



ISUNA
HASEKURA

WOLF
&
PARCHMENT
VOL. 7

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

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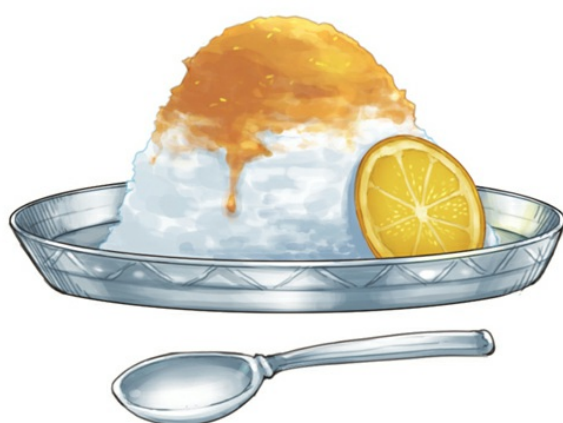
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WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 7

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





THE TWILIGHT
CARDINAL, THE
GREAT REFORMER
TOTE COL

"DIDN'T
MOTHER AND
FATHER TRAVEL
LIKE THIS?"

DAUGHTER OF WOLF
AND MERCHANT
MYURI

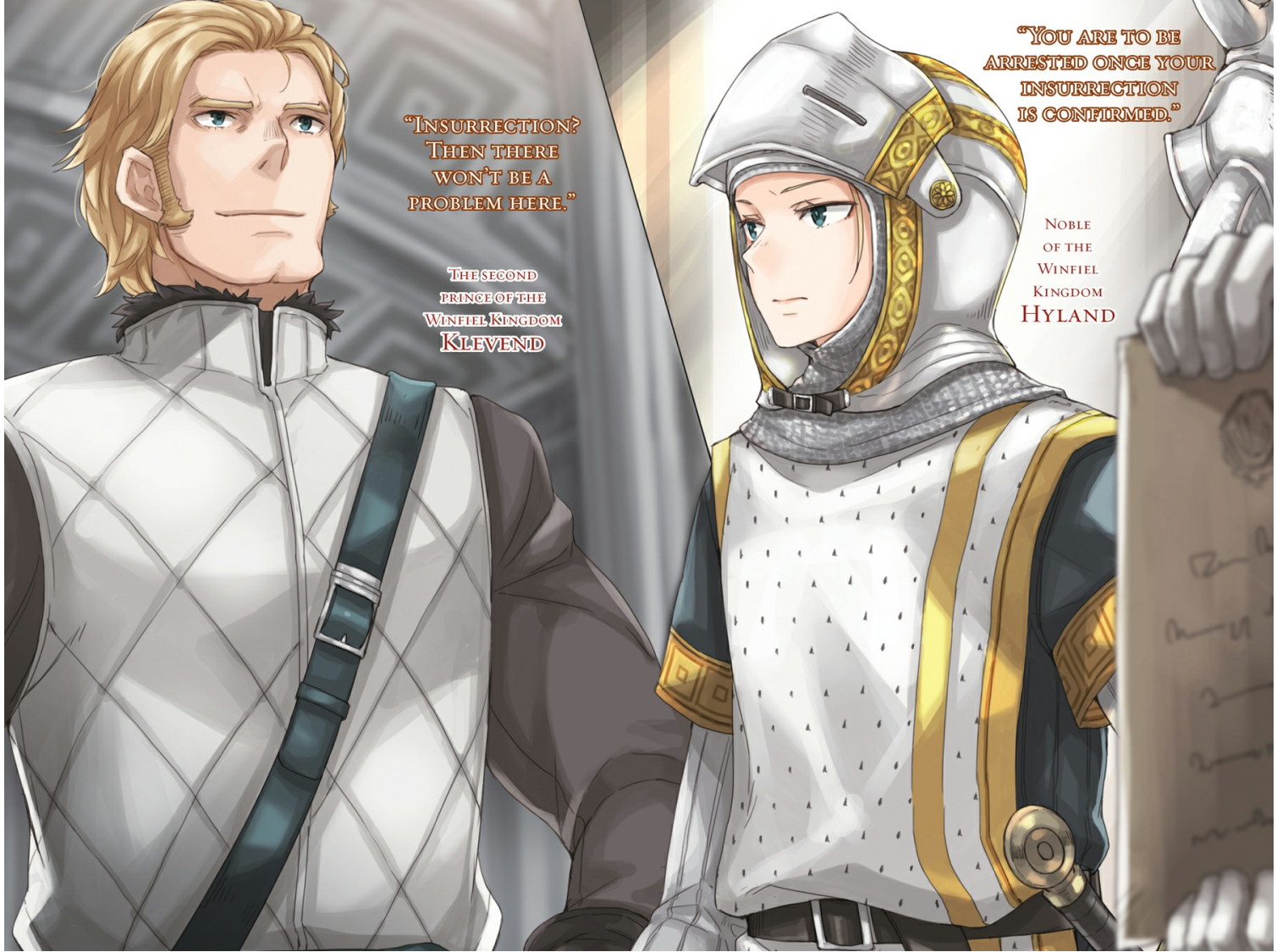


ARTISAN WITH
FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE
JEAN



APPRENTICE
ARCHIVIST OF THE CURIA
CANAAN
JOHALEM

"WE ARE
LOOKING
FOR AN
ARTISAN
NAMED
JEAN."



"INSURRECTION?
THEN THERE
WON'T BE A
PROBLEM HERE."

THE SECOND
PRINCE OF THE
WINFIEL KINGDOM
KLEVEND

"YOU ARE TO BE
ARRESTED ONCE YOUR
INSURRECTION
IS CONFIRMED."

NOBLE
OF THE
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WOLF
&
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Vol. 7

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

With a small whetstone, one that fit in the palm of his hand, he sharpened the blade of his old knife.

Though its only real purpose was for emergencies during his travels, it was plenty sharp enough to nick his finger if he was not careful; the focus required, combined with the repetitive motions, meant this task had his undivided attention.

If he overdid it, then the blade would shrink, and if he were to take it into a local shop, they would certainly hound him about the unevenness of the blade, so he stopped when he felt it most appropriate.

With a cloth, he wiped at the newly sharpened edge of the knife. His eyes roamed the desk and eventually settled on three feathers and a small dish made of cow's leather. A goose contributed the milky white feathers that were nearly the length of his forearm. There were only so many flight feathers on a goose's wing, and he had always found the sight of them entrancing, often running a finger over the smooth vane while losing himself in thought.

Depending on which wing the feather came from, there was a subtle difference in the curvature. Debates over which kind fit most comfortably in the hand could continue for eternity. Personally speaking, Col had no preference—if anything, he was more concerned with the thickness of the shaft and generally liked thinner ones.

He pressed a feather into the desk with his left hand, then held his freshly sharpened knife in his right. He cut off the tip of the feather's calamus like he was cutting a vegetable, then trimmed it diagonally. He ran a finger over the pointed edge and continued to hone it until the angle was to his liking. He had a habit of overcutting.

This usually happened because of his preference for thinner tips—he always felt like things seemed more severe that way. As an added economic bonus, he

could fit more on a single page with smaller writing.

Make the tip too thin, however, and the ink would refuse to stick and the tip would be too soft, which was a terrible thing for those who tended to press hard when writing, as it made the quill more difficult to use. This was especially apparent for anyone who tensed their shoulders as they wrote, which led to a slight rise on the right side in their writing.

With a faint smile, he cut the final, vertical slit into the tip. This was where the ink would sit, and from there, new worlds would spring forth on paper. He held the tip up to the light, checking his work, then brushed dust off with a finger, before finally dipping the quill into the ink that pooled in the leather dish.

When Col thought about how all the books, all the surviving knowledge that existed in this world, began from this little procedure, he felt like one rush of water in a much larger river.

He wiped off the excess ink on the edge of the dish, then pressed the tip to the paper.

The quill smoothly drew a beautiful line over the page.

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Two weeks had passed since the commotion at Raponell, where there had been ceaseless rumors of ghost ship sightings. Now Col and Myuri were already on their way back to Rausbourne.

The strait between the Kingdom of Winfiel and the mainland had a steady northward current all year round, so northward journeys by ship were rarely, if ever, dictated by bad weather. If anything, the weather was a bit too nice, and it almost felt hot standing on deck beneath the expansive blue sky.

All sorts of things had happened at Raponell, and at the end of it all, Col had come down with a fever and wound up stuck in bed. Spending a moment in the sun like this was exactly what he needed.

The more he gazed up at it, the more he felt like he might fall into the sky. Ghost ships filled with bones had become a distant tale from a distant land, like a dream he had chanced upon in the thick of a moonlit forest.

Without a cloud in sight, the sun blazed overhead. Col brought up a hand to shield his eyes and squinted; he could see faint round shapes in the sky. He had once heard that sailors with good eyesight could see the stars and the moon shining brightly beyond the blue skies, even at midday.

Col found himself looking to the sky more frequently since then.

His thoughts often went back to the metal globe he had found during the recent excitement.

On the last night dealing with the old Lord Nordstone, he had peered out the window of the forest manor and spotted the golden moon hanging heavy in the sky. And there had been a globe in the manor that looked just like the moon.

An alchemist had once lived in the Nordstone manor and presumably feared breaking taboos no more than any other student of the alchemical arts. Based on how it was treated, it was safe to assume that globe represented some of

the most forbidden knowledge to ever exist.

“If that is indeed what this world looks like...,” Col murmured as he tightly gripped the crest of the Church that hung from his neck. There were all sorts of outlandish ideas out in the wild—for example, the idea that the earth rested on the back of a giant turtle or that the ocean ended in a sheer cliff. There were but a few theories that were bandied about with great seriousness in old texts.

Of course, most of them amounted to nothing more than tales to entertain children, and adults did not take them seriously. But there were some schools of thought that were certainly not meant to be bedtime stories. They might sound preposterous, but they were also strangely convincing.

There was little doubt the globe was meant to show the world’s supposed true form—a physical representation of the old school of thought that the world was round.

The Nordstone manor alchemist had apparently been searching for the new continent, only to vanish without warning one day. If she had made it her mission to find the continent on the other side of the western sea, then learning the true shape of the world would have been mandatory. And if heading directly west led only to a massive waterfall, then there would not be much to discover or explore.

“But if the Church were to find out—”

There were some things that should never be spoken aloud. Things that were not allowed to exist.

The best example of such were spirits who understood human speech and occasionally took human forms.

Col was not being honest with the Church in that regard, but what he saw in Nordstone’s manor crossed an entirely different line.

When he returned to the Nordstone manor after things had settled down, the globe he had seen there had vanished without a trace. Perhaps that could be considered a blessing. Since he never got the chance to confirm its existence with Nordstone, it was easy to chalk it up as his misunderstanding. Maybe it was just a fever dream he’d had while stuck in bed.

A part of him thought the right thing to do as a servant of God was simply forget everything he'd seen. But if he and his companions were to seek out the new continent in due time, it would inevitably become a problem. Col wondered what he should do if that were to happen. He had no answer to that. How would he react when he discovered a truth that would flip the scripture he held so dearly on its head? There was no way to know.

But if he did not prepare himself, then he would undoubtedly freeze at a crucial moment yet again. He tried to rouse himself with that thought, but his mind felt clouded, making it hard to think. A general unease had settled in his chest, almost as if he was seasick. He could feel his mood dipping, despite the rare opportunity to enjoy such lovely weather. Then the cry of a seabird and the yell of a young girl rang out across the deck, pulling him from the depths of his thoughts.

“Whoa! Hey! It’s—it’s okay! Stop—*flapping!*”

Col was long past feeling surprise when the familiar yelling filled his ears. With a sigh, he turned to see other sailors, much like him, staring at Myuri, who held a thrashing seabird.

“I just want a feather! Oh—hey, Brother! Where do you take the feather for a quill?!”

Though birds did not technically make facial expressions, this one seemed quite desperate. In contrast to the seabird’s fear of death, Myuri wore a cherubic smile.

“That would be its flight feather. But if you pluck it, that one will no longer be able to fly.”

“Wait, really?” She looked down at the bird under her arm. “It’d be sad if it couldn’t fly...And it’s not like we’re going to eat it, either.”

Seabirds were always a part of the scenery around ships and ports, but despite their elegant appearance, they were surprisingly violent. On Col’s travels a long time ago, they had swooped down and stolen his food on more than one occasion. But that very same sort of bird was currently paralyzed in fear of a wolf. The ruler of the forests had become ruler of the seas.

“Let the poor animal go. The birds have helped us plenty of times already.”

Though a fatigue had settled in, one that threatened to bring back his fever, Myuri’s nonsense helped him get his mind off the alchemist conundrum.

With a tired sigh, Col stood and stretched.

“Does this mean you ruined your quill already? Shall I trim it for you?”

After a moment of hesitation, Myuri let the poor seabird go. Though they typically glided along the wind without nary a flap of their wings while staring down at the flightless humans with pity, this one flapped off in a panic like a chicken.



Myuri stooped to collect the feather that fell from the poor seabird and study it closely.

“Can’t I use this one?”

“In theory, yes, but I believe it will be too small for your hands.”

She held it like a quill, but it already seemed too small.

“Geese have feathers that are just the right size.”

“And they’re tasty,” Myuri added, patting her stomach. “Is it lunchtime yet? I wonder what we’re having today!”

Amazed by her abject lack of decorum, Col poked her in the head.

“Take care of your tools.”

“I do! But I just get so into it, you know?”

It was almost as though she was blaming the quills for failing her so quickly.

In the few days following the end of the incident in Raponell, both of them had gone through little changes.

Col spent considerably more of his time staring at the sky. In contrast, Myuri started to spend a lot more time writing at the desk.

“Not only are you straining the quill, you are far too rough with it.”

“It’s because I’m writing so much!”

There was no falsehood in what she said—Myuri had probably written more in these past few days than she had in her entire life up until that point. She had never been much of a writer in the past, and Col had to practically tie her to a chair for her writing exercises.

But one night after their adventure with Nordstone came to an end, she stood before Col with writing implements in her arms and a serious look on her face. Paying no heed to his confusion, Myuri asked him to teach her the proper way to write because there was something she wanted to put to paper.

Col still had vivid memories of how much trouble he had getting a younger Myuri to sit down and learn how to read and write many years ago, so there

was honestly nothing he could say to describe just how happy her request made him.

After realizing that out of all the things the Church banned, the globe was easily one of the most dangerous, Col quickly became bedridden with fever. It was her request that had restored some of his vigor, and he poured his energy into teaching her proper spelling and grammar.

He watched as her vaguely incorrect letters, her plethora of spelling mistakes, and her odd grammar choices soon righted themselves. Myuri had always been smart—this was simply another demonstration that nothing could stand in her way when she put her mind to something.

That alone was enough to fill her foster brother with joy, but what touched him most was that she practiced using sentences from the vernacular translation of the scripture.

How many times had he imagined Myuri—rambunctious, tomboyish Myuri—murmuring God’s teachings to herself, copying God’s teachings onto paper? It was crucial for a young lady to have proper faith and the skills to write beautifully. He found himself, beyond a shadow of a doubt, enchanted by the way her cheeks lifted in her smile as she read aloud the gospel, sitting at the desk by the window, bathed in sunlight.

As one who had been caring for her since her birth, he could feel his eyes brimming with tears at the thought of finally being able to lead her down the correct path.

But the movement of his heart hid other things from him for only a very short period of time. Myuri quickly absorbed Col’s lessons; once she started responding with annoyance whenever he asked if she had any questions, the tide began to recede, and he started to see reality.

There was another question he should have been asking himself.

Why on earth would a girl like Myuri want to suddenly practice writing?

Myuri rested her elbow on the desk, stained her cheeks with ink, and fought desperately with the quill, a tool she was not used to holding. And the scripture, one her dearest elder brother had worked so hard on, from which she had been

so eagerly learning, was soon discarded coolly in a corner of the room.

Instead, she fell asleep hugging a tattered, worn-out booklet held together by twine, and she no longer wrote prayers to God.

“Hey, Brother? I have some more spelling questions.”

It was not long ago that Col would not even dream of this happening—Myuri tugging on his sleeve, asking him for spelling advice. But the sole reason he felt a weight on his chest whenever he felt his arm move against his will was because of *what* she was writing.

“Pliers? When you have to pull out an arrowhead from your arm or something—how do you spell *pliers*? And can you tell me if I got *blood splatter* right?”

The words she asked about were a far cry from the proper words girls her age should be asking about. What in God’s good name was this girl writing with her renewed skills? When Col finally asked her, Myuri answered: “The more I thought about it, the less I like how things ended at Raponell.”

As she gave her answer, her longsword—the proof of her knighthood that was engraved with the crest of the wolf—gleamed in the light beside her.

Things that normal folk like Col could never have imagined were the reasons she had taken up the quill.

“As they say, I’m forging my destiny.”

The day they disembarked at Rausbourne, they just so happened to come across Eve, who was busy discussing business.

Myuri took advantage of the opportunity to show Eve her used-up quills and order some extra paper. Col had no time to scold her for wasting money; Eve quickly wrote down her order on her wooden board, then shook on the exchange with the silver-haired girl.

It was only after their exchange had been settled that Eve learned why she had ordered quills and paper, and she smiled.

“It’s not often you find someone so determined to rewrite their fate. And so literally, at that.”

When Col watched the delighted smile cross Eve’s face, all he could do was

sigh.

“You can offset the cost of the ink and paper by...Let’s see—how about some info on House Nordstone? Seems likely they’re going to be raising the price of wheat down there—if I know when they plan to do that, then I could make a pretty penny off it.”

Unlike Myuri, whose hands were small yet powerful, which meant it would be some time before she figured out the right way to hold a quill, Eve elegantly wielded the implement.

“But first you become the knight of your dreams, and now you write your own knight’s tale of your dreams. Good grief, you’re greedier than I am,” the woman said.

Myuri seemed to take it as a compliment. She grinned and puffed out her chest.

She had suddenly brought up wanting to relearn how to write after all was said and done, and whenever she had a spare moment since then, she had been busying herself with writing—and what she had been writing this whole time was every little detail on what happened with Nordstone.

That in and of itself, of course, was not especially strange. The world was chock-full of tales of adventure, and large cities had chronicles that detailed the land’s history, and great kings often detailed their tumultuous lives.

Everything Col and Myuri experienced in Raponell and beyond could stand proudly alongside those tales: a ghost ship filled with human bones; an alchemist sacrificing goats under the moonlight, praying for a bountiful wheat harvest; a fated tale of a boy and a girl left to the whims of their noble families, whose allegiances were still dictated by an ancient war.

A wandering bard could entertain the patrons at any tavern for a decade with those stories, but these stories belonged to Myuri, and she was determined to write them down. And what she was most concerned with was the ending.

It had all begun because of the crotchety old Lord Nordstone, who had been rumored to be dealing with the devil himself via these ships of the dead. He boasted a strong reputation, due to the fact he had saved his people from

starvation by transforming a barren land into one rich with wheat. On the other hand, his often eccentric actions left him at terrible odds with the local clergy. And when events finally came to a head one fateful night, a certain priest decided the time had come to take down the nonbeliever, and he personally stood at the head of a mob.

The way the armed populace marched through the nighttime fields, torches held high, made them seem like an army of crusaders on their way to recapture the holy land. Their enemy, Nordstone, had no one on his side; and the very ones trying to take him down were the people he had dedicated his life to serving. The very people he had risked everything to keep well-fed wanted to tear him down with their own hands.

Col remembered how his chest had felt like it was being torn apart—he did not want the story to end in tragedy. The least he and Myuri could do was be at Lord Nordstone's side, and so they rushed to him. But who appeared before them was not a despairing, wizened lord—no, it was a dauntless old knight, fully clad in armor, burning as he waited for his thankless assailants. And the moment he saw Myuri in her wolf form waiting beside Col, he believed her to be a well-trained hunting hound; he asked for her help and followed her. Before Col could stop either of them, they valiantly departed the forest.

Ultimately, the people's sense of loyalty to the man who had helped their land prosper took precedence over the priest's orders, and a tragedy between Lord Nordstone and his people was thankfully averted.

Myuri, however, came away from the incident carrying something else in her heart—the tension and excitement that only came with the prospect of heading into battle.

Though she had fought hasty, impromptu scraps in her wolf form before, this had been her first time when the lines of battle had been drawn and there was a clear enemy for her to fight as she stood under the banner of her cause. Myuri was a girl who grew up dreaming of adventure in the mountains of Nyohhira, where her weapon of choice was a tree branch. At long last, after a great many trials and tribulations, she had gotten her very own title of knighthood. Much like a puppy who spent an overly long time chewing on a cow bone, Myuri recounted her first experience of true battle for her brother over and over again

—or perhaps it was more apt to say that she ruminated on it for ages when they were under the blankets.

Though at first the tale was full of excitement and dazzling moments, through repeated retellings, certain flaws inevitably began to show. And since this was Myuri—whose greed could astonish Eve of all people—she eventually came up with her own solution.

She wondered if her already wonderful experience could have been something greater. She wondered if it could have been even *more* wonderful.

What if events were supposed to have played out in some grander way, especially since this was her first true battle as a knight, something worthy of written record? Perhaps a certain someone could have marched into the enemy camp by her side, for example.

That crotchety old lord was certainly not a bad choice for battle companion. But the blade hanging from Myuri's hip was decorated with a crest that only two people in the entire world were allowed to use.

So with a bitter look on her face, she said to him:

"I wish my first time had been with you, Brother."

It went without saying that Col quickly slapped his hand over her mouth, and his eyes darted around in a panic.

He sternly warned her not to say things like that in front of others to avoid giving people the wrong idea, but she only stared up at him wide-eyed, and it wasn't long before her tail began to wag, his hand still on her mouth. Nyohhira was a village of hot springs and mirth, and those wild dancing girls had filled this rambunctious girl's head with so much unnecessary information. Even God's authority grew faint in the steam of the baths, and so Myuri had grown to be a girl whose head was filled with all sorts of needless and superficial information about scandalous acts.

And she had four ears—she could easily hear oneiric footsteps even with her eyes closed.

Recalling the sounds of that night that carried the unique tension of impending battle, she wrote it down.

She wanted a gripping, ideal night of fervor, befitting her very first time standing on the battlefield as a knight.

“I’m honestly not sure how many times she’s rewritten it now,” Col said with a sigh.

Eve seemed to be in a genuinely good mood. “You know, I often think back on big deals I make. What I could have done, what I should’ve done, and all the things I would’ve done better if I had the chance.”

When Myuri heard that, she folded her arms over her chest and nodded. Of course Eve understood her.

“It isn’t as noble as you think. Myuri’s gone far beyond that, and now she’s coming up with far-fetched tales. Yesterday, it was just the two of us up against an army of ten thousand.” Col cast Myuri an admonishing glance, but she ignored him. “I scold her for wasting paper, but she refuses to listen. I have been biting my tongue, though, since it *is* good writing practice...”

Indeed, as she wrote more and more, that odd right-handed tilt had naturally fixed itself. And once she realized that large letters wasted space, she made a point to write more economically. That meant her messy, unreadable writing quickly became much neater.

Though she used a lot of frightening words in her writing, a knight who fought in battle did not often have time to pray to God. She would occasionally open the translation of the scripture and ask Col how one might pray in certain situations. He could not deny this could be one way to plant the seed of faith within her.

And he was simply surprised by himself—by how happy he was that all the things he had learned about faith could be useful to another.

Taking all that into consideration, he thought...perhaps, just maybe, despite all the negatives, Myuri’s newfound fascination was ultimately a net positive. Or so he told himself through gritted teeth.

“Either way, I’m just glad I found myself a new deal.”

In the eyes of Eve’s company, which had business dealings across the seas, no large order of paper—not even parchment—would bring them a considerable

enough profit. Though Myuri might have been enjoying herself, it was not a cost Col and Myuri could ignore.

“She may put in an order behind my back, but I am still not paying.”

“Well then, you can just go directly to Hyland. It’s not like the money’s coming out of your own coin purse. Never met a noble that kindhearted, and definitely not one so soft for Myuri.”

What a dishonest merchant... Col stared hard at Eve, but Eve only smiled coolly in return.

“And *you* may not order anything without my permission anymore,” Col said to Myuri, who pointedly watched nearby ships unload cargo as though this conversation were no business of hers. In her tales, she was a noble knight who protected her priestly brother no matter what trouble befell him, fighting loyally by his side under his command. And in truth, that was exactly the kind of person she was.

Myuri stared with mouth agape at an apparatus that appeared to be a large crane raising more cargo. Col poked her in the head and adjusted his bags on his back, adding, “In any case, Mister Az has been a huge help.”

Az was the guard Eve had sent to accompany him and Myuri. Myuri had pestered him for sword lessons and fitness training, and he had become like a second teacher to her.

“He said he had fun, too. He usually looks all gruff, but he looked positively chipper today.”

Even though Az had only just finished one job, he had rushed straight to Eve to help with the next and was already gone. Though Col knew they could say hello next time they saw him at Eve’s manor, the abrupt way they had parted at the end of their journey made him a bit sad.

“I bet he ran off like that because he was a little too embarrassed for lingering good-byes.”

Though he acted like an iron man who rarely let his emotions show and concentrated on nothing but accomplishing his given task as efficiently as possible, this was a good reminder that it was unwise to judge things from

appearances alone.

Or perhaps it was a testament to Myuri's natural friendliness that she managed to befriend someone like Az.

"Either way, you should go home and rest. You've had quite the journey."

Myuri then interjected, "Oh, right. We met someone named Kieman on the mainland."

"Hmm?"

Eve's eyes went wide; she had not expected to hear that name.

Myuri grinned. "He said he's a way worse merchant than you are, Miss Eve."

The word *worse* here came with a nuance of craftiness and the implication that he feared nothing.

In her business dealings that spanned both kingdom and mainland, Eve often butted heads with Kieman over territorial disputes. The moment she heard the name of her bitter rival drop from Myuri's mouth, a smile crossed her face. It was like she had bitten into a particularly sharply seasoned piece of jerky.

"He can say whatever he likes. That boy has been obsessed with me for as long as I can remember."

Myuri's eyes went wide as she delighted in the childish back-and-forth of two bad merchants.

Once they arrived at the familiar manor, a young maidservant greeted them, a bright smile on her face.

Of course, this wasn't a greeting that stemmed from faith, welcoming back a serious and honest budding priest. It was primarily because she was delighted to see Myuri, who indulged in quite literally everything the house staff gave her, like she was some sort of big dog.

The puppy they had taken in to mask Myuri's spring shedding—courtesy of her wolf ears and tail—also came out to greet them and rushed right to Myuri's feet.

Col straightened himself—none of this particularly bothered him. An elderly

servant approached and took their things. He was one of the people who often prayed with Col in the early waking hours at the manor chapel.

“We missed you at morning mass, Sir Col.”

There were people besides God who kept a close eye on his actions.

That fact emboldened Col, and he promised the man that he would be at the next day’s mass.

The man then informed them that Hyland was absent, as she was attending a city council meeting. They sent a messenger to alert her of their return, so they might adjourn the meeting early, but until that happened, Col and Myuri were encouraged to freshen up and get some rest.

Though the ship journey home made for easy traveling, after many nights of sleeping on the hard floor and spending their days in the salty sea air, their exhaustion had built up. Not to mention all they had seen at Nordstone’s—Col wanted to eject all the anxieties, both physical and mental, by completely submerging himself in hot water at least once.

There was no way to indulge in such a thing, of course, so he washed his face with the warm water that had been brought to their room, scrubbed himself with a cloth he soaked in the water, and cleaned his feet last. It hardly felt like enough for someone who had grown used to the bountiful springs of Nyohhira, but it still made him feel as though he had been blessed with new life.

Myuri, however, got to sit and splash around in a washtub full of hot water, naked, as was her right as a child. Ever astonished by her behavior, yet rather envious of what she was allowed to do, Col began unpacking their things.

Their bags were mostly filled with letters and gifts for Hyland from the lord of Raponell. The rest were notes on the incident that Col had collected for the purpose of compiling a report, all the quills Myuri had ruined that he had felt bad about throwing away, and the abridged translation of the scripture that Myuri quickly lost interest in.

Even though the emotional impact of seeing Myuri copying passages from the scripture had been great enough to cloud his vision, he looked over to her as she scrubbed herself with a sponge and hummed a little tune to herself, and

sighed. He wondered when the seed of faith would finally take root within her.

“You will unpack your own things, Myuri.”

“Hmm? Okay,” she replied breezily.

Col turned his gaze toward her bag, and it, too, was stuffed to the seams. It was filled with all of Myuri’s dreamed-up tales of adventure she had busied herself with, as well as mounds of dried fruits and candies from Raponell’s new lord, the young and proper Stephan.

Though she no longer held Col’s hand in town—she was a knight now, as she often reminded him—Myuri still had many childish habits, like her love for sweets. As his expression wound up somewhere between exasperated and relieved, the girl he worried about so often spoke up.

“Brother! Rinse out my hair!”

Her wolf ears, which had remained hidden throughout the entirety of the journey at sea due to the proximity of others, flicked off the water clinging to their fur. Her typically fluffy tail was covered in suds, too.

“Is our proud knight currently at rest?” Col asked. Despite himself, he found himself rolling up his sleeves. Though he wished she would find her independence sooner than later, he always ended up giving in to all of her requests; he told himself that was because caring for her was simply a long-term habit that was deeply ingrained at this point.

“Knighthood is the spirit of helping one another. Don’t you know that?” And Myuri, of course, showed no signs of changing at moments like this. “And actually, my hand hurts. I can’t wash my hair all that well.”

“Your hand hurts?”

Just as Col got to his knees behind her, the sudsy girl revealed the real reason behind her call for aid.

“My palm hurts when I clench my fist.”

As Myuri slowly curled her slender fingers, Col cupped some of the water from the washtub and poured it over her long hair.

“I keep telling you—you grip the quill too hard. You must learn to keep a

lighter hold on it.”

“But you always complain about your hand hurting when you write a lot, Brother.”

Just like how Col had kept a close eye on Myuri ever since she was born, Myuri had kept a close eye on Col for as long as she could remember.

“But it’s weird. I don’t have any problem holding a sword, and it’s way heavier than the quill.”

“They do say that the pen is mightier than the sword.”

She was constantly scolded for swinging her sword around, so she glanced over her shoulder at him and pouted.

“You’ll get used to it after a time, I think. Your writing has become much nicer as of late.”

Myuri’s wolf ears, unlike her hair, were rather water-resistant.

They twitched, flicking droplets into Col’s face.

“Really? It is?!”

Delight bloomed on her face, and Col wiped his own with a sleeve as he donned a begrudging smile.

“At the very least, your letters don’t lift to the right anymore. I’ll massage your palm later, just as you did for me long ago.”

Back when he continued his studies as he worked in the bathhouse, she would often rub his palms when he spent too long with quill in hand. Myuri had been young enough that her tail was essentially the same size as the rest of her, and when she stepped on his hand, the pressure was just right to untangle all the knots.

“Should I step on your hand again?” she offered innocently, remembering the old days.

“You would break my bones if you tried that now.”

She immediately narrowed her eyes, and a growl rumbled in her throat.

As they talked, Col rinsed Myuri’s thick hair. Watching the dirt of travel fall

from her silver strands reminded him of peeling a hard-boiled egg. As he thought about the future, and just how many times he would be caring for her like this in the days to come, he knew that all the things he found annoying would soon become fond memories.

He smiled to himself, hoping that day would come sooner than later. Myuri had been resting her chin in her palm but then suddenly spoke up.

“Oh yeah, you hired a bunch of people to write books for you a while back. That must’ve been tough work.”

She was talking about a time not long after they left Nyohhira, when life alone with Myuri was not as comfortable as it was now. They had been at odds with a city church, knowing they needed to spread the teachings of God to the masses to keep the church in check. So Col had gathered artisans who specialized in transcription, and made copies of one part of the vernacular translation of the scripture.

“Transcription...the copying of writing, is considered a part of a monk’s strict training,” he explained.

Myuri still had the spirit of a boy in her heart; her tail reacted to the word *training*, but she uncomfortably squeezed her hand open and closed again before nodding in understanding.

“So that’s the reason why there were chains on the books in the library.”

“It is good you understand the hardships of others.”

Myuri briefly puffed out her cheeks in response to what she thought sounded like a lecture.

“Come now. Hold down your ears—I’m rinsing your head.”

She hated when water got in her wolf ears, so she quickly brought her hands up to cover the triangular tufts. Col poured water over her two, three times and reviewed his work.

“There. All finished.”

“Dry my hair.”

“.....”

Myuri opened and clenched her little hand again, as though emphasizing her point.

With a sigh, Col began to wring out her hair, and the smug girl grinned.

“Oh, right! Brother!”

“Do your tail yourself. It always tickles you when I do it, and you get water everywhere.”

“No! I’m talking about the old man!”

“Lord Nordstone? There, your hair is done. Dry the rest on your own.”

Now that he was finished wringing out most of the water from her hair, Col took a white linen cloth and placed it on Myuri’s head. She must have thought he would dry it all for her—she looked back at him and frowned, then reluctantly began to scrub the cloth through her hair.

But the real reason Col placed the cloth on her head was to block her view. Whenever Nordstone came up, he could not help but think of the globe. The unbidden welling of anxiety never failed to come as well.

He had kept everything about the globe secret from even Myuri.

“Miss Ilenia said she’ll be going on the same boat as him. I wanna see her,” Myuri said. It did not seem as though she noticed he was hiding something.

Ilenia, a sheep spirit, was more invested in pursuing the rumors of the new continent than even Myuri; she wanted to create a land for nonhumans like them. After the incident, Nordstone took advantage of his exile and left on a journey by ship. And because he was somewhat related to the alchemist who believed in the existence of the new continent, Ilenia had left before them and hopped on the same ship so that she may learn more from him.

Ilenia could easily be considered Myuri’s first friend since leaving Nyohhira, and she was probably feeling as though she had been left behind.

“Miss Sharon might know where they went. I believe she joined them because her home was in the same direction, yes?”

“Hmm, I dunno. I feel like she said she was busy and flew off on her own.”

Sharon managed an orphanage in Rausbourne and was also a bird spirit, which meant she enjoyed a much greater freedom of movement than they did. But Sharon had been acquaintances with Ilenia for much longer, so it was very likely that she already knew where Ilenia was going.

“You ask for me, Brother,” Myuri said, pouting, her lips red from the heat of the water.

Whenever Sharon and Myuri shared company, they began snapping at each other, calling each other “Chicken” and “Dog.” From a certain perspective, they were oddly in tune, and Col had thought they got along rather well on some level.

“She has been a big help to us as of late. It wouldn’t be the worst idea to give your thanks, and—yes. Why not offer to help at their orphanage while you are there?”

“Hey!”

Myuri sounded genuinely upset by that suggestion, and the puppy yelped in surprise.

“Knighthood is the spirit of service.”

“Ugh...” She groaned, and the puppy stared at her. She kicked out her folded, slender legs from the washtub and drew up her thin, bony shoulders—a sign she was still growing—as she stared at the ceiling. “I’m a knight now, but nothing I get to do is awesome!”

“A true knight stands atop the slow accumulation of small good deeds.”

Myuri pouted at the lecture, immediately shook out her tail as she stood, and sprayed Col with water.

After eating wheat bread sweetened with honey the maids brought to tide them over until dinner, Myuri promptly fell asleep.

As energetic as she had seemed, not once did she insist she was not tired by their journey, and she dozed off in an instant. It wasn’t as though she had suddenly given out after running around Rausbourne in her excitement of their return, but more that she was genuinely getting some rest, and that pleased

Col.

But even though he had been so desperately looking forward to sleeping in their soft beds upon their return to the manor, Col found himself oddly unable to find slumber, likely due to how much he had slept on the ship.

The sun was still high in the sky, and since Hyland was occupied by the council meeting, it was unlikely she would be returning anytime soon. He had already finished writing his report to her on the ship.

