighter.

Though she seemed wide open, the hidden parts of her were held deep down. Maybe that was why when he started talking about what knights should be like, that had caused her to push herself to grow up more quickly than was necessary.

The spark that had lit this mess of emotion on fire was the clash between the reality that this journey would one day end and her older brother's dream of becoming a priest one day.

And the wolf, afraid of the blaze, had panicked as she lost her cool and concocted a fake attack.

But as Col watched Myuri sob in his arms, he was not frustrated with her, nor was he angry, of course. If anything, he was relieved.

Though she occasionally acted on the whims of her youth, Myuri was still a vigilant and coolheaded wolf, and though she was somewhat different from Col,

she had still wrestled with a great deal over the course of their journey. Even though she often cried or got angry or had fits of selfishness, in the most crucial moments, her logic and reasoning never led her astray. Just like a wolf leaping unerringly at its prey.

And what of it?

When she noticed Lutia's secret, she sympathized with her, schemed with her for questionable ends, put their plan in motion, and in the end, regretted it all.

Though it made logical sense as a series of events, the reasoning did not quite add up. Perhaps it would be a bit of an exaggeration if Col were to say that he was delighted to know that Myuri, too, had her foolish moments.

While she clearly felt guilty, at the end of the day she had been plotting to fool her brother. But that was not the true reason he was not ready to forgive the wailing girl. It was simpler than that. Myuri had overlooked something far more fundamental.

It was time to fulfil his role as older brother, a role which had remained unfilled these past few weeks.

"Listen to me, Myuri."

After letting her cry for a little while, he rubbed her back and placed both hands on her shoulders, then peeled her away from him.

As he carefully moved her away, like peeling a scab from skin in a way to keep oneself from bleeding again, the silver girl looked up to him with the smoldering embers of her eyes once there was distance between them.

"Think about this simply."

Myuri's tears fell like hot springs as she hiccupped. Col continued.

"If I told you to go back to Nyohhira, would you do so without question?"

Col thought that perhaps there might have been a frown on his face.

Because he had pictured himself telling Myuri to go back to Nyohhira due to one reason or another, and the trouble that followed was so easy to imagine.

"Would you listen to me, no matter what sort of reason I gave you?"

There was a phrase: no matter what. When Col had been busy preparing for his departure, Myuri had insisted she would be coming along with him and had even gone as far to sink her teeth into his arms and legs. She had ultimately hidden herself in an empty barrel and followed him ever since. She would be coming along, no matter what. It was impossible to picture that same girl choosing to go back to Nyohhira of her own volition.

He was confident enough to swear to God.

No matter what, Myuri would never leave his side.

“I think you’ve been writing too many fantasy stories.”

Perhaps a weaker-willed girl might listen to her older brother’s request without question and return home in sadness.

But that was just a fictional girl that Myuri was picturing, or perhaps the sort of girl a bard might sing about. There was no doubt she had been so drawn in by Lutia’s story of loneliness that she, too, began to think she was the main character in a tragedy.

When it came to sentimental matters, she was, after all, just like any other girl her age.

“Well?” Col asked again, and Myuri stared up blankly at him. “Would you listen to what I say if I told you to go home? Is there any sort of reason that would convince you go home?”

“.....”

Myuri sniffed, then shook her head.

Apples did not fall into the sky. The sun did not rise in the west.

And much in the same way, this wild girl would never go home even if he told her to.

“...Er... I... W-wait...”

Myuri’s wolf ears flicked back and forth, hesitant, and her tail drooped listlessly.

Soon her expression followed, and her head drooped awkwardly.

“You so foolishly get ahead of yourself.”

Col knocked lightly on her head, and like a stake being driven into the ground, her head fell and her back hunched over.

“But I suppose you sympathized too closely with Lutia’s plight.”

Myuri, whose fingers were folded so tightly together, unable to control herself, suddenly looked up when he said that, as though recalling something important.,

“Oh! B-Brother!”

“What is it?”

“Wh-what should we do...about Lutia...?”

She seemed ready to burst into tears yet again, and a jolt of tension ran through Col.

“What was it that the two of you were plotting in the end?”

Col was always suffering stomachaches in Nyohhira because the mischievous Myuri was more cunning than any adult.

And on top of that, she and Lutia were connected by a darker motivation this time.

“Well... It looked like you and everyone else were going to solve all the problems so easily, so I told her...she should probably work more closely...with the southern eagles...”

Perhaps the conclusion they came to was that in order to oppose the Twilight Cardinal, an extraordinary bookseller, and a prodigy boy who worked in the heart of the Church, that was their only choice.

The southern eagles, too, had plenty of reasons to talk to Lutia.

“Have those talks happened yet?”

When Col asked if there was still time, Myuri’s eyes quickly darted around the alley, panicked, before settling on Col once again.

“I—I don’t think so...”

The southern students who came to attack the chapel had sounded like they were doubting Myuri and Lutia.

As Col concluded that must mean nothing definitive had happened yet, Myuri spoke up again.

“L-Lutia said she was gonna purposefully make the rescue mission a total, tragic failure to earn the other students’ trust... She said it would be their present...”

Lutia had already decided to hide her fangs and claws. And now she was attempting to sell out her conscience.

She believed *this* was much preferable to waking from the dream.

Col sighed deeply, and Myuri flinched, drawing up her shoulders.

“We cannot allow Miss Lutia to brand her heart in this manner.”

She was not a lost sheep. She was a lost wolf.

The water ran deep and dragged the weak into the dark depths.

Myuri had left her knight’s sword and sash behind. She attempted to stand, apparently no longer able to bear her own carelessness, but Col stopped her.

“You will not be taking part in this.”

“B-but—!”

“No buts. You two colluded to perform wicked deeds. If you changed your mind, then who is Miss Lutia going to believe?”

“Oh... Um...”

Myuri’s ears drooped. In order to untangle this complicated mess of hair, they would have to work out a plan for freeing each strand without breaking any.

“Listen to me. I saw through your plot. And then your brother, the Twilight Cardinal, rebuked you, grabbed you by the scruff of your neck, yelled at you, and made you confess to everything as you cried. Do you understand me?”

“Huh? But...that’s...”

Myuri shrunk as though her head was being pushed down, but her lips still

moved as though searching for something to say.

“And that is why I will be the one to put Miss Lutia back on the proper path.”

This way, Myuri would not be labeled as a traitor who would so easily divulge secrets, and Lutia would not have to experience being betrayed by the first and only fellow wolf she had met in her entire lifetime.

The reason Myuri eventually confessed was because for wolves, hierarchy was absolute—when her elder brother grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, she had no choice but to cry.

“In the meanwhile, you should... Yes. You should meet with Mister Le Roi and the others and stay put with them.”

It was unlikely Lutia would believe Col if her accomplice was with him. And there was yet another reason why he was sending her away.

“Go...to the others?”

The hairs on Myuri’s tail stood on end out of discomfort, perhaps because she had pictured going back to them.

Her eyes turned up desperately toward Col, pleading with him to allow her to stay here.

“Your knight sword and sash are there. You need to go back and understand the meaning behind your knight’s vows.”

Myuri looked like she was going to burst into tears again, and she eventually hung her head.

“Good grief.”

Col ruffled Myuri’s hair because he understood she did not scheme with Lutia out of greed and self-interest. She had sympathized with the girl’s loneliness, and she genuinely could not bear to ignore the plight of a wolf who had no home to return to. Though she constantly derided her brother for being too softhearted, Myuri was exactly the same.

But what set them apart was that while she was softhearted, she was also keen.

She had realized that she would allow her own dream to continue into eternity all while helping Lutia, and so she decided to work with her.

“I will not be overlooking your latest trick like your usual antics. I will be punishing you for this.”

Myuri, recalling how often she had been scolded back in Nyohhira, lifted her head and gaped like a fish.

“Do not make that face at me. Put your ears and tail away and go back to Mister Le Roi.”

Col clapped his hands, and Myuri, who had been sitting huddled in her despair, slowly got to her feet.

She then turned to look at him again, eyes begging for his pity, but he found it rather easy to stare back at her with indifference. That was because he had a little feeling about what she might do.

And just as he thought, after the scared girl’s eyes darted around his face, she stuck her tongue out at him and then scampered away. Col had no idea if she was a child, or an adult.

Then she came to a stop at the entrance to the alley a short distance away, and turned to look back at him.

“Please save her, Brother.”

That was all she said before vanishing into the dark of the alley.

He almost wished she would never grow up, and that she would always stay this way.

“Now then.”

There was one lost wolf left.

He planted his feet firmly on the ground to set off, but he was not sure of the roads in the dark.

He naturally thought about getting Myuri to lead him to the Green Gourd, but that only caused him to smile wryly to himself—he also relied on her a little too much.