He then realized that, despite what he said to Myuri, she would be delighted if he went to Sharon to ask about Ilenia's whereabouts. And he, too, wanted to hear, from someone besides Myuri, how Nordstone had been faring since the incident. He wanted to confirm his suspicions of whether the old lord had left while Col was bedridden expressly to avoid pointed questions about that globe in his house.

Myuri clung to her blankets and snored loudly. Col lightly patted her head, then entertained the clingy puppy for a few moments before leaving a message for Myuri on the wax board telling her that he was off to see Sharon. As he left the manor, one of the servants regarded him dubiously when he said he was going for a walk, but he received a respectful send-off nonetheless.

The private orphanage Sharon managed sat in a particularly mazelike district. Since Col had always relied on Myuri's navigation when visiting, he was a bit worried about getting there on his own. But as he neared the orphanage, the neighbors recognized him and politely gave him directions.

When he spotted the familiar door, one with a rustic iron peephole, he relaxed.

There were several pigeons perched on the roof, looking down at him. All the birds in Rausbourne fell under the command of Sharon, an eagle spirit. It was likely they had already reported his slow arrival, and she perhaps already knew that Myuri had even captured a seabird aboard the ship.

Before he could knock, the peephole slid open.

"Where's your dog?"

For her to ask about Myuri before even saying hello was surely a sign they

were close, Col thought to himself.

“Myuri is napping at the manor. We arrived back in the city not too long ago, so I think she’s tired.”

“You don’t look it, though.” Sharon huffed quietly, but briefly closed the peephole before opening the door proper. “Clark’s been wanting to see you, but the timing’s always bad.”

The inside of the building smelled like milk; there were a lot of young children at the orphanage. It reminded Col of when Myuri was little.

It was quiet. The children were either out working at this time of day or, like Myuri, napping.

“Is the construction of the monastery keeping him busy?”

The reason he and Myuri met Sharon in the first place was because of a big to-do surrounding the tax-collecting association that Sharon led and a plot concocted by merchants from distant lands. The one who had stood between them and the Church, and continually stood by Sharon’s side to support her, was a boy a bit younger than Col himself—Assistant Priest Clark.

After many twists and turns, Clark ended up helping Sharon and her cohort build a new monastery and was the one eventually appointed to be head abbot. He did not let it get to his head, however, and was working himself to the bone to get the monastery up and running.

“He’s cleaning up the ruins we’re using for the monastery. He’s put on some muscle recently.”

“We should have some free time, too, so we’d be happy to help.”

A look of surprise crossed Sharon’s face, and she smiled dryly.

“You’ll be just as much help as Clark was not long ago.”

Even Myuri had said that Col and Clark were very similar. It took only a glance to confirm that neither was very well acquainted with heavy lifting.

“If there’s anything you can do to help, it’s use your name to do something about our funding problem,” Sharon mused.

“Your funding? But I thought that was...”

They had permits from the cathedra, backing from Hyland, and funding from Eve. Col had assumed this would be more than enough, but Sharon sighed.

“Doesn’t matter how much funding we have; it will never be enough,” she said, her tone practically admonishing him for his ignorance. “Sure, Hyland’s given us a former noble’s residence, but we can’t use it without a lot of work. My head hurts just thinking about how we’re going to raise money for repairs alone. And even if we do manage to fix up the place, you think we can run a monastery with only copies of the scripture? I used to be a tax collector, remember. I’ve seen plenty of failing businesses, and all I can see here is bad news.”

There was anger in her chilly gaze, and Col found himself shrinking. He recalled when Myuri had been helping them, running around to purchase furniture—he had been shocked by how long the shopping list was. He could only begin to imagine how much it would cost to transform what were essentially ruins into a livable space, and then to turn that space into a stable business.

With that thought in mind, and upon closer inspection, he noticed faint bags under Sharon’s eyes and ink stains on her fingers.

He could easily picture it—once the children had been sent to sleep, she sat under the weak light of a tallow candle, brows deeply furrowed, as she racked her brain over the management of the monastery and annexed orphanage. It made perfect sense that she was genuinely irritated to have been pulled away from all that when they needed her help to resolve the Nordstone problem.

Sharon was undoubtedly a loyal and reliable companion to spare time to help with an incident that had little to do with her—and right when her hands were already quite full with big responsibilities.

“Holy relics attract pilgrims anyway, so I have hope for the monastery side of business,” she said, glancing at Col. She looked at him not as an acquaintance but as a shepherd checking how the wool was coming in on her sheep—or perhaps this was like the time when Myuri begged him for a legendary sword that incorporated the bones of a saint.

Even if calling himself a “relic” was a bit of a stretch, Col was known as the Twilight Cardinal now and would surely attract many visitors. Though he had decided to offer a handwritten copy of the scripture to the new establishment, he now wished he had settled on something more relic-like. Just as he was starting to genuinely consider offering a piece of his own clothing—after deciding the usual spectacles of a saint’s tooth or bone might be a tad difficult for him to give—Sharon shrugged.

“Well, that dog always gets real annoying whenever I decide to put you to use.”

“That’s not—”

—*True*, is what he wanted to say, but could not.

“I’ll get yelled at if I go to Hyland any more to discuss funding. Seriously—this gives me a headache.”

That surprised Col.

“I’m sure Heir Hyland would be delighted to speak further with you.”

A displeased smile crossed Sharon’s face. “I know. She’s *real* earnest when we chat. And I hate it.” She sighed, folding her arms over her chest. “She’s a nice noble. In a world full of people who can’t think past the tips of their own noses, you’d think a landowning noble as honest as her would be running an affluent domain, wouldn’t you?”

It was hard for Col to imagine, of course: Hyland levying heavy taxes on her people.

What would happen if Sharon went to Hyland asking about financing the monastery?

“She would do anything to give you money, wouldn’t she?”

Sharon gave an exaggerated shrug.

“I could ask the cathedra for extra money, but it’s probably safer not to. Considering how the kingdom and the Church are fighting now. At this point, I only have so many options.”

And Col knew right away what sort of options those were.

“I know Miss Eve would be happy to talk with you, too.”

Eve was also providing the monastery with funding.

But the deep wrinkles between Sharon’s brows did not disappear.

“True, she would. But you know she’s like a crow scavenging on corpses, right? When I think about how much interest she’ll ask for on whatever amount we borrow, I can feel another headache coming.”

Perhaps the only reason Col wanted to insist that Eve was not that awful of a person was because Eve had spoiled him silly as a child.

“Well, if this monastery doesn’t get up and running, I could always threaten her to write off all the money she gave us as losses. If it comes down to it, I can just take a look at her trade record. I bet I could find a wrongdoing or two and use that to blackmail her.”

Sharon wasn’t a former tax collector for nothing.

“Good grief. God sure always has a plan, doesn’t He? Right. Anyway. You here for a chat?” Sharon changed topics, her eyes weary.

Col found himself unconsciously straightening himself. “Ah, well...”

What he had come here to ask about felt beyond silly after hearing her gripe about problems as grounded as finance, but it would be strange if he said nothing after coming all this way.

“I just...was wondering what Lord Nordstone and Ilenia were up to...”

Sharon, who drew up cold well water as he spoke, smiled wryly.

“You’re too soft on that dog.”

He could not argue that.

“But she really likes Ilenia, huh. Maybe lamb smells tasty.”

Now that he thought about it, Myuri always gave Ilenia a tight hug whenever they reunited.

“Ilenia and that old man said they’d be going to the royal court, which is a little north of here. They’re going to raise some money for the voyage to the new continent.”

“Ilenia went, too?”

Sharon shrugged, vexed. The eagle spirit did not seem to share the same passion for creating a home for other nonhumans on the new continent as Ilenia had. It seemed as though she was settled on living life here, among people, for the orphanage with Clark.

“A continent on the other side of the sea? They sure are bold for wanting to send a ship out for such a stupid idea. I genuinely can’t believe it.”

Hearing this from the one who had all the birds around Rausbourne under her control made it sound quite clear that even the highest-flying birds had never seen this continent at the edge of the sea.

“I heard Ilenia reached out to some of the birds of passage, too.”

“And Myuri asked a large whale, one as big as an island the same.”

The chuckle rolling in Sharon’s throat quickly turned into a sigh.

“Then there’s that whole business with the alchemist, the one Nordstone knew. Personally? The dog aside, I wish Ilenia would wake up already and realize she’s getting involved with bad news.”

Nordstone, rumored to have been dealing with the devil via ghost ships, had a friend. And that person was the alchemist, the one who had not only transformed barren land into great fields of wheat but who had also been investigating the rumored existence of a new continent. Sharon spoke of this alchemist like a witch who was giving her friends terrible nightmares, but Col, who was indeed being plagued by awful dreams, knew the feeling well.

“Have you heard anything new from either Lord Nordstone or Vadan and his crew?”

For a moment, Col believed Sharon narrowed her eyes at him because it seemed as though he had seen through one of her secrets.

“I’m not an owl. I don’t sit at people’s windowsills to get info on my enemies.”

Col recoiled—that was not what he meant—and Sharon scoffed.

“I never pegged you as the type to get caught up in this new-continent business, but...all I’ve heard is that the alchemist ordered Vadan and his crew to

scavenge for documents in the desert countries so that she might find information on the new continent.”

Vadan was also a nonhuman who controlled the mischief of mice commonly found on ships, and he had been working with Nordstone under the alchemist’s orders. Not only was he a mouse spirit, but he was also an accomplished pilot in his own right.

“Desert countries?”

Sharon shrugged. “A lot of what the alchemist learned was knowledge lost when the ancient empire collapsed, including wheat-growing techniques. It’s been a long time since all that knowledge was last used in the lands under the Church’s influence.”

According to legend, the big island that was now home to the Winfiel Kingdom was originally invaded and conquered by soldiers from the ancient empire and the Church. But as time passed, the empire collapsed, and its existence remained only on parchment now.

In the days when the empire reigned supreme, the Church was not the extensive organization it was in the present day. The world was still full of pagan myth back then. The Church’s reach only grew after the empire collapsed; they took the opportunity to smother all customs and cultures that did not align with their teachings by branding them as heathenry and heresy. A visible example was how wolves were no longer used in noble crests, something Myuri had been furious about.

Along the way, a great many other things had undoubtedly been lost as well.

If the story of the new continent originated in the time of the empire, then it made perfect sense that traces of it would likely be found in the desert lands. Not only that, but it was likely information on it would remain in the desert regions especially if it was considered heretical by the Church. And in short, Col could easily surmise that the globe modeled after their world had been created with knowledge gleaned from the desert.

“Didn’t Vadan and his crew often collect copied books from the desert kingdoms?”

“Did they? They can reach the south easily enough by ship, and they *are* good at stealing.”

These nonhumans’ true forms were often animals on a scale beyond what humans could conceive, but Vadan and his crew could take on their small mice forms and easily slip through the cracks in the walls to get into places. And mice were particularly adept at chewing holes in obstacles, so there were very few people who were better at theft than them.

But the point Col wanted to make in that moment was entirely different.

“That may be true, but what I mean to say is that finding where valuable tomes are kept would not be very easy.”

“Hmm...? Ah, right, I didn’t think they were all that educated. But that alchemist was some kind of cat, wasn’t she? I heard cats originally come from the desert, or something like that. Maybe she always knew that stuff to begin with. Perhaps she simply lived through the era when the ancient empire was still alive.”

“Oh, yes. That’s very possible...”

Col remembered that nonhumans lived on a time scale far beyond what humans like himself could comprehend. Vadan and his crew would have needed a guide to find books in the desert, and a spirit from the desert would be more than qualified. Even better if they had been alive when the books were written and read.

“But besides that, I haven’t heard anything particularly new. Ilenia had been listening intently when she heard the story, but she didn’t look particularly happy about it.”

Nordstone also did not seem entirely sure why the alchemist had been so convinced about the existence of the new continent. Or perhaps the alchemist was simply positive that the world was round and set out to sea while considering the discovery of a new continent to be a fun bonus.

“So it did not seem that Lord Nordstone had any additional information on the new continent.”

Even if the cat alchemist was convinced of the new continent’s existence for

one reason or another, Nordstone did not have the means to confirm. Perhaps it was apt to assume that he simply trusted the alchemist.

“Or maybe he was hiding something and didn’t trust Ilenia. She’s obsessed with that continent. That Nordstone is by far the most eccentric human I have ever met. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was hiding something unthinkable behind that blank face of his.”

Considering the globe with the world map drawn on it, Col could only respond with a tense smile of agreement.

Sharon leaned against the wall, crossing her arms as she said, “It’s not like I care if you end up fish food at the edge of the sea. But if you start sticking your nose in weird stuff, Hyland’s going to get upset.”

Even Col knew the reason Sharon said this was not because she was particularly attached to Hyland. The orphanage, where all the orphans under her care would eventually live, was a part of the monastery, which had Hyland’s backing. If Hyland were to lose her position, the monastery’s foundations would grow shaky.

“Of course,” he replied earnestly. But the expression on Sharon’s face reminded him of his own when Myuri reacted to him after he scolded her for eating too much.

“But I appreciate the offer to help clean up the ruins. I’m sure Clark will have an easier time of it with more hands on deck.”

“Yes, of course.”

“But,” she continued, her smile lopsided, “does that dog know about this?”

Col was about to take a drink from an unglazed cup, but he stopped.

A servant of God would not lie.

“She is a knight, after all,” he said.

It is the duty of a knight to help those in need...or so is the way it is meant to be.

Sharon shrugged and summoned a pigeon to help Col find his way home.

Not even Autumn, avatar of a whale who swam the seas, or Ilenia, who spoke with migratory birds, had any definitive information on the new continent. And it seemed apt to believe Nordstone was no different.

Myuri had always loved tales of adventure—an undiscovered continent would be right at home in her stories.

Col began to seriously consider the idea not simply because he sympathized with the desire to found a country for nonhumans. He wanted this for Myuri, who had the blood of wolves running in her veins and who straddled the line between the human world and the deep forests, and he also wanted to support Ilenia's dreams.

Col himself, however, was both human and a devout lamb of God.

A few years had passed since the Church first came into conflict with forces mostly centered around the Kingdom of Winfiel. Forgoing outright war, neither side had been able to decisively gather a winning hand, and so things had come to a stalemate. Col had a feeling that the existence of a new continent may very well be what was needed to end the current deadlock.

So Col had gone to see Nordstone not only because Hyland had ordered him to, but also because he had heard rumors that Nordstone had also been investigating the new continent.

His and Myuri's latest trip had been a fruitful endeavor. But nothing Col found had been decisive—instead, he felt as though what he stumbled upon only deepened the world's mysteries. And then Sharon mentioned ancient knowledge buried in the desert.

He sighed, now knowing there was more that would only cause Myuri excitement. He wanted to turn to the heavens, to where God supposedly sat, and ask just how many secrets this world held.

As he walked, carefully rolling these thoughts around in his head, he eventually found himself before a familiar manor.

"Thank you for your guidance." Col gave his thanks, stroking the throat of the pigeon that perched atop the manor walls with the back of his finger. The pigeon puffed out its chest, cooed as though insisting it did not need any

thanks, and finally flew off. As he watched the creature soar away, he spotted something above him—it was not God, but someone peeking out from the manor window.

“Are you done napping?”

Myuri scrunched up her drowsy eyes and retreated into the room. It seemed she was not happy with the combination of discovering that Col was gone when she awoke and that he had gone to see Sharon.

As he stepped into their room with a tense smile, she came to give him a tight hug. Where had her noble knight’s bearing gone?

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

Or perhaps she had had a bad dream, the kind she typically had during her naps. As he drew his hand over her head, damp from sweat, her drooping tail slowly began to swish back and forth.

He gave her a small smile—she was still very much a spoiled child—and drowsiness suddenly overcame him as well. He considered taking a short nap because he knew it would be bad form of him to be constantly yawning during their dinner with Hyland.

As he brought the sleepy Myuri back to bed in his arms, she stomped down hard on the floor and refused to move.

“Myuri.”

Myuri, her face buried in his chest, chuckled, and her tail wagged. The puppy sensed the playfulness of the situation and chased after her tail, rolling on the floor.

The sadness Col felt at the prospect of her future independence lasted for only a moment. He, in fact, wished she would stop clinging to him as soon as possible.

“That’s enough. Your actions will only cause your title of knight to—”

—*Weep*, though the word did not leave his mouth. Myuri’s fluffy wolf ears suddenly stood on end.

Not a moment later, the sound of a horse and carriage came through the

window; he twisted around to pull himself closer and see out it. There, he saw a familiar carriage entering the manor.

“More interruptions...,” Myuri muttered—it seemed her wolf ears could easily tell who exactly was in the carriage. “Brother...let’s stay in bed until dinner...”

Her whiny tone only brought recollections of Sharon at their most recent meeting.

“Miss Sharon had bags under her eyes from working on the construction of the orphanage.”

“.....”

Myuri silently stood her ground.

“Come now. It’s time to get dressed.”

“.....”

“...I’ll braid your hair.”

“Fiiine.”

Though Col knew he was not playing his part well because he constantly compromised in situations like these, he always found himself feeling defeated whenever he saw just how delighted Myuri was as he gathered her hair into two braids—her favorite way to wear it.

Once the rambunctious girl was ready, the maid came to announce Hyland’s return.

What caught Col by surprise was that they had been summoned to the office, of all places.

“Oh yeah,” Myuri said as she waved her braids about like her tail. “The carriage did sound heavy when it came in.”

Despite how soft they looked, her wolf ears always picked up on the most important things.

“Do you mean someone else was in there along with Heir Hyland?”

“I thought she brought back lots of presents.”

“If that was all, she wouldn’t ask us to come to her office.”

She would have asked them to come to the dining hall instead.

“Something may have happened while we were away. A problem with the Church, perhaps.”

Col tried to gather himself—now was not the time to give in to the exhaustion of their journey—when Myuri pushed something onto him.

“Here, Brother. For you.”

She had pressed the scripture to his chest; not understanding why, he took it, and she slid her sword onto her belt. In contrast to her high spirits, Col dropped his shoulders.

“Are you still dreaming?”

“What? Hey! Stop!”

Col lifted the sword from her belt and placed it on the desk along with the scripture.

“You shouldn’t carry around your sword if there’s no real need.” Before Myuri could argue back, Col stopped her and said, “You have a perfectly sharp weapon besides your sword, and that is your intellect.”

Myuri was indeed much stronger than Col against opponents who were hiding ulterior motives.

“I believe an upstanding knight should be perfectly capable of handling most situations with intellect and calm judgment.”

Myuri stared blankly at Col. And perhaps that image crossed her mind; her tail began to swish back and forth, and her eyes gleamed.

“I can do that!”

“I know you can.”

Though Col found himself losing arguments to the unruly girl more often nowadays, he could not let go of her reins quite yet. Her new standing as knight turned out to be a good excuse to keep teaching her for a little while longer.

And so he fell in step behind her, her braids swishing back and forth like her

tail as they made their way toward the office. As he watched her walk with wide, elated steps, he found himself smiling in relief. For a long time, he only felt nervous when he watched her go on ahead, but at some point, he had begun to find the sight reassuring.

“Brother?”

As the thoughts rolled in his head, Myuri turned to speak to him.

“I feel like I really should’ve brought my sword after all.”

Her voice was low; two guards stood in front of the office. One was a familiar face, a knight who served Hyland directly and had instructed Myuri in her sword training. What caught Col’s interest was the other guard, whose physique suggested a lifetime of training; he scanned the area with animosity in his eyes. And that meant beyond the door was someone this person was tasked with protecting.

Even as they approached, this new guard did not bother hiding how he glared directly at them; Col was worried Myuri might start growling at the man.

“Heir Hyland is expecting you.”

Myuri’s sword instructor invited them closer; Col pretended he did not notice the sharp gaze coming from the other guard and nodded slowly.

The knight knocked on the door and announced, “Sir Col has arrived.”

“Send him in,” came the response from inside, and the door swung open almost instantly.

“I’m sorry to bother you while you were resting,” Hyland said.

“It’s all right.” Col replied with a dip of his head.

As he did so, the visitor in the office stood.

What sort of noble was this going to be?

Col strained himself to lift his head, only to suddenly feel the wind knocked out of him. Before him was not an arrogant noble, nor was it a greedy-looking merchant.

It was only an initial impression, but he was sure this visitor was a member of

the clergy. But he seemed to still be in training and was perhaps a bit older than Myuri. He was a marked contrast from Rhodes, the knight-in-training they had gotten to know when the pope's personal Knights of Saint Kruza came to the city. His soft, bright hair and jewellike eyes made him the perfect picture of a refined boy. He, quite frankly, did not match the imposing soldier standing guard outside.

"You must be the Twilight Cardinal."

Oblivious to Col's bewilderment, the standing boy spoke with a kind smile.

Col, however, could tell right away that it was not a typical boyish smile but the expression of someone who was familiar with and relaxed in situations like these. If Col ended up overawed by the sheer atmosphere of this encounter, the wolf at his side would surely tease him afterward.

He somehow managed to meet the other boy's eyes and held them as they exchanged a handshake.

"My name is Tote Col. The people call me the Twilight Cardinal, but it's a bit excessive."

The boy smiled and said, "My name is Canaan Jochaiem. Please call me Canaan."

Col idly considered how classically elegant his family name was, but those thoughts were cut short by his shock at what Canaan said next.

"I am an apprentice of the Holy See's archives."

Just as Col was about to jerk his hand away, as if he had touched a hot surface by accident, a mischievous glint shone in Canaan's eyes.

"I am not your enemy. I believe most within the Church rather consider me a traitor."

Col could tell he had not been able to completely hide his shock due to a displeased sigh from Myuri. But it seemed Hyland grimaced not because of his lack of grit.

"It's okay. I was shocked when I first received word, too."

Canaan mentioned the Holy See—the pope's seat of power. Even if he was

just an apprentice, he still held an important position among the clergy. Considering how the kingdom and the Church were currently at odds, the fact that Canaan was here could not be made public.

That also explained the need for a steely guard in a meeting like this.

“I’m sure you understand things would get sticky if word got out that he was here in the kingdom. I apologize for springing this on you the moment you’ve returned from your travels, but I knew I had to bring you two together before something slipped.”



This was important enough that when Hyland heard of their return, she decided to prioritize this meeting over dinner and listening to Myuri's adventures.

Canaan added, "I have come to the kingdom to mediate the conflict between the kingdom and the Church."

His blue eyes softened, and he smiled.

The Church was an organization where the pope—the individual closest to God—sat at the top. The churches scattered across the world were bound together by a strict hierarchy, and they all submitted to the pope's authority. Several cardinals acted as the pope's assistants, and they were the ones who made decisions over the entire Church body from within the Holy See's administrative body, the Curia.

The Curia was, in essence, the heart of the Church. It was an institution that embodied the world's faith. For Canaan, an individual who worked in such a place, to be in the kingdom was essentially an act of treason, just as the boy himself said.

"To put it frankly, the Church is not a monolith." Canaan described his position briefly.

Hyland continued for him, delving into the boy's family name.

"The Jochaiem family is connected to the Church Father, who made contributions to the formation of the Church during the time of the ancient empire. Their pedigree is impeccable and includes many popes, though none hail specifically from the Jochaiem family itself. God himself vouches for his identity."

The pope, whom all the kings who ruled the world would kneel before, could be counted as one of the boy's relatives. As Col tried to digest the idea, which felt completely removed from reality, Canaan smiled softly in response to Hyland's explanation.

"We are like the smaller branches that always come attached to a much larger tree. All my family is really good for in times like these is gaining the trust of feudal lords."

Due to the way he presented himself, what Canaan said did not come across as self-effacement or humility. There was a calm about him—a coolness, almost—that accepted reality without reservation, taking the situation and, instead of exaggerating or downplaying it, simply seeing it for what it was.

And that did not seem to be an overestimation at all, either.

“But smaller branches have their merits. If my betrayal were to be revealed, it could easily be brushed off as the independent decision of a foolish young boy who chose the wrong path out of ignorance.”

Canaan understood himself as a sort of disposable pawn. Perhaps there was little sense of tragedy about that due to the Church’s many accounts of missionaries heading into pagan lands without any regard for their own lives.

“The proposal comes from a genuine member of the Jochaiem family. If there is a way to resolve the conflict between the kingdom and the Church, then we will need to consider it seriously. Especially if what he says is true.”

“What did he say?”

Canaan nodded as he responded. “There are those within the Church who are losing their patience in the face of this stalemate. More and more people are hoping for war. If we simply stand by and allow things to run their course, I believe war will break out by the next harvest.”

“Oh no...”

Col knew that if the conflict escalated, the only thing that awaited them at the end of this path was open warfare. He wanted to avoid this if at all possible, which was why he had considered investigating the new continent, even though it sounded like something Myuri might have dreamed up.

It seemed they did not have as much time as he thought.

“Isn’t that weird, though?”

Everyone present turned to look at Myuri. She did not spare Col and his shock one glance—despite her casual tone, her eyes were sharp and alert, boring into Canaan, who smiled in an almost emotionless manner.

“You said mediate, right?” she asked.

Canaan nodded.

“Face is super important when it comes to arguments,” she continued. “No one would have any problems if everyone could just agree to stop fighting.”

Col could not scold her for interjecting into the conversation because she was much more adept in the art of debate than he ever was. That, and he also remembered what Eve had said to him.

That greedy merchant had said the dispute between the kingdom and the Church was not over lofty ideals like the righteous of faith, but something easier to understand, something more down-to-earth.

“Tithes, right? They were originally used to raise money in the war against the pagans, but the Church keeps collecting them even though the war is over. And they’re using that money now as reward money for all the people who contributed to the war, right? But since the Church thinks of itself as a major player in the fight, they believe that getting rid of the tax would mean getting rid of their own reward. And that’s why they’re not listening. Isn’t that the gist of it?”

Even though Myuri was not typically very eloquent, and often spoke with disdain about the Church, considering her heritage as a merchant and a wolf’s daughter, it was times like these that she was most composed.

And her accurate summary of what Eve had proclaimed to be the bones of the matter had seemingly won Canaan over.

“I was wondering why such a lovely young lady was present at this meeting,” Canaan said, his expression revealing his surprise.

Col decided to ignore that Hyland seemed even prouder by the implied compliment than Myuri herself.

“But yes, you are correct,” Canaan continued. “It is a problem of...Yes. It is a problem of face,” he said, his tone astonished.

The kingdom insisted that the tithes should be abolished since the war was over, yet the Church insisted that the money was being used as remuneration for the war—not only did both arguments have a certain degree of logic to them, but resolving the conflict required making sure that neither side lost face

in the process. That was why Col had turned his attention away from the tithes, where one side would lose and one side would gain in their abolishment, to the new continent, which would only bring more riches to the table.

He believed that rather than fighting over limited tax revenue, everyone would benefit if they linked arms under the banner of cooperation once again and worked together to acquire new land.

Was it possible that Canaan, too, had set his sights on the new continent?

But just as that thought crossed his mind, Myuri spoke up.

“Problems of face are complicated. And yet here you are, saying you can get everyone to make up peacefully. I just have to know what kind of evil plot you’ve cooked up.”

She specifically used the words *evil plot* because what she really wanted was to check whether Canaan was planning on taking advantage of her foolish little lamb.

It was wording that would normally be intolerable for an envoy of peace who had exposed himself to danger by venturing into enemy territory, but Canaan responded by letting his fake smile drop. A boyish look, one more befitting his age, quickly took its place.

“Journeys bring us to people we could never have dreamed of. I am truly thankful to God.” He beamed. “We have a plan in mind, of course. Naturally, we have no intentions of unilaterally compromising and capitulating to the kingdom’s demands. For the sake of the Church’s authority, you see.”

Myuri had sniffed out the makings of a plot; her eyes gleamed brighter, and she canted her head to the side. It was as though she had found prey deep in the forest and was listening to it walk with both sets of ears.

“However, the victory we have in mind does not align with the intentions of the mainstream factions, which includes the pope. It is in this regard that I believe our faction and the kingdom share a common objective.”

Myuri furrowed her brow and turned to look at Col, as though she had questions for him. It was perhaps because she did not know the Church well.

Col, however, was not thinking of Myuri. He was shocked.

“I assume the pope does not agree with this?”

If that were true, then Canaan’s self-evaluation as a traitor would not be an exaggeration at all.

“All the powerful cardinals are ready to stand firm and oppose the kingdom until the bitter end. Additionally, the pope, with his broad insight and magnanimous heart, will hear what they have to say and pass fair judgment in kind.”

Even Col, the one subject to Myuri’s frequent teasing for being gullible, could not take Canaan’s words at face value. Cardinals ranked just below the pope, but whoever sat in the position of pope was always someone who had been chosen from among the cardinals, so their relationship was not as simple as a bond of ruler and vassal. They were, at times, his vassals, but at other times his equals. If what Col had heard was to be believed, there were even times the cardinals were the pope’s puppet masters.

In essence, there were bound together by a common destiny, and it seemed the current pope was somewhat weak compared to the current group of cardinals.

“What is your definition of victory, then?” Col asked.

Canaan narrowed his eyes slightly and said, “Purging the Church.”

“...*Purging?*”

“Yes. Think of us as inquisitors.” It seemed as though Canaan was expecting Myuri to frown and for Col to catch his breath. He flicked the sleeves on his robes and adjusted himself in his seat. “But what we are cracking down on are not contradictory ideas about God, but the Church’s discipline. Especially those giving in to the temptation of gold.”

Canaan had introduced himself as one of the archive workers of the Curia. There, they held documents detailing all of the Church’s activities, and Col had even heard that people had gotten injured before due to how large and mazelike its halls were.

Which meant a certain type of document was most certainly mixed in among all the other types of literature.

“Do you manage the ledgers, then?”

The Church, spread over such a wide area, boasted a massive income, and that was not just limited to donations.

At the center of the whirlpool of money was the heart of the Church—the Curia.

“The accounting office is a part of the archive division. They record the flow of funds throughout the entirety of the Church and serve God by directing that flow toward righteous causes. But much like actual rivers, it is not so easy to change the flow of money. Even if we attempt to build a bank, it is doomed to crumble eventually. All we have been able to do is watch the floodwaters sully beautiful land with its mud.” Canaan placed his hand on the large desk in the office and leaned forward. “But then you appeared, Twilight Cardinal. You are the one who can right the Church’s wrongs.”

When Canaan looked right at him, Col’s words failed him.

Hyland spoke up instead. “You have exposed the corruption and the wicked accumulation of wealth in churches across several cities, but not in a manner that has expressed any contempt for the Church. In fact, facing the people in such a manner has only restored the people’s respect for the Church, whose reputation was in tatters.”

“And we found hope in you,” Canaan said. That easy smile of his no longer graced his face—his expression was one of hardened resolve.

But he became aware of his excitement; he suddenly cleared his throat and reclined in his seat.

Hyland then spoke again, as though willing to entertain them while Canaan regained his composure.

“We in the kingdom worked with clergy who stood against corruption in the Holy See once, before this conflict with the Church. As you know, there were more than a handful of churches within the kingdom that wielded absolute control over matters of trade and were wrongfully accumulating wealth.”

“I reached out to you, Heir Hyland, because of that history.”

That meant Canaan’s proposal was not something that had suddenly occurred to him and he prepared in a fit of desperation; it was an extension of work that had already been underway in the Church’s long history.

“But the riches hoarded by corrupted clergy are more often than not treated as having greater weight than the word of God. The glimmer of gold charms a great many. We may advise them to use the donations collected from faithful believers in a proper manner, but all too often our words are nothing more than the buzzing of a fly in their ears. And because we practice God’s teachings and try to live honest lives, we ourselves do not have any gold—the weapon of the vulgar world. No one will listen to us without the weight of gold backing our word.”

Col found himself nodding vigorously because he, too, advocated for a life of simplicity and frugality, only to be constantly waved away by the girl beside him. Attempts to live righteously only earned him jeers for being honest to a fault by the common folk.

Even if Canaan’s worldly manner was nothing but a well-honed negotiation technique, his anger that Col caught glimpses of seemed genuine.

“Once the war with the pagans came to an end, the large amount of income the tithes pulled in put shimmering coin into the hands of corrupt people who did not used to have it. Many of them used that as leverage to unjustly spread and maintain their influence. Not only are they unwilling to let go of this source of income, but many are attempting to exacerbate the conflict between the kingdom and the Church so that the ensuing war will make the gold in their coffers shine even brighter.”

Col recalled the face of an evil merchant who had been plotting to make a pretty penny by profiting off war. Any opportunity to make money would always draw in the worst kinds of people.

But after hearing that much, even he began to see what Canaan and his people were hoping to accomplish.

“So abolishing the tithes will allow the conflict with the kingdom to end peaceably, while cutting off the flow of funds will allow you to weaken and

eventually get rid of the corrupted individuals with too much power.”

At a glance, it seemed like the Church would be making great concessions to the kingdom and eventually conceding. But according to Canaan’s principles, the Church would actually be achieving victory. That was the plan.

A few moments later, there came the loud clatter of a chair moving across the floor.

“Lose the battle, win the war!”

Myuri, who loved tales of battle, had a soft spot for things that sounded like stratagems. Canaan blinked in reaction to her excitement, but it was not long before a delighted smile crossed his face.

“It is thanks to your actions that many have begun to question the flow of gold within the Church. Though it is only temporary, there are a number of people who are starting to hesitate drawing water from the river. This is our only chance to rebuild the banks to hold back the raging waters and use them to irrigate the fields of proper faith.”

This was a lifesaving idea for Canaan and the other archivists, whose honesty meant they were at a disadvantageous position. Moreover, it was an ideal outcome for the kingdom, which desperately wanted a way to decisively settle matters with the Church.

But there was one thing that bothered Col.

“I understand the idea in essence, but...” When he tried to picture what sort of role he might serve within this plan, nothing came to mind. “Is it your hope that I will expose the Church’s corruption on the mainland as well? I, uh, strongly agree with your objectives, but I cannot imagine I am the most suited person for this job.”

As she righted her chair, Myuri fixed him with an exasperated look, one that said she could not believe he was being so cowardly and voicing aloud his lack of self-confidence again. He couldn’t completely deny the accusation, but he had a more realistic reason for thinking this way.

“The Knights of Saint Kruza are doing precisely that within the kingdom right now.”

“Oh,” Myuri said, her tone of astonishment making her sound somewhat silly.

It was not long ago that Col and Myuri had come across the company of knights after they had lost their home. And after many twists and turns, they regained their honor and a knightly mission. Their role was to expose the wrongs of the much-loathed Church wherever they may find them in the kingdom.

“The knights were even once considered the pope’s right-hand warriors. Wouldn’t leaving this task to them garner less resistance from within the Church?”

“In a way, you are correct.”

Canaan, however, hesitated in his response. The one who answered instead was Myuri, plopping down in her chair after righting it.

“Yeah, that’s true. Those knights are amazing enough to be living legends. But I guess that’s why they can’t do it.”

Col didn’t quite follow, but Canaan quickly agreed with her.

“That is correct. If the pope were to give them orders, they would obey, as is their duty—even if he commanded them to give up on the correct course of action.”

If the relationship between loyal knights and their lord had to be described as right or wrong, it would most certainly be considered right.

And exposing the wrongs of the Church on the mainland would occasionally put the knights in a position where they would be targeting the coffers of powerful people.

Col had a good guess of what might happen in those situations.

“We must destroy the vice of putting money before God, and correct the thinking of the pope and the cardinals. But we cannot accomplish this alone. We need external pressure.”

The enemy of my enemy is my friend—Col had heard this logic before.

Hyland followed Canaan’s line of thinking and said, “But that external pressure cannot be us. If the kingdom were to pressure the Church into

cleaning house under the banner of righteous faith, that could easily spark wider conflict.”

Hyland was right. And rushing into an all-out war was not something the kingdom wanted; thus, the stalemate continued.

“I don’t think the kingdom and the Church simply stating their positions will help relieve tensions at all. Just as the young lady here said, it’s an unfortunate problem of face. That’s why we have to trust this to a third party.”