Though Col got a little lost along the way, he managed to find his way to the Green Gourd somehow. As he looked up at their usual hotel, it did not immediately seem much different, but he looked closer to see candlelight flickering beyond the cracks in the shutters, and to see the silhouettes of people busily coming and going.

It seemed he had made it before the plan to save the kids had been set in motion.

Lutia was attempting to earn the southern eagles' trust by purposefully causing the plan to fail, all so that she could work even more closely with them.

If it went well, then her boys would never find out about her secret arrangement, and they could continue fighting the southern eagles as they always had. But Lutia knew the truth, and it would only corrode her pride like it had been exposed to sulfur.

The reason she had made such a dark decision was most certainly not out of emotional weakness. If anything, it was due to Col's own naïveté—his innocent belief that all her problems could be solved, and therefore, they should be. He had never even stopped to consider that someone might *need* those problems to exist.

That was exactly the same as the knightly orders and children of nobles who lost their way once all the wars stopped, even though a world without war was strictly a better one.

Therefore, it was clearly wrong to one-sidedly rebuke Lutia for being a liar.

But this was not a matter of whether what Lutia was doing was right or not. It could not be healthy for her to continue dreaming in this city, which sat somewhere between heaven and earth, still imprisoned by the memories she had of her hair—or fur—being combed by the fire. It was even less healthy for her to work with the southern students so she could remain in this stasis, getting the poorer students entangled in it all in the meanwhile.

Though Lutia might scoff at him, saying this was none of his business, he knew that if he did not reach out to her here, as someone who aspired to be a man of the cloth, then he would have to hide his copy of the scripture beneath the carpet, just like Myuri did.

If someone was hurt and in pain, then he had to take their hand and pull them out of the darkness.

And unlike Myuri, who could only think of licking one another's wounds, Col had another way of resolving this.

"Is Miss Lutia in?"

When Col threw open the door to the Green Gourd, the tavern was filled with quiet bustle and the murmur of voices.

Some people present were wrapping leather straps to the handles of shiny pots and pans and strapping them over their chins like helmets. Some were doing practice swings with rolling pins, and some were checking to see if their leather riding whips were in good shape.

Every single one of them were younger boys, and in the candlelight, it seemed like a scene from a child-friendly tale of adventure, the sort Myuri might think up.

The innkeeper, among the very few adults present, responded, overwhelmed.

"Lutia's...upstairs..."

"Thank you."

Shaking off the stares of the boys readying for battle, Col headed upstairs.

The boys on the second floor were also busy with their preparations, and the floor was in total disorder. Col could not see Lutia at a glance, so he climbed to the third floor to find it surprisingly empty. When he turned his gaze upward, he was also asking God for luck in the impending clash.

Col had a secret plan to persuade Lutia. But he could not completely rid himself of the feeling that it was none of his business.

He would need decisiveness to close the gap.

And that was why he needed God's guidance, more than ever.

When he came to the fourth floor, the door to the armory of knowledge was open, and light spilled out from the inside.

"Miss Lutia."

He stood in the doorway and said her name. It was likely she already knew he was coming even before he had stepped in the building. With an exasperated look on her face, she closed the book in her hands. Judging by the thickness of it, it was a copy of the scripture, written in the script of the Church.

“So the Twilight Cardinal has come in the silver wolf’s place. This can only be bad news.”

“It is good news, actually.”

Lutia turned to look at him.

“Because I’ve come here to pull you out of this nightmare.”

The wolf had hidden her pain and her true self; only one corner of her mouth turned upward in a smile. Perhaps this would be seen as a smile on the face of a human, but it was also the look of a bloodied wolf who had finally been backed into a corner after a hunter had tracked its bloody trail.

“This is none of your business.”

“I thought you might say that.”

Col took a big step into the room, and he thought for a moment she was going to throw the scripture at him.

But Lutia remained still, and instead revealed to him her wolf ears and tail.

It was as though she was telling him she was going to bare her teeth and claws next if he took another step closer.

“You shouldn’t do this.”

But Col continued to casually close the distance between them, unafraid. Lutia’s eyes widened, and she faltered.

“Miss Lutia, I thought you were a proud wolf. You must stop this at once.”

Flames burst behind Lutia’s eyes, furious that he spoke like he knew what he was talking about. Perhaps that was the fire of the hearth she had come to know in her past, or perhaps the fire of the candles she used to mourn her former lords.

“If you continue to steep in this fake conflict, then who are you bringing

happiness to?”

The poor students desperately held on to the hope that they might be conferred a degree one day, and Lutia continued to wish that time would stop for her. In an ambitious city such as this, no one would think it odd to entertain such idle hope.