A third party?

That was something Col had not foreseen at all. As he sat there in bewilderment, Hyland stood from her chair and made her way to a nearby grand bookshelf and pulled out a book. It was not yet bound, simply held together by string—Col recognized it.

“The help we need the most will come from the common folk, the ones who have learned of the proper faith written in this book.”

The thick sheaf of parchments Hyland had produced was the vernacular translation of the scripture, rewritten with the help and knowledge of many renowned scholars under Hyland’s guidance so that the common people could understand.

“The common-language translation,” Canaan said, seeing where Hyland’s talk was leading. “One book can provide so many people with knowledge, far beyond what one fervent preacher is capable of. In truth, the abridged version you and Heir Hyland distributed to the people in Atiph has already been copied so many times and received a great reception in other cities. If we could produce a complete edition and then spread it on an even grander scale that reaches across the entire continent, then surely even the pope will not be able to ignore calls for change.”

Reading God’s teachings in the common tongue would make it perfectly clear that the modern Church had succumbed to fraud. Once that happened, more and more people would begin to ask the Church to purge evil from its ranks.

It made perfect sense. After all, Col had also been wishing to do the same.

But there was a reason why things had not progressed since Atiph.

“Col, I regret not spreading the translation of the scripture far and wide, even though I had you translate the entire thing.” Hyland fixed her eyes on Col, then briefly closed them, as though bowing her head in apology. “The king has determined that we cannot allow tensions with the Church to worsen any more than they are now, so I’ve had no choice but to shelve the plan to distribute it on the mainland for now. Personally speaking, I don’t want to risk all-out war with the Church, either. But the reason I’ve not been able to keep it going in secret is because I cannot raise the funds and workers required to copy such a massive amount of text without the help of the royal court. It is, realistically speaking, impossible.”

She was cloaked in despondency as she lightly bit her lip even as she smiled, as though cursing her powerlessness.

“So the most we can do is wait for those whose interests are piqued by the text to take it upon themselves to make their own copies and spread them on their own. And unfortunately, what we distributed in Atiph was an incomplete version.”

“So...you are suggesting we have Canaan take over the business of making and distributing new copies?”

Neither the kingdom nor the Church had been able to find any places for compromise, nor had either discovered a way to decisively defeat the other.

So the king of Winfiel judged that escalating tensions any further would only lead to war. As such, he decided to curb direct action and simply wait for the vernacular scripture to spread on its own.

But those within the Church, like Canaan, wouldn’t be restricted by those concerns if they decided to distribute copies themselves.

As that thought crossed Col’s mind, a vague smile crossed Canaan’s face, as though to say he did not completely agree.

“We did think about doing that. But we have faced the very same problems as Heir Hyland. It is a very realistic problem.”

At that, Col recalled what he had seen at the harbor not long ago. Myuri needed to buy quills and paper from Eve in order to keep writing her tall tales.

“Is it a matter of cost?”

“It is. We would have to hire a cohort one thousand strong to circulate enough copies to cover the entirety of the mainland. Even then, it would be incredibly difficult to carry out such a large-scale transcription job without the pope or the opposing cardinals noticing. Accomplishing such a feat on the mainland is beyond our power.

“The scripture is so long and dense. It would take one experienced transcriber months to make one copy. Longer, if we want to bind it properly. And we’d need dozens if we want to distribute them at every major port town along the coast. We’d need a hundred, maybe two hundred, if we want to include all the biggest towns inland as well.”

Myuri began to count on her fingers, but she soon lost track and stared blankly at her hand. The sheer scale of the operation was also far beyond Col’s imagining.

And since he doubted Hyland alone would be covering the cost, he found his next question leaving his mouth without much thought.

“Are we asking the king to act as an intermediary?”

Nordstone had gone to the royal court to negotiate so he might achieve his dream of setting sail for the western continent.

Their plan was a bit more realistic than his.

“Well, no...I haven’t spoken of this to His Majesty,” Hyland said, her face hardening. “There are many in the royal court who have ties to the corrupt clergy within the Church. We will have to proceed alone.”

Canaan had called himself a traitor to the Church. And in a similar manner, Hyland, too, was disobeying the king’s orders. But if Canaan and his fellow archivists were to distribute copies of their own volition, then it would not be an issue between the kingdom and the Church; it would be purely an internal matter. Perhaps that was how he had convinced himself to take this course of action.

And Col was painfully sympathetic to Hyland’s desire to proceed with the plan. He never could have imagined that they would have an ally within the

Church, and one who was determined to rid the organization of its corruption at that—he could only see this as a mission from God.

“His Majesty can’t rely on the court nobles’ finances, of course. That’s why we’ll need to do whatever we can to make as many copies of the scripture as possible.”

What Canaan had imagined was using the Twilight Cardinal’s name to gather as many helpers as possible. But that would only inform the entire world who exactly was planning to distribute the translated scripture. The masses would not see this as the Church reforming itself, which would only fan the flames of impending war.

Col thought he might find himself following the logic in circles, but it was clear that Canaan had come to them because he had found a different way forward.

But it was about to lead him down a path he never would have imagined.

“Sir Col, there is a specific technology that has been stamped out because the Church deemed it heretical. But it can make the impossible, possible. It can make miracles happen.”

“A technology?”

Col was not the only one surprised by what Canaan said. Myuri, the girl with a keen interest in legendary swords and the like, had caught a whiff of adventure.

“There are two reasons we have come to the kingdom. The first is to offer our assistance—you were the ones who translated the scripture into the vernacular, after all. And the second...” Canaan took a deep breath before continuing, “...is to revive this technology the Church banned. There should be an artisan in the kingdom who has learned these techniques.”

If Myuri’s ears were out, the fur on them would most certainly be standing on end—Hyland kept the girl in the corner of her eye as she said, “The workshop that invented this technology originally existed on the mainland, but charges of heresy apparently forced it to close shop. Inquisitors were dispatched afterward to arrest the scattered artisans of the craft, and most were caught. However, one managed to escape.”

Myuri’s eyes, gleaming in anticipation, were completely focused on Hyland.

And Hyland seemed nervous, though she knew she had no reason to be.

“The inquisitors searched high and low for the final artisan. By the time they received word that the fugitive had gotten on a boat toward the kingdom, the conflict between the kingdom and the Church had already become quite grave. It has been several years since the inquisitors gave up the hunt. That’s when Canaan and the other archivists discovered those records.”

“That’s correct. As we were poring over the inquisitors’ records, we discovered that final artisan is still free.”

At the time, they had likely not expected the conflict would last so long; they stood down for what they believed would be a moment, only for their search to be delayed for years. The curiosity of the wolf girl beside Col seemed about to explode, so before her ears and tail could burst forth, he got to the heart of the question: “What technology is this, by the way?”

A taboo art, one the Church attempted to completely erase from existence. An image of the metallic globe he saw in Nordstone’s manor flashed in his mind.

Canaan took a short, nervous breath, then began to speak.

CHAPTER TWO



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“Pursuing the artisan will come with its own difficulties. And reviving forbidden knowledge will be even more difficult than finding it. But we believe this *is* the path God has shown us,” That was how Canaan concluded the conversation once he finished explaining the details of the technology.

The conflict between the kingdom and the Church stood at a standstill for several long years; neither could back down even if they wanted to, and all that waited for them were the ominous signs of war. Canaan’s plan would not only peaceably resolve the sticky conflict, but also sweep away the corruption that had taken hold in the Church over many years.

If this was not the guidance of God, then how could Col remain faithful?

The technology Canaan told them about could indeed make the impossible possible.

“For the sake of righteous faith.”

Once he was finished with his speech, Canaan got to his feet and came to stand before Col, right hand extended. Though his smile was not as confident as it was earlier, there was still a boyish conviction on his face, one that knew what they were doing was close to impossible.

Behind him, Hyland nodded slightly at Col. Canaan had quite literally risked his life to cross into enemy territory and bring them a proposal that was nigh unthinkable. The great difficulty of this task was a sign of how it could change the very fate of the world itself. It would be a joke if Col did not take Canaan’s hand now, for the sake of peace and proper faith.

“By God’s guidance.”

Col gripped Canaan’s hand, and Canaan’s cheeks lifted in relief. And instead of offering verbal thanks, Canaan drew Col’s hand closer and kissed the back of it before bringing it to his forehead, as a priest would do.

“I thank both God and Heir Hyland that I was able to meet you, Sir Col.”

Hyland stood from her chair, too, and she and Canaan exchanged a firm handshake.

“Archivist Canaan, I firmly believe that our cooperation will deliver us from this hardship.”

“Of course it will,” he said. “Let us pray for a peaceful world under God’s rule.”

It would have sound audacious and shameless were anyone else to say that, but that was not the case here. The three of them gripped one another’s shoulders; Myuri, alone, sat pouting in her chair.

If they had the time, Col would have loved to speak more with Canaan about the finer points of faith, but it was hard telling whose attention they would catch if he stayed overlong at the manor. Seeing his business concluded, Canaan hopped aboard his carriage, which had been prepared to make it seem like Hyland was heading out, and left.

After seeing off Hyland and Canaan, Col and Myuri returned to their room, and Myuri plopped onto the bed.

“*Ugh*, that was so boring!” she exclaimed.

Her ears and tail popped forth and flicked to the side. She grasped the puppy, who thoughtlessly rushed to her to play, holding it in both hands and shaking lightly.

“Stop that, the poor thing.”

“But he’s happy!”

She let the puppy go on the bed, and it staggered a bit, apparently dizzy, but it rushed right back to Myuri, tail wagging eagerly as though wanting her to do it again.

“He said it was some mythical technology that the Church wanted to destroy! I thought it was going to be a powerful spell or something!”

Though that was not exactly what Canaan had said, Myuri had four ears—she was more than capable of hearing everything perfectly; at the same time,

perhaps having four ears was what gave her a talent for hearing only what she wanted to hear.

“It *is* powerful magic.”

The world beyond the window was still well lit, but the air was cool as the sun began to set. Col closed one half of the window as he spoke. And as he did so, he heard the puppy bark loudly; Myuri perhaps had bullied the poor thing again.

“What’s so amazing about technology that can make lots of books?”

Myuri must have imagined a legendary sword or something along those lines, but Col believed the technology to be on par with any blade of legend.

“Creating books quickly is nothing short of a miracle. You know very well how much effort it is to write, don’t you?”

Even if she had been lying about her hands hurting too much to wash her hair, she certainly had not been lying about the aches and pains that came from moving her hand nonstop.

“This is a way to completely do away with all the trouble of producing a staggering number of books in a short amount of time. It is an awesome piece of technology.”

What Canaan had told them about was brand-new printing technology and the artisan who had mastered use of the technique.

It would take even an experienced transcriber months to copy something as thick and dense as the scripture. But using the technology Canaan told them about would allow them to create a large number of copies in just one month with just a handful of workers—or even just one.

“I think it’d be even better if the words would appear just by thinking of them, though,” Myuri said, looking away in a huff. She was digging in her heels because the big reveal had fallen short of her expectations. “I’ve already seen what that kid was talking about back in Nyohhira, anyway.”

Col closed his eyes at the sheer insolence of calling Canaan, someone who worked at the Curia and had *popes* in his family tree, “that kid.” Pressing on, he

countered with, “You mean wood-block prints, yes? Where images are carved onto wooden blocks, colored in ink, and then pressed onto paper?”

“Yeah, those things. I saw one of a knight fighting a dragon.”

Nyohhira had many guests who stayed for extended periods of time, and artists of all stripes came by to relieve the patrons of their boredom.

What Myuri was talking about were prints sold with images to match what the bards sung about.

“What’s so dangerous about that?”

“This is something different.”

Myuri only shrugged, but this was a technology that could increase the production of books by a factor of not two or ten but a hundred or more. And the reason the Church feared this technology was clear to anyone who regularly dealt in books.

But when Myuri had listened to Canaan explain the technology and watched Hyland and Col listen intently, all of them wearing deeply serious expressions, she had looked on with doubt on her face. Or perhaps Myuri’s dissatisfied look had been because she felt left out, unable to share their appreciation.

“But they’re just pressing letters onto a piece of paper, right?”

“Well, yes...In a broad sense...”

It was strange how Myuri could make the most incredible concepts sound so bland.

The forbidden technology Canaan had spoken of consisted of several things.

First, lead stamps molded into the shape of letters had to be prepared in great quantity. Then these metal stamps would be laid out to reproduce the desired text, coated with ink, and pressed onto paper. It did not differ much from wood-block prints at a glance, but metal type made it possible to recreate the intricacies of script in a legible manner and transfer the characters onto the page in an instant. If that were all, then changing wood into metal would indeed be the only difference, as Myuri mentioned. What was revolutionary was how sentences of text were divided up into letters, which could then be recreated

with metal stamps, making it possible to print any text under the sun with the exact same set of tools. Block printing could not accomplish this, and what was even more incredible was that one could create many more stamps at the foundry.

On top of that, a wooden stamp would lose its sharpness after several dozen prints; but a metal stamp was more durable by leaps and bounds. An engraving mallet, which pounded patterns into medallions of metal in order to create coin, could last for about a thousand coins. If it were hammering paper instead of metal, it could easily print tens of thousands of pages.

The core of the technology that Canaan spoke about was that it brought together technologies that were known but existed disparately. It did this in a way others had never considered before and cleverly put those technologies to use.

“With the right tools, we could create enough copies in one month to fill this entire room. And we would never copy the wrong thing, never make a mistake in the writing, and have perfectly formed letters in the same place every time. It is...truly awe-inspiring.”

Though it was simple enough, the more Col thought about the ramifications of such a thing, the more he understood how great of an effect it could have on the world.

Myuri, however, still did not seem to understand.

“Sure, it sounds useful, but is it really worth getting all worked up over?”

Her ears and tail, which shared fur color with the puppy, flicked unhappily.

“It is.”

Her eyes settled on him in disbelief for a moment before she turned to look at the puppy in her arms, then tilted her head in a theatrical manner.

“Give it some thought. One could write a text full of lies and then easily spread it among the people.”

“Huh?”

What the Church most likely feared was the proliferation of texts espousing

heretical ideals. Because if they were to spread faster than the authorities could find and burn them, there would be no stopping them.

It was precisely because it was so difficult to record things by hand that heresy spread primarily via word of mouth. That made it simple to uproot those ideas, since they only had to follow the chain of the association back to the source. But if printing became a much easier endeavor, then it wasn't hard to see how the situation could change drastically.

If all households could own books written in a script that anyone could understand and would persist for years if treated with care, how would the Church eradicate misguided ideas from the people's minds? What's more, those books would propagate without end.

Col offered Myuri an even easier-to-understand example.

"You know the tale of the great merchant who traveled the world, yes?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah. I think Father was reading it back at the bathhouse, and Mother was scowling at him."

It was thanks to the skills of Myuri's mother, Holo the Wisewolf, that Myuri's father, Lawrence, was convinced to give up his adventuring life as a traveling merchant and settle down as a bathhouse owner. The reason for Holo's displeasure was likely the sour prospect of having to set out on a journey yet again, after she went through all the trouble of setting down roots.

An exasperated smile crossed Col's face as he imagined the two, and he continued his explanation.

"Let's say this person happens to stay at a bad inn and ends up writing rather negative things about the Nyohhira baths. And then that book is copied and spread faster than the guests who compliment Nyohhira can talk to one another—what do you think would happen then?"

"....."

At last, Myuri seemed to understand the sheer power of the technology Canaan had discussed.

"So what that kid is trying to do is fight fire with fire?"

They would be using technology, one that had been banned due to the fear that it might spread heretical beliefs, to quickly spread God's correct teachings over the world. That was what Canaan and the other archivists wanted to do.

"And the one who knows how to use that technology is somewhere in the kingdom," Myuri said, somewhat occupied with the puppy's front paws pressing on her nose as though commanding her to sniff them. She turned to look at Col. "Are we helping them?"

Though she supposedly loved all sorts of adventure, she did not seem particularly enthused about this.

But it did not seem to be simply because she had been disappointed by the technology Canaan had told them about. After traveling with her, Col found himself doubting her intellect less and less. What the silver hunter was most upset about was not the technology Canaan had spoken of—it was the whereabouts of the artisan they were supposed to be seeking out.

"And we're supposed to look all over the kingdom to find this artisan, when no one knows where they went?"

Though the kingdom was an island, it was not a small one, nor was it deserted.

Myuri was an adept hunter; she was seeing a very real problem with this plan.

"We should be able to find them," Col said.

With her nose to the puppy's, she suddenly opened her mouth wide, pretending she was about to bite into it, then looked at Col.

"I don't think so."

That was the answer he was expecting, but he was not going to give up now.

"Even though you believe a legendary sword is obtainable?"

Her wolf ears twitched at the simple provocation. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him, then held the puppy to her chest and lay down on the bed.

"Because it's *legend*. People talk about legends. We'd just have to follow the trail of the story, that's all."

That sounded precisely like pagan tales.

“The artisan exists, at the very least. I believe they will be much easier to find.”

“The legendary sword exists, too!”

It was hard to tell how serious Myuri was about the sword, but she was right that finding one artisan within the entirety of the kingdom might be impossible.

“Also, you’d know a legendary sword the second you see it. But what about an artisan who knows how to do some weird craft? It’d be nice if they were dressed like an alchemist or something to make it easy, like Miss Diana.”

They had been pursued by inquisitors, which meant that was unlikely.

“Besides, you’re blind as a bat, Brother. You can’t do it.”

He had nothing to say in turn.

But if he ran into a setback here, then Canaan and the archivists’ plan would face a setback as well, which meant the kingdom and the Church would remain at a standstill. If they were to let this opportunity go, they would have no choice but to place their hopes of reconciliation on a dream—the new continent. And their only other choice would be a great war, with the honor of both parties on the line.

Canaan and the archivists’ suggestion could be a miraculous blow that could cut a path to the future wide open. It was unlikely they would see another development that allowed them to both peaceably resolve the conflict *and* right the Church’s wrongs.

What was at stake here was much too great for Col to give up so easily.

Which meant he needed to stoke Myuri’s motivation and embark on this reckless search across the kingdom.

“Oh, but you love books, Brother. I bet you’d find them if you just follow the smell of ink,” Myuri said with a chuckle, her tone rather mean-spirited as she played with the puppy. She must have been more upset about him doubting the existence of the legendary sword than he thought.

O God, Col prayed silently, because he was aware he was about to do

something dishonest.

“Let’s say we work with Canaan and the archivists. Do you understand what that would mean?”

“Mm?”

The puppy had its paws pressed onto Myuri’s cheek, squishing her face in a strange manner as she looked up at him.

Even though it was unlikely that she was not cooperating because she was not interested, it was clear how much motivation mattered, considering how messy her writing was when he was forcing her to learn compared to when she wanted to learn of her own will.

Perhaps God would forgive him for resorting to a few tricks.

“Canaan works in a division of the Curia that manages the archives, a place said to be labyrinthine.”

“Okay? Brother, are you using the word *labyrinthine* hoping I’d be—?” she said and then stopped. The puppy, held high above her, slipped from her hands. “Wait, you mean we could go in the archives?! Do they have adventure stories?!”

She took the bait.

“Until very recently, the Church has been fighting pagans for centuries. What they are not lacking in are tales of miracles. And that means—”

“They’ll have the story of the legendary sword!”

Col held his tongue in response, but Myuri not only had human ears, but wolf ears atop her head as well. They lay flat on her head when she did not want to listen to something, but when she *did*, they would not miss even the whispers of a fairy hiding behind a pebble. It seemed those ears had imagined Col saying, *Yes*.

He did not respond with precise words, nor had he directly claimed that the reward for helping Canaan was entry into the archives. Yet he still prayed silently—*God, I have not told a single lie*—before continuing.

“There may be many hidden stories about the new continent, though they

might not be much more than rumors. They keep many banned books that would have been burned outside of the Church's keeping."

Col emphasized the words *banned books*, keeping Myuri's love of adventure in mind.

And just as he had expected, her clean, fluffy tail grew in size as it puffed out farther.

He had successfully pulled on her reins.

Of course, even though it caused him a great deal of vexation, she always tried to leap from his hand.

"The books are great," Myuri began, her canines pressing into her lower lip as a dauntless smile crossed her face. "But that kid works where the pope is, right? Then maybe we can see if the bear is in the Church, too."

"Oh!"

The Moon-Hunting Bear was said to have put an end to the age of spirits—those like Myuri. It had apparently destroyed all those who stood in its way, and legend had it the bear was big enough to reach the moon. Such a being could have ruled the world, yet the enormous bear mysteriously vanished.

Old legends say it disappeared into the western sea, and there were indeed what looked like footprints on the ocean floor. And with clues pointing toward a new continent at the edge of the western sea, it was a coincidence that was hard to ignore.

But Myuri's imagination had gone far beyond that fairy tale.

The bear could have ruled the world, yet it was gone with nary a trace. Her question was, after it vanished, who ruled the world in its place?

The answer to that was obvious to anyone who lived in the current age.

The Church.

"Heh-heh. We're off to look for someone, aren't we?"

The way she sat up on the bed made it seem as though it was her fluffed tail that lifted her up. Col intended to ask Canaan about the archives in his own way

and on his own time, and he wondered if it was possible to get an audience with the pope.

Or perhaps it was possible for Myuri to see what he truly was from a distance.

They obviously could not leap at him to rip off his mask, so that would be good enough for Col so long as it cleared up her strange fantasies. It was ludicrous to think that the pope and his cardinals were bears dressed in priestly vestments.

And so what they should tackle first was the problem before them.

“Yes, an artisan. We have scarcely any clues. However...”

He decided not to say, *I have a few leads.*

“Okay!”

Myuri leaped from the bed; the puppy was tossed in the movement and rolled on the bed.

Then she snatched the short sword ordered specifically for her from atop the desk and slipped it into her sash, like a bandit.

“C’mon, Brother! We’re off to find an artisan!”

Myuri was like well-oiled tinder.

She was either cool and silent or a roaring flame.

“It’s still bright outside, so we should go to the plaza first! There’s so many people there, we could probably find them right away! We could probably interrogate all the people who smell like ink, like you do! C’moon!”

She grabbed at him and tugged. Col sighed at the puppy, who stared up at them curiously, then readjusted his grip on her hand.

“There is no need to interrogate anyone. And we are not going to the plaza first.”

“Where, then?!”

He could feel the heat from the fire in her reddish eyes as he replied: “To Miss Eve’s.”

With her silver, taillike braided pigtails swishing behind her and her sword at her hip—a necessity for leaving the house, she insisted—Myuri dashed on ahead.

After informing the elderly servant that they would be going out, Col was timidly reminded that the staff would be beginning preparations for dinner soon; it was very likely Hyland had ordered them to prepare a grand feast. Col promised they would return before sundown and then rushed after the wild girl.

It was not long after he set off after her that he wished he had taken the time to nap. But knowing they were headed to the same place, he eventually gave up trying to keep pace with Myuri.

Though there was still time before the bells would ring, signaling the closing of the markets, the sky was madder red, and the looks of those he passed were somewhat relieved. The only ones brimming with energy were those who were on their way to the taverns, their workday just beginning; the porters who were glad they were on their last run of the day; and the wolf girl, whose hunter spirit now burned brightly.

But such a peaceful evening sight would be engulfed in the color of flames if war with the Church ever broke out.

The thought alone was enough to spur Col on faster, and he at last arrived at Rausbourne's old city.

As he made his way toward his destination, he found Myuri, who had grown bored of waiting, practicing her swordsmanship on the side of the road.

"You're so slow!"

He had no time to scold her for swinging her sword on the streets. Their companion during the incident with Nordstone, Az, was watching over her.

As he turned to look at Col, his blank expression somewhat jovial, he gave a slight nod of the head.

"Is Miss Eve in?"

"Yeah!" Myuri shouted. She flicked her blade to the side to end her session,

then sheathed it.

“The movement you take when you stop your blade is important, too,” Az said. “Be mindful of this next time.”

“Okay!” Myuri replied, her expression serious in a way she had never shown Col before.

“At least practice in the courtyard or something,” Col scolded her. But she only shrugged in response. Though she may master her sword skills sooner than later, it seemed like the day she would become a prudent knight was still far-off.

Az led them both into the manor, which had once been used as a loading dock for the trade of wheat in the city.

“Whoa,” Myuri could not help but exclaim. The storage area had once been filled with detritus, but it was now stocked high with merchandise.

There Eve stood, ledger in one hand, inspecting the stock.

“I’m busy, you know,” she said. They had come to see her not long after returning from their journey; she probably thought they were here to bring her more trouble.

“We need to speak with you. It isn’t certain, but I believe it is a matter that will involve trade.”

They would need to arrange not only for a great deal of ink and paper, but twine to hold the pages together and leather to bind them, then transport for the completed copies if they intended to print a large number of books. And if they wanted to avoid drawing attention, then payment for these things would have to be in secret, and conducting trade discreetly was Eve’s specialty. It was likely they would be relying heavily on her services in the near future.

Eve reached up, quill still in hand, to scratch behind her ear, and she looked up at Col as she sighed. “Now what?”

Sharon was clearly wary of Eve, and Col, too, started to lose his nerve when he thought about how indebted he would be to her, but he thought of her as a generally good person.

His feelings must have been obvious on his face; Eve frowned.

“I need you to contact someone for me,” he said.

“What?”

It was obviously not Eve who voiced her shock in such a silly manner.

“Brother, do you know where the artisan is?!”

Eve frowned when she heard that, and Col offered a strained smile.

“I don’t, no. Miss Eve, I need to contact Le Roi.”

Eve’s eyes widened for a moment after she heard the name, but then she narrowed them dubiously.

The person Col had mentioned was a merchant he’d met on his travels more than a decade ago who specialized in dealing with books.

“If you brought him up to me in the sticks out in Nyohhira, I would’ve thought you wanted a copy of the scripture for yourself,” Eve said. “But now? I’m pretty sure you can ask one of your noble or priest friends for whatever book you want.”

She had deduced he was looking for literature that was not so easily obtained.

And since Col was asking, she knew it had something to do with faith.

“I...doubt it will cause you much trouble, Miss Eve.”

“Ha!” Eve barked. She continued with a sharp tone, almost as though she were physically jabbing him with her finger. “You want me to contact *Le Roi*, who deals in precious books way more valuable than their weight in gold, and then claim you’re not going to cause me any trouble? You’re practically putting the beehive at my front door and telling me you didn’t *mean* for the bears to come by.”

It was a strange metaphor, but he understood what she was trying to say.

“You’re not going to help us?” Myuri asked, her red eyes turned up at Eve.

“.....”

Eve looked genuinely displeased; perhaps she could see the wisewolf behind

the girl's eyes.

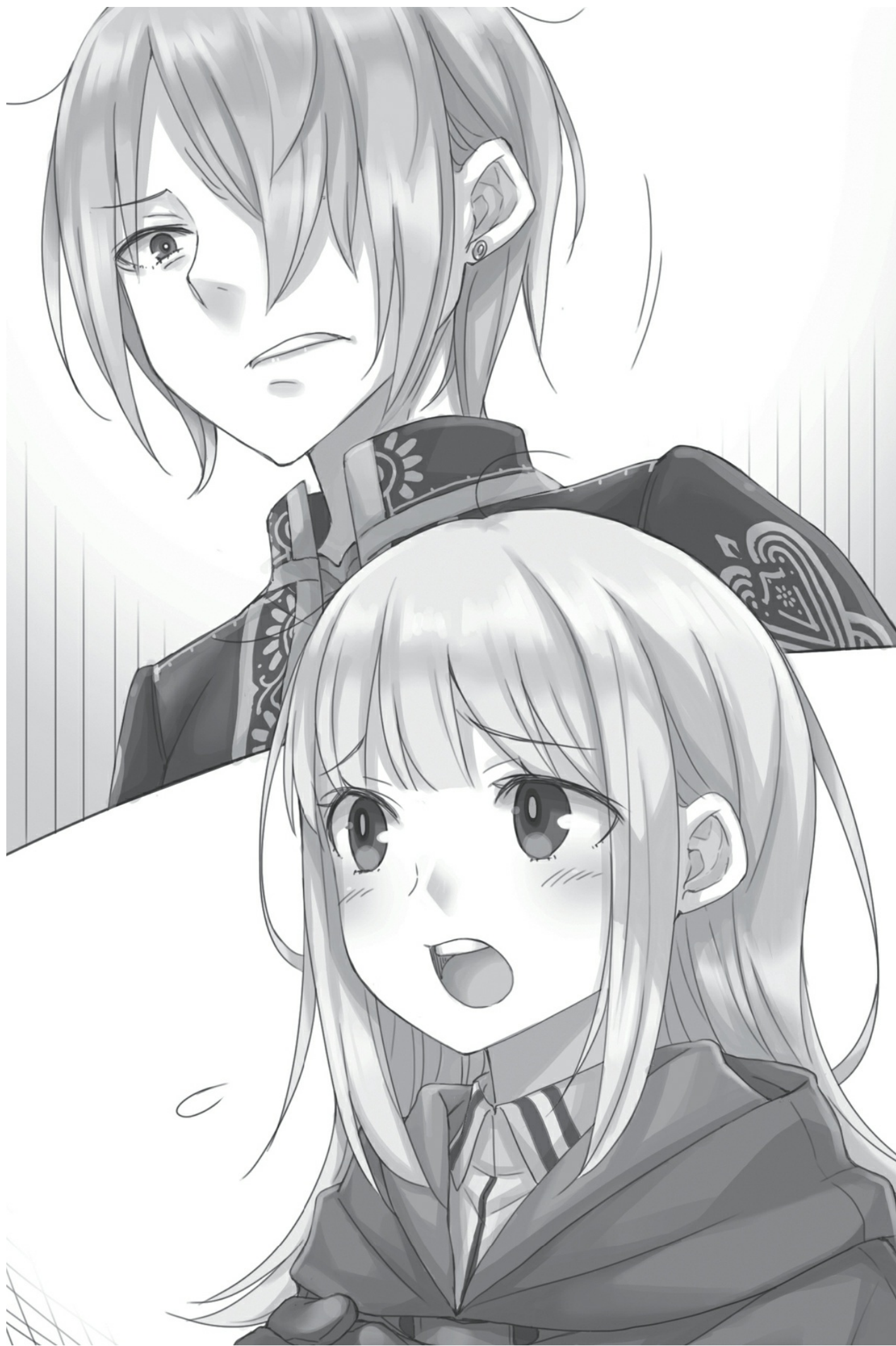
Col did not think that was it.

It was because, for some reason, whenever Myuri visited, delicious food seemed to appear even in this manor.

In her genuine displeasure, Eve groaned. "I guess I should always be keeping an eye on you, if you decide to go sticking your noses in places I can't see..."

Myuri blinked and then beamed.

Though Eve was likely also considering her relationship with Myuri's parents, her trade with Hyland, and her future business, the biggest reason she agreed was because she was worried about the two of them.



“But,” she said, her expression twisting, “I’m warning you for your own good: I don’t know why you’re doing this, but don’t think you can waltz into the world of hidden literature and walk out unscathed.”

Perhaps that was the conclusion this greedy merchant, one who had dealt in all sorts of merchandise over her career, had come to after crossing a great deal of dangerous bridges. Books were filled with ideas, and ideas could be either poison or panacea. That was precisely the reason why the Church had banned the technology that would allow ideas to propagate endlessly.

Col knew well the dangers that came with this, as did Hyland and Canaan.

What kind of face would Eve make if she found out they wanted to revive the technology that would allow them to make infinite copies of such literature? Myuri, too, was likely picturing that very outcome.

Instead, Col said as quietly as he could, “I just want to ask him about bookmaking.”

“.....”

Not once did he think he could fool her. But Eve understood that the weight of information was shared once it was given to another. And considering her default attitude toward others was generally suspicion, she doubted he was hiding something from her out of spite. Col genuinely had no intention of causing Eve any trouble.

After weighing the dangers of knowing against the dangers of ignorance, Eve ultimately decided the latter was riskier.

“I’ll contact Le Roi. If he says it isn’t dangerous, then I’ll have him help you. But if it is, I’m going to pretend like this conversation never happened. Understand?”

It was a warning, but in a way, it was also her way of trusting them.

“Of...of course,” Col replied.

Eve stared at him for a moment longer, then scratched the back of her head again.

“You’re starting to remind me a lot of that old traveling merchant. He sure

acted like a sheep, but he was fearless when it came to the strangest things.”

With a strained smile, he decided to take that as a compliment.

“Le Roi is very popular with the most eccentric nobles. Someone must know where he is. I’ll get a hold of him pretty quickly; three days at the quickest. A week at worst.”

“Thank you so much.”

With a weary look, Eve gave a heavy sigh. “And? Are you staying for dinner?”

“Oh, um, Heir Hyland was actually—”

“Thought so. Heard someone was out at the markets buying high-quality mutton and expensive candies. Thought it might be Hyland, but I heard rumors that some important bigwig’s come to town. I laughed.”

“Well, she’s going to need all that to reward a hardworking knight, after all,” Myuri boasted, never losing her nerve and puffing out her chest with pride.

“Heard you did put in good work back in Raponell,” Eve said.

It sounded as though Az, who sat patiently beside her, had filled her in on what had happened.

“But only heaven knows how long anyone’s good luck will last. If you somehow find yourself stumbling in this next little job of yours”—Eve reached out, quill still in hand, to gently lift Col’s chin—“you can come work for me.”

Myuri lightly took Eve’s hand.

“Give us lots of honey and dates, and we’ll think about it.”

“Heh. Then you’ll jump ship and join me right now if I throw in lemon ice candy?”

“Lemon? What’s that? Sounds tasty.”

“Ah-ha. Poor thing, living life not knowing that delectable sourness.”

Please don’t feed Myuri any unnecessary information, Col thought; but at the same time, he was relieved to know that Eve could get in contact with Le Roi, the book merchant. Col felt like speaking with the man about dangerous matters might even make him feel safer. That was because Le Roi dealt with

dangerous literature, the kind that could not be discussed publicly, just as Eve said.

“Brother, Brother! I want to try lemon ice candy!”

Myuri, now armed with knowledge of a new treat, tugged on Col’s sleeve; the witch who was constantly a terrible influence on the romantic girl grinned in delight.

“Heir Hyland will be holding a feast for us soon.”

“But she’s not going to have lemons! Miss Eve said the peel has a really powerful scent, and the inside is stuffed full of really sour fruit, and when you mix it with honey and sprinkle it over ice shavings, it’s really good!”

Col felt like he had heard of something similar from a very rich noble back at the Nyohhira bathhouse. As he thought about how much food there was out there that he had yet to lay eyes on, he began to wonder just how much knowledge and technology was yet to be discovered out there in the world. And since the world of banned books, too, was something even Eve warned against, he began to feel vaguely apprehensive of what new perspective he would discover once he gained that knowledge.

The alchemist who had lived with Nordstone had mostly likely been looking at the world from that unique angle.

She had discovered a kind of fertilizer for wheat that no one else had thought of, she held conviction in the existence of land at the edge of the western sea, and what was more, she— “Brother?”

Myuri’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

“Oh...Sorry.”

“I knew you should’ve napped with me.”

She thought he was dazed from the exhaustion of travel, but if he said aloud that he was thinking about the possibility of the world being round, she would certainly brush it off as sleep talk.

“Okay, let’s go back and eat dinner, then, Brother!”

He admired how she could constantly keep him on his toes.

That said, they would be searching for an artisan in this wide, wide kingdom whom even the inquisitors let slip, so her mental agility would be a reliable ally.

But as they stepped out of Eve's manor, he wished she would stop pulling on his sleeve to make him go faster.

There were rumors a bigwig had come to town after people had seen how suddenly someone had been buying a great deal of expensive meats from the butchers and sugar from the apothecaries, but Col was not entirely surprised to hear it was all for one girl who had come from a mountain bathhouse.

But Hyland, who had put together this luxurious supper, seemed genuinely pleased with Myuri's reaction.