“I apologize for foolishly trying to resolve your problems without fully understanding your circumstances.”

The Twilight Cardinal had power even beyond Col’s imagining. This was the first time he truly understood that such vague notions as renown and connections could be wielded with such terrifying power.

Because the problems Lutia had comfortably deemed unsolvable were quickly shoved aside in the face of his power.

“Now that I know, I still believe the problems must be uprooted.”

“Shut up!” Lutia bellowed, peeled back her lips to bare her fangs, and leaped at him.

When a wolf of the forest loomed over a person, ferocious growl accompanied by bared teeth, most would desperately try to pull back and run away. But the difference in power between a wolf that lived in a forest and a person who lived within the confines of a city’s walls was vastly different. Such a thoughtless reaction rarely helped in any situation. But there was a trick. One did not need to use power in order to confront such ferocious power.

What he needed to do was the opposite.

“Miss Lutia.”

“—?!”

For a moment, it seemed as though Lutia did not understand what had happened. All she knew was that she had been pulled into an embrace, and her fangs had caught nothing but air.

If this were Myuri, she may have anticipated this and put distance between the two of them, and she knew how to get out of Col’s hold by wriggling like a lamprey if need be. That was because Myuri was so full of others’ love that Col

was surprised she never burped from it; she had been given hugs her whole life.

But Lutia was not like that at all.

She had once shyly confessed that the days she spent letting people comb her hair before the fire and calling her Lutia had nearly numbed her mind. So it made sense that half of her life story didn't teach her how to deal with someone coming in straight for a hug.

"I am not your enemy."

"Grrrgh!"

She growled, twisted, but Col's right arm wrapped beneath Lutia's left arm, and his left arm pressed down on the top half of her right arm, pinning it in place even as he wrapped around her. While keeping their mirrored postures in place, he grasped his left wrist with his right hand to maintain his position; not even a thrashing Myuri could easily escape from this.

It seemed Lutia did not know how to give herself strength the way she wanted, so all she did was fruitlessly struggle. She could not bite at Col either, of course, so it almost seemed like she was drowning.

"Miss Lutia, I am not your enemy."

If this were Myuri thrashing in his arms, he would prepare himself for a head-butt, but Lutia did not seem to think that far. Or perhaps her anger and thrashing was just for show—all she did was awkwardly twist and growl.

Col considered it was because of these things that she did not return to her wolf form, so he let go without warning.

Lutia staggered back, putting space between them. But all she did was stare at Col nervously, as though bewildered that she had been let go.

"You should return to the correct path."

And she was perfectly capable of doing so.

But his words clearly warped something in her mind.

It was only for a few moments that she seemed furious he was overstepping her boundaries, but Col soon understood this was the look was of a girl who

could no longer withstand the pain.

“...No.”

Because what she so childishly whispered were essentially the first pebbles in a landslide.

“No... No, no! No!”

Lutia shook her hair loose, screamed, and dug her fingers into her hair in a furious scrub.

“What do you know?! I’m alone! No one answers my howls! The ones who took me out of the forest died! Left me by myself! Abandoned this city!” she shouted, eyes still set firmly on him. But what she was *really* looking at were the memories of the lord and lady she loved so much.

The days she thought would continue forever came to an end without fanfare, and in her eyes, as a spirit who would live for a very long time, it was a betrayal. And because she *knew* thinking of it in that way was wrong, she did not know how to relieve her pain. Perhaps she needed a dream like this so she could forever keep this long-running nausea at bay.

Legend had it there was a family in the desert nations who once served the king, yet engaged in assassination; they needed the smoke of special herbs in order to keep the fear at bay. Much in the same way, she had inhaled lungful after lungful of the decadent air of this dreamlike academic city.

Half a smile sat on Lutia’s face while tears spilled from her eyes.

A wolf of the forest would never weep.

Only those who knew the warm hearths of the human world could cry.

“What...do you...?”

And the foolish sheep, who had no confidence in anything, said to her, “I do know. I understand.” Perhaps the exhaustion that had seeped into his tone made his words sound more authentic. “Because the wolf at my side was frightened by the same shadows not long ago.”

And in order to chase those shadows away, Col had made her a promise.

I will always be on your side.

But he could not use the same method in order to persuade Lutia, because their relationship was not the same as his and Myuri's. And the first method he thought of, inviting Lutia on their journey, was not only rude, but even insulting.

Because since she was sad after losing her lord and lady, it would be impossibly brazen for them to offer to be their replacements.

Myuri, too, was likely intending on talking down Lutia as well. But Myuri had Col, and perhaps the words she had given Lutia to help ease her loneliness had no power over her precisely because of that. Perhaps the reason she wanted to bond with her over darker motives was because she knew that was all she could do.

And so, in order to solve the problems that were causing Lutia pain, she needed to form a different kind of bond. The kind that not even Myuri could offer.

Col had been thinking about that the entire way to the Green Gourd.

It was clear a simple promise held no meaning if it was nothing but words.

Yet sometimes, one person would cut themselves to convince another to trust their resolve and words. Lutia had done something similar by betraying her good conscience to work with the southern students, the ones she had spent so many years fighting.

In that case, Col knew what Lutia needed to hear.

All he needed to do was think back on her when they first came to the city.

That was where his clue lay.

Col stared straight into her eyes and said, "Bards say that a broken heart can only be healed by new love."

"Er, what?"

In order to draw the attention of an excited dog, the first thing one needed to do was do something unexpected.

"I have a wolf who never wants to leave my side. She thinks that once the end

of an adventure is in sight, she can prolong it by forcibly creating new adventures.”

“.....”

Lutia was silent. She was likely thinking of Myuri, who quite literally sniffed out her deception from the letter’s scent, and with whom she then shared her secret.

“Despite your fangs and claws, they served no use when it came to parting with the people you loved. They could not even protect them from the unfairness of the human world. And that is why you tried to find new power in human society.”

Of all the written powers, ecclesiastic law was among the most powerful. Nations may rise, codify their own laws, and then fall, but only the Church’s laws survived throughout the eras.

“But you said the nobles who took away the land of the lord and lady you so loved had been working with the Church, right? What if I told you there was something that could shake the very foundations of the Church?”

Lutia, who had remained on her back foot for most of the conversation, finally managed to find her footing, and she tensed.

“That...doesn’t exist. The ruler of the human world *is* the Church. If the people in red capes and golden crowns said the same thing, then I would’ve seized everything with my fangs and claws a long time ago.”

Swords and shields could only do so much. In reality, there was no country in the world that had as far a reach as the modern Church did. As such, anyone who haphazardly confronted the Church with force would be met with force overwhelming.

And for that reason, Lutia wanted to learn ecclesiastic law so she could get close to the Church, much in the same way Col embraced Lutia.

“Or what? Are you telling me the Twilight Cardinal’s going to be the one to bring down the Church?”

Her wry smile seemed forced, and of course, that was not what he meant.

But there were things he was keeping from Myuri, too.

“I do not want to bring down the Church. I want to fix it.”

She must have thought his reply evasive at best. She was doing her best to emphasize the sneer on her face, the sort that only came about right after getting frightened.

“But I have found something that could turn the entire righteousness of the scripture on its head. That knowledge comes from the ancient empire, passed down within the desert nations.”

Lutia’s scornful grin froze.

“What...are you—”

Despite her clear bewilderment, Col stepped forward to close the distance between them with a single stride. She tried to escape, but he grasped her shoulders firmly and leaned in so close that he could count every damp eyelash on her eyelids. He did this because he knew no one else should hear this. Not even the moon.

He whispered into the wolf’s ear—it was only for her, and no one else in the world.

“It’s the shape of this world.”

“The...the shape?”

“Does the sea have an end? What lies beyond it? And...” He glanced out through the crack in the open window. “Why the moon waxes and wanes...”

Lutia’s eyes widened because she knew what he was talking about.

In her search for kin, this girl had been looking up houses with wolf crests, those that could trace their lineage back to the ancient empire. If she had learned the desert languages along the way, then she would have learned about this story in her studies.

Because grammar books typically used stories to teach.

There were plenty of odd stories from the ancient empire that the modern Church mindlessly suppressed. And among those, the greatest one was the idea

that the world was not flat, but round.

A silver, metallic globe had sat hidden in Nordstone's house.

It was as though the moon itself had fallen to earth and etched out the lines of the world map.

The moonlight had partially illuminated the globe, and it was a perfect recreation of the phases of the moon.

"I think there is a possibility that the Church, too, refuses to wake from its own slumber."

The scripture said this world was created by God, unique in its properties, and that it sat in the center of all of creation.

But if there was no end to the sea, if one traveled west only to return from the east again, and if that same assumption could be applied to the moon, given the way it waxed and waned, then the sun was undoubtedly the same. And if that were true, it would be hard to believe that all the stars in the night sky were any different.