"Your mission took you far away, but it was for a great cause."

Though Hyland typically spoke in a relatively informal manner, she sounded like a proper noble when she said that. It was, of course, to please the wild Myuri—who insisted that a supper like this required a knight to be dressed in their most formal, which naturally meant wearing her sword at her waist.

With manners she had just learned from a real knight, she removed her sword and fell to one knee to show her fealty.

It was impressive posturing, but the moment she dropped her head in a bow, she began to drool—the delicious scent of freshly grilled mutton on the table beside her wafted forth, accompanied by the sound of fat crackling under the heat. When Col saw her frantically wipe at her mouth with her sleeve, he sighed.

"I bet all your food on the ship was cold. Come—eat up."

Myuri, satisfied with playing knight for the time being, handed off her sword to a maid, rolled her shoulders, sat at her spot, gripped her knife tightly, and stabbed it into a hunk of meat.

"Honestly, Myuri..."

Her table manners were atrocious, but Hyland, who was essentially head of the household in this situation, was delighted, so Col could say no more. And though it was slight, he got the sense that Myuri, too, was acting in a slightly

more boorish way for Hyland's entertainment, so he quickly reached out to cut the meat into smaller pieces so that she would not bite directly into it.

"I heard you did a fantastic job with regards to House Nordstone. Very well done."

Col had given Hyland the letter from Stephan and a detailed report of the incident before the meal.

A number of secrets had come about during the incident, so as he drank his wine with Hyland's toast, he could feel it catching in his throat.

"It is hard to say the old Lord Nordstone is completely innocent, but I believe it's more that he is...a unique individual. But his heir, Lord Stephan, is a devout man, so I doubt we will have to worry about their lands in the future."

"I see. I got that sense just from reading the letter. One's writing reflects one's character," Hyland said, smiling as though recalling what she had read. Col could somewhat picture how Stephan's overly eager personality shone through in his letter to Hyland.

"But you can imagine my surprise to learn that all those rumors I thought were tall tales weren't entirely false," she continued.

"Right?! Exactly! My eyes almost popped out of my head when I saw that boat filled with bones!" Myuri exclaimed, filling her mouth with a piece of beef shoulder slathered with a strong-looking sauce made of a paste of grated garlic, pine nuts, and peppercorns.

"The old lord lived through a turbulent age. He doesn't really care what others think of him when he's getting things done; maybe we could learn a thing or two from him."

"Yeah! He was really cool!"

Hyland agreed with a smile; after watching Myuri dig into the fava bean soup, she turned to Col. "And after all those heroic efforts, you have Archivist Canaan to contend with. You'll have to forgive me for putting so much on your plate."

"Of course."

Col was flustered for just a moment before Myuri laid her hand on his

shoulder.

“It’s fine. We’ll do whatever, so long as you keep feeding us like this.”

“Myuri!”

Myuri seem unbothered by the scolding; she plucked out one portion of lamb ribs before biting into the fatty meat.

“Paying you in food is an easy ask for me. And I know this task with Archivist Canaan is truly going to make big waves over the entire world.”

Though Hyland spoke with a smile, there was a slight hue of melancholy to her expression.

Unlike Col, who simply had to do what he was told, Hyland stood between Canaan and the other archivists, and the kingdom. Even if things went well, the weight resting on her shoulders was far beyond what he could imagine.

“Is he staying in the cathedral?”

“No. The cathedral isn’t necessarily free of acquaintances from the opposing faction. We followed Eve Bolan’s lead and set him up in one of the old buildings in town.”

A city with a long history would be no stranger to fierce battles. Old buildings that survived the fires of war often had underground tunnels and hidden rooms, so it was much safer for him to stay in a place like that if push came to shove.

“In terms of safety,” Hyland continued, “I would have honestly preferred he didn’t step foot in the kingdom at all. But the high-ranking clergy who mediated for us told me that Archivist Canaan refused to proceed with his plan until he met you in person and figured out what sort of person you were.”

What surprised Col most out of what Hyland had said was that he now saw Canaan not as a disposable pawn, but as a key figure in the plan. He was surprised more by his youth than the prestige of his name.

Hyland continued, “He’s apparently very well known for being a child prodigy. I’ve heard he can take one look at a dense book on theology and have it memorized in a snap.”

Col recalled Canaan's calm that seemed far beyond his age, his poised air, and how intelligent he seemed as he spoke boldly about banned technology. He was not simply an individual of high standing—he had the talent to match his status.

The girl beside Col was an equal match when it came to confidence alone; he turned to look at her, only to see her delightfully placing a slice of thick cheese on a slice of wheat bread. He could practically see her tail wagging happily.

“Do you mean to say I've earned his favor?” Col asked.

Hyland shrugged with a smile. “I think he was using a screening as an excuse to meet someone he truly admired and might not get the chance to see again.”

“.....”

Though Col was unsure how to respond, Hyland seemed pleased, so he gave an ambiguous nod.

“And when I dropped him off, he seemed beyond excited to read the complete version of your vernacular translation. Despite how tense he was during the meeting at the office.”

Col had been desperately keeping himself afloat, in contrast with Canaan's cool demeanor. Hearing how he was behind the scenes, that both of them had been conscious about staying composed for each other, struck him as funny.

“I could tell right away,” Myuri said. After putting away her bread, the wolf girl grinned, baring her sharp canines, and narrowed her eyes. “Also, I would have kicked him down after he kissed your hand if he were a girl.”

Hyland, who had raised her cup of wine to her lips, burst out into laughter. “I'll have to be careful, too.”

Please don't make jokes like that, Col thought as he turned to look at Myuri. And as he did, Myuri opened wide and tore into a new piece of meat.

“Ugh...I can't move...”

Col thought the sight looked familiar, and he realized it was because Myuri was the spitting image of her mother, Holo the Wisewolf. Even Holo, who had once been worshipped as a god, put on a similar disgraceful display whenever she drank too much.

But from the outside, it was clear that her attitude did not come from debauchery, but because her beloved husband was always by her side, doting on her. And that meant Col was partially responsible for Myuri's behavior because of the way he spoiled her.

"Brother...It hurts..."

After eating a whole mountain of food, Myuri did not have the strength to return to the room. So she had decided to lie down on a stone bench in the peristyle that faced the inner courtyard.

"Are you sure I don't have to call a doctor?" Hyland was fretting somewhat.

"This always happens," Col replied with a sigh. "She'll be better in a little bit."

Her stomach would be grumbling the next morning anyway.

He gave his thanks to a maid who hurriedly brought out a blanket, and laid it over her.

"Gluttony is one of the deadly sins. I will have to lecture you later."

"Hnng..."

Her groan was most certainly fake—it was her way of telling him that she was not listening.

He poked the tricky girl's forehead and stood.

"In any case. Heir Hyland?"

"Hmm?" Hyland, who seemed fully intent on staying by Myuri's side the entire night, looked up at Col.

"Regarding the artisan—I've decided to reach out to an acquaintance bookseller first."

"You know someone like that?"

"I met him on my travels from long ago—he dealt in manuals that were marked for destruction by the Church. He not only has knowledge and connections, but he can most certainly be trusted."

"I see, a bookseller who deals in rare books. I'm certain he must be particularly sensitive to the inquisitors' movements due to his trade, so he

might know something about that time period.”

Hyland gave a deep nod and placed her hand to her chin in thought.

“Is something the matter?” Col asked.

Hyland’s expression remained clouded, however. It seemed as though she was hesitant to say what was on her mind.

“Archivist Canaan’s proposal is most certainly God’s will in the eyes of the kingdom,” she said, her speech a bit stiff for how she thanked God for the stroke of good luck. “But I think there is one problem with helping him.”

“A problem?”

One could say that Canaan’s proposal itself was full of problems. They would be sticking their noses in the depths of the world of books, a place not even Eve dared venture, and spreading the vernacular scripture across the continent could easily be put to a stop on the king of Winfiel’s orders.

That said, he had thought that the make-or-break decision had already been made.

When Col began to wonder if Hyland was worried about the difficulty of finding the artisan, like Myuri was, she expressed a perspective on the problem he was not expecting.

“Namely where we’ll be making these books.”

There would be dozens, hundreds, even thousands of copies of the thick tome that was the scripture.

The technology Canaan spoke of could apparently make that many copies only with a few workers. The cost of paper books that did not use parchment or leather bindings was mostly determined by how much the transcribers were paid.

Col thought they only needed the technology, but it was as Myuri said—he had eyes for only half the world.

“A place, hmm...A place...”

The amount of paper alone would be staggering. And on top of that, they

would have to transport it all. If they wanted to print a great number of books without anyone else noticing, they would have to work in a place far from civilization but not too remote that the transport of material became too difficult. Plus, carriages coming and going to the middle of nowhere, stuffed full of paper and ink, would stand out painfully.

And the technology Canaan spoke of could only print words on a page, so even if they were to make simple books, they would still need a number of workers to cut the paper purchased from the papermaker, punch holes for bindings, and add covers. If they were to all crowd in the workshop to work, they would not only need the basic necessities to live, but also people to support them and for the materials necessary for all their activities to be constantly brought in. And that was not something they could do in secret in town.

As he chided himself for lacking the foresight to see this, Hyland continued, voicing yet another thing that took him completely by surprise.

“Which means I’m going to need your good word.”

“My...my what?”

He could not possibly understand why.

Hyland’s shoulders dropped, and she sighed. “I know of the perfect place for this plan...You know, that new monastery we’re backing.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, before he realized he was speaking.

Sharon and Clark’s new monastery was most certainly ideal for the job.

“It’s a bit rural, big enough for many people to live in, and no one would question the frequency with which people came and went—I can’t think of a more suitable place.”

“And constant orders of paper and ink would not be out of the ordinary for a monastery. I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Col said, and that was when the question hit him. “But, ah, why do you need my good word?”

“Well, you know...” Hyland scratched her forehead, hesitant. “I’ve made arrangements for the monastery for Mister Clark and Miss Sharon. They must

be very busy every day with preparations toward opening the monastery. For us to waltz in and use it for our own purposes is..."

What shocked Col most was not the lack of conviction in Hyland's speech.

It was how distant Hyland actually was from the image of nobility he had in his mind.

"Of course, it's not as if we're keeping it for ourselves. The moment the project is over, the monastery will be theirs, just as promised," Hyland said, her tone defensive.

Col could not help but smile. "Heir Hyland, my trust in you is more steadfast than it has ever been."

"What?" She blinked.

He adjusted his posture, straightening himself. "You have the power to command Clark and the others to do whatever you like. Yet you feel hesitant to wield that authority, and you are as considerate of their situation as ever."

Hyland, standing before him, looked away, much like many a girl her age might.

"I think it's a wonderful thing," he said. "I am proud that I get to walk beside you—"

"C-Col—"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. I am genuinely impressed."

"No, I, ah..."

Hyland's nobility was the sort sung of in songs, and Col doubted anyone else could ever be more suited for royalty than her. Despite how flustered or embarrassed she seemed, he still wanted to convey just how moved he was by her disposition, so he reached to take her hand.

"Grrr..."

But then there came a growl, one that seemed to emanate from the depths of hell.

"Col..."

Hyland's expression was one of defeat, as though to say, *We are awaiting judgment*, and she lifted her hands to her shoulders. Had she not the wit to notice, their hands would have been deeply entwined with each other.

"Your knight's defenses are impregnable," she said, taking a step backward as she turned her attention to Myuri.

At last, Myuri stopped growling.

"I believe I need to remind this rambunctious girl exactly who our master is..." Col sighed.

The knightly order she shared with Myuri was a privilege granted to them by none other than Hyland. And that meant their master was, ostensibly, Hyland, but that did not seem to matter much to the wolf girl, who observed the rules of the forest more than she did the rules of human society.

"But more important, Heir Hyland, the monastery."

Hyland was not so much upset that she was not being respected as a master should be, but more afraid of losing her goodwill with Myuri, and she was jealous of Myuri's sour mood. So when Col brought the conversation back on track, she looked at him with a smile colored by surprise and guilt.

"I believe Clark and Sharon will understand. I will explain. Shall I tell them of the plan?"

"Oh, yes. We should be able to trust them. And I'd like their help if possible—for checking the text once we have copies printed."

"Very well," Col said, and continued with something he found a bit difficult to bring up. "But borrowing the future monastery's plot of land will bring its own troubles."

"It will?"

It was a bit funny that this was the opposite of what happened earlier, but what he was about to tell her was not all that funny.

"The plot is more of a ruin than initially thought. Clark goes every day to work on restoring it, but it's apparently in a very poor state. And the financing for the repairs does not seem to have very good prospects."

Hyland looked at him, slack-jawed, and took a brisk step toward him, no longer minding Myuri.

“Is that true?!”

“Er, yes.”

It was Col’s turn to mind Myuri—though she still lay on the bench, she held her lips in a pout.

“I know I heard that things might be worse than we thought, but...I see. I didn’t know it was that bad.” Hyland put a hand to her forehead, feeling the weight of responsibility land on her shoulders. “I have a bad habit of not thoroughly looking into things. Right. I understand. In that case, I’ll gather funds for the repairs. And I suppose in exchange, could you negotiate with them to see if we can borrow the plot for a little bit?”

Hyland was powerful enough that if she were to unilaterally order them to vacate the premises, Clark and the rest would have no choice but to obey.

Myuri was watching, so Col did not take Hyland’s hand, but it struck him again just how perfect a partner she was in their fight against the Church’s corruption.

“Very well. I will let them know.”

“Right. Thank you,” she said, and took another step backward, then began to think.

Col took the opportunity to look at Myuri, who bared her canines at him.

“Goodness. If only they’d told me earlier...Oh, perhaps not.” As Hyland spoke aloud to herself, there was a touch of sadness to her smile. “Sharon used to be a tax collector. I have a feeling she has a good grasp on my financial position.”

Sharon herself had said that no kindhearted noble was *that* rich. Travel money was one matter, but her circumstances were different from a noble who could build cathedrals with their own means.

“How shameful of me as royalty to make them worry about their finances.”

“That’s not true.”

Col raised an objection before he realized what he was doing. Hyland drew

her shoulders up slightly with a smile before turning her attention to Myuri.

“I’ve heard your father was an extraordinary merchant. Could you tell him that I’d like his instruction someday?”

Myuri huffed. “If I feel like it,” she mumbled.

“Either way, our first order of business is to find the artisan. I’ll ask around to see if there are any records of inquisitor visits at any of the ports.”

“O-oh, yes.”

“This project will finally put an end to the conflict between us and the Church,” Hyland said, and rested her hand on Col’s shoulder, but in a panic, she turned to look at Myuri.

“Geez, I’m not gonna get mad anymore!”

The lie was incredibly transparent; she sat up, stood, wedged herself between Col and Hyland, then physically pushed the two of them apart.

“Braid my hair, and I’ll forgive you,” she said to Col.

“Give me figs drizzled in honey, and I’ll forgive you,” she said to Hyland.

It was not moments earlier that she had been whining about eating too much, and how this vexed Col. Hyland agreed willingly, and Myuri gave a satisfied nod.

Canaan’s project was not going to be easy.

But perhaps it was going to go better than any of them thought.

The night was quiet enough to lead Col to believe this.

The night Myuri ate her fill to make up for the time they had been away from Rausbourne drew to a close, and in time, dawn broke. She woke up early to do her sword training, and Col attended morning mass at the manor’s chapel. When both of these things were finished, they made their way to Sharon to tell her of the plan.

“You stink of garlic.”

Sharon stood before them, the scowl she typically wore in Myuri’s company on her face, but this time she seemed genuinely displeased. Myuri, of course, was embarrassed. She had mentioned something smelling strongly of garlic

when she woke up and had gone around their room to sniff, and that just made it worse.

“And? What do you want?” Sharon asked.

Col pushed down on Myuri’s head—she growled to hide her embarrassment—and informed Sharon of their business. She was shocked when he told her about Canaan and the banned technology, but she was rather intrigued to hear that the conflict between the kingdom and the Church might end peaceably. Though she did not seem to care all that much about the conflict, she likely wanted nothing more than peace for the sake of the children who toddled around behind her.

“This conflict between the kingdom and the Church is beyond us,” she said. “But if it’s going to help us get these repairs done, then I’m honestly relieved. Clark is so stubborn about it.”

“He is?”

Sharon gave a shrug and a sigh. “Work is going much slower than planned. He stays there overnight to work because he says it’s his job. I tell him to come back sometimes, but he doesn’t listen to me. You Church people are like that sometimes.”

Her expression was bitter. Myuri gave a knowing nod and peered up at Col.

“I bet if you were the one to tell him to rest while you’re out there, he’d listen to you,” Sharon said.

“A-all right,” Col stuttered. He could feel Myuri’s stinging gaze on his skin—it was as though she was telling him that he was the same way.

“Still. Technology that can make as many copies of a document as we want?” Sharon folded her arms and sighed. “Can you imagine how easy things would’ve been if I’d had something like that when I was a tax collector?”

“Huh?” Myuri looked up at Sharon.

“Do you know how many times I’ve had to write set phrases like *Per the request of God and the council* on collection deeds? So many people would’ve been saved from that drudgery if we didn’t have to bother with that.”

Myuri, who still did not quite grasp the power of printing, seemed genuinely impressed by the realistic problem Sharon once had.

“But it’s a mixed blessing,” Sharon continued. “Imagine how much false information you could spread with something like that.”

Those who dealt with documents understood both the technology’s advantages and dangers.

She scoffed, then looked between Col and Myuri.

“But are you really intent on finding a missing artisan? Do you understand how difficult it is to find an artisan who’s failed to pay their taxes and vanished into thin air?”

“It’s fine. We’re smart enough to figure out the truth behind ghost ships, you know.” Myuri puffed out her chest in pride.

Col could only offer a strained smile.

Sharon found the contrast amusing; one corner of her mouth quirked upward. “Oh yeah, speaking of ghost ships,” she said, unfolding her arms to turn to Myuri. “Heard you bullied a seabird on the way back.”

“What?! I wasn’t bully—”

“Yes, you were,” Col interrupted.

It had been the first time he had seen a seabird look so desperate. Myuri did not care about the cool stare from Sharon, but when she felt Col’s, she shrunk in on herself and stared up at him with wide eyes.

“The least you can do...,” Sharon said, “...is go help Clark and make up for your wrongdoings, Dog.”

“What did you say to me, you—?!”

—*Chicken*, was what she was going to say, but the sword at her waist shifted when she leaned forward, drawing her back to reality. It did not matter who she was charged with protecting—she could not harass them.

Though God’s teachings were not sticking with her, that chivalrous spirit had been a part of her since she was little.

“...Apologize to the bird.”

She would have received full marks had she been able to look Sharon in the eye and say it, but this itself was a big improvement.

“And the next time you see a seabird at the harbor, give it a piece of bread.”

“...Okay.”

Had her ears and tail been out, they would have drooped.

Col patted her on the head for a job well done, but she swatted his hand away in annoyance, then clung to him. It seemed she had genuinely felt no malice when she captured the unlucky bird.

“Ha. The kids here are more grown-up than you,” Sharon teased, and Myuri stuck out her tongue at her.

When it was settled that they were to go to the future monastery’s plot, Sharon gave them some extra clothes and food meant for Clark while they were there. Among the foods were biscuits, which would keep for a while, as well as cheese and salt-cured meats to give him strength. Clark typically avoided meat due to his pious nature.

Many of the clothes they were given showed signs of mending, but the sheer difference in the skill of the mended areas led Col to picture Sharon and the children sewing together. With the happy circle of her and the kids doing needlework flashing in his mind’s eye, he was convinced that the monastery and orphanage they would soon live in would turn out to be a wonderful place.

After Col and Myuri returned to the manor and reported to Hyland, they began to put together a plan for the repairs. First, they would hire gardeners and carpenters to get a grasp on the situation, then determine exactly what it was that they needed.

It would take a few days to procure the workers, and since Sharon had asked them for a specific favor, Col decided that he and Myuri would go ahead and see Clark alone. The only issues they had were over the sword that Myuri whined about keeping on her and how Hyland stubbornly insisted they not walk to the monastery’s plot. She urged them to take a horse, likely because she was taking their condition into consideration—they had just returned from a long

journey, after all—but more important, she wanted to send over wine and fresh fruit as an apology to Clark for not paying enough attention to him after finding them the plot of land.

And so Col and Myuri borrowed one of the manor's horses and one of their carts.

"Wait...You can drive a cart?"

When it was clear they would be traveling in good weather on a cart, Myuri, her sword at her hip, rushed out of the room with sheaves of paper and ink. When she looked at Col sitting on the driver's perch, her eyes went wide.

"You may not know this, but I lived on the road for a long time."

"I don't know about this..."

Hyland smiled, amused that Myuri scarcely trusted her brother in anything, and offered a good word.

"I've seen how he handles horses in Nyohhira. It was impressive."

"Whaaat? Are you calling my *brother* impressive? He always struggled to kill the chickens for dinner!"

Please don't compare me to the wolf girl—her glare alone can kill a chicken, he thought.

"Come on. Hop on."

"Fine."

Col sighed as she clambered onto the cart bed, and turned to look at Hyland. "I suppose this will be ours for the time being. I hope to be back tomorrow. And if not, the day after."

"Of course. No need to rush yourselves."

A maid packed food into the cart bed, and another servant laid a blanket over the driver's perch; Col and Myuri both waved as they left.

Despite what he said to Myuri, Col was also a bit nervous about driving the cart, so he had practiced a bit in the courtyard. They proceeded along Rausbourne's roads without much trouble, but he was certain it was not

because of his own skill; it was the horse that had been so carefully cared for at the noble's residence that was making him look good.

"Heh-heh, this is funny."

"Hmm?"

As the horse plodded along toward the city gates, Myuri kneeled at the edge of the cart bed and leaned over the driver's perch.

"You look so out of place when you're doing anything besides reading books, Brother."

"....."

He was not wearing the clergy garb he wore when he left Nyohhira, nor was it any of the young, sophisticated merchant's outfits he would borrow from the manor. He wore clothes of thick jute, the type that gardening apprentices wore when they came to work at the manor, mostly in anticipation of being put to work at the monastery's plot. He could not exactly find comfort in it, even being the one wearing it.

"And I hate that I didn't know you could drive a cart."

She only decided to talk with him because she was discontent in that regard.

"We rarely ever needed to use a cart in Nyohhira, and when we are in a rush on this particular journey, we have you."

He had ridden on wolf-Myuri's back a number of times now.

Though he always felt like he only hung on to life by a thread every time, he was certain that any wild horse would be easy to control if he got used to that sensation.

"...Uh-huh."

Perhaps she meant to look cool and composed, but her delight was evident in the way her lips curled.

She sat up and began rummaging around the cart bed, looking for something, then leaped onto the driver's perch.

"You're probably lonely up here. I'll keep you company," she said, but she

held paper, her quill, and an inkpot in hand. She was fully intent on writing those absurd knight stories again. Col knew she would not listen and would get cranky if he told her to write in the back because there was not much room at the front, so he simply remained silent.

“Didn’t Mother and Father travel like this?”

The cart arrived at the city gates; Col showed the travel papers Hyland had given him to the guard, and they passed through.

They had an abundance of provisions with them, so they would have been taxed without the papers.

“I heard Mother always had trouble at these inspections because she couldn’t hide her tail.”

“According to Mister Lawrence, the experience always made her grumpy.”

“It did? Why?”

“Because they would treat it as a lap warmer, and some referred to her tail as cheap wolf fur.”

Col thought Myuri might pout when she heard that, but she instead grinned with delight.

“I wish I could see Mother look so upset!”

What a terrible daughter, Col thought with a tense smile.

“Hmm, but...I guess that wouldn’t be so bad.”

“What wouldn’t be?”

As they began their venture down the highway, the scenery around them became fields and plains.

Myuri stirred, let out her ears and tail, held her fluffy tail between her knees, spread out her paper, and dipped the quill into the ink. Col wondered if she would get upset if she spilled any ink on her silver tail, but unlike her mother, she was rather indifferent about it.

“A beautiful knight survives a terrible battle in the snowy mountains. The other knights are dressed in fancy ermine furs to keep themselves warm, but

she's the only one wrapped in plain silver wolf furs."

She stumbled over *a beautiful knight*, but her pen glided smoothly across the page.

"Everyone else around her wonders why she wears something so shabby, but only the priest who leads the knights understands how wonderful it is."

Myuri, full of herself, quietly giggled as she spoke.

She had originally begun writing because she had not been satisfied with how the confrontation with the priest who wanted to arrest Nordstone had unfolded, yet here she was, now speaking of a great battle on snowy peaks that an entire handful of knights were participating in; Col did not know how she reached this point.

And as he followed the story, Myuri had somehow grown at least five fists in height, and the shape of her face had become more sculpted and slimmer in her knighthood. Considering her mother, Col doubted she would ever look like that, but Myuri was taking this seriously.

"And then you start thinking about my tail because you really, really want to touch it, but you know people are watching, so you pretend you don't."

Though she had mentioned an ambiguous "priest" at first, this person, at some point, became specifically Col.

And so, as her older brother, he had a thing or two to say about that.

"The only time I think about your tail is when you go gallivanting off into the woods and return with rubbish clinging to your fur. Do you know how much trouble it is to clean up after you?"

"Shut up!"

Col held his tongue as she shouted, and then he sighed.

Though she stopped showering him with absurd requests to get married, her straightforward feelings of romantic affection had begun barreling forward in a strange direction.

"Your parents' journey was a lot like this," Col said.

He recalled the scenery he had witnessed from the back of the cart as a child. Though it was not specifically the same as what Myuri mentioned, a strange feeling settled in his chest. This felt exactly the same as things were back then, yet somehow completely different.

“But what you really love isn’t my tail—it’s my beautiful hair and how lustrous...Hey, Brother? How do you spell *lustrous*?”

Myuri tugged at his sleeve, so Col took the quill and wrote the word in the corner for her. The sentence that came after that word was about the honest and blockheaded priest feeling his heart reel and bearing through anguish at the sight of the beautiful knight’s silver hair.

I won’t say anything, he thought, readjusting his grip on the reins.

Myuri stared hard at the word, wrote down her new vocabulary for herself, and looked very pleased.

When Col was a child, he remembered how much fun the two adults had been having on their journey.

But he and Myuri were about evenly matched in how carefree they were, he thought.

The cart rumbled onward as that thought rolled around in his head.

As they ventured along the road, they at last came to a cairn, built by travelers to pray for safety on their journeys, and turned left; it was not long afterward that they came to a little bridge over a stream. After crossing it, they eventually spotted a forest that stood out among the fields. The building in question would be in the deep woods.

Though those were the directions given, the girl who was born and raised within the deep woods in the remote mountains saw the little thicket and said, “That’s a forest?”

“Sir Col!”

And so Clark, who had been working on the grounds, immediately noticed the approaching cart, and once he realized who it was, he leaped to his feet. He immediately ran toward them on the grassy path leading to the building.

“What’s the matter?! Is Sharon causing more problems?!”

Col had been under the impression that between the two, it was Sharon who held control over the unreliable Clark, but what the boy said made him reconsider his initial impression. Myuri, at the very least, had a wolfish look on her face—she was excited by the prospect of possibly finding one of Sharon’s weaknesses.

“Um, well, Miss Sharon has asked us to bring all this over for you,” Myuri said. Though she typically called Sharon “Chicken,” she addressed her politely and showed Clark all the things Sharon had left with them.

“Oh goodness...”

“You have to thank her, okay! People as reliable and hardworking as her are hard to come by!”

Clark was not the only one who blinked in surprise—Col did, too. Clark did not even consider that Myuri might be plotting something; a smile creased his mud-caked face.

“Heh-heh. Well, she shows off for you, so I’m certain it comes across that way.”

“Wait, what? She looks really trustworthy and everything to me.”

Despite what Myuri said, Col could see the glint in her eye, one of a naughty cat that had stolen her dinner, and poked her in the head.

“We’ve actually come to speak with you about the repairs on the building,” he interrupted.

Myuri, unhappy that Col had butted in, stamped on his foot.

Clark was somewhat perplexed, not fully understanding the meaning of their exchange, but showed them priestly consideration.

“Of course, but not here. And...I see you’ve brought things that are not from Sharon.”

“Oh, yes. Heir Hyland gave us many things to supply you with as well.”

When Clark realized that all the cargo in the cart bed was food and other

necessities, he grasped the crest of the Church hanging around his neck with a rough hand and began to pray in thanks.

There were several stone buildings spread over the wide plot of land, with the main building in the center and the annexes in each cardinal direction. Each were connected by stone-paved corridors, but the decorative pillars lining the colonnades were covered in vines and tangles of weeds. The path from the main road to the manor itself had become but a grassy plain, and the only reason it looked traversable was because Clark had cut a path himself.

“You’ve been doing this all alone?”

“Things aren’t going as well as I expected, and it’s rather embarrassing...”

Col stopped the cart before the manor; Myuri, who had hopped off and waded through the grasses to get a better look at the gardens around the building, came back and shrugged.

“No one can deal with this alone.”

Col agreed, and Clark gave them a thin, tired smile.

“It isn’t as bad inside.”

The door at the entrance hung crooked, its hinges rusted, but since the floor was paved with stone, it was not overrun with foliage. It seemed Clark typically slept in the great hall right inside the entrance—Col could see his things and a serviceable blanket on the floor. Without the candle and scripture by his pillow, one might easily mistake it for a bandit camp.

“The main building is made of stone, so it is relatively intact, but the wooden buildings are derelict, and the building to the north currently seems to be home to some animals...I hear them rustling around out there at night.”

Though they were ruins, there was still a real possibility of getting caught up in trouble by straying too close to a noble’s property, so the villagers from the nearby towns likely stayed away. There was no doubt that it was a perfect little hideaway for the neighborhood critters.

“The animals will probably leave once people move in,” Myuri piped up. “But your problem is the yard. It’s so big.”

The garden was not among the biggest, but having hailed from a little town squeezed in among the mountains, Myuri thought it looked like a vast plain.

“And I’m almost certain the well has been completely filled in. You have a big job ahead of you,” Col remarked.

When he thought of monasteries, he pictured cobblestone paths, clear streams, herb gardens, and perfectly mowed lawns in which to get lost in thought, but due to the present state of things, that was a distant prospect.

“I cut the grass myself, but by the time I made it around the building, the place I began to cut started to grow again. I don’t think I’ll ever manage to get around to repairing the buildings themselves.”

Clark was one dense concentration of responsibility, yes, but something else occurred to Col when he saw the plot. Clark had likely been looking forward to this hardship, thinking of it as a trial from God. And that was likely why Sharon had so bitterly called him stubborn.

Good members of the clergy were oddly fond of hardship. Col understood how Clark felt, and he also understood Sharon’s frustration; she wished she could tell him to prioritize efficiency over simply enduring trials. But when Col pictured the two of them squabbling over these things, he could also easily see how close they were, and that brought a smile to his face.

But if they were to let Clark carry on this work alone, the prospect that he may never finish was very real. Though Col felt bad knowing they would be intruding on his delectable hardship, he had a strict minder named Myuri, so he plainly stated their business.

“We’ve spoken with Miss Sharon about this already, but we would like to employ Heir Hyland’s help in repairing the monastery buildings all at once.”

“What?”

Clark was shocked; due to his background as assistant priest in a small diocese in a tough part of town, the first thing he thought of when he heard those words was nothing positive.

“Oh, no, please don’t worry. We will ensure that you can continue to use the building for your faith, but once we’ve repaired it, we would like to borrow it

for a short while for our own purposes.”

“O-oh, I see.”

Clark was still somewhat bewildered, so Myuri spoke up.

“We have a secret project,” she said suggestively.

Col sighed and told Clark exactly what they told Sharon.

After the sun set and they finished eating their dinner around the fire, Myuri found herself inspired by life in the ruins, and her quill rushed over her paper as she sat before the fire. Though it would be a waste of firewood to use it for such an activity in town, but they had a literal mountain of things they could use for fuel out here.

Clark, after hearing about Canaan’s plan, optimistically agreed to cooperate, hoping for a peaceful world, much like Sharon. He was eager to help when they would be printing copies of the scripture.

Once their business was concluded, Col found himself with plenty of light, time, and expensive wine from Hyland. And as a bonus, the typically loud Myuri had gone quiet, so he and Clark were free to discuss theology all they liked.

“I see. Your interpretation is impressive, Sir Col.”

“Oh, no. All I did was follow the text and attempt to reword the smattering of knowledge I’d come to obtain in my own words. On the contrary, I believe I can learn much more from you—the interpretation you’ve come to based on your practice as a priest has a much greater depth, Mister Clark.”

The scripture Clark had brought with him all this way was not one properly bound, of course. He had copied it himself onto tattered paper, but considering his position as an assistant priest in a city, one whose benefices tended to stagnate, Col could easily see how much trouble it would have been to access bundles of paper and quill pens.

When Col considered how many fervently pious people out in the world did not necessarily stand out, he began to wonder if there was someone else out there who was more suited for translating the scripture than he was. Perhaps he should be asking for more people to look over it carefully before spreading it

all across the mainland.

He voiced his concerns in the brief interlude of their conversation. Clark stared at him for a moment before a faintly warm smile like candlelight crossed his face.

“It’s strange,” he said, reaching for the handmade scripture that sat between them, and flipped through it. “This is written in the script of the Church, and I have read it so many times that I have it memorized. I’m almost certain I could communicate with a priest from a distant land using the script of the Church if we were to speak of the scripture.”

He was rather talkative, likely owing to the fine wine Hyland had given him.

“But it’s different when it comes to explaining what is written in the scripture to regular townsfolk who cannot read, who most certainly have never read the scripture for themselves.”

The firewood, excessively smoky, likely due to remaining moisture in the fiber, gave a loud crack.

“I thought I understood it well, but the moment I attempt to speak about it in plain language, my tongue turns to stone. Words that represent piety, for example—their meanings are so complex in the script of the Church, and I was completely lost as to how to render them into everyday speech. It would be like trying to fit a square peg into a triangular hole. Something would be lost in the process, but I couldn’t figure out what that might be. I did not know which branches of the lush and varied words I would have to trim off. But...” Clark looked at Col. There was a flash of envy in his eyes. “...there were some places in your translated narratives that were worded with such sharp clarity, it shocked me. When I first read your translation, Sir Col, for a moment I did not realize I was reading in the common language.” He quietly sipped from his cup, which was almost empty.

“I am not sure how you’re able to pull off such a thing.”

Either due to the alcohol or due to the exhaustion from work, there was a slight glaze over Clark’s eyes.

“Sir Col, you have been blessed with a rare and God-given talent. I believe you

should be spreading this all over the world.” Clark paused to hiccup, then continued. “You have nothing to fear. Wake the corrupt Church with those words of yours.”

Though Clark was clearly drunk, when he turned to look at Col, only his eyes glinted with sharp clarity. As an assistant priest in a poorer diocese within Rausbourne, he had seen with his own eyes just how unfair the world was and had felt just how corrupt the Church was, just how powerless he was as a priest himself. But there was nothing a lowly assistant priest could do about the situation, so his only choice had been to accept his fate.

Col was certain there were plenty of people out there like him. It was in that moment that he realized that he could be hope not only for higher-ranking clergy like Canaan and the archivists, but those like Clark as well.

But the reason he could not fully accept that he needed to spread his own translation of the scripture around the world was not exactly due to his lack of confidence, but something akin to guilt. Clark had asked why he had been able to translate in such a precise manner, and he knew the answer. If he did indeed have any talent for translating, he knew very well where it came from.

“If my talent was indeed God-given, then I would have more self-confidence.”

“...?”

Clark, eyes heavy-lidded, hands unsteady as he poured the wine for them, looked to him.

Col took a swig of his drink and used the tipsiness it gave him to keep talking.

“The reason I can put the scripture into such easy-to-understand language is because of her.”

Clark followed Col’s finger to look at Myuri, doubled over the page as she wrote.