Which meant the concept of a heaven and earth and underworld, all created by God and passed down for a thousand years, was much too narrow for reality. If there was no heaven in the heavens and there were many earths like the one he stood on now, then exactly which star above them did they go to when they were called to God's side in death? And if digging a hole straight down only brought one to the other side of the world, then where was hell supposed to be?

There were plenty of intelligent people within the Church. They had realized long ago that if they acknowledged the world might be round, then that could possibly cause an explosion of problems beyond their control.

And that is why they worked so hard to put a lid on those ideas and pretended like they never existed.

"There was once a nonhuman alchemist who lived with a noble. She was a cat spirit—once she created a model of the world, she suddenly left on a journey, saying she was going to head to the edge of the west. It was through knowledge of the ancient empire that she observed the night sky and studied how the stars

crossed the heavens. I have been told the alchemist set off in search of a new continent, but I think that is not exactly right. I think she wanted to confirm the shape of our world.”

Col paused, then abruptly and deliberately changed his tone:

“I want to *right the Church’s wrongs*.”

He believed they needed to be woken from their bad dreams, even if it meant waking up to a painful reality. It was better than continuing to lie.

“I have not told Myuri this. It would be a...powerful drug for her.”

He could not even begin to imagine how she might react.

It was not something he could tell her while it was still merely conjecture.

“But you—you lost your dear lord and lady, came face to face with the injustices of the world yet did not use your fangs and claws as a crutch, found a path to ecclesiastic law through logic and reasoning, and stood tall as you followed that path. I believe I can trust you with this knowledge.”

Col took Lutia’s hand. She looked at it as though a terrible and alarming jewel had been placed there.

“So would you solve this mystery in my stead?”

Col had a feeling he might be doing something terribly cruel. He was taking away the problems of the vested interests that were so deeply rooted within the academic city and saddling her with something else beyond measure.

He could not even begin to fathom how one might confirm the shape of this earth. The cat alchemist hopped on board a ship and journeyed west. Maybe she had been thinking she might be able to come back from the east.

But this was a problem that might never be solved, just like Lutia wanted.

And this time, it was the Twilight Cardinal entrusting her to solve it.

He was not following his principles in an attempt to wake only Lutia from her slumber.

That was because he had left something in Lutia’s hands that was essentially a heretical belief, one that the Church would not hesitate to mark as a falsehood

for the sake of their faith.

“Just like there was once a Moon-Hunting Bear, I believe it’s now the wolf’s turn.”

Lutia’s knowledge, fangs, and claws allowed her to tackle the world’s mysteries in a way the Twilight Cardinal could not.

And as a nonhuman, Lutia had plenty of reason to pull the carpet out from under the Church.

“You...”

Lutia stared blankly up at him, and then gave him a lopsided smile.

“I am the Twilight Cardinal. Is that not apt for the sliver of time that sits between night and day?”

He was clueless when it came to the opposite sex, and he was at the mercy of the ever-shifting line that divided good and evil.

But he could walk confidently within the world of spirits.

If he could bring the two worlds together, then he could love a just Church while still questioning its foundations.

“I trust you, so I give you the key.”

The key to a door that might be better left closed.

But this was far from just a method to earn her trust by sharing a secret.

He had to fight the Church head-on alongside Hyland and Canaan, and he could not simply set off on a jaunt across the desert like Myuri wanted. Forget openly investigating an idea that was even more absurd than that of the new continent, one that would undoubtedly be considered heresy.

But it was something *someone* had to test, and if there was anyone who could, Col did not trust anyone more than Lutia to do so.

That the surprisingly shy Myuri would work with her on a shady plan was proof enough for him. If Myuri trusted her, then of course, Col could, too.

“You may lose more people dear to you in the future.”

He had placed the true key in Lutia's hands.

"But you will always find new people who care for you."

And that was why he wanted her to wake up from her slumber in the dark, get to her feet, and begin to walk again.

Perhaps it was cruel, perhaps it was indeed none of his business.

It was not something he could promise would happen, anyway.

But this was what Col believed.

He believed in the words of a god whom he had never once met, after all.

Lutia stared hard at him, then quickly looked away.

She dipped her head, as though swallowing something, and then looked up at him again.

"...I think I get why a girl like Myuri is so attached to you," Lutia smiled, rubbing the back of her hand against her teary eyes. "You're stupid for telling me a secret like that. An utter fool."

Col drew up his shoulders and smiled. He was used to being called names like that.

"Time to wake up, huh?"