“She honestly...shows no interest in faith at all. She is a rambunctious girl—if she has a spare moment, she’s running freely around the mountains, and she’ll maybe hear a word or three of what I have to say. And as you can see, I would have to be precise with my language. Short and simple enough that I can quickly hammer it into her head when she comes to me, covered in mud, to show me

the big frog she's found."

Perhaps she would have noticed them talking about her if her wolf ears were out, but she remained engrossed in her writing. Clark kept his eyes on her for a moment before a faint smile crossed his face.

"Ah-ha-ha. I see. I see..." He trailed off. "That's love." He brought his fist to his mouth, giving another laugh along with a drunken hiccup, and continued with a sigh. "It is love that has fostered your faith, Sir Col."

"....."

Col did not answer, though not because he was embarrassed. It was the first time anyone had seen him that way, but he did not feel the evaluation was off.

Myuri never listened to his lectures, but her ears were always pointed in his direction when he spoke. And the most vexing thing was how quick-witted she was—if there was a single fault in his lectures, she would immediately latch on to it.

Yet the reason he could never keep his eyes off her, the reason they were here together, and after all was said and done, the reason they shared a crest that only the two of them could use—it was all because he continually prayed for Myuri's happiness.

There was, indeed, no other way to describe that than love.

"...But I can't say I'm completely happy with that," Col said.

For some reason, the only way he could properly express his feelings was with words that suggested the exact opposite.

Clark, too, understood the complicated feelings that came with being a sibling, and he smiled like any other young person.

"My words did not come to me after careful thought. It was truly only because I was yelling."

"But that, too, is love. That means your desire to convey faith to people you love was enough to change the world," Clark said in a terribly honest fashion, then gave a carefree laugh.

Myuri, by now, had noticed something was going on between them but did

not hear what it was they were talking about, and she wore a doubtful expression.

Col, too, began to laugh because Clark was right.

If Canaan's plan went well and his translated scripture spread all over the mainland, that would mean all the yelling he had done at Myuri in Nyohhira would echo across the entire world. And the idea that the world's heart would move before Myuri's did also made him laugh. It was like a nursery tale, one with a sprinkling of irony.

Myuri was stubborn, single-minded, and would not budge once her mind was made up. Col had no idea how many times she had given him trouble and the number of times she had given him ulcers. But there was one good reason he could not forsake her.

And that was because he loved her.

It was not the romantic love Myuri herself was hoping for, of course.

But how he could not keep his eyes off her, how he always minded her every movement, how he always wrote off her havoc when she gave him that smile could not be more accurately described than with the word *love*.

When that thought crossed his mind, his smile faded into something wearier and eventually manifested as a strange sigh of defeat. Myuri, who knew she was being spoken of but did not know precisely what, frowned at him.

"And so love does not always go the way we want," he said—not to Myuri, of course, and neither to Clark. But he could not think of anything else to say.

Myuri, who was looking at him, ready to pounce, felt a certain charm to what he said. She sat up straight, blinked, and then feverishly jotted it down on her page.

Clark, in contrast, looked as though rain finally began to fall on a cracked earth, and he gave a deep nod. "About the strange technology you brought up earlier," he said, suddenly changing the subject. "I hope you find the artisan."

Col did not ask why he decided to change the subject so suddenly—he knew Clark did not think the Church banned the printing technology simply because

they thought it would cause the spread of heretical ideas. It was because the world was full of stories similar to the one they just exchanged that could be shared with smiles across the entire world. Col could see the conviction in his profile.

The question was about how the world would adopt the technology; the Church did not trust society, so they sealed it away. But Clark held an optimistic view of the world.

The precedent sat within the Twilight Cardinal and the silver-haired girl beside him.

Clark closed his eyes and gave an even louder hiccup.

“Ahhh, I want to go home to Sharon and the kids...”

The fine wine had quite the effect on the other man, who was exhausted from his work. Or perhaps it was because he had been witness to a love powerful enough to shake the world.

Clark began nodding off on the spot, so Col draped a blanket over his shoulders. Myuri, who had her nose practically pressed to the paper in her writing, now peered, alert, over the edge of the paper.

They sat in a ruin, surrounded by a thin copse of trees; the only ones coming and going were likely the foxes.

With a small smile, Col extended his right arm, and Myuri sidled toward him with a faint frown and snuggled into his arm. But when she closed her eyes, she took the sheath of her blade, the proof of her knighthood, and turned it over to hide the crest of the wolf.

Col was fairly confident in his ability to get up early, but by the time he opened his eyes, Clark had already begun working.

He was fighting a fierce battle to transform the place into the beautiful monastery it was meant to be—he peeled away vines from the pillars, uprooted shrubs.

Despite how big the grounds were, despite how the first weeds would be overgrown by the time he pulled up the last weed, he still did not give up.

“Myuri, it’s time for you to put your sword to use.”

Col looked at Clark, who stood before a row of trees that had grown too much to be uprooted, then turned to speak to the sleepy Myuri. As the wild girl took a bread roll from their bag, she looked at him with a glare.

“A knight’s blade is not for mowing the lawn.”

“Then use your hands.”

Col stood and strode over to Clark. Myuri, the only one left behind at the camp, pouted, stuffed the bread into her mouth, and rushed after him.

“All right, we’re pulling on three! One, two...three!”

Despite all her grumbling, Myuri had an incredible talent for enjoying whatever work she was involved in once she got started.

She barked orders at the two clumsy sheep as she took the initiative. Before long, they had a mound of uprooted grasses and shrubs, and by the time they decided to stop for a rest, the air around them smelled like earth.

“We could probably get most of this done if we had a week,” Myuri mused.

They all sat around eating their lunch, watching the grasshoppers hop about in confusion, having been evicted from their homes.

Myuri then suddenly extended her slim neck and peered beyond the trees of the copse.

“Hey, someone’s coming. I hear horse hooves,” she said, reaching for her sword. It was likely an extension of how she played knight.

“Is it Heir Hyland?” Col asked. He had the impression that she was kind enough to offer help with hard labor, but Myuri only tilted her head in puzzlement.

Beyond the trees, they, too, could see the man atop the horse, and Col soon understood why.

“Mister Le Roi?”

The man on the horse, like a round mound of dough, soon spotted them, and gave a bright smile and a big wave.

When Col was a child, he traveled with this man for a little while. It was not the two of them alone, however—they had been with others they met on the road, but it was while he spent time with this man that he truly understood the definition of what it meant to be learned.

But he soon recalled that the bigger impression he had of Le Roi in his memory was not his erudition, but his open-mindedness.

“Eve reached out to me, you see! To think the one moving the world, the Twilight Cardinal, is little mister Col! I simply could not sit still, you see, so I took an overnight ship to cross straightaway!”

There was plenty of gray in his short-cropped hair now, but his voice and the way he spoke was exactly as it was all those years ago. And though he had grown considerably rounder, it was simply to show that he had only grown stronger over the years.

“It has been quite a while, Mister Le Roi.”

“Not since Lawrence’s wedding! Oh, and here we have the girl I’ve so often heard of!”

When Myuri had seen Huskins, the avatar of the golden sheep, she had trembled before his overwhelming presence. And now it seemed her list of people she did not mesh well with had been updated.

“You look just like your mother!”

“.....”

She flinched as she and Le Roi exchanged a handshake. And when it was over, she slunk behind Col as though to hide.

“And, ah, there was something I wanted to ask you...”

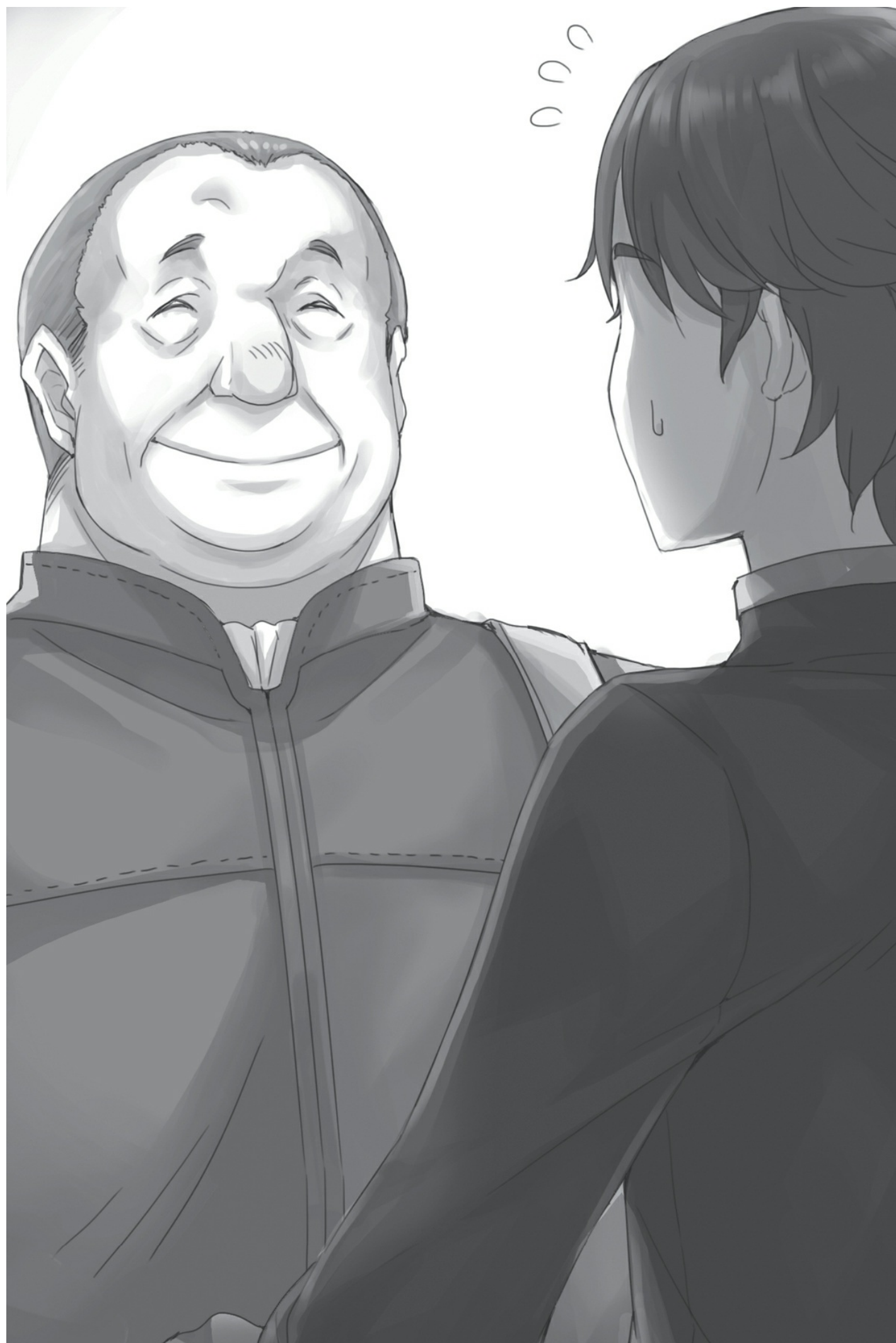
“Oh, you flatter me! I heard you had a question for me about books. Every book you come across is a chance encounter, you know! I cannot even count how many books I will never see for the rest of my life because I was just a fraction of a moment too late!”

Though many may imagine a bookseller who deals in tomes worth more than their weight in gold to be like nobility, clad in white gloves, Le Roi was

apparently not an exception or an eccentric among those types of booksellers. He was always on the move in search of valuable books, and apparently, it was at times a job in which one could not hope to contend without a loud voice and a degree of aggression.

“Ah, pardon my manners! My name is Le Roi, a wandering bookseller. Please give me a shout if you ever need any books relating to the word of God!”

Le Roi at last introduced himself to Clark, whose eyes were rounded more than Myuri’s, and they exchanged a handshake.



“And what sort of text could the Twilight Cardinal be after? Or”—Le Roi’s voice, which had been loud enough to scare away the moles in the ground, suddenly quieted into a whisper—“are you perhaps authoring a book of severe criticisms of the Church?”

“What?”

“It will sell, I tell you. There are a surprising number of nobles who hate the Church yet still hold on to their faith. For those who own dangerous text but lack in stimulation, such a book would fill them with vengeance! With faith! With the desire to get their hands on a copy! It would be the perfect book!”

Though the man was shorter than him, Col felt like Le Roi was looming over him, crushing him. His face was twisted in a greedy grin, an expression he would never show even to Eve. He only backed off when Myuri, bewildered in Col’s shadow, put her hand on her sword.

“Oh no, Mister Le Roi. I’m not—”

“You’re not writing anything like that?”

Col vigorously shook his head; Le Roi looked like a young boy whose friends never showed up to play.

“Do you have any plans to write one?” he asked.

“...No.”

“Are you sure?”

Col nodded.

Le Roi sighed. “Well, if you ever decide you will, let me know.”

When they first met, Le Roi had been the type to walk among suspicious-looking mercenaries to peddle copies of the scripture for them to pray while at battle. It seemed his belly was not the only thing that had gotten softer with age.

That said, there was no doubt that what Col and Canaan were trying to accomplish would indeed be a severe criticism of the Church, so perhaps Le Roi had a keen nose in that regard.

“Then what sort of business do we have today?”

“I’m afraid it isn’t about buying or selling any books...”

And that was why Col had been hoping to go to Le Roi himself after he made contact. Yet Le Roi had thought up a wild possibility of a book and rushed to him at the thought of making a pretty penny. If he had indeed come by night ship, then his journey would not have been a cheap one.

“Oh, that’s all right. I know you must have your reasons if you decided to reach out to me and not any of the local businesses. Miss Eve sounded rather apologetic in her letter! That *must* mean what you have to ask me will be interesting.”

Le Roi laughed out loud at the thought of Eve being apologetic. Eve herself had made the analogy of a beehive on her doorstep.

In short, this bookseller was the bear that had been lured in by the scent of honey.

“What I want to ask you is more about bookmaking...”

“Oh?” The merchant at times dealt with books that could not be made public; his eyes widened.

“I’ve heard there is a way to easily make more books—a method the Church banned.”

Col had never seen so many expressions pass across a single person’s face in such a short time before.

“...I know of this, yes.” Le Roi at last croaked out his answer, his expression twisted in a terrible frown. “I see...This is indeed not something you can ask the local papermaker.”

He sighed, scratching his head as he pursed his lips.

The sudden change in emotion was more intense than Myuri’s mood swings, which changed like the weather.

“But where did you hear about this? That was discovered in the workshops of the Curia’s bookbinders many years ago. It was considered heretical, and all artisans were arrested before the methods could spread. Not many know that it

even exists.”

“Well, ah...” Col hesitated, unsure if he should name Canaan.

Le Roi held up his hands. “No, my apologies. I have asked you too much.”

There were books out there that owning a copy alone would draw the attention of the Church.

Le Roi, who dealt almost exclusively in those types of texts, was adept enough to know not to tread too far over the line.

“I will not ask why you are looking into that technology, Master Col.” Le Roi placed his hand over his heart, as though swearing to God, and continued. “But you must promise me one thing.”

I promise not to cause you any trouble, Col was about to say, but Le Roi jumped in before he could.

“If you ever pen a book that criticizes the Church, you *must* contact me first.”

“Oh, um...”

For a moment, Col was at a loss for words, his mind whirring in a panic as he was unsure how to respond. But the way Le Roi looked at him with an unflinching gaze until he said *yes*, reminded him how he did the same to Myuri while caring for her.

Myuri remained hidden behind Col, gazing up at Le Roi, because she had at last come face-to-face with a stare more powerful than Col’s.

“I...I will.”

When Col finally spoke, he almost felt as though he was speaking his wedding vows.

Clark was mindful enough to know that Col’s conversation with Le Roi was something he should not be listening in on. So after taking them to the main building, which he was using as his bedroom, he left to work outside, and Myuri followed him. There was the very interesting prospect of investigating the ruins versus talk about technology she was not interested in—and taking into consideration the personality combination of commanding yet docile that was Le Roi, exploring the ruins won out.

“We are looking for one particular artisan who managed to escape the grasp of the inquisition.”

Col poured glasses of the wine Hyland had sent with him, and Le Roi drank half his glass in one gulp.

“Ah yes. No one has seen hide nor hair of them since they escaped to the kingdom, is that it?”

Col was surprised he knew that much, and Le Roi mischievously rubbed his forehead.

“I used to work in that maze of an archive at the Holy See. I have connections, and all booksellers like me kept a close eye on that whole development, you see.”

Col was shocked to learn that the source of Le Roi’s knowledge came from his experience working with the Curia. Perhaps he was acquainted with Canaan.

“You did? Was it to save the artisans?”

Technology that could easily make copies of books could easily be the object of envy for those who dealt in books.

That was what Col was hoping for when he asked, but Le Roi did not smile.

“Quite the opposite. It was mostly those like me who dealt in rare books who were reporting the scattered artisans’ whereabouts to the inquisitors.”

When Col failed to find words in his shock, Le Roi quietly looked at him.

“Because they could easily make more copies of books of which there is supposed to only be one copy.”

“Oh.”

When one party wins, the other loses.

“Even before the technology was deemed heretical, the transcribers’ guild and the quill artisans harassed the printing workshop. In contrast, those who would make even more money from the increased number of books, such as the shepherds and the parchment-makers, the papermakers and illustrators—they all had high hopes for this new technology. And booksellers like myself

who traded rare books fell into the former category.”

A great number of people were involved in the process of making a book, but it was not necessarily true that all their interests aligned.

“But ultimately, even though it was the Church themselves who asked them to find a way to make books quickly and cheaply, they suddenly changed their minds and deemed it heretical—and that was that.”

This was the first Col had heard of the Church being the one to commission the technology. Perhaps it had been hard for Canaan to bring it up, but though it was unfair to the artisans, Canaan himself had said that the Church was not a monolith, and this was a good example of that. Perhaps they had at first supported the discovery of the technology to ease the burden of those involved in the bookmaking side of things, but it was the inquisitors who realized the disaster it could bring.

“And though the artisans ran, they were at a terrible disadvantage. The only way they could feed themselves was with the technology they had developed, but there were only so many people who could read. It was only the nobles, or pious clergy, who entertained the idea of keeping books at home. Their clientele was very limited, so they naturally stood out.”

Col recalled how the sale of sugared candies and high-quality mutton was enough to cause rumors among merchants that someone very important was visiting the city. Making books for cheap would be akin to lighting a fire in the dark.

“And since the artisans continued to make books after they ran for their lives, most ended up captured anyway. Even those who successfully escaped at first and were granted refuge by alchemists and eccentric nobles ultimately followed the same pattern. The tragic nature of craftspeople is that they will cling to their art so long as they have the tools and technology, even if they know it is dangerous, which means they are easily found and caught.”

“And the one who got away?”

“A careful one, perhaps. Or a fearful one.”

That he was being pursued by the inquisition was nothing but hearsay at this

point.

But the inquisition could appear anywhere—they were spoken of like shadows that could reach every corner of the globe. They were synonymous with the noose. Anyone being pursued by them would never be able to sleep soundly again.

“But the most likely explanation is that this artisan never existed in the first place,” Le Roi said.

“What?”

Col could not believe the sudden revelation at first, but Le Roi’s expression was dead serious.

“Even if all the artisans had been captured, there is a possibility that one of them could have shared their knowledge of the technology with someone else while they were in hiding. In that case, concocting a story to plant the idea that the inquisition is still actively seeking those who have this technology is a powerful deterrent.”

Tenacity and cunning.

That was how the faithful fought against the pagans and heretics and protected the proper teachings of the Church.

“That said, I haven’t heard anything on this for a very long time. I was about to forget all about it until you brought it up, Master Col.”

It was as though a bad dream had come back to him.

“Do you not have even the faintest idea of where they might be?”

It was out of his kindness that Col said that, knowing he should not so blithely touch on the subject.

“Unfortunately, no.”

Someone like Le Roi must have figured out by now where Col had learned of this information.

“I understand how dangerous this technology is. But I have my reasons for wanting to find them.”

Part of it was for Canaan and the archivists' plan. The other was because he recalled the look on Clark's face the night before.

"Do you have any information you'd like to share with me?"

This technology was a nightmare to many booksellers.

Even if Le Roi knew, he had no obligation to tell Col.

Yet the look on his face as he shook his head suggested he was not lying.

Though Col did not assume Le Roi would know the artisan's precise location, he did wonder if the man had a finger on the sort of information the inquisitors might, since they occupied the same spaces.

But he had never even imagined that it was the booksellers themselves who volunteered information on the artisans and reported their whereabouts to the inquisition. In the eyes of the merchants, those who could operate the technology were not simple rivals in business—they had the power to uproot their profession entirely.

And the booksellers, the shrewd people who traded in dangerous texts beyond the watchful eyes of the Church, were still unable to snag the final artisan in their net, no matter how hard they searched.

Both Sharon and Myuri had pointed out how difficult a mission this was going to be, and Col understood this, of course. But he did not think he would completely end up stranding them in the middle of nowhere, perhaps because of his overconfidence in how well things had gone thus far.

But now he had discovered a ship even larger than his, one that had been at sea for far longer, that had been stranded on this journey, on this search for many years. The crew was even beginning to believe that there *was* no destination island to begin with.

After speaking with Le Roi, Col sat in the entrance of the main building, wondering what to do.

But all he could think of after letting his mind whir and whir was Canaan.

Canaan should have known about the booksellers' actions. And since he was in relative proximity to the inquisitors, he should have considered the possibility

that the escaped artisan was a fable, a remnant left as a warning.

And that would mean Canaan had proposed the project knowing full well that finding the artisan would be impossible in the first place.

For a moment, he wondered if this was a trap, but it was hard to imagine Hyland failing to properly investigate, and Canaan's passion did not seem to be faked.

Or perhaps Canaan had simply failed to explain the pious clergyman's assumption that they could beget a miracle, that they could make the impossible, possible, and refused to even consider any bad outcomes.

But even Col knew that devout faith becoming power strong enough in the secular world to solve its problems was stuff of fairy tales, like in Myuri's stories. If they did not find the artisan who knew how to operate the technology that Canaan spoke of, then Canaan's project would be nothing more than a pie in the sky.

"We have Canaan to think about, yes, but how are we supposed to find clues in a situation like this?"

After Col asked himself the hundredth question to which he had no answer, Myuri dashed past him at full speed.

"Myuri? What's the ma—?"

Before Col could finish his question, she returned leading the two horses. Behind them was Clark, clearly panicking.

"Brother!" Myuri called. "You come, too!"

"Hmm?"

He had seen her act this way many times back in Nyohhira, when she played a prank (which she was free to do) but was unable to deal with the consequences that came afterward and came to him seeking help.

Col followed, wondering what sort of problems she had caused this time, chasing them into the center of the grounds. They came to a spot thick with grasses and shrubbery, where he and Clark went pale in the face.

"Mister Le Roi?!"

“Ah...Master...Master Col!”

For a moment, he was not sure what had happened.

All the buildings on the property were connected by stone passageways. Flanking the passages were decorative pillars, spaced evenly along the path, but these pillars had gone neglected for many years, and some had fallen.

And from the gaps between some of these pillars, which had fallen atop one another, Col could see Le Roi trapped underneath, upside down, his feet skyward.

“Brother! Tie this line around the pillar! Clark, use a branch as a lever to lift it up!”

Once Myuri shouted her orders, she leaped forward lightly, like a rabbit, to check up on Le Roi from above the fallen pillars.

“Can you hold on a little longer? Can’t you get out from beneath?”

“It’s such a narrow little passage, I don’t think I can...The walls are sturdy, so I doubt they will fall any more than they have. But...I feel the blood rushing to my head!”

The pillars had not fallen on top of Le Roi, in fact, but he had somehow slipped and gotten caught between pillars that had already fallen. Or perhaps he attempted to enter an underground passage by slipping between the pillars, but his stomach had gotten caught, and he found himself with no way out.

Either way, they would need to move the pillars in order to save him.

They worked as Myuri commanded and had the horses carefully pull the pillars. They pulled off one, and then both pillars, and somehow saved him.

“Phew...I felt like a carrot in there!”

“Not a turnip?”

Col and Clark nodded in agreement—he had definitely looked like a turnip.

“How did you manage that?” Col asked.

Le Roi, his face darkened with dirt, gave him a strained smile. “I find it hard to sit still in places like this.”

“You almost frightened me to death. Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Chafed my stomach, is all.”

As Col stood there, astonished by the feeling that he was speaking to a second Myuri, Le Roi brushed off the dirt, and his eyes calmly roamed the area. He seemed to be searching for a way to go down again.

“Noble manors come with cellars. Some are simply underground rooms for aging liquor, but some serve as hiding places for gold that cannot be left in the city. Some cellars are forgotten about when the manors change hands, and occasionally, they house dangerous texts that the owners didn’t know what to do with. And when I spotted that passage leading down between the pillars, I could not contain myself!”

Le Roi was a different species of person altogether—at this realization, Col and Clark exchanged tired glances.

“Ah, I do hear about those sorts of things in old abbeys as well,” Clark said.

“Yes! That’s exactly it. Old abbeys, especially, originally served as places of refuge for merchants full of the adventurous spirit, or strongholds for knights who fought against the pagans. Sometimes you find a forgotten hidden room filled with very interesting and valuable things.”

And those like Le Roi would sniff around for the treasure.

As surprising as it was to find him like that, as though he were about to be sacrificed for a demonic ritual, Col was glad he was safe regardless; it was then that he realized how oddly quiet it was.

“Hmm? Where did Myuri go?”

The one girl he would think would be most enraptured by this conversation was nowhere to be seen.

When one particular thought came to mind, he crouched by the collapsed stone path and peered into the dark hole.

“Myuri!”

It was hard to tell if the hole itself was a tunnel, and it would be a very tight fit for most fully grown adults, not just Le Roi. But that was not the case for Myuri,

who was small enough to feel relaxed in the smallest of washtubs.

At the edge of the reach of light, Col spotted the bottom of her shoes and her little rear.

“Come back here this instant!”

He could feel his breath growing short at the simple thought of the tunnel collapsing on her, but Myuri had already begun shimmying backward before he could tell her to, and it was not long before she arrived at the hole and remained on all fours.

“What on *earth* do you think you’re doing?!”

The air in the tunnel must have been stale—the moment she lifted her head out of the hole, she began to rub at her nose and gave a sneeze-like cough. And when she was unsteady in getting to her feet, Col grabbed both her armpits and pulled her out like a cat.

“Oh, look! Look what you’ve done to your clothes!”

Myuri was wearing her fine squire’s clothes, which she also wore to Raponell; Hyland had them specially made for her. Col had no idea how much *literal* gold the outfit had cost to purchase, and now it was thoroughly dirtied.

Myuri plopped to the ground, gave one last big sneeze, and then got to her feet.

“Ugh, shut up.”

“—!”

Col was unable to find the words to scold her; as he stood in silence, Le Roi wandered the area.

“What did you find inside?” he asked, as though trying to keep himself from laughing. He turned to Col, who still was trying to think of a way to scold her, and winked at him in an attempt to calm him. It was enough to make him believe he was trying to get them to get along.

“Nothing. It didn’t look like a secret passage, either. It smelled like animals, though, and I found some fox kits at the far end. I think it’s a hiding place for a family of them,” Myuri said, scarcely containing her annoyance as Col

attempted to brush the dirt from her clothes.

“Ah-ha-ha, I thought so. Had you been a little late in saving me, I think they might have bitten my nose!”

Col pictured the curious fox kits shocked by the sudden appearance of Le Roi’s round face, yet bashfully approaching to investigate.

“This isn’t a passageway—it’s a waterway. I found an outdoor bath buried in weeds over there.”

“A bath?!” Myuri exclaimed with hope; that reaction was only natural, since she was born in Nyohhira, but it would be months before she would be able to use it at the earliest.

“I believe the water would be boiled in the north annex, then come through these waterways and fill the bath.” Le Roi pointed as he explained.

A look of understanding crossed Clark’s face. “Then the rustling I hear at night is of the fox family?”

Perhaps the reason he looked somewhat disappointed was because he was hoping for an angel or other holy being, which were often said to appear to holy people staying in ruined buildings.

“But an outdoor bath means this is a very old building. Miss Eve told me—you’ll be turning this into a monastery?”

“Oh yes,” Clark replied. “Do you know Heir Hyland? She’s a very faithful member of the royal family, and she was the one who offered this to us.”

Le Roi nodded with a smile and slowly scanned the area. “This must be very, very old. It may have been built before the kingdom was founded, when soldiers of the ancient empire invaded this island.”

The man seemed peaceful yet somehow enraptured by the sight; the jovial air he carried around him earlier was gone. Now he wore the face of a scholar who adored history.

“Have you looked into its history? I believe it may be a selling point for your monastery.”

But he quickly returned to the flippant look Col knew all too well.

“Oh! Are you talking about the people who were the origin of the kingdom’s knight orders?”

Myuri, who was brimming with more curiosity than a kit herself, immediately locked onto what Le Roi said; she leaned forward, wanting to get closer.

“Are you interested in knight history?” he asked.

Her eyes widening, she nodded vigorously.

“Very well. Then I shall offer you a lecture on the subject.”

Le Roi had encountered a great number of texts. He would be able to tell her so much more in-depth information than the street vendors who were selling unused knights’ crests as charms on the steps of the Rausbourne cathedral. Even Col had to admit he was a bit curious.

But there was something regarding the missing artisan he still wanted to discuss with Le Roi.

“Mister Le Roi, there is still something I would like to ask you—”

“Oh?”

“No!” Myuri interrupted. “You’re just going to talk about boring God stuff again!”

Her grip was tight on Le Roi’s sleeve, as though to show that this was her prey.

Le Roi, caught between Col and Myuri, rubbed his stomach with delight.

And Clark, who had undoubtedly seen a similar sight countless times at the orphanage, gave a tired smile and said, “Why don’t we take a little break for now?”

That was enough to soothe the child and the childlike adult.

Col and Myuri ended up staying another night at the ruins, and on the following morning, they convinced Clark to return to Rausbourne for the time being, despite how much he wanted to remain and continue working. This would be a good chance for him to recuperate.

They arrived before noon, and when they dropped him off at the orphanage,

where Sharon was waiting for him, she immediately began scolding him, and the children, in their delight, came to drag him into the building.

“So you *are* useful sometimes,” Sharon said, a wicked little smile on her face. Myuri bared her canines and growled at her. This only confirmed to Col that they were indeed close.

Le Roi was apparently planning on staying in Eve’s manor, and they ran into her just as she was sending off some of her goods when they went to drop him off. They got to see Eve’s nerves wear thin in Le Roi’s overwhelming presence, so Col considered the excursion worth it.

And when they finally returned to the manor, Hyland, who had been there all day, came out to greet them, and she blinked in shock when she saw how dirty Myuri was.

“So the booksellers were chasing after the artisans, too.”

While Myuri cleaned up in the room, Col and Hyland remained in the peristyle around the inner courtyard while he told her about his conversation with Le Roi. He told her that the booksellers had been pursuing the craftspeople in order to protect their business. And when they could find neither hide nor hair of the final artisan, they wondered if it was a trick devised by the inquisition.

“I see...I hadn’t thought of something with such guile, but it sounds plausible,” Hyland remarked.

“What do you think?”

Col, of course, was fully intent on continuing to search for the artisan, but to be frank, they had too little in the way of clues. Not only that, but booksellers like Le Roi had been keeping a close eye out for this last artisan and *still* could not find his mark, so perhaps Col truly had no business trying himself.

In addition, he had been wondering this entire time if Canaan had been aware of this possibility. If so, then what was he thinking when he proposed the project? Even if Canaan *was* good and honest, Col wondered if he should begin to question the motives of the people who backed him.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, Hyland spoke up.

“Archivist Canaan may have known about this.”

Col’s head snapped upward; there was a gentle smile on Hyland’s face.

“But he came all this way, putting himself at risk of being labeled a traitor to the Church. He must have strong motives for doing so. It’s hard to think he did so out of simple faith, to tell us about a project that has no hopes of completion.”

“.....”

Col was not sure where she was going with this.

She shrugged. “The technology he told us about is indeed nothing short of a miracle, but it isn’t magic. We could easily replicate it with our own skills.” She mischievously made her hand into a claw, just like Myuri once did. “We can carry forward with the plan with enough scribes. This might be Archivist Canaan’s real objective.”

Considering how long he spent by Myuri’s side, reviving a technology considered so dangerous it was effectively sealed away did not sound all that far-fetched to him. But perhaps Hyland’s calm and composed eye had foreseen this all from the beginning.

“Merchants don’t usually agree to anything if they can’t profit from it. If Canaan and the other archivists were normal high-ranking clergy, then they would round up personnel from the cathedrals and abbeys under their control or use whatever privileges they have as remuneration for the scribes. But they are acting to *eradicate* those very types of people who have an unfair amount of power. Even if they were to enlist the aid of a secular noble, the landed gentry and the Church’s interests are much too entangled, and it’s hard to tell who would be on their side or not. And that’s why they approached us, because we are clearly enemies of the Church...Or something along those lines.”

Though Hyland was an illegitimate child, she was still considered royalty. That was why Col and Myuri never had to worry about having enough money for travel and why this manor they were renting was of very fine make.

So even if they were unable to revive this mythical technology, they might be able to procure the funding to make enough copies to spread over the

mainland. It would not be all that far-fetched to think that was what Canaan and the archivists were after.

Canaan, after all, had brought up the funding problem right at the beginning of their conversation.

“And it isn’t as though we have to make thousands of copies. I think the most important thing is whether we can create the very situation that inspired fear in the inquisitors.”

Though she spoke in what sounded like a riddle, Col understood what she wanted to say immediately.

“Do you mean if those copies can spread over the mainland faster than they can be confiscated?”

“Yes. Once someone learns how incredible the vernacular scripture is, they make one copy, and whoever gets that copy does the same. That takes a lot of work off our hands. It will take time, of course, and it isn’t the most reliable method. The technology Archivist Canaan told us about would be a much surer bet. But I think he saw there was considerable value in working with us, even if it does not necessarily result in an outright victory.”

Roasting something over a weak flame would only burn it, not set fire to it. They would need considerable kindling in order to set it alight.

But Col, unsure, began to open his mouth. It was a terribly rude thing to say to a member of the royal family.

How are things in terms of money?

Sharon had been hesitant to rely on Hyland for even the repair expenses for the monastery. Or perhaps she was thinking about relying on the Debau Company, another one of their backers, or Eve for funding.

And Hyland seemed to have noticed that Col swallowed his words. She smiled bashfully and said, “All we need is a good handful of scribes. The monastery would be the perfect place. It’s not a problem.”

She nodded, as though telling Col not to worry and that he could leave it in her hands, so she must have had her own means.

Though unsure as he was, inquiring any further would only come across as distrust for her, so he remained silent.

“Heh-heh,” she chuckled. “I thought I knew why you looked so serious...but your knight is still bathing upstairs,” she said in a rather deliberate manner, signaling the end of the conversation.

Col, too, gave a reluctant smile and let the conversation flow.

“We have the artisan, of course, but when I gave Archivist Canaan the translation of the scripture, he returned with all sorts of questions about it. Do you think you could look them over?”

“Oh, yes. Of course. I am a bit scared to look, though...”

“I think he’s a bit scared to ask, which is why he’s written them down.”

Col had been so desperately trying not to drown in Canaan’s presence when they had spoken in the office, but Canaan, too, had apparently felt the same way. Recalling that fact alone was enough to lighten Col’s mood.

“Ah, that’s right.” Just as they set off to make their way to Hyland’s office to retrieve Canaan’s letter, a thought came back to Col. “Does the building on the monastery plot have much history? I have heard it is of an old style that dates to before the kingdom.”

“It could be, but...why?”

“Mister Le Roi, the bookseller who agreed to help us, mentioned that could be a selling point for the monastery.”

When he said that, she gave an uncomfortable smile.

“I would not have caused everyone so much trouble if I were a noble better with money.”

She was sincere and so hard on herself—the noblest of nobles.

“If nothing else, I have gotten to where I am today because of who you are, Heir Hyland.” Col smiled in return. “I thought I might tell you how I feel while Myuri isn’t here,” he added, a slight joking tone to his voice.

Hyland lifted her hands, as though signaling her defeat. “I’ll look into the

monastery,” she said with delight, and turned to look at Col. “I think everything will go well with your help.”

It was a groundless statement, but the reason Col could agree with a smile was simply because of the kind of person Hyland was.

By the time Col parted ways with Hyland and returned to the room, Myuri was finished bathing. He let the girl fuss with her hair by herself while he took a seat at the desk and unfurled the letter from Canaan. He had been unable to contain himself the moment he took the letter and had opened it along the way, but when he took the time to read it over again, he found his cheeks flushing as he did so.

“A love letter?”

Myuri peeked over his shoulder; the flush had been so pronounced that she felt the need to stare hard at him and speak up about it.

“N-no,” he stuttered. But only because the letter was filled with such passionate praise, he could clearly see Canaan’s face beyond the words on the page.

“It smells so happy.” Myuri leaned in close to the letter, sniffing with displeasure. “Are you sure he wasn’t actually a girl?”

With a strained smile, Col dodged the jealous wolf’s question.

“There are only so many with whom one can discuss theology in this way. It’s like meeting an old friend from one’s hometown in a distant land.”

“No one understands what you guys talk about.”

Myuri whipped her damp tail, essentially declaring that any topic she could not participate in was boring and worthless.

“And who was it who was so engrossed in conversation with Mister Le Roi?”

The two of them chatted on and on atop the carriage cart bed. Though Col and Clark had discussed interpretations of the scripture on the driver’s perch, they were no match for the lively conversation going on behind them. As one who knew well how passionate Myuri could be when she was engrossed in a conversation, he became aware once again of simply how great Le Roi was,

considering he spoke with her long enough to the point her throat went dry.

“He promised me he’d take me to the city library after this. We have to research the monastery, you know.”

The city council collected all sorts of information, including regional annals, noble crests, and records of notable battles.

A girl like Myuri would consider the place like heaven, especially when accompanied by Le Roi.

“Don’t cause him *too* much trouble.”

She would ignore him if he told her she could not go, and in light of Hyland’s financial standing, they should honestly take more seriously what they could consider the monastery’s selling points. If Myuri could find one for them, it could, in a roundabout way, be of help to Hyland.

When that thought crossed his mind, he gave her a slight scolding, and Myuri gave him a cross look.

But the reason she looked so displeased was due to reasons he was not expecting.

“You sure you’re okay with this? I’m going out with a man.”

“.....”

For a few moments, Col did not understand what she wanted to say.

The moment he realized what she was trying to tell him, he almost burst out in laughter. Every single time she managed to get two or three steps ahead of him, she would relentlessly make a fool of him—he had no idea she was capable of speaking in such an obviously feminine manner.

And of course, picturing her side by side with Le Roi brought him no unease.

“And if you told me you were going out to dinner with Mister Le Roi, I would be more worried that you would eat too much.”

Over the past couple of days, Col came to learn that Le Roi needed to eat an astonishing amount of food—an amount that shocked even Myuri—in order to preserve his round shape. Col did not want her forming an appetite that big.

“That’s...not what I mean,” she grumbled.

Col, of course, knew precisely what she meant.

It was not all that long ago that Myuri kept pestering him for marriage; her tactics had not vanished but simply changed direction.

“We have this. Isn’t that enough?”

He pointed to the embroidered crest of the wolf looking away in a huff on her sash.

There were only two people in the entire world who could use this crest.

Myuri dropped her gaze to her sash, sighed, and looked up again.

“I will forgive you for lashing out at me.”

Perhaps she simply wanted to fawn over him a little bit after getting jealous about Canaan’s letter.

But if Col had the same nose as Myuri, he would most certainly be able to easily sniff out the same scent from all the fiction she had been so busy writing. If they handed the sheaf of papers over to her mother the wisewolf, then she would certainly grin and say, *This is quite a long love letter.*

“I want you to show self-restraint even in the face of a cut of lamb,” he added.

Myuri frowned deeply and smacked his shoulder.

“You’re so mean, Brother.”

It was a line he had heard many times; he gave a cough-like laugh, and she smacked him again.

“And I know you are getting information about the artisan from Mister Le Roi in your own manner, aren’t you?”

Though he was a foolish lamb, he could still learn.

Myuri pursed her frown into a pout and flared her nostrils.

Perhaps she did not expect him to notice.

“Hmph...Fine, so long as you get it.”

Col pretended not to see how she wagged her tail, and simply dipped his head in reverence. “Thank you,” he said.

She shrugged, then brought over another chair to sit next to him. After slamming her comb onto the table, she turned the back of the chair toward him.

“But he’s so smart,” she said. “Even if he really does know about the artisan, getting the information out of him isn’t going to be easy.”

Labor deserves compensation.

With a sigh, Col took the comb in hand and gently sunk the teeth into her hair. At last, she broke into a satisfied smile.

“What did Blondie say about the artisan, by the way? You went to tell her about that, right?”

“When I told her they may not exist, she agreed it was likely. I think she may have been thinking that from the very beginning.”

Myuri’s hair, still damp and somewhat cool, had a strange texture to it. He could understand how one might become absorbed in caring for something so beautiful.

But she asked him an odd question, interrupting his thoughts.

“Blondie wasn’t all that upset about it, was she?” she asked, even turning to glance at him over her shoulder.

Col was perplexed. “Oh, I suppose not. But I understand why.” He tapped her shoulder as his way of asking her to face forward again, and she did so, but still minding him. “The plan Canaan proposed is replicable in principle, even without the technology he spoke about.”

If they absolutely needed to revive the lost technology in order to accomplish this, then she would have felt much stronger despair over the situation. This was a once-in-a-lifetime situation, one that would not only peaceably resolve the conflict between the kingdom and the Church, but would also remove the corruption lurking within the Church—she would have been much more desperate to make the project a reality.

“If this were simply a question of funds for hiring the artisans to make the books, then things aren’t all that bleak. The sheer amount of money needed for the project is a problem, yes, but Heir Hyland seemed to have some ideas. I get the feeling she is determined to proceed forward, even if we do not find the artisan.”

He guided the comb lightly through Myuri’s hair, but he suddenly felt as though she had shrunk before him. By the time he realized she had given a big sigh, she turned around and looked at him with eyes colder than her damp hair.

“You really are useless without me.”

“...And what is this about now?”

Myuri did not immediately answer; she gestured with her hand, bidding him to continue combing her hair before facing forward again.

Col could sense, from the way she sat, that the fawning air about her had vanished.

“Let’s say there’s a problem standing in the way of something you want to make a reality and Blondie has the key to solving that problem. Which means, considering what she’s like, she’d never look upset about it. She’d probably appear relieved instead and say something like...” She paused, putting on a haughty air. “...*Sacrificing myself to solve this problem is an easy ask.*”

The comb in her hair paused, and Myuri glanced back over her shoulder.

“And she’d say it with a smile, too, wouldn’t she?”

Col was dumbstruck—he could picture it in his mind with shocking ease.

“I don’t know if she’d actually do that, but I bet she’ll do something outrageous to get the money, so you should be careful.”

Sharon, too, had been wary about talking to Hyland about their funding; she had been apprehensive about Hyland’s strong sense of responsibility. And it was because of that strong sense of responsibility that Col trusted Hyland so fiercely.

He recalled the expression she wore when he asked about the monastery’s history, when he mentioned it might be a bonus to the business.

“I would not have caused everyone so much trouble if I were a noble better with money,” she had said.

“It’s annoying that you get so worked up about her, though,” Myuri said flippantly, shrugging. “But I’m not sure what I’d do if she stopped giving me sweets.”

Myuri was still turned away from Col, and Col wondered what her face looked like when she said that.

He, of course, could easily see her doing such a thing, and though Myuri was prideful, her heart was full of even more kindness.

“I had no idea.”

One day, Hyland would have spent an unbelievable amount of money to successfully find and hire scribes, and Col would have not even blinked. He would have believed her smile to be simply a smile, and he would not have questioned it.

The forest was littered with dangerous pitfalls, but the wolf walked several paces ahead to find the path and make sure her pack did not stray. When he moved the comb through her hair again, he did it gentler, with more care than he had before.

“I am thankful to have you as my knight,” he said as he drew the comb through her hair, flecks of silver in ash.

Though Myuri did not look back at him, her wolf ears and tail moved in a way that told him exactly what sort of face she was making.

After combing her hair, Col braided it—he knew she was going to pester him to do so—and then Myuri donned her still slightly dirtied uniform that marked her as a knight-in-training. She was ready to make her way to Le Roi.

The reason he could not stop her from arming herself with her sword was not because he felt indebted to her for making him realize something very important, but because her outing overlapped with Hyland’s attendance at a lunch in the city council hall. Hyland was essentially their master, considering she was the one who gave their knightly order the privilege to exist in the first place, and it was a knight’s duty to safeguard their master’s safety whenever

they went out. Hyland was delighted to have the little knight's protection and gestured for her to join her in the carriage.

And so Col and the other servants saw them off as the carriage rambled away over the flagstone streets.

Hyland wore her usual smile, and the way she enjoyed the banter with Myuri did not seem to be an act. But if what Myuri said was true, that would mean Hyland was hiding dangerous decisions beneath that smile. There was no doubt, of course, that Canaan's proposal was immensely important and could greatly influence the relationship between the kingdom and the Church, and Col sympathized with her desire to make it a reality.

But he did not want her to do anything reckless, nor did he want her to do so in silence.

Even if she was already doing so with her sturdy sense of responsibility and considerable dignity as royalty.

"Though God determines our birth..."

It was never a comfortable thing.

Perhaps the only one who could do anything about that from head-on was the rambunctious girl with strange hair of flecks of silver in ash.

"Is something the matter, Master Col?" said the old servant. He peered at Col curiously, as though wondering how long he was planning to stand there.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking—a bad habit of mine."

A smile cracked over the old servant's face, revealing several missing teeth, and he placed a hand on the steel gate.

As he was about to close it, he lifted his gaze toward the end of the street. Col followed suit, and the one who was walking in their direction froze in place.

"Is that...Rhodes?"

Col hesitated, not entirely confident in his observation.

Because the first time they met, he looked to be nothing more than a muddled body discarded by the roadside, and his position as knight-in-training

was extremely precarious.

But the person he saw standing, perplexed, at the end of the road was clad as a proud knight, his plain cloak fluttering behind him in the wind.

“A guest?” The servant paused and turned to ask Col.

Rhodes was a knight of the order of Saint Kruza, so it was unlikely he just happened to be on a stroll in the neighborhood. Rhodes, too, seemed to steel himself as he squared his shoulders and strode toward the manor.

Perhaps he did indeed have business here, but he had made eye contact with his acquaintance much earlier than he had been ready for and felt embarrassed.

Yet Rhodes approached and offered a formal greeting, as though telling himself that a knight of Saint Kruza could not let such embarrassment get to him.

“It is a pleasure to see you, Master Col.”

He placed his hand over his chest, but Col, of course, stopped him from getting on his knee.

“It’s been a while,” Col replied. “Please, be at ease.”

Rhodes wore a cape over his shoulders and a leather cuirass, with a longsword at his hip and tall leather travel boots that almost reached his knees. It was a stellar traveling outfit, but there were clear signs of snowmelt on his shoes.

“It seems you’ve just arrived from travel,” Col remarked. “Why not come inside and rest?”

“...Your kindness is touching.”

His words were indeed that of a knight, but they did not seem natural coming from him, simply due to his age.

The servant took them to a sunny room that looked over the street with stained glass windows depicting angels.

“You just missed Heir Hyland.”

Col retrieved the drinks the maids brought outside the room and served

Rhodes himself. Rhodes was gazing up, eyes squinting in the light, as he observed the colored pieces of glass that made up the angels, and Col mused about how much more grown-up he looked, even though it had not been that long ago that they saw each other. If Myuri saw him, she may get frustrated to see how much more of a knight he had become over her.



On second thought, he did not think Rhodes knew that Myuri had been knighted, and he was not sure if he should tell Rhodes or let Myuri tell him herself.

But he did have a feeling that Myuri generally thought favorably of Rhodes, so perhaps he should let her have this so they had more to talk about. Those thoughts rolled around in his mind as he took his seat, and Rhodes finally spoke, as though waiting for that to happen.

“I will stop by another time to give my regards to Heir Hyland. Today I have an urgent letter for you from my captain, Master Col.”

“What? For me?”

Col was shocked, not expecting to be the object of business, and Rhodes pulled out a letter from his breast pocket. It was an official letter, bound with horsetail cord and sealed with red wax, imprinted with the knight order’s stamp.

He retrieved it with a flutter of nerves; he glanced up at Rhodes, seeking permission to open the letter, and Rhodes nodded.

And what he read shocked him even further.

“It is thanks to your aid and God’s guidance that we were able to regain our honor as knights,” Rhodes said, momentarily dropping his gaze to the letter in Col’s hands before looking back up again. “But we often find our own power to be lacking. And each time, we are reminded of the authority and influence you have.”

The letter, penned by that knight of knights with the silver beard, said as much. The knights were acting to expose the Church’s wrongdoings throughout the kingdom on the kingdom’s behalf, since tensions would likely escalate if agents of the kingdom were to try the same on their own.

The Knights of Saint Kruza were popular with the people, enough so that their praises were sung in fairy tales, which meant Col had often heard that popular opinion on their quest was quite good, but it seemed not everything was going smoothly.

“We have no problem in relatively larger towns,” Rhodes continued. “Everyone knows the name of the Knights of Saint Kruza, and none can argue back when presented with the scripture. However, in smaller and older towns and villages where God’s protection does not reach, especially those where the seat of the bishop is hereditary or where the priests cannot read the script of the Church, that is not the case.”

That the bishop, one who was meant to be celibate all throughout their life, was a hereditary post was a dizzying contradiction, and a priest who could not read the scripture due to the script of the Church and thus did not exactly know what was written sounded like a joke, but that was rather common.

“In those places, we are derided as brigands and often chased away with curses and splashes of water. However...”

The people immediately behaved when they learned the knights had come under the orders of the Twilight Cardinal, detailed the letter.

And without exception, all those churches had a copy of the booklet containing excerpts of the vernacular scripture.

“Though they may not know the word of God, they all do have their eyes and ears on what is happening in the world. They hear of your name from traveling merchants and residents who go to sell their crafts and livestock in larger towns. And though the copies are occasionally filled with misspellings, they do get their hands on partial copies of the translated scripture and come into direct contact with God’s teachings for the first time.”

Col was genuinely surprised to know that their work was having that sort of effect on things. And at the same time, he felt a powerful hope knowing people would take notice when one does the right thing.

“May I ask what you’ve brought with you, then?” Col asked.

The letter was filled with compliments that were beginning to fluster him, along with praise of how wonderful it was that he was translating the scripture into the common script. The latter half of the letter expressed the captain’s desire that the Twilight Cardinal accompany them on their travels so that they may right the nominal priests’ ignorance together, but it was worded in a way that made it obvious it was simply a sentiment and not a genuine invitation.

Because even if Col himself was not present, his words could still reach the people.

“The captain has ordered me to quickly make one copy of your translated scripture,” Rhodes said. He pulled open the bag he had slung over his shoulder and pulled out a quill and other familiar writing implements. Col had once seen a letter Rhodes had written, and his handwriting was neat and methodical.

First Canaan and now Rhodes had come to make a copy of his vernacular scripture.

This was not so much a coincidence but the righteousness of their path beginning to bear fruit. What people needed the most among all the things that were happening now in the world was, indeed, a scripture in the common language.

“I will have to ask Heir Hyland to confirm, but I believe you may have a place to stay here in the manor for an extended period.”

Copying the scripture could not be done overnight.

But Rhodes quickly shook his head. “No, I couldn’t cause you that much trouble. It would be a problem for the cathedra, I believe.”

The order of the Knights of Saint Kruza were considered the Church’s own knights, so Col wondered if that was due to their status. Rhodes’s unit was bound together by the fact that they were all from the kingdom, but they were officially on the Church’s side and technically enemies of the kingdom. Col sat there in his disappointment when Rhodes suddenly dropped his gaze, his knight’s facade fading slightly and his natural boyish expression showing through.

“But I have one request...”

“What is it?”

Rhodes was oddly hesitant, and it suddenly reminded Col of Myuri.

She had once said that Rhodes had a crush on her.

Knights were typically meant to lead celibate lives, but this was not an absolute rule. And as her surrogate older brother, Col would be relieved if a boy

like Rhodes got on well with her.

As those selfish scenarios floated through his mind, Rhodes looked up at him, determined.

“I don’t mind if it’s only occasionally, but when I’m working...do you think I could have your instruction, Master Col?”

“Hmm?”

Rhodes stared straight at him, and Col could not help but blink. That had not been what he was expecting, but Rhodes’s gaze had been stronger than his surprise.

“Ah, of course, I don’t mind...”

“Thank you so much! It is thanks to you that we knights have truly been saved. And we truly understand how incredible you are, wherever we go! I can only think of the time you saved us from a dog’s death at the roadside as guidance from God himself! But...I do have one regret.” Rhodes’s tone was frustrated. “I am constantly embarrassed by my ignorance—if only I’d asked for more of your instruction. I acted so rudely toward you, too...I confess that I personally saw this transcribing assignment as a chance to make up for my lack of study. But I want to learn from you with all my body and soul!”

“Oh, um...Yes. I hope I can teach you well.”

Col, instead, was embarrassed that he thought Rhodes was going to ask about Myuri.

It was often said that one’s handwriting reflected one’s character—Rhodes was a boy who perfectly suited his methodical, heavy-handed writing.

“So long as you don’t mind my inexperienced scholarship, then I would be more than happy to help.”

Rhodes beamed, bowed his head again, and said a word of thanks.

Since Hyland was absent and Rhodes had come straight here from his travels, he excused himself as he stood from his seat, saying he needed to say hello at the cathedral. Col also stood to see him off; he placed his hand on the door—“Master Col?” Rhodes spoke up.

Col turned to see Rhodes standing closer to him than he thought.

“The captain has a message he wanted to impart with you in total confidence,” he said, his voice lowered.

“A personal message from your captain?”

Col turned to face him, and finally understood that this was the real reason the boy had arrived in town and immediately come to the manor, still dressed in his traveling clothes. He gave a short nod and briefly glanced out the door.

Outside was a gentle afternoon; in the courtyard beyond the peristyle, the elderly servant minded the fruit trees as the puppy playfully pounced at his feet.

“No one’s here.”

Rhodes nodded, took yet another step toward Col, and said, “Sinister individuals throughout the kingdom seem to be plotting to deliberately foment an incident between the kingdom and the Church.”

Col said nothing, only staring at him in return.

“Someone attempted to ambush us and planned to make it look like the royal court’s work. We turned the tables on them and captured the perpetrators, only to discover they were run-of-the-mill bandits, but on their person were epaulets painted with the crest of the golden sheep. They were planning to plant that as evidence had their attack gone well.”

The Knights of Saint Kruza were the most knightly of knights, the kind sung of in legends. Col found himself suddenly sympathizing with the bandits’ ignorance—they were only in it for the money, after all.

“They were simply after the coin, so they did not know who hired them for the job. It was either the Church, who wanted to turn the blame on the kingdom, or the kingdom’s roundabout way of making it seem like the Church is plotting something...”

Rhodes’s unit was bound together from among the rest of the Knights of Saint Kruza by their shared homeland in the Kingdom of Winfiel, and that meant they occupied a particularly strange position. Both the Church and the kingdom

regarded them more as enemy than friend.

But if the bandits were planning on leaving the royal crest at the site of the attack, then it would be apt to assume this went far beyond simply targeting the knights.

“Either way, this means there are forces out there trying to incite fighting between the kingdom and the Church, correct?”

“Yes.” Rhodes nodded, then hesitated before continuing. “There are many within the kingdom, the Church, and those who belong to neither who would be delighted if war broke out.”

That might refer to the merchants who would profit handsomely off arms and rations, or those like Rhodes, who existed solely to act in war. For them, the end of the war against the pagans was a signal that their entire reason for existence had vanished as well.

A new war was a new job.

“And another member of the order reported spotting someone from the Holy See at a harbor not too far from here. I would not be surprised if they were plotting something in concert with the ambush.”

At mention of the Holy See, Col was worried his reaction showed on his face. Because the first person he thought of was Canaan.

He had, in essence, betrayed the Church to come here, so Col knew he had to tell him about Rhodes immediately.

“I see. You...wouldn’t mind if I shared this with Heir Hyland, would you?”

“Not at all. Right now, both you and Heir Hyland stand at the forefront of the conflict brewing between the kingdom and the Church. I would not be surprised if either of you was the next target of these plotters, to the point that we debated posting ourselves here so we may protect you. But I believe we would only get in your way, so...”

Getting protection from the Knights of Saint Kruza when things were already so tense would likely only cause more friction. But Col knew if he told Hyland how Rhodes and the knights felt, she would be delighted.

“God sees your faith, as well as the deep consideration you have paid all of us,” Col said. “Thank you for telling me.”

“This is the least we can do to repay the debt we owe.”

Rhodes’s sense of honor was so strong it almost seemed stubborn. Now that Col had seen a true knight’s spirit, he could not help but feel his wild little sister was still missing something fundamental to become an upstanding knight.

“May God guide us in our path,” Col intoned.

Rhodes dipped his head in reverence.

After seeing off Rhodes and returning to his room, the first thing that escaped Col’s mouth was a sigh.

Though he was genuinely thankful that not only Canaan and the archivists of the Curia, but the Knights of Saint Kruza had realized the might of the vernacular scripture, that also meant that antagonistic forces were seeing the very same thing. It made sense that the attacks against the knights at this hour meant that while Col and those on his side considered this their prime opportunity, there were those who saw it instead as danger.

But while Rhodes was questioning whether the Church was planning something, considering what his fellow knight said about seeing someone from the Holy See, Col did not think they were.

In fact, he could think of one force in particular that could hold even greater sway over this conflict than the Church.

It was one force that Hyland would know very well; Col would have to confirm with her once she returned home. Though this conflict split the world cleanly in two, there was no lack for actors with complicated roles.

“I at least hope things are going smoothly in Myuri’s story.”

Sitting on the desk was a sheaf of papers with Myuri’s fantasy knight tales, which she worked on whenever she had a spare moment. Col could not help but murmur aloud with a sigh when his gaze fell on it.

But standing here grumbling would help nothing; that both Canaan and Rhodes took notice of the vernacular translation of the scripture was, without a

doubt, a good sign. If they could make a great number of copies of the translated scripture and distribute them across the mainland, then proper faith would spread like wildfire.

The questions Canaan sent him regarding the scripture translation were imbued with an almost tangible fervor. There were people out there using everything at their disposal to interpret what he translated.

Though they were originally words he had refined in his attempts to instill an ounce of faith into one particular rambunctious girl, they were now striking chords in many hearts.

If Myuri knew this, she would surely be filled with pride, as though it were her own accomplishment. The thought of that alone brought a lopsided smile to Col's face, but in truth, with the way things were going, the vernacular translation of the scripture could very well bring a definitive end to the conflict between the kingdom and the Church.

That meant Col had no choice but to do everything in his power to help.

He pulled out the chair, sat, and faced Canaan's letter.

He took quill in hand and began to write an even more passionate response to a letter so filled with fervor that Myuri had suspected it was a love letter.

Col's head snapped up, and he found the room had grown dim. He felt like he had been holding his breath at the bottom of a lake, and gave a deep exhale. He could hear the vespers bell ringing from the world beyond the window—he had been absorbed in his work for quite a long time.

He stretched his stiff back, and the moment he thought Hyland and the others would be returning, he heard a familiar flurry of footsteps from beyond the door.

"Brotheeer!"

The door flung open, and Myuri's cheery voice filled the room. Before Col could say anything in response, she strode over to him and shoved what she had in her arms onto him.

"Here. Put this on and get ready!"

“...This is sudden. May I ask what this is about?”

She had smelled of dust and dirt when she left, and now she smelled of the unique scent that came with old books. And what she had shoved into his arms were the clothes of a young merchant. And Myuri, too, had changed out of her knight's outfit and into the guise of a mercantile company errand boy.

“Blondie's orders!”

“Heir Hyland's?”

Though he wondered for a moment if she thought she could get her way by using Hyland's name, he considered how much effort it would take to stop Myuri when she had this much energy and decided that it would be better to simply play along for the moment. And if he got to see Hyland because of this, then he could tell her about Rhodes's message.

But Myuri, who quickly stripped down and pulled a new shirt over her head, suddenly froze and began to sniff the air. Then, trouserless, she began to pad barefoot around the room, and eventually came to stand by Col.

“I know this smell.”

When she turned her eyes to him, she looked both like a knight pursuing a heretic, and a lover questioning her partner's infidelity.

“Rhodes...Sir Rhodes came by.”

After Myuri heard the name, her wolf ears flicked up and down.

“Did he always smell like this? It's, hmm...”

“He has grown into a young, dauntless knight in such a short period of time.”

Her tail wagged.

“But I'm a knight now, too.”

Myuri held herself with pride, as though this was a competition, but she wore only a shirt and no pants; she looked as though she had just gotten up for a midmorning nap or just having changed after wetting the bed. Either way, Col sensed not even a fraction of the discipline he had sensed in Rhodes.

“Knights do not wander around in such unsightly dress.”

“Oh! We need to get changed!”

Col’s scolding went in one ear and out the other. Myuri quickly began to dress herself again; Col kept a dubious eye on her as he, too, finished changing.

Once they left the room and ventured down the stairs, there they found Hyland, dressed as a city girl, a way they have seen her dressed only once before in Atiph, waiting with a bright and happy smile.

Here was a young merchant who had just arrived in Rausbourne on a ship full of cargo, inviting a staff girl he was immediately smitten with out on the town, and they had arrived at a modest tavern with his entourage and guard in tow.

That must be how I look, Col thought with defeat.

“It’s kind of fun to do this every once in a while, isn’t it?” Hyland said, dressed as a local town girl. Her guards, dressed as cargo handlers, poured wine into her mug, and she took it in her hands.

“The meat at the Golden Fern is good, too, though.”

The establishment Myuri mentioned sat on the cathedral square and was frequently patronized by the most important people of the city. With how a great curtain, painted with the shop’s logo and name, hung from the ceiling in the great central atrium, it, too, almost seemed like a cathedral of meat and booze.

In contrast, the place they were at presently was in a part of Rausbourne where many artisans lived and was cozy but not particularly outstanding. Stray dogs loitered around the front door, hoping for scraps; loud sailors threw back cup after cup of ale while the forceful barmaids commanded attention of even the drunkards; among it all were shady individuals hoping to get their hands on unsuspecting patrons’ wallets while taking tiny, tiny sips of their drinks.

“Why are we here?” Col asked.

Not only were there plenty of other taverns just like this one all crammed in the area, the room was filled with smoke—the chimney that allowed it to escape must have been clogged—and Col had to keep blinking it out of his eyes.

He wanted to speak with Hyland about what Rhodes told him about, that

there were forces in the kingdom scheming to stir up even further trouble between the kingdom and the Church, and about Canaan and the other archivists, but this was not the place for it.

“Mister Le Roi and I read so many books at the library.”

Lamb ribs sat piled high on a wooden plate—though parts were burnt here and there, the fat still crackled and popped in the heat. It smelled strong—it was doused in a rich sauce comprised of mostly grated garlic, likely to suit the palate of the clientele. Hyland seemed to delight solely in the fact that she got to eat this food with her hands, and bit into it; Myuri did not mind that it was still hot, and she bit straight into the meat as well.

“Because we found out about the history of the building we’re using for the monastery,” she continued.

“What?”

Though Col had been genuinely curious about that, he realized he did not quite understand how those two things were connected.

He opened his mouth to ask again, but Hyland spoke up this time.

“When I arrived at the council, I found an old acquaintance of the one who sold me the land and the building you were wondering about. I asked after the building’s history, and he told me that it once belonged to a band of knights called the Aloné Order, which traces their roots back to the ancient empire that came to this land long ago.”

Hyland was unsure what to do with the grease on her fingers and ultimately licked them clean. Her guarding knight, upon seeing her do this, did his very best not to show the shock on his face.

“But it’s a very old order, so there weren’t any official records of them in the library. Is that right?”

As Col watched Hyland turn the conversation to Myuri, he recalled that Myuri and Le Roi had gone to read at the library annexed to the council building. Hyland had been meeting with some important members of the city on the same grounds, so that was where they likely convened.

“Yeah,” Myuri replied. “Mister Le Roi recognized the name, but they didn’t have any crests in the library. So he suggested that it might’ve been a really old order that was more like a mercenary band.”

“But...that knowledge alone is not enough, is it?”

It still did not explain why they came all the way out here, to this tavern, in disguises.

Col was unsure if he should scold Myuri for the way she wolfed down the meat. His eyes drifted to the dried codfish—despite how the server had practically thrown it on the table, the dish looked positively delectable—and he decided to take a piece and wait for her to continue.

“Haum, hom, gulp.” But he said it was also really well known. He suggested we should collect stories about them and restore the buildings to match the stories and stuff. So you know how we need a lot of money, right? And apparently monasteries can make a ton of money if lots of people come.”

As the very one combatting the Church’s excessive desire for money, Col found it hard to nod in agreement, but it was true. A monastery’s most reliable source of income was sheep farming, but there were plenty of abbeys with grand facilities that were the result of donations procured from eager pilgrims. If the building was related to the Aloné Order of Knights, then it would not be bad for business to use that as a selling point.

But the reason Myuri emphasized that point was perhaps because she had foreseen Hyland making some bad decisions to raise money. She was trying to lessen Hyland’s burden in her own way. Though she always took on a salty attitude when it came to Hyland, she ultimately recognized the blond woman as an ally.

What Col did not understand was why they had come all this way to talk about the Aloné Order of Knights and why there were no records of them despite being so famous.

Something was not adding up, Col mused to himself, when the commotion in the tavern suddenly felt like it changed direction, like a flock of birds, all at once.

“Oh, oh! They’re here!”

Right when Myuri yelled, the other patrons around them stood and raised their mugs into the air, sending their applause toward the front of the building.

Col craned his neck to see what was going on and found a group of bards. They were an essential part of business among the bathhouses in Nyohhira and were of course present at the Golden Fern. But these were a bit different from the bards he was used to seeing.

They were a most eccentric bunch, one who often played music for the people who lived in the most squalid parts of the city.

“O, all-powerful and almighty creator! Thank you for another day of drink and merriment!” one of the bards yelled, his voice carrying well over the noise of the tavern as he strummed the strings of his lute. And the music that suddenly broke out was nothing like the sort played to soothe the souls of those soaking in the baths, or to obscure secret business talks of the rich and powerful. No, this was a boisterous tune, one meant to be enjoyed with ale in one hand while stomping one’s feet, blowing away the accumulated exhaustion of a hard day’s work.

At the front of the tavern, patrons linked arms together to form a ring and began whirling in a circle in their dance. It was apparently a standard song for those who frequented places like this—some were even singing along.

Myuri was understandably delighted by the crude and obvious merriment; Hyland clapped along to the beat, enjoying the music; and the guard kept a sharp eye out, making sure no pickpockets decided to take advantage of the commotion.

As Col sat there, overwhelmed by the noise, Hyland, face flushed from the alcohol, leaned closer to him and shouted so her voice did not get lost in the clamor. “We can’t hear music like this at the Golden Fern! We had to come here!”

In his bewilderment, he wondered if they really needed to be here among this chaos. Myuri began rustling around at his belt.

“I need some coppers, Brother!” she said, taking the contents of his coin

purse like a little thief. She then added, “The bards who come to places like this will always know a song about the Aloné Order of Knights!”

After giving him an excuse, she rushed off into the enthusiastic crowd, copper coins in hand. As he watched her vanish, it finally clicked—not all epics and tales of the world were recorded in text, neatly bound, and kept as books. Some stories were passed down through the ages as song, embellished and dramatized for people’s entertainment.

The story of the Aloné knights was among them.

“I’m not exactly sure if this is appropriate for a monastery,” Hyland said, watching Myuri negotiate with a particularly sinister-looking clown who loitered around the bards, taking offerings and music requests. “They’re apparently well known for their captain, whose actions caused a scandal of legendary proportions. That sort of makes you wonder if we should keep the outdoor baths on the grounds as is, doesn’t it?”

The buildings were all connected with flagstone colonnades, which were flanked by decorative pillars. That was very reminiscent of the ancient empire, and to modern sensibilities, it was rather sensual.

But how would an open-air bath featured in a popular city tune be received at a monastery these days?

As one who played assistant to an extraordinary merchant who opened a bathhouse in the steamy Nyohhira, Col could not help but sense a business opportunity. And though they were baths left behind by a shameless knight captain, ablutions were considered a crucial activity in any monastery, so it could very well be considered unproblematic in matters of faith. As that thought crossed his mind, he saw that Myuri’s negotiations had gone well.

Not long afterward, the tune and rhythm of the music changed to something gallant yet strangely sweet. The dancer immediately cozied up to the bard, and the singing girl began to sing of a romance between a knight and a beautiful girl.

Just as Col focused his attention on the lyrics, he almost choked when he heard the words.

There was once a beautiful mansion that stood in the kingdom’s quiet

countryside. A great knight captain sat soaking his feet in the mansion's canals, which smelled fragrantly of roses, while a gorgeous woman served him wine to drink. The spot Le Roi had fallen into upside down, looking rather like a demonic sacrifice, was precisely the waterways the song was about.

And as the song went on about the uninhibited pair in the outdoor baths, Col's face went red for reasons besides the alcohol.

"This is something, isn't it?" Hyland said, lopsided smile on her face. The instruments' melody grew even more bombastic, and the singer sang with such vigor and pressed her hand to her chest so hard that it looked like it might even cave in.

"I reap rewards in battle—oh!—to swear my love to you! But, my beloved, as there is no end to my valor, so, too, is my love never-ending!"

As the singer's clear voice went on at length about, essentially, someone who went from battlefield to battlefield to find lover after lover, one particularly enthusiastic drunk wrapped his arm around one of the barmaids, who mercilessly slapped the patron across the face, and he promptly dropped to the ground.

The song was of an era when war was primarily the pursuit of the nobility, when adventure was a man's reason for living. The Church did not have that much power back then, and wolves were popular symbols for noble houses.

If one were to write this song down, bind it in leather, and place it upon bookshelves, they would no doubt be criticized by the Church. This was a story the wandering bards had kept alive while dodging the Church's censors. This was a world that not even Le Roi, a bookseller who has encountered a vast portion of the world's knowledge, could find in his books.

The song ended; Col, in an attempt to erase the lingering echoes of the lascivious lyrics from his mind, concentrated on eating the whole dry codfish. Once he had gotten through about half, a deep realization that there was so much of his world of which he had yet to learn settled in his chest.

But in contrast, all he could do was sigh.

"I am worried that girl is only ever going to take to inappropriate recreation,

and that includes this song.”

His gaze settled on Myuri, who was spinning along with the dancers to yet another upbeat song.

“And? She seems to be in her element.”

Hyland is much too easy on Myuri, Col thought. But the way she held hands with the professional dancers was so entrancing it was almost impressive—and shameless. As he thought about it, he recalled how, not long after they left Nyohhira, Myuri had danced for some drunkards at the checkpoint inn to get food.

But the sense of déjà vu came from how he recalled Myuri’s mother, Holo the Wisewolf, danced with traveling performers when Col himself was a child.

Like mother, like daughter, Col thought as he pressed a hand to his head, almost feeling a headache coming on. But when he noticed how most of the patrons were concentrating on the florid dancing girls, he realized this was a perfect opportunity.

“While the wild girl is preoccupied elsewhere, there is something I need to tell you, Heir Hyland.”

“Hmm?”

Hyland, who had grown all too used to licking grease off her fingers now, turned to look at Col.

“A knight came bearing a message while you were away. Do you remember Rhodes?”

Hyland’s usual countenance returned to her; she briefly glanced around and gestured with her hand for Col to whisper to her. All this noise was, in fact, perfect for secret conversations, so even if another saw him leaning over, whispering to her, it would only seem like he was doing a poor job of wooing her.

The three things Rhodes had discussed with him were his declaration that he wished to create copies of the scripture, that someone from the order had spotted someone from the Holy See, and that there were forces who had

attacked the knights in an attempt to bring things to a head.

After briefly going over the topics, Col silently glanced at Hyland to see if she heard him, only to find her noble bearing shining through, no matter how she may disguise herself as a regular city girl, in much the same way her long lashes framed her eyes.

“For the first matter of business, of course, he is more than welcome to. But if he were to work in the cathedral, other members of the clergy might spot him. It might be best he stay at the manor for the time being.”

It was all right for Col and his company to think of Archbishop Yagine of the Rausbourne cathedral as an ally due to their complicated history. But there were more clergy in the cathedra than there were failing businesses, and each held their own opinions about the conflict between the kingdom and the Church. There might also be some who did not think very favorably of Rhodes staying there.

“As for the second...That’s precisely why I told him we should meet up on the mainland.”

Hyland, the one who was hiding Canaan’s presence, would have to bear responsibility if something were to happen to the young archivist.

That said, that was simply a matter of which side of the scales that problem should be weighed on.

“Had all of us gone to the mainland, the archivists would all be saddled with the exact same problem.”

Taking on the problem themselves was less of a burden on their conscience than forcing it onto others. As that thought crossed Col’s mind, Hyland fixed her gaze on him for a moment before giving a tired smile.

“I wasn’t insistent enough.”

“That’s not true.”

With her smile, she gazed off into the distance before turning back to Col again.

“I’ll tell him someone may have spotted him. But...in that case, he may as well

stay in the manor. It might be safer.”

“In...in the manor?”

“They’ll be making copies of the scripture as well, so it might be better if they can ask you questions directly, and I’m sure they would otherwise need to go into town to buy necessities. Staying in the manor will solve a lot of their problems. That would mean they would come across the knight Rhodes, but it isn’t like Rhodes is the one who spotted the person from the Holy See, right? Archivist Canaan would surely not think that way.”

She had a good grasp on the reality of the situation.

“And if need be,” she continued, “we can explain our plan. I’m sure Rhodes will understand. I don’t think he was all that stubborn. He would no doubt understand our cause.”

Though Rhodes was somewhat stubborn, Col’s impression of him was not all that different from Hyland’s.

“The problem is the third.” Hyland sighed, giving an exaggerated heave of her shoulders. She grasped her mug of wine, but she did not drink it. “Do you have any ideas of who might be responsible?”

There was no point pretending like he did not.

“The second prince, perhaps,” Col replied.

Heir Klevend was second in line for the throne, raised in case something ever happened to his older brother. The eldest brother was supposed to take over the throne, as according to procedure, and now that the war with the pagans had come to an end, there was almost no chance that Klevend would ever become king. There was no possibility his brother would die in the chaos of war, and there was no opportunity for him to make a name for himself through acts of valor in battle. He would never be the main character in his own life—all that was expected of him was for him to pass on his family name and lands to the next generation. He was a pessimistic man, one who complained about the dark sides of the institution that was nobility.

Rumor had it that he had still not given up on his ambitions for the throne and apparently commanded a gaggle of noble boys who also complained about

their lot in life. Some even said he was willing to start a civil war. He had plenty of reasons to attack the Knights of Saint Kruza, who were presently working within the kingdom, hoping to exacerbate the conflict between the kingdom and the Church.

Though very few were as magnanimous as Hyland, it was only toward Heir Klevend that she did not hide her hatred. It was likely related to how desperately she tried to earn the king's loyalty, due to her background, which was decidedly not happy.

"He's the first one I think of, too. The methods are a little too roundabout for me to think it's someone who's carrying out secret orders from the Church. Especially when it comes to the king or the royal court—none of them would have reason to do so."

Hyland finally took a sip of her wine and turned her gaze to the front of the tavern. Myuri danced along with the other patrons and the bards to the rhythm of a harmless dance number, not an ode to passionate knights from an old age.

"I'll suggest to the king he pay close attention to things happening around the Knights of Saint Kruza. If we manage to get definitive proof that someone is trying sow chaos within the kingdom, His Majesty might finally take decisive action. This is a perfect opportunity to root out the evil in this country..."

There was a cool glint to Hyland's eyes, one Col had rarely ever seen. Perhaps it was a conscious decision for her to rest her gaze on the plate of lamb, which was now only bone.

She suddenly noticed Col looking at her and lifted her head.

"I think I'm drunk."

She could not remain calm when all the hostility she felt toward Heir Klevend came to the surface.

Col had nothing to say; he only dropped his eyes and dipped his head.

"Why don't we join the dancing to sober up a bit?" Hyland suggested, and stood.

The guard, who had been quietly beside them this entire time, spoke up in a

fluster.

“Young madam, you cannot!”

And it was as though she had been waiting for him to say that.

“Hollande, I thought I told you not to call me that. As punishment, you’ll have to dance with us.”

It seemed the guard was one who had served Hyland’s family for a long time, just like an old house steward. In contrast to the straight-faced Hollande, Hyland wore a mischievous expression much like Myuri’s and patted his shoulder. The man was always calm and collected, the very picture of a knight who always helped Myuri with her swordplay for as long as she asked, except now he was pouting like a child.

“Come on, stand up. We’re going.”

Col watched how she tugged on his arm, bringing him slowly to his feet, and he could not help but smile. Perhaps there were more young ladies out there who had people like him by their sides, who went through all the same troubles as he did.

But he could not allow him to do this alone.

“I’ll be joining you,” he offered.

With Hyland, who was both surprised and delighted, and Hollande, who simply resigned himself to going along, Col joined the circle of dancing at the front of the tavern. The whirling and twirling itself was fun, but he was rather nonplussed by how the moment Myuri spotted him among the dancers, she leaped at him with a wide grin across her face. Not only was she full of energy, but this was after she had been dancing for a while—she was drenched in sweat, like a puppy caught out in the rain.

The strumming of the instruments echoed loudly, the stray hounds howled in the infectious excitement, the people danced and stomped their feet, and it numbed Col’s mind to the very core. *Forgive me for finding amusement in wicked pastimes*, he prayed, but he could not even see the moon from the narrow streets of the city.

But he had an excuse—when he saw the way Myuri smiled and the way delight colored Hyland’s face, he told himself he would have not even noticed the full moon.

CHAPTER THREE



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When Col awoke, his body refused to move.

Last night, he had ultimately joined in on the partying until the city guards came to ask them to wrap it up; he and Hyland's guard had somehow managed to bring home two girls, unable to walk straight due to the alcohol and exhaustion and excessive laughing.

One of those girls was Myuri, of course, and the other was Hyland.

Both men lent a shoulder to their companions on the way back to the manor, and when they said good night before heading to their respective bedrooms, he and Hollande the guard exchanged glances. The look in his eyes was much more eloquent than anything he could have said.

He had essentially wished both of them the best of luck.

"I need...water...My back hurts..."

Rarely did Col ever participate in dancing, so he ached all over. He realized he had been sleeping at a terrible diagonal slant over the bed, likely due to how he was writhing in pain in his sleep. His odd sleeping position had put even more burden on his already-hurting body, which made getting up even more difficult.

No—there was another reason for his terrible sleep, and he had this realization because the hairs from Myuri's tail were clinging to every part of his clothing. He was near certain he had put her to sleep in her own bed the night before. She must have crawled under his covers without his permission.

"Good grief..."

The rowdy girl in question was nowhere to be seen. He pressed a hand to his throbbing head—owed likely to sleeping without a pillow. A cursory examination of the room revealed that Myuri's sword was gone. She was either out happily swinging around her sword in the courtyard bright and early this morning, or she had gone to see Le Roi again.

Either way, Col needed water. The more squalid establishments in the city seasoned their food with an excess of salt and garlic, either to hide the poor quality of the ingredients or to simply encourage patrons to order more drink.

But the water jug was empty, and he pictured Myuri getting up in the middle of the night to drain it in a single gulp. With a sigh, he grabbed the pitcher and stood to bring it to the well, but he noticed something odd on the desk.

“...A book?”

It was poorly made, the pages worn and of varying sizes, the thinning binding cord just barely holding it all together, but it was, indeed, a book.

“A Knight’s...Tail.”

The title was clearly misspelled. The cover did not only feature a title, but also traces of writing practice and a doodle of a knight’s profile. It was not Myuri’s writing, so perhaps it had been written as it passed through many hands. Col flipped it open and was greeted with the moldy smell particular to poorly made paper.

But the inside pages were written rather neatly, and as he read, it eventually clicked this was the story of the scandalous knight captain from the era of the ancient empire, the very same one he had heard at the tavern the night previous. In the song, it sounded like the story of a rather frivolous and wild knight, but the book was filled with tales of surprising hardship, and he was soon engrossed in reading.

What snapped him back to reality was the sound of footsteps on the other side of the door, ones that reminded him of the day previous.

“Ugh, I’m exhausted!”

Myuri flung open the door, returning to the room.

“Oh, Brother! You’re finally up.”

She was the one typically scolded for getting up late, so she seemed particularly pleased by the reversal.

“You have some hair sticking up,” she pointed out.

She unhooked her sword from her belt and leaned it against the wall before

letting her ears and tail out, flicking them this way and that to work out the last dregs of stress from sword practice.

“What is this?” Col asked.

A book’s dignity was dictated by its size. The scripture’s large, arm-sized binding spoke to the authority of its contents. In contrast, tales of ancient knights were delegated to flimsy paper and kept small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand.

He held up the book, and Myuri shrugged.

“You borrowed it from the bards last night. Don’t you remember?”

“.....”

He was fairly certain that he had been the one taking care of Myuri and Hyland last night, but...on second thought, perhaps they were not the only ones who could not walk straight. Though he did not have much recollection of drinking too much, he had a feeling he had gotten swept up in the energy and imbibed quite a bit.

And that meant this headache did not come from Myuri’s clinging forcing him into a weird sleeping position, but from the alcohol.

“You were super drunk, too, Brother. You reeked of ale.”

Of course, she would not apologize for joining him in his bed.

And he knew that any inept protest on his part would only fall flat, so he returned to the topic at hand.

“But...why would I borrow this?”

“To copy it. Because they apparently don’t sing about the whole story. We should do what research we can to attract people to the monastery, right?”

A monastery was a place of contemplation and prayer, not a place for recreation or amusement. But despite the thought, it did not seem he could write it off as a silly idea after seeing the excitement of the tavern patrons last night.

“I suppose finding a way to help with the funding would ease Heir Hyland’s

financial burden...”

“Right? And the monastery honestly has such an incredible history, so if it ever did become a popular place to visit, Miss Eve might end up giving us a little more money. She does love a good scheme to make money.”

Eve had indeed offered funds in exchange for the right to hold a market outside the monastery, under the assumption that business would thrive. If the monastery started attracting crowds, she would almost certainly start licking her chops and calculating her profits. But as he listened to Myuri, he had a feeling she seemed much too adept in the ways of the world, even if she was originally a sharp girl.

“Mister Le Roi put that into your head, didn’t he?”

Myuri pretended not to hear him, but regardless of where the idea came from, it wasn’t a bad one.

The possibility of Hyland pushing herself too far to accommodate them with the funds was most certainly not Myuri’s wild imagination.

“Also, we have to give back the book tonight, so we have to copy it really quickly. You’re going to help me, right?”

Even a book like this would not be easy to write, so buying it would cost them a pretty penny. Copying it, on the other hand, would only cost them paper and a coin or two as a thank-you.

Col flipped through the booklet, quickly estimating the word count, and saw that the two of them could indeed manage by themselves. He also spotted strange symbols and emphasized intonation markers—he realized these notes must have been important tools for the bards’ trade.

“I see. The bards use this as a reference for their music.”

“Yeah. You were sloshed last night, Brother. That’s why I had the bards tell me more of those stories until you could stand.”

He had a feeling she had said something he could not let pass without comment, but that she did not appear to be teasing him made it seem awfully plausible.

Perhaps his memory of exercising moderation until they went home was a dream he had while Myuri clung to him last night.

“And there are some paper sellers in town who handle these story booklets for bards. What songs are popular changes depending on the city, so when they go to a new place, the bards write down the songs they know on paper and then exchange it for the popular local songs.”

Col had heard valuable copies of books were often exchanged in that manner, too. That was because making a copy of a book was not an easy task, so the completed books went for very high prices. And the practice of making copies instead of being forced to buy a book meant that everyone could keep their favorite stories on hand and made it much more feasible to obtain new books.

That itself was not a particular surprise, but the booklet did pique his interest.

Eve had estimated that the books staunch booksellers like Le Roi dealt in were often worth more than their weight in gold. Not many people could read, and even fewer could write, so the only ones who kept books at home were nobles or affluent merchants.

But there were back-alley markets like this in the world of writing and books.

“Sooo...Broootheer...”

As those thoughts rolled through his mind, Myuri clasped her hands behind her back, sidled up to him, and peered up at him with wide eyes. Most people may consider that little act of hers cute, but in Col’s eyes, it was only a terrible omen.

“I want to go to the papermaker.”

He sighed when she said what he was expecting.

But even in his hungover state, he knew that telling her to go on her own was meaningless.

“I heard they have all kinds of stories there.”

What she was implying was that she either wanted to buy them or borrow them to make a copy.

And that meant Col would have to open his coin purse.

“Ooh, and we might even find clues on our legendary artisan.”

Though it sounded like a contrived excuse, what was certain was that the papermaker would be dealing in stories that were beyond Le Roi’s grasp. They had reached a total dead end in their search for the legendary artisan’s whereabouts, so talking to the papermaker was as good an idea as any.

Col gave a reluctant nod, and Myuri leaped to throw her arms around him in a playful manner. “I love you, Brother!”

What a glib girl she was. He plonked the tin pitcher atop her head, and it rang with a hollow noise.

“Refill the water when you finish it.”

Her wolf ears struggled against the pitcher.

Despite how she just said she loved him, visible discontent colored her face as she snatched the pitcher from him and stuck out her tongue.

Before Myuri rushed them to the papermaker, Col had to remind Hyland about Canaan and Rhodes. It was that thought that led him to her office, where he found the noble pale-faced and glumly signing documents.

After Col confirmed what they had discussed the night before and let her know that he and Myuri were off to the papermaker, Hyland offered them a half-hearted smile that made it seem like she might shatter at any moment. Myuri, surprisingly, did not tease either of them, and once they left the office, Col murmured regretfully to himself, “We may have indulged a little too much last night.”

And so they ventured through the lively streets of Rausbourne with Myuri in the lead. Col was surprised to see there was no hesitation in her step, but he reckoned that was thanks to the strays telling them where to go.

They came to a district on the north side of the city that had a somewhat desolate mood, and there was a peculiar smell in the air. That perhaps originated from the cluster of workshops dedicated to tanning and glue-making. All those jobs were terribly difficult ones, since the workers had to keep fires running for a long time, and that meant not letting one’s attention stray from the flames for a moment.

This was most certainly not a place frequented by booksellers like Le Roi and his ilk, who dealt in valuable, rare books that regularly sold for astronomical prices.

“This smell reminds me of tallow candles.”

The manufacture of tallow candles also came with an especially unique smell, unlike wax candles. So Col often had Myuri make them whenever she got in trouble for pulling pranks at the bathhouse.

“It’s this way, apparently.”

As they followed a gaunt stray’s directions through the artisans’ district, they arrived at a workshop where there sat a mountain of old clothes at the front eaves. It was an open workshop, with no windows or doors, so they could see everything inside.

The crafters were wielding wooden hammers that were as big as themselves—two people per hammer—lifting them, then slamming them into a massive tub. In a corner, children were ripping the old clothes into thin strips; in the center was a large pot big enough to fit an entire bull, with liquid bubbling away inside it.

“Whoa...”

Myuri, the bundle of curiosity that she was, stared at the papermaking process in fascination, but it did not seem like they were actually selling paper here.

“Did you need something?”

Col turned at the voice behind them, and the man who spoke lowered the carrying pole he had on his shoulders. The buckets on each end of the pole were stuffed full of rags—he had perhaps just returned from collecting them.

“Pardon us. We heard we’d be able to obtain booklets for bards here.”

The man regarded the outsiders with suspicion—a common thing in places where obstinate artisans gathered—but Col’s request was enough to soften the animosity in his eyes.

“Then it’s not here you want to be. You’ll want to make a left at the end of

that block. And when you reach the square with the well, you'll find the papermaker's workshop in the corner."

This place processed the rags that would later be used in the papermaking process itself.

"Thank you very much," Col offered. Apparently that was considered a rather pompous demeanor in this part of town, given how the man's shoulders jerked upward as he snorted. Myuri was reluctant to leave, fascinated by what she saw in the workshop, but Col gently pried her from her spot and followed the local's directions.

They found the papermakers immediately, and the building was a familiar combination of storefront and workshop.

"We're all out of paper."

The crafter inside immediately spoke up the moment Col poked his head into the wide-open storefront.

"Even out of the books for bards?" Myuri asked, poking her head out from behind him.

The crafter, clad in a dirtied apron, raised his brows. "You're a little young to be a singer. Or are you a dancer?"

"I could do both, but no."

Tickled by her confident reply, the crafter gave a quiet chuckle before wiping his hands clean and motioning for them to come in. Many of the booklets for bards had content that would garner the attention of the Church, so shops like this were probably careful about who they let browse their wares.

Inside, there were several tanks that looked like holding ponds, and other crafters clad in aprons were dipping square sieves into the water and rocking them back and forth. Several of those same sieves stood leaning up against the wall, and Col spotted a meshwork made of thin wire on the same wall. A wooden box, upon which sat large stones, was likely meant to wring the water out of the freshly formed paper. Col was sure that if he left Myuri here, she would not come home for ten whole days.

He skillfully nudged along the girl as her eyes roamed the workshop, and they entered the adjoining room. Shelves stuffed full of little booklets lined the walls.

“Two kingdom silvers to buy; five coppers to borrow for a night.”

A silver’s worth varied depending on the exact currency, and the kingdom-minted silvers were on the cheap side. But one was still enough to feed a workshop of artisans for a few days. Poorly made paper booklets could not cultivate the soul like the scripture, nor could they fill stomachs, so two kingdom silvers was much too high.

But this price hadn’t been selected to accurately represent its value—it was meant to make the borrowing fee look cheaper.

“What if we swap with a story you don’t have?” Myuri asked.

“Then your pick of book is free, but you’re buying the copying paper from us. But I doubt you know any stories we don’t have.”

The artisan was right to be proud. Col was honestly shocked to see just how many tales for bards there were out there.

“How many can I get, Brother?”

Myuri impatiently turned a feverishly impatient eye to Col; he thought her ears and tail might pop out at any moment.

He knew she would be dissatisfied with whatever answer he gave, so he used his wit to come up with an answer.

“You may borrow one for now, and you can come back when you’re done copying it.”

Col knew she would give up more quickly if she understood the hardship of copying a text by hand awaited her, as opposed to the ease of writing down whatever came to mind. They still had the booklet about the Aloné Order of Knights they were borrowing from the bards, too.

It was hard to tell if she had sniffed out his schemes. “Then I should pick the thickest book,” Myuri said, and leaned toward the shelf.

“Huh. Writing at a young age, eh?” said the impressed artisan as he watched Myuri, after listening to their conversation.

“I practically had to tie her to the desk to teach her,” Col replied.

The artisan burst out laughing and nodded. It seemed he could empathize with that.

“So you must be...some kind of noble’s scribe, is that it?” he asked.

The young merchant’s outfit Col wore the night before stunk of roasted meat and booze-scented sweat from all the dancing and was in no state to be worn out during the day. He wore his typical, plain, priestlike garb and added a brightly colored sash to make himself seem less like a member of the clergy.

This must have made him seem like one who spent most of their time around books, and since he was in search of bard’s booklets, it stood to reason his primary job was recording territorial income or writing letters on behalf of a noble.

“Something like that, yes.”

Perhaps that he no longer hesitated when he glossed over facts like this was, in a way, growth.

But the artisan’s assumption was a welcome one, considering the question he wanted to ask.

“Every day I wish I had extra sets of hands,” he said, priming the artisan with another laugh. “You know, I happened to hear of a printing device that could record entire sentences on a page in the blink of an eye without having to write with one’s hands. Can you imagine how easy my job would be if something like that truly existed?”

Le Roi had said that the moment printing technology came to fruition, it was deemed heretical, so people were mostly unaware of its existence.

But if the escaped artisan was still using the technology, Col reckoned it could be treated as a rumor somewhere out there. He had brought it up in a roundabout way while clinging to that slimmer of hope, but the papermaker only laughed even louder than before.

“Magic like that could make our workshop filthy rich!”

The carefree laugh on his face made it hard to believe he was hiding anything.

Col glanced at Myuri, who was much more attentive when it came to these things, but she was flipping through a booklet, entirely uninterested in their conversation.

“Still, too many paper sales is bad for business, too. We don’t have enough raw material, but that’s not a good enough excuse to force the entire city to walk around naked,” the artisan said, then turned his attention to Col. “How about it? Why don’t you tell your patron to collect all their residents’ old rags? If you do, I’ll let you copy as many books here as you like.”

That must have been the ulterior motive for allowing Col and Myuri in.

“Ah, you did say you were out of paper, didn’t you?”

“Couple of days ago, some rich-looking fellow came in and bought a whole ream. Cleaned us out.”

Col had a feeling it might have been Canaan. That fellow had been so passionate about the vernacular scripture that it made Col blush; perhaps he was planning on copying the script as a personal project separate from their main plans.

Still, the idea that he might have bought out their entire stock shocked Col. Paper that was made from rags was most often used by companies to record their day-to-day transactions. He had been initially wondering if business was doing so well that a papermaker could actually run out of product, which was why the artisan’s mutterings stood out to him.

“I bet some lord or another is going to force a poet to write some awful song for their vanity again.” He planted his hands on his hips with an irritated sigh. Col was standing in stunned silence, not expecting to hear about the boasting of a noble, when Myuri spoke up.

“Like one like this?” She flapped the pages of the booklet in her hand. “*The Adventures of Sir Dagfolk*.” She read the title aloud.

The artisan’s brows furrowed as he laughed again. “Exactly like that one. What a load of rubbish.”

Col glanced at Myuri, who shrugged in return.

“Alone he protects the fortress, fells a thousand soldiers by his own hand, and returns home, unharmed, under the protection of God. Petals fall from the sky; the people thank him for his reign; the bells of the church sing his praises. O, the magnificent Sir Dagfolk! He is a great knight—an intelligent and merciful leader!”

Myuri recited the text with theatrical inflection, much like the singers from the night before, and the artisan raised his brows, impressed.

And Col understood what that meant.

“That sounds like the stories you write every night.”

Myuri’s lips immediately folded into a pout, and she stomped on his foot.

“There have been a lot of shameless, tedious songs like that nowadays.” The artisan shuffled toward the shelf and pulled out a book. “Of course, the number of enemies that the brave knights and lords face are always in the thousands, ever since the olden days. Their allies are always daring and resolute. None of them ever betray their friends or desert the front lines. God is always on their side, their rule is always fair and impartial, and the wheat always grows longer than a crafter’s beard. All according to God’s will, you see.”

He ran a hand through his beard, and Myuri grinned, amused.

“But a skilled lyricist can make these songs palatable, and even the alcoholic lords know shame. Rarely do they force the bards to sing these stupid songs while they’re still alive. But who cares! Things have been good recently—lords with a little extra pocket change start boasting about their victories in battle, battles that probably never even happened, and I’m not sure if they even led any soldiers to begin with! But then they make incompetent bards recite them all over the place. They start thinking they’re fit to stand shoulder to shoulder with the other tasteful families whose names are on the tongues of bards.”

The artisan’s pent-up frustration was not toward the poor quality of the poetry, but to what he essentially thought was a waste of paper, something he toiled to create.

Col wondered if he would faint if he saw what Myuri was writing down, what she considered to be her ideal knight’s tale.

“They’re made so badly I feel myself going mad. They don’t get scribes to write them down—I bet they get apprentice miniature painters to copy the text. They spread them around, spelling mistakes and all! They’re honestly awful pieces of work.”

These illustrators were craftspeople who drew the miniatures that went in copied books, and many did not know how to read. But writing was, in a way, a form of drawing, so illustrators who could deftly copy the shape of a letter could copy texts. So it was not particularly unusual for a miniature painter who was a quick worker—or who did not have any other work—to take on jobs copying books. That said, it was not as though they were copying the meaning of the words, so they often reproduced misspellings as they were, which propagated them further.

“You can have that nonsense for three coppers a piece,” the artisan said.

Myuri immediately replied, “Two coppers.”

The artisan folded his thick arms over his chest.

“Two for five.”

“Three for seven.”

Col could swear he heard the man grumble.

Myuri certainly has a sharp tongue, Col thought as he flipped through one of the booklets, idly considering how terrible the poetry truly was. He then pulled out the booklet beside it, and shockingly, it had the same contents.

“Why do you have two of the same?”

He was wondering if they were popular, despite the poor quality, when the artisan put his quick-fire negotiations with Myuri on hold to look at Col.

“That one? There must be some real bigheaded noble out there—whoever it is, they’re spreading that stuff all over. Which means all the bards who come to Rausbourne always bring one of those and exchange it for something new.”

“I see.”

It took a lot of work and a considerable amount of money to create anything even resembling a book, and that was just as true for the ones as poor quality

as this.

Whoever commissioned this must have *truly* been eccentric, but there was something nagging Col.

A lot of work and a considerable amount of money...

As he stood there staring at the booklet, Myuri's bright voice echoed through the room.

"Then three for seven and cleaning the workshop!"

"Cleaning, eh? Hmph, can I trust you to do the work properly?"

"You sure can!"

Myuri grinned, and the artisan scratched his head, admitting his defeat. They shook on it, and the deal was sealed.

Col wished she would read commentaries on the scripture instead of meaningless books like these, but perhaps that was expecting a bit too much from her. The actual contents of the books aside, the text was written with surprising clarity and was not a terrible thing to copy from.

He wondered why, occasionally, the same letter would be scratched in places; perhaps it was the writer's tick?

"So, Boss, what do you recommend?"

"Calling me Boss already, kiddo? You sure are a sharp one."

"Hee-hee."

Myuri, clearly having fun, moved toward the shelf with the artisan to pick out a book, while Col stood in place, dumbstruck. Impatient, she started physically moving him.

"Ugh, get out of the way, Brother."

She shoved him aside, and he did not even stumble.

His concentration was wholly on the booklets in his hand.

"Brother?"

He ignored Myuri's question and turned to the artisan.

“I’ll take this book.”

“Hmm?” The artisan looked up in surprise.

Myuri’s brows shot up. “Hey! You’re not making the decisions here!”

“And I’ll take this one as the second.”

“Heeey!”

Myuri smacked his arms and shoulders, but he ignored her and counted out seven coppers for the artisan.

“Hmm...You sure? You’ll be borrowing two of the same thing,” said the stalwart, bearded artisan as he took the coins. Or perhaps he was paying close mind to Myuri, who was acting like a beached octopus beside him.

“I don’t mind at all. What I want to know is...”

Though Myuri had accumulated a bit of pocket change over the course of their travels, she seemed conflicted as to whether she should get out her own wallet; Col quickly patted her twice on the shoulder.

“...if you might know of the noble sung of in these songs.”

Both Myuri and the artisan stared at him.

At last, Myuri noticed his hands shaking.

The papermaker watched with a puzzled look on his face as they left the workshop, and it was Col who now walked with longer steps than Myuri.

“Mister Le Roi should be at Miss Eve’s, yes?” he asked, not bothering to turn around to look at Myuri.

Myuri, who had been walking ahead of Col more often as of late, jogged to catch up with him.

“He said it’s been a while since he’s come to Winfiel, so he’ll be spending most of his time at the library. Why? What are you—?”

“Then you go to the library and look into the noble in this poem with Mister Le Roi.”

He handed one of the three books they borrowed to Myuri, and she chewed

on her words.

“Oh, uh, okay. But, Brother? Can I—?”

“I will speak with Miss Eve. It might be best if I speak with Heir Hyland, but...”

The reason he hesitated was because he was not quite sure of his conclusion yet. There was a chance that ever since she heard about Canaan’s project, she had been planning on forging ahead with it, even if it meant harming herself. Which meant, in a way, that giving her unnecessary hope was akin to a sin. Col would have to look into what he could on his own, find his confirmation, *then* tell her.

“Come *on*, Brother!” Myuri grabbed his hand, and he turned to look at her. The expression she wore was the one she had when she was being scolded for going too far in her mischief and when the shed of the door was about to be closed on her. “What is this about all of a sudden?! Could this be a—?”

“We have a lead.”

The papermakers’ workshop was filled with poor-quality books brought in by bards. The paper was cheap, made from rags—they were nothing like the thick copies of the scripture with paper made of parchment and covers made from hardened leather. Even so, making books was not cheap.

And yet among these, the artisan said that this awful poetry was being distributed to towns all over. At first, Col thought it was simply the work of an eccentric noble, and considering how neat the writing was, he did not think much further than perhaps asking this scribe for help when he and his allies were deep in hand-copying the scripture.

But one simple fact changed his entire perspective.

One portion of the letters in this book were scratched the exact same way each time.

“What? You mean that?”

As Col explained his reasoning to her as he walked quickly, Myuri responded dubiously.

“I know you remember,” he continued. “Do you remember how the

technology Archivist Canaan told us about works?”

“It, um...Oh!”

“Exactly. It uses carved stamps of letters.”

When he said that, Myuri hurriedly opened the book he had handed to her and flipped through the pages.

“It is not all the letters, but there are cases over several pages where the same letter is scratched in the same way. I believe that is due to them preparing several stamps of the same letter in their mold.”

“.....”

“When you pay close attention with that in mind, you will see that several of these letters are peculiar. And those peculiarities continue across many pages. Well, a very, *very* skilled illustrator could theoretically replicate that, if it was their work.”

“.....”

She at last frowned and narrowed her eyes—Myuri was not as familiar with the script as he was, so perhaps the differences were not as clear to her.

“I guess I can see it, now that you mention it...”

“The writing is also much too legible. Text this neat over multiple volumes that have been distributed across various towns? I doubt this is the work of one lone apprentice scribe.”

Myuri understood his point about the writing being too neat. She nodded in reluctant agreement.

“I could be reading too deeply into this, of course,” Col admitted. “But don’t you see what I mean?”

As they came to the end of the artisans’ district, the road split in three directions.

They stood at the fork, and Col turned to Myuri and said, “This world of awful poetry is where stories that Mister Le Roi and the other booksellers never bothered paying attention to thrive.”

The way her reddish eyes turned to him made it seem as though she was sulking.

“If this mystery artisan really does exist, then it would be the perfect place for them to hide, no?”

She pursed her lips, as though questioning if such a convenient development was even possible, after looking back and forth between his earnest expression and the booklet in her hands.

Her brother was not very sharp when it came to most things, but when it came to books, he knew a thing or two.

“The noble who commissioned this poem may know something. It’s worth looking into, at the very least.”

Myuri no longer protested and nodded, albeit begrudgingly.

“I hope you know you’re going to have to help me copy my books as payment for me helping you. And they’re going to be awful poems!”

“I don’t mind. I will see you later in front of the cathedral.”

Not waiting for him to finish, she raced down the leftmost fork in the road.

Once her silver hair vanished from view, Col turned to the right and rushed off.

After running breathlessly across Rausbourne, Col returned to the grand stone steps of the cathedral entrance, where he found Myuri sitting, munching on mutton skewers, sulking.

“Nothing,” she said, her expression clouded; a dark contrast to the liveliness of the cathedral square.

“That goes for me as well,” Col replied.

He had run all the way to where Eve was staying. The dubious former kingdom noble and well-traveled merchant took one look at the book, shrugged, then handed it off to her guards, Az among them.

The response he received was that none of them had ever heard of the noble’s name, and the war mentioned in it was likely made-up, which meant

the victorious verse in the booklet was a work of pure fiction.

“But Mister Le Roi went pale when he saw it.”

“He did?”

“He said he hadn’t even considered that the artisan might be hiding in that side of the book world.”

The printing technique they were looking for was incredibly valuable—significant enough for the Church to stamp it out in fear. There could very well be meaning in why the person they were looking for decided to use it for something so trivial, but Col wanted to take it one step further.

“Did he go pale because he noticed the unique characteristics of the writing?”

Le Roi was a crafty merchant, but he was dealing with a silver wolf whose specialty was sniffing out her prey’s tracks even if they were hidden beneath a blanket of dried leaves. She may not have noticed the subtle differences in the letters, but she could easily discern how another’s complexion shifted in a conversation.

“Mister Le Roi was supposed to be the artisan’s enemy, but you didn’t tell me not to show him the book, which might be a clue to the artisan’s location. I thought that was a little strange.” She turned to look at him, her red eyes boring straight through him. “But you can be bad sometimes, can’t you?”

There was a hint of delight in the way she grinned at him.

“My assessment could very well be wrong. I wanted Mister Le Roi’s thoughts as well.”

Col was not lying, but it was not the entire truth, either. Le Roi had to have been thinking about the great damage to his business if the artisan was found in a place he did not think to look. Which meant that if he knew of the booklet, he would frantically investigate its origin.

When Myuri’s lips parted in a grin, Col could see her sharp fangs peeking out.

“I have the strays and the birds that work with Chicken keeping an eye on him, so we’ll know immediately if he tries to go somewhere.”

Even if they and Le Roi had differing opinions on the mystery artisan, that did

not change the reality that they had a powerful ally for their search.

And the silver wolf, who understood everything before Col could even give any instructions, stretched her head toward him, as though asking for her reward. Of course, he obliged, patting her on the head.

“Also, it seems like the story really is just total nonsense.”

“Miss Eve and the others reached the same conclusion.”

Col’s thought was that if they could find out who the noble was in the poem, they could interview them directly and trace the artisan’s steps. But things did not always go according to plan.

It was this booklet that brought to reality the notion that the artisan could exist, but whether the booklet could lead them on the artisan’s trail remained a mystery.

“I wonder if they made up a noble because they know people are searching for them.”

“That would be the simplest explanation, yes.”

But on the way back from Eve’s manor, Col had realized that line of thought did not quite add up.

“Think about what the papermaker said. If this is not the result of eccentricity from a bigheaded noble, then no one would pay the money for a poorly made book.”

Had Myuri’s wolf ears been out, they surely would have piqued at that.

“No matter how easy it is to print the text, paper doesn’t suddenly become free.”

“...Which means if some noble is helping make the books, it would be weird if they printed something where it was impossible to tell who the story was about?”

“Precisely.”

Myuri looked at the booklet in her hands and tilted her head. “Then what is this?”

Col wondered briefly if there was some sort of political intent behind the book, but that did not seem to be the case. The book's contents were bland—a poem of feats of arms written in an overly stiff style, with empty words of praise and a thick layer of arrogant pride on top. It was a tactless article.

If that style was deliberate, then skilled court bards did come to mind as potential candidates, but that seemed unlikely.

“Before I came here, I went back to the papermaker to ask if they knew where the book came from.” Myuri spoke up.

Unfortunately, it would be nearly impossible to know where a wandering bard had been.

“Or maybe it's a code.”

“A code?”

She flipped through the book, turned it upside down, and tried to read out the first letter of every line.

“Bad people were chasing the artisan, right? What if they're trying to bring their scattered friends back together, so they put a code in the book before spreading it around? Then maybe, when all the other artisans get their hands on it, they figure out what it means and head for the destination!”

Col had a feeling that very thing had been in a story about a person searching for their long-lost friends after a war.

And pieces of paper were nothing special, yet still circulated widely over the world. The idea that there might be something special about a piece of paper *because* it appeared to be nothing special was not a terrible one.

“Or maybe they're selling them with the lie that there *is* a code in it.”

Col was taken aback by her suggestion. What a bright girl.

When he was about Myuri's age, he had been deceived by that very idea.

“That brings back terrible memories. I was tricked once when a swindler duped me into buying a whole sheaf of papers with a very similar selling tactic.”

It had happened when he was a child. He had been a wandering student, and

when he was in need of money, he fell victim to that scam.

The scammer told him he had his arm cut off because he learned of a great secret. And he also claimed that the bundle of papers he was selling came from the errand boys of a particular company who escaped when they could no longer bear the hazing. That's where he supposedly got copies of the company's contracts and notes on their tax collections. At that age, Col thought those pages looked like they contained all the world's secrets.

"You were sitting there, upset with those papers, when you met my parents, right?"

"Precisely. And in that sense, it was a very small price to pay."

When Col said that, Myuri hugged her knees to her chest and smiled.

It was a long time ago now, but in that moment, Col had sat much like Myuri was in the present—on the ground, flipping through each page, desperately scanning every word. There he was, in a distant town far from home with no one to rely on, holding a stack of papers that had cost every last coin he had to his name. How he prayed for them to be the genuine article, turning his head toward the sky so his tears did not fall and lifting the papers to the heavens as well. It was a bittersweet memory.

Of course, there were no secrets in the documents. All he found was a peculiar little symbol on the paper when he held it up to the sun.

Or perhaps those were his tearstains.

That moment remained clear in his mind—a smile crossed his face as he thought about how much he had grown in the meanwhile. Then he froze.

"Hmm? Brother?"

He turned to Myuri, but he had no words. What was this feeling in his chest?

He felt like there was something among his replay of his memories that he could not dismiss.

Was it his life as a wandering student? No—was it the swindler? Or his memory of sitting at the tax collection office at the riverside, bundle of papers in hand?

No, no, no. One by one he discarded the memories, until he came to his destination.

It was how he held the paper to the sky.

“Yes! That’s it!”

He tore open the booklet in his hands, held it up to the sky, and let the sunlight filter through.

Surprised by the sudden movement, the nearby birds pecking at the ground leaped into the sky and flew away.

But Col’s gaze remained fixed on the paper. Because the very thing he had seen all those years ago now returned the stare.

“It may indeed be a code.”

Myuri, who sat on the stairs, cheek resting on her palm like a gloomy girl annoyed by her brother’s weird act, opened her eyes wide.

“But, ah, since they add this when they make the paper, that means...”

Back when he worked at the Nyohhira bathhouse, he had to procure all the things he needed for his studies himself, due to how remote the village was. Countless times he would create his own copybooks by organizing all the things he heard from the visiting nobles, copying manuscripts he borrowed by hand and then organizing them into book format. So while he was generally knowledgeable when it came to writing and bookmaking, he had only vague knowledge of the craftsmanship that went into the processes that enabled those things to happen.

But he had never once forgotten the strange pattern he saw on the paper the moment he had lifted his head to hold back the tears. He had even looked up what that pattern meant after he grew up.

“.....”

The next thing he knew, Myuri stood next to him, her cheeks puffed in displeasure.

“We may be able to figure out where this booklet came from,” he said.

She looked back and forth between the book in her hands and the book in Col's, then gave an almost exaggerated shrug.

“Okay?”

A woman staring at her excited traveling companion with cold, exasperated eyes.

Col had a feeling he had seen this very sight a long time ago.

The way Myuri stood with her head tipped slightly to the side, hands at her hips, reminded him very much of the flaxen-haired wisewolf.

“Paper always leaves a trail. There will always be a code.”

It was thanks to being duped by a scammer that he met Myuri's parents. And it was because of that very same incident that shed new light on their conundrum.

Perhaps the one who sold him the sheaf of papers all those years ago had indeed been a one-armed angel.

“That's why we need to...Ah, this code is...Yes, yes, I know. We need to follow this trail, so...”

His mind raced in his excitement, and out of habit he grabbed Myuri's hand.

“We must see Miss Sharon.”

The frown deepened on Myuri's face, either because she was not too pleased with the idea of holding hands in public, or perhaps because she was not too thrilled with seeing Sharon and the dog-chicken back and forth that came with their meetings.

But she did not pull her hand away; before he realized it, he noticed her walking lightly beside him.

“A code? You said it was a code, right?”

The red eyes she inherited from her mother still had a childlike gleam to them.

“It isn't a treasure map,” Col said, foreseeing the trouble if she acquired unrealistic expectations, but Myuri already seemed to have stopped listening.

She drew her shoulders up in tickled excitement, quickened her pace, and began to drag Col along.

“C’mon, Brother! Time to wring that chicken’s neck!”

What an awful thing to say, he thought, yet he could not help but smile back.

God always gave them trials.

And he always made sure they were possible to overcome—Col was sure of it.

Though Col was excited and ran at first, along the way to Sharon’s house he realized that he still had not entirely sobered up from the night before. It was not long before he was struggling to catch his breath, and even though the energetic Myuri often made fun of him for this, she was currently occupied—as she hurriedly proceeded down the streets, she stared hard at the book in her hands, turning it this way, that way, and flipping it upside down.

She was, at first, naively excited after hearing there was a secret code hidden in the paper, but she grew more and more irritated knowing that her feeble brother, who could barely run, had noticed the secret before her, the wolf.

“It’s not that I’m particularly smart.” Col spoke up. “It’s simply a matter of knowledge. If you look—”

“Don’t tell me!” Myuri shouted, frustrated and growing ever more stubborn in her search for the clue. While he let her do as she pleased, he took each booklet from her, one by one, to test his theory.

And it seemed as though all the paper in each booklet had been made at the same workshop. Myuri must have asked the papermakers where the booklets came from. Their answer apparently did not lead anywhere, but that was because she had asked the wrong question.

Had she asked *which workshop* the paper had come from, the papermaker would have doubtlessly taught them how to find what they were looking for, even if he himself did not know the answer.

“Master Col?”

As they proceeded down the complicated maze of houses, they ran into Clark, who sat in front of the orphanage with several small children, working; he had

called out to them after noticing their approach.

“I’m sorry, I know you’re busy right now,” Col replied.

“It’s all right.”

Clark was in the middle of doing the laundry with the kids. They had filled the washtub with water and mixed ash in with it. Clark was swishing the clothes around with his hands, and the children were using their feet to stomp on them. The children, however, seemed to be treating this more like a chance to play in the water, and were having a delightful time splashing one another and drawing on one another’s faces with the ash.

Clark had a swirl drawn on his left cheek.

“Is everything okay? Is there a problem with the monastery?” he asked.

As he hurriedly stood, wiping his hands, the children leaped on him, and he scolded them in turn.

“I would call this good news...I think,” Col replied. “But I need Miss Sharon’s help.”

Clark seemed unsure if they brought good tidings, but he ultimately nodded.

“Sharon’s inside,” he said.

He pulled open the door, the one with the peephole through which Sharon typically greeted them, and invited Col and Myuri inside. Though the children seemed somewhat curious about them, they were much more interested in playing in the washtub. They quickly forgot the visitors and went back to squealing and playing.

“We’ve managed to get our hands on a lot of ash by cleaning up the monastery,” Clark said as they entered the building. He likely meant that they had burned all the grass and shrubbery they cleared from the plot of land, securing them a big supply of ash for laundry.

“But what is that?” he asked, a curious gaze fixed on the small stack of booklets in Myuri’s hands.

When the clothes being washed in that tub grew too ragged to wear, and too thin to use as cleaning rags, they would eventually be reborn as books.

“The legendary artisan might’ve made these books, so they should help us find them,” Myuri replied.

“What?!”

“I mean, I’m not sure how.” Myuri directed a sharp look at Col. “But my brother says we can.”

“I believe it’s possible. So long as we have Miss Sharon’s help,” he added.

“Sharon?”

Sharon was apparently keeping her true nature as eagle spirit from Clark.

But they had not come seeking the aid of the eagle avatar, who ruled the skies above Rausbourne—no, this time they needed to speak with the Sharon whose two feet were firmly planted on the streets of Rausbourne and wielded great influence in human society.

“Sharon,” Clark called.

As they passed through the building and emerged into the inner courtyard, they came across freshly washed clothes hanging and drying on a long rope. There were so many—the new abundance of ash might have led them to taking in the washing from the entire neighborhood.

Sharon sat beside the children who were hanging up the clothes, working on mending with a needle and thread.

“Are you just going to stand there and stare?” she said.

“Master Col says he needs your help, Sharon.”

Upon hearing this, Sharon must have also assumed they wanted her help as an eagle spirit. She frowned, quietly reprimanding them for starting this conversation with Clark present, but Col took one of the books Myuri had on her and handed it to Sharon.

“We’ve found a lead that might help us solve several problems, including where to get the funds for restoring the monastery.”

“The legendary artisan made that book. And I found it!”

Myuri’s excited tone only invited Sharon’s frown to deepen.

“...And?” she said.

“We need to find out where this booklet was made,” Col explained.

Sharon turned it over in her hands, looking at the front and back, then shrugged. “Hmm...I see. And that’s why you came to me. You sure like to give me work, huh.”

Myuri’s eyes went wide, seeing that the conversation was proceeding without Sharon asking for an explanation.

“Wait, you can tell, Chicken?!”

After being called “Chicken,” Sharon pulled herself up fully and thwacked Myuri across the head with the booklet.

“It’s not easy chasing after tradesmen and merchants who don’t pay their taxes, but they’re not impossible to find. We have our ways.”

Sharon once worked in an industry at the Rausbourne ports that garnered terrible hatred from a small subset of people. She had been the vice president of the guild that brought together all the tax collectors.

“I’ve chased merchants who hand in sloppy documentation from all over to the ends of the earth to make them pay their taxes.”

The cold-blooded smile suited her, but in her opposite hand, the one that did not hold the booklet, she held needle and fabric, mid-mend, and very young children clung to her legs, looking up at her wide-eyed as they listened.

Sharon herself was a little too idyllic to be called a heartless tax collector.

“But we’d need more people. I bet these kids could be useful.”

Sharon called to one of the eldest children. A smart-looking girl took the message and rushed into the house.

“But you didn’t go to Hyland or that Eve woman. You came to me. Seems like you know a little bit more about how the world works than you let on,” she said.

Col shrugged. “It comes from an experience I had traveling as a child. I was duped terribly by someone selling copies of leaked company ledgers and fake

permits.”

“Well, well.”

“But it was because of that experience that I met her parents and found the help I needed,” he said, placing his hand on Myuri’s head. “And now it’s helped us find an important lead.”

Myuri had been sulking, not getting a chance to join in on the conversation, and she swatted his hand away.

“All of our experiences help us grow, but it’s on us to embrace that growth and learn from it. You’re wasted on this dog, Big Brother.”

Myuri, who was busying herself by running her fingers through her hair, hissed at Sharon when she said that before looking away in a huff. In the meanwhile, the older child who had rushed into the house returned with a handful of children around her age.

“Ready? We’re going to the tax collector’s association office.”

““““Okay!””””

As the children gave an enthusiastic reply, Myuri stood beside them, the only one looking cross.

They found that eight or nine out of every ten books at the papermakers’ had been printed using a technique that should have been stamped out ages ago. But no one knew any of the nobles referred to in the interiors, and no one seemed to know where any of these books had come from.

Myuri seemed to believe that they might be able to sniff out a clue from the scribbles in the margins, but the truth was that paper made from rags had special properties that parchment did not have. And Sharon, too, seemed to know this.

Clark remained at the orphanage to watch over the children and continue with the laundry, while Col and Myuri joined the strange entourage of children with Sharon in the lead. Together, they made their way to a large, magnificent building near Rausbourne’s lively harbor. That was the tax collector’s association building, and though she was technically no longer a member, when

the former vice president showed up, the tax collectors welcomed her with open arms. When she asked to browse through the tax documents the building had kept, they happily lent their assistance.

And when she announced that what she needed was not what was written *on* the paper, but the paper itself, they immediately knew what she was trying to do. They brought out countless random bundles of paper from the cellar archives and stacked them in a sunny room with a view.

Once everything was ready, Sharon announced:

“It’s treasure-hunting time!”

There was a theatrical nature to her voice, either because the children were with her or because she used to act like this at work. But once it rang out, everyone rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

Both the children and the current tax collectors began to take the paper and hold it up to the light.

It was like everyone was hoping to spot the handprint of an angel.

“Rrrgh...How was anyone supposed to figure this out?!”

Myuri groaned, frustrated. She held in her hands the record of a company based in a distant land, requesting permission to bring a great amount of cider into Rausbourne. There was no secret code on it to suggest there was any trace of smuggling, of course—but paper like this always had traces.

Rags were torn by hand, hammered, and boiled in an oven; once it became sufficiently goopy, the pulp was spread thin in cold water and eventually became paper. A wire net stretched over a sieve was part of the last step of the process, and the weave of that mesh imparted a characteristic pattern.

The texture of the mesh, made of thin metallic wires, was different depending on the workshop. That meant, upon very close inspection, finished paper all possessed different and unique patterns, depending on the mesh used.

If they managed to find a match among the tax collectors’ archives, they could ask the company where they purchased that paper. And once they knew where the paper was made, they could find where the artisan might be, since they

would have purchased a great volume of paper to print those booklets.

There were enough printings of these booklets for there to be copies in every city, so the papermakers would almost certainly remember who their client was.

And there was no better place for them to begin their search than a tax collectors' association, where paper from far and wide came together.

"That said, there are as many workshops as there are cities. This will not be easy."

Many patterns were similar.

But honest work always led to a proper answer.

"And if we find it, you owe me a plate of fatty mutton," Myuri said before diligently holding one page after another up to the light. The tax collectors seemed used to this job, since it was a standard part of chasing down scoundrels who refused to pay their taxes, so they flipped through the pages with amazing speed.

And while Col was glad he knew enough to come up with this idea, his understanding was purely academic—he had never done this before. He found it nearly impossible to detect the subtle differences, and he found himself constantly looking back and forth between the tax documents and the booklet pages, which had been unbound from their twine and distributed to everyone. Myuri, on the other hand, was very good at this, so she made great progress while keeping her sorely lacking brother in the corner of her eye.

As he began to wonder if he should just help ferry documents in and out of the cellar instead of awkwardly fumbling around, it happened.

"I found it!"

The delighted cry came from a girl a few years younger than Myuri.

"Here!"

She handed Sharon the paper, who held it and a page from the booklet up to the light, then patted the girl's head with a gentle smile.

"This is it," Sharon said to Col before scanning the contents.

“Can you tell what city workshop it’s from?” Col asked.

Commonplace documents all generally used local paper.

“Wool trade history of the Vide Company, huh,” Sharon said. “They operate widely in the kingdom’s eastern midlands. Their headquarters are in a town called Salenton...but this won’t be easy if they’re using this paper throughout their entire trade network.”

“They have a branch here in the harbor,” one of the tax collectors said. “I’ll send someone right away.”

“Just tell them we want to know where they got their paper.”

“And we’ll find their smuggled goods while we’re at it.”

After their conversation, several men left the room.

In the meanwhile, after they had found the first match, another and then another began to pile on the table—they had begun to selectively look for documents from similar regions. When Sharon saw the small stack, she seemed relieved.

“They’re all from the same place. We’ll find this workshop in no time. We can stop now.”

She had likely pictured this taking all day and night, or perhaps an entire week if their luck was bad, but they had found what they were looking for more or less instantly.

When Col and Myuri first came to the city, they had sensed a very delicate situation between the tax collectors like Sharon and the merchants who dealt in long-distance trade, and it soon became very clear why the merchants hated the tax collectors so much. Sharon and the tax collectors were very skilled hunters.

“Ugh...I haven’t done *anything*!” Myuri complained.

Col, who was rebinding the scattered pages of the bard’s booklet, patted her on the back.

“You were the one who led me to this booklet,” he said. “You are the divine—no, the *lupine* of luck.”

“.....”

For a moment, Myuri seemed displeased, but she threw her arms around him for a brief second before moving to help put away the documents.

Afterward, it sounded like there had been a bit of trouble at the Vide Company when the tax collectors went to pay them a visit, but they did manage to find out where the paper came from. Apparently, the paper originated from a workshop in Salenton, where the Vide Company's headquarters were located.

Salenton served as one of the stockyards for wool coming from the eastern midlands, and they were told reaching the town would take about two days by horse. Myuri enthusiastically proclaimed she could get there in half a day, but sending her alone would accomplish nothing.

Col and Myuri thanked Sharon for her help, then gave earnest thanks to the girl who found the first matching sheet of paper. They decided for the time being to return to Hyland's manor. There they asked one of the maids, who was cleaning the beautiful candleholders that lined the peristyle, and she told them that Hyland was in her office with a guest.

Interrupting her may have been bad manners, but Col wanted things to get moving as soon as possible. There Hollande stood guard outside the office, a look of slight surprise on his face, alongside the stalwart guard they had first seen several days ago. Col greeted both, told them he had urgent business, and pushed open the door.

Inside, he found Hyland, sitting before a bundle of parchment, and Canaan, who had apparently been in the middle of speaking. Even Rhodes was present. To them, Myuri announced: “We're hot on our prey's tail!”

And it went without saying that all three of them stared at her in shock.

Just as Col managed to calm Myuri, who was ready to rave about their findings, Canaan seemed to sense what was going on and immediately explained Rhodes's presence.

“I knew right away that we simply must add Sir Rhodes to our forces,” he said.

Evidently, Canaan had decided to reveal himself to Rhodes and share their goals.

Rhodes made his intention clear by immediately rising from his chair and falling to one knee. “I will risk all I have to assist you in your project, Master Col!”

He had knelt before Col could stop him and was now offering incredibly dramatic vows.

The captain of the Knights of Saint Kruza had once called Rhodes the most knightly of knights in their order, and though he had said those words with a wry smile at the time, it seemed he was right.

“It is clear that we can place our trust in the members of the Knights of Saint Kruza. Especially in Sir Rhodes.”

“Excising the putrescence from the Church is our mission!”

Even when he had been lying face-first in the mud on an empty stomach, the boy would still find the strength to stand up straight and offer proper greetings. And his energy when he was healthy was almost more overbearing than Myuri’s.

“I’m glad to have you, Rhodes. You’ll be a huge help,” Col said.

“It is an honor!”

He bowed, as though speaking to his lord; Col eventually managed to get him on his feet, but the boy instead offered him an almost painful handshake. But it was only when he shook hands with Myuri that he seemed bashful.

“And what sort of miracle have you performed now?” Hyland said. There was little doubt the group had been speaking about what to do if they were unable to find the artisan who understood this miracle technology. The look of relief on her face probably related.

Regardless whether Myuri was still aware of the lingering oppressiveness in the air in the room, Hyland’s question prompted her to proudly and excitedly recount what had just happened, almost as though she had achieved it all herself.

There was practically no doubt that the books they had found at the papermakers’ had been printed using the banned technology, so their first

order of business was traveling to Salenton and locating the workshop where the Vide Company had purchased their paper.

Hyland had scarcely gotten a word in edgewise during Myuri's storytelling; but when it was finished, she said, "We'll get you a horse." When she rang the bell, a maid came into the room to receive her orders.

Everyone's interest had moved from whether they would be able to find the paper workshop in Salenton to how they would track the artisan afterward, but Col took the opportunity to speak up.

"If it's all right, I have one request," he said. "Would you mind if we brought along a bookseller we know to Salenton? Namely, Mister Le Roi."

Myuri blinked. Le Roi's interests were in direct conflict with theirs when it came to the artisan. While showing him the booklet had set them on the right path, she was not sure why they would want to bring along a rival.

"Mister Le Roi is a merchant who deals in rare books, which means his interests are diametrically opposed to ours in this matter," Col continued. "However, his depth of knowledge on books and the world of books is fathomless. I would like to leave open the possibility that he be of assistance not only in our search for the artisan, but for what comes after."

None of what he said was untrue, but it was not the only reason.

After a brief pause, he added, "I traveled with Mister Le Roi when I was a child, and I owe him a great deal, as he taught me many things. In fact, he was the first person I looked to for information when I initially set out on our search. I know this is more personal than anything, but..."

If it seemed like they could indeed find this artisan, then Col wanted to share whatever information they unearthed with Le Roi. Because there was a possibility that this artisan was secretly printing the valuable tomes that Le Roi stocked.

"This is clearly someone you trust, so I don't mind," Hyland immediately replied.

"Even an opponent is worthy of love, respect, and trust," Rhodes said. "That is one of the oaths we knights must always keep in our hearts."

He was the ideal knight, one who refused to abandon his principles even on the bloodiest of battlegrounds. Myuri nodded deeply in respect.

Canaan smiled and said, “I know Mister Le Roi. He served in the archives long ago.”

“You do?”

Col turned to Canaan in surprise.

He shrugged lightly. “The world of literature is small. Mister Le Roi was once sent by a mercantile company, contracted to manage the books of the Curia—he is a wise man who created an inventory system for the mazelike collection of books. He’s rather well known among us archivists.”

Le Roi had mentioned frequenting the archives, but he had never said anything about being the one responsible for creating the cataloging.

But now it made sense why he knew so much.

“But in that case, he must have realized it was me the moment you spoke to him of the printer. There are very few people who know of the technology’s existence.”

“.....”

Col recalled the conversation they had at the monastery ruins, the grounds Clark had been cleaning up, and the way the man had acted did seem to suggest that.

“So if he comes with us—”

“I would not mind. You should prioritize your long-term relationship with someone like Mister Le Roi.”

What Canaan said sounded both like a practical decision and also one that was considerate of Col.

Col thought he recalled Hyland saying that Canaan had been quite tense in Col’s presence, but when it came to the ease with which he navigated the world, Col knew he could not win, even if Canaan was at a disadvantage.

“In that case, you’d best send word as soon as possible,” Hyland said. “He

sounds intelligent—he may have already reached the same conclusion, and he may already be on his way to Salenton.”

That can't be, Col thought at first, but Le Roi was the type to cross the sea in the dark of night, which even the most adept sailors feared doing. It was not out of the realm of possibility that he noticed the pattern on the paper immediately, got Eve's help, and was already on his way to the Vide Company.

He glanced at Myuri, who drew up her shoulders in displeasure but reluctantly got to her feet anyway.

“Why not leave tomorrow morning? If the weather is good, a horse can get you there by the evening.”

Col had no objections to Hyland's suggestion.

“May God watch over you.”

He nodded deeply in response to her blessing.

In the time of night before dawn broke, when the stars still shone in the sky, the air was cold, even at this time of year.

As the readied horses huffed white breaths in the manor courtyard, a group clad in traveling clothes gathered.

“It's good to see you again, Master Le Roi.”

“Well, well! Look who it is!”

As Canaan and Le Roi caught up, Rhodes, Hollande, and Canaan's guard inspected the horses.

They were quite the entourage—even if Myuri and Col shared a horse, there was still Canaan, Canaan's guard, Rhodes, Le Roi, plus Hollande, whom Hyland insisted on sending with them for their safety. Altogether, that meant there were quite the number of horses in the courtyard.

It seemed as though Myuri could communicate directly with the horse, so Col thought she would be able to ride one even if she did not know how to handle it properly, but he recalled how much she had whined about her rear hurting after their last excursion on horseback.

If they were traveling by cart, she could walk alongside the horse, but that was not the case when it came to horseback riding. It would only spell trouble if she was unable to manage the horse along the way, so he made the decision to have her ride with him. He thought she might whine that a knight should ride their own horse, so he was caught a little off guard when she easily accepted his proposal. But he had a feeling the reason was that she had stayed up late.

The naughty girl saw an opportunity and took it. The moment she clambered onto the horse's back, she buried her face in its mane and dozed off.

With a sigh, Col adjusted his grip so that he held her small frame between his arms, just to make sure she would not fall off. And she had insisted on bringing her sword despite his attempts to convince her to leave it behind. It was a terrible nuisance, but he had a feeling she was dreaming about brandishing it on horseback in battle.

"I pray your search goes well," said Hyland, who had come to see them off, smiling at the dozing Myuri. "I'll make sure things proceed smoothly here with the monastery repairs. Don't push yourself if you don't end up finding this mythical artisan."

"We will return with good news," Col said.

Hyland smiled, ran her hand over the horse's nose, then stepped back. "Keep them safe," she said to Hollande, who often stood by her side. Though Col doubted there would be any dangers on the road itself, Hyland reasonably questioned if it was Heir Klevend who was targeting the Knights of Saint Kruza, so she could not afford to let her guard down.

"We will see you soon." Col bid her farewell.

"May God watch over you."

Hyland and the servants watched as the column of six horses set off.

They proceeded through the empty streets, passed through the city gates just as the night watch and the morning guard were exchanging posts, and once they came to the wide roads, the horses picked up the pace. Myuri sat up, perhaps woken by the sound of clapping hooves and the swaying of the horse, the top of her head butting into Col's chin, and she gave a big yawn.

“Yaaawn...Hmm? We’re already outside the city?”

It was Rhodes’s horse that took the lead, its rider vigilantly keeping an eye out; behind him, Canaan and Le Roi trotted side by side, staring intently at the map; they were followed by Myuri and Col; and bringing up the rear were Hollande and Canaan’s guard, their eyes carefully scanning the area.

“Heh-heh, a whole band of knights,” Myuri said as she looked back and forth. She held out her chest, as though proud to be a part of this procession. And once she chuckled to herself, she yawned again.

“I thought I told you to go to sleep early. You were up much too late,” Col scolded.

But Myuri was not listening. She patted the horse’s neck, as though saying hello.

“But I couldn’t help myself once you told me there’s hidden codes in paper.”

Myuri’s excuse did not amount to much. After reporting to Hyland and informing Le Roi of the situation, she rushed to finish copying the booklet they borrowed from the bards. Col, of course, was drafted to help; he was already at his wit’s end when he ran to the tavern to bring back the book, only to discover upon his return that Myuri was adding to her ridiculous knight story again. She was fully engrossed, writing a story about receiving a letter from an ally trapped behind enemy lines who begged her for aid. Nowhere in the letter did the ally state their whereabouts to avoid detection by the enemy, but they would be able to infer the location through the patterns on the paper.

It was not the stern priest who noticed the pattern, but the silver knight. Myuri was perhaps more upset that she did not realize the secret than Col first thought.

“I wonder...Yaaawn...I wonder what kind of person the artisan is.”

This time, she was not sprawled over the horse’s neck to sleep, but instead leaning back against Col.

“Should a knight be acting like such a spoiled child?” he asked, already weary.

Myuri’s only response was twisting to get into a more comfortable sleeping

position; she gave a satisfied sigh, like a dog sleeping with its back on the floor.

“Knights march through the day and night. It’s normal to support each other when a comrade needs to take a rest. Didn’t you know that?”

That was quite a stretch, and Col only sighed. He could feel her snickering below his chin, which prompted another sigh. Then he turned his attention to the starlit road ahead of them.

“I am less interested in their personality and more interested in what their goals are.”

The artisan was using technology that had been erased for being heretical to print large amounts of booklets that would not earn them any money.

It was so strange that it drove Col to analyze the text itself for hidden clues, wondering if there was some sort of ulterior motive.

Though he had no leads at the moment, he would not be surprised if this artisan was involved in some sort of plot.

“I hope everything goes smoothly,” he said.

“Yeah...Yeah...”

Myuri’s reply was nothing more than a mumble as she drifted off to sleep.

They passed shepherds, who always began the day’s work at this early hour, and by the time they started crossing the wide-open fields, the sky had begun to lighten, heralding the dawn.

At the very least, that sight was enough to make this a hopeful departure.

Myuri remained asleep for a while after leaving the city. She awoke again once the rays of the sun began to warm her cheeks, and she was dazzled by the sight of the plains at daybreak.

They faced no dangers or difficulties on the way to Salenton. And while Col was a bit worried about the mud from snowmelt, they were well into spring, so it was not a problem. The warm sun that hung over the grassy roads was invigorating, and Myuri was not the only one smiling at the beautiful weather.

They ventured north from Rausbourne. A little after noon, they reached a

small port town. There, they turned west and made their way inland. Along the way, they happened upon a great flock of sheep that flowed like a great river. They took a break by a cairn, built up carefully by travelers who added stones as they passed as a prayer for good luck.

They were blessed by good weather, and the view of the setting sun was dazzling.

And just as planned, they arrived at their destination of Salenton right before the sun dipped below the horizon. It was less a town and more a large village—it did not even have a city wall to speak of.

But unlike Col, who wanted to ride for a little longer, Myuri practically collapsed on the bed when they got to their room at the inn.

“My bum...hurts...”

This apparently had very little to do with her being light. In the early afternoon, she had already seemed uncomfortable in the saddle, so she now lay face-first on the bed, her rear in the air.

As much as he pitied her, Col could not help but say, “It seems you cannot handle riding the way the knight in your story can.”

“Uuugh...You’re so mean to me, Brother!” Myuri wailed.

But ever since her rear started hurting, she had pawned off her sword onto him, demanding he carry her on his back since she could no longer sit properly. His hands had been full caring for her all day, so he felt it was well within his rights to scold her.

“You will simply have to get used to it,” he said, doffing his travel gear.

Myuri began to wriggle her bum in the air. “Hrmph! Fine, then you’ll have to let me take lessons in mounted combat!”

“I’m sorry?”

“Fighting from horseback and jousting are the essence of knighthood! I know I’ll have to do my best once I get your approval!” There was a proud, victorious look on her face, despite her silly pose. “Gosh, I really want to enter a jousting competition sometime. I wonder if Rhodes has been in one. I have to ask him

when I get a chance.”

“.....”

Col pictured Myuri clad in a leather cuirass with her sword at her hip, returning gallantly on horseback to Nyohhira. He had a feeling her mother, the wisewolf, might find the sight hilarious, but her father, Lawrence, would be beside himself. That thought convinced him he could not allow her to become any wilder than she already was.

He had a feeling that reminding her that girls ready to be married should not be riding horses all over would only go in one ear and out the other three, so he decided go after her one weak point—she would always listen when it came to knighthood.

“Mounted knights typically wear full plate armor. I doubt there is any armor that can fit your smaller frame.”

Combat on horseback, especially, required swords much longer than ones used on the ground, or spears that were as long as a full-grown adult was tall. While Myuri may have displayed fine swordsmanship, there was little she could do about her physical strength and size.

“Even if you did master horseback riding, you would be relegated to a messenger.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

Her wolf ears and tail drooped. There was little she could do about the natural size of her body.

Col thought she might give up on the outrageous idea of wielding an oversize sword in mounted combat, but she quickly leaped to her feet.

“Okay! Then I have to eat a lot so I can grow bigger!”

“What?”

“C’mon, Brother, we’re going! There’s a tavern on the first floor, right? I caught a glimpse of the kitchen, and there was a *huuuge* eel in a bucket!”

Myuri tugged on Col’s arm, forcibly dragging him out of the room.

Col thought he had emerged victorious, but at some point, the tables had turned.

Only an eel would be more slippery and harder to catch than a wolf.

“You’re growing to be more and more like Miss Holo every year...”

“Hmm? Did you say something about Mother?”

Col prayed in partial defeat that she did not inherit her mother’s love for alcohol.

That night, they all had their fill with a big eel dish, and they headed straight for the Vide Company the following morning.

Salenton’s main source of business was the exchange of wool coming from farther inland, and trade goods and marine products coming from the sea, and the Vide Company was the biggest wool dealer in the area. They asked the innkeeper where their place of business was located and received an immediate answer.

“But why only you and Canaan? That’s not fair!”

When it came to asking the company about where they procured their paper, Col and Canaan decided their best course of action was to act like tax collectors who hailed from Rausbourne. They could not state their objectives explicitly, but poorly hiding their goals would only make them seem like inquisitors. It was typically only tax collectors or inquisitors who investigated the paper of documents.

The members of their entourage who could plausibly pass as tax collectors were Col and Canaan, and that displeased Myuri, who was eager to stick her nose in every aspect of an adventure.

“Miss Myuri, when the artisan realizes someone is actively looking for them, that might be the moment they slip out the back. It happens a lot when we seek out corrupt Church officials. We will stand watch in the back,” Rhodes offered.

Myuri’s eyes immediately went wide; she was shocked to know that flavor of adventure was an option, too, and she quickly cheered up. When she thanked him, he gave her a boyish, bashful smile.

“You’re in a rather good mood this morning,” Canaan said amusedly, turning to Col as they made their way to the company.

“When is that girl ever going to grow up...?”

Together, they stood at the front of the Vide Company building as wool cart after wool cart passed by them. Col took a deep breath, knowing they had a job to do, but then Canaan suddenly spoke up.

“Thank you, Master Col.”

His attention turned to the boy beside him—he wondered if he misheard him. Canaan dropped his gaze from the company sign, which used a design of a sheep, and let his eyes go to Col.

“We never thought we would ever find a clue that pointed to the artisan’s whereabouts.”

“O-oh...I see.”

Canaan smiled and dipped his head. His gaze drifted to the side, and he watched Myuri bound eagerly to the back of the building as she dragged Rhodes along.

“We simply sat in the dark of the archives, lamenting our powerlessness. But we heard that there was someone called the Twilight Cardinal out in the world fighting to radically change the Church. That gave us courage—if we were willing to sit there and let the wicked crush us, then we could at least recklessly leave the Holy See.”

Hyland had joked that Canaan came to see someone he truly admired under the pretense of negotiation.

“We at last managed to pool enough money together to travel. When we met Heir Hyland and informed her of our dream to rid the Church of its corruption, we felt as though that was somehow proof that we, too, were fighting against the world.”

Three burly men passed by them on their way to the loading dock, pulling along a cart piled high with wool.

“To think that would actually lead us closer to the artisan and let us move

forward.”

The way he spoke made it seem like he never had any hope of finding the artisan from the beginning. He and the other archivists had simply accepted that they were powerless in the face of much greater forces in the world.

That was why they were overjoyed when they first stepped out of the shadows and into the sunlight.

“And so, when I understood that Heir Hyland was a wiser leader than I had anticipated, I felt a terrible regret.”

Col wondered if that was when he and Myuri arrived at the office to inform them they were on the artisan’s trail. He had noticed a heavy, oppressive mood in the air when they entered the room. Hyland had perhaps been talking about a plan to make copies of the scripture without relying on the artisan’s skill by spending a massive sum of money, one she might not be able to afford.

Canaan turned his attention back to Col and drew up his shoulders with a smile.

“I don’t want Heir Hyland to suffer on our behalf. We should be the ones to shoulder the burden—we were the ones who proposed this project. I will make sure nothing happens to her, even if it means joining forces with Mister Le Roi.”

The Vide Company seemed to deal in every facet of the wool trade, judging by the traveling merchant carrying several large shears on his back as he exited the loading dock. Once he passed them, it was Col’s turn to speak.

“Did you put the archives’ books on the black market?”

Le Roi dealt in tomes worth more than their weight in gold, and the Curia’s archives were full of them. The wicked could make plenty of money in that business, but Canaan and the other archivists had retained their virtue by not doing so.

Canaan looked at Col in neither confirmation nor denial. Those of the cloth considered lying to be prohibited, so Col understood that this was essentially a silent confirmation. Had this happened right after he left Nyohhira, he would have immediately grabbed Canaan’s shoulders to try to convince him to stop.

But Col, too, had traveled and seen things.

“I really hope we find the artisan,” he said. He knew Myuri would have said the same, so his tone mimicked hers. But considering how busy things were, it was unlikely his voice would reach the back of the building. “And if not, we’ll think of something else.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he patted Canaan’s back to encourage him.

Canaan was not all that much taller than Myuri—he easily stumbled forward.

But that instead only energized him, and he began to march ahead with this second step.

“I...I believe!”

Col watched as Canaan gave him a forced smile, then followed in after him.