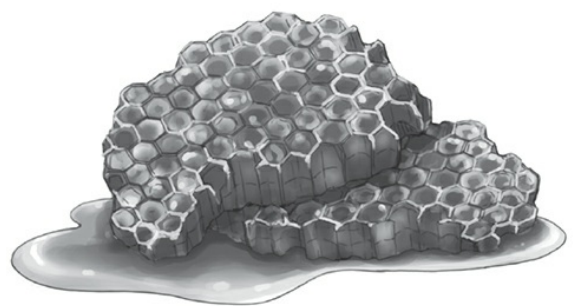
She dropped her eyes to her palm again. When she clenched her hand into a fist, she lifted her head.

"Fine. But on one condition."

"What is it?"

Like the wolf girl she was, Lutia bared her fangs, undaunted, in an endearing grin.

EPILOGUE



EPILOGUE

Young boys came to the city of Aquent, often only hanging on by a thread, only for their ignorance to be preyed upon as they were forced to act as the agents of petty villains.

The operation to save all these poor kids was a resounding success.

Even when some were moved from the places Myuri had discovered, there were only so many spots in the city that could hide them; they could not be hidden from Lutia, who was a wolf who commanded every stray in the city.

Then, as the southern eagles reeled in chaos after losing all the underlings who had been working for them, the northern wolves, who had been trying so hard to right their evils, doggedly chased them down.

There also came a letter from the Debau Company, stating they would offer monetary support for boys with bright prospects. The city church, which did not particularly stand out amid the chaos, had not been engaging in any shady activities. Canaan spoke to them and arranged for them to provide support when Lutia and her group denounced the southern eagles. This, too, was a great boon.

In addition, Canaan and Le Roi struck the professors' guild, which had been inextricably involved with the southern eagles, and forced great compromises out of them regarding joining fees, rules relating to gift giving in exchange for degree conferment, textbook selection, and so much more.

That said, if Jean's printing technology worked well, then all the scheming around textbooks would quickly lose meaning anyway. No matter what sort of valuable tome might be chosen as a textbook in the future, so long as they could have them imported from the Kingdom of Winfiel at a low price, the predatory sales would cease completely.

And so, like the imminent collapse of a dam, all of Aquent's problems were set on the path to resolution.

All of this happened over the course of a few days, after Col spoke with Lutia, and this was what he wrote in his letter to Hyland.

There were a few things he did not include in his tale.

For example, several days before all of Aquent's problems washed away in the billowing waves, the night when Col returned to Le Roi and the others from his talk with Lutia was a prime example.

Once he returned to the others, he found Myuri waiting alone for him.

"Everyone went back to the inn."

She sat atop their things. Her sword was strapped to her hip, her sash with the painted crest of the wolf was tied around her waist, and she wore a grumpy look on her face. The reason she had decided to remain by herself was her way of twisting herself to follow her brother's command while also keeping as much distance between herself and the rest to avoid awkwardness.

"We have reconciled with Miss Lutia."

Myuri used the dark of the night to her advantage and had her ears and tail out, and she looked at him like a guard investigating a thief's crimes.

"...You *really* smell like her...", she said.

The one reason he did not check how his clothes smelled was because he knew that already.

"But on one condition."

Lutia's words replayed in his mind, and when he recalled what had happened afterward, he found in himself a strange mix of exasperation and relief.

"How did you talk her down?" Myuri asked dubiously, her tail twitching nervously.

The way she spoke told him that though he was cleaning up after her mess, she had the right to hear what he did as his traveling partner. But Col said nothing.

"Come *on*, Brother!" she urged him, her expression more unease than anger. "Tell me!"

When it seemed as though she was about to stand from her spot on their luggage, he finally replied.

“I cannot say for the sake of Miss Lutia’s honor. And more importantly—”

Col closed the gap between them in a single stride; Myuri flared her nostrils first, and all the hair on her ears and tail stood on end, as though she had been struck by lightning.

“—*This* is your punishment.”

“Wh— Hey, th—”

“Or...” Col raised his voice, leaning in closer to peer down at her. “Are you doubting our bond?”

Lutia understood from smell alone what his relationship with Myuri was, and she had laughed. She had even been able to sniff out exactly how she clung to him in the night, which made Col terribly embarrassed.

And when Myuri examined him, it was as though Col had been covered in the glowing spores of a mushroom in the darkest cave; Lutia’s smell told her exactly how she had clung to him.

There was one condition to rousing Lutia from her slumber.

“Can I...borrow your chest for a second?” she had asked.

Though her face was red and her tone was brusque, he immediately understood that this was the secret key she was handing him. And perhaps it was even the one thing she had been unable to say, honestly, to her lord and lady before they departed this world.

After she fit snug in his arms, she soon began to sob. That was soon followed by a barrage of bitter resentment at having been left behind.

Col had done his absolute best to erase his presence so that she could let it all out, but the one thing he could not erase was the thought that, despite how very similar in size Lutia was to Myuri, she felt so different in his arms.

Though it was likely not very long that they stayed this way, Lutia pulled back without any warning, grabbed a piece of scrap paper nearby, then furiously scrubbed at her face and blew her nose. Col did not ask if she was okay now.

After taking one final deep breath, she strode past Col with heavy footsteps, peered down the stairs, and yelled to her boys, “We’ll pluck those southern eagles bald!”

After a brief moment of tense silence, a loud, enthusiastic roar rose from the northern wolves.

“You won’t tell anyone about what just happened, right?”

Lutia turned her wolf eyes to the Twilight Cardinal.

“So long as you keep the secret I shared with you.”

Lutia smiled, and without another word or a look of regret, marched down the stairs.

And so, Col quietly left the Green Gourd alone, and came to stand before Myuri, who had used her older brother in her plot despite all the circumstances around them both, but now was completely drenched in the scent of another wolf.



“I will smell like this for a while,” he said. “We are sleeping separately. I will not hold your hand, and I will not teach you any new words or spelling.”

As he listed off her punishments, it almost seemed as though Myuri’s red eyes were going to melt.

Col held back a smile as he said, “Your wolf crest is watching you. You are a knight, are you not?”

A knight would not cry so easily when they should be concentrating on fixing their mistakes. Myuri bit her lip, puffed out her cheeks, managed to wipe the corners of her eyes, and shot up from her spot on their things.

“I am! I’m a knight!”

She then fixed him with a reproachful gaze and growled at him. Col smiled to see her usual attitude, then took half her things for her, and they returned to the inn where Le Roi was waiting.

On the way back, they heard the commotion that had shattered Aquent’s night as the northern students attempted to save the kids, and at last the guards’ whistles, loud enough to wake the dead, tore through the night sky.

May all wake from their nightmares and find peaceful slumber.

He then prayed that they would all be greeted with a beautiful sunrise.

“Brother...?” Myuri whispered as they approached the inn.

“I can hold your hand, right?”

It seemed Col would never be the tough leader of any pack.

“I prefer that over being bound to you by string.”

He held out his hand, and she grabbed it as though sinking her teeth into him.

It felt like she would never let go, so that she would remember this warmth always.

Col was sure that was how she felt from the way she held his hand while the advent of summer danced on the night air.

AFTERWORD

Hello everyone. This is Hasekura. I forgot to submit this afterword, so I'm writing this in a panic.

We've reached the eighth volume of Col's and Myuri's adventure. This episode was the kind of story I've been waiting to tell for a while now, so I'm quite satisfied. And I'm very happy with the resolution! I'm especially very, very happy with how I handled the globe in Nordstone's hut, which had to come up because of the new continent. I was thinking to myself, I have the Moon-Hunting Bear *and* the new continent *and* the conflict with the Church—if I add this question into the mix, then how am I supposed to wrap it all up neatly?! That's a load off my shoulders.

But nothing like that even existed in the original plot outline, so I am a bit unsatisfied because I spent so long working on the plot, and suddenly it's like: Why?! It's a bit like making elaborate travel plans, and after spending days preparing, only to forget something vital the day you set out.

Also, I like this volume because there are many scenes where Myuri is pouting. I feel like she's at her cutest when Col is scolding her. That, and how she never learns.

It was also a lot of fun to write, because we had Col scolding her not as the Twilight Cardinal, but as her big brother. The scope of stories tend to get pretty big, and very serious in longer narratives, so I personally think this added a nice flavor.

I used a book called *The Autobiography of Thomas Platter, a schoolmaster of the sixteenth century* for reference on traveling students and academic cities. It's very old, so you may have to go to the library to find it. But it's very interesting, and I highly recommend it.

If you have already picked up this volume, I believe you may already know this, but just in case—*Spice and Wolf* is going to have another anime

adaptation! For those who did not know, please search for “*Spice and Wolf* anime” immediately! I’m working hard to write more *Wolf and Parchment*, too, so I hope you stick with me on this journey as well as the travels of the main series.

I know there’s quite a large margin left here, but I think I’ll leave it at that for now.

Isuna Hasekura

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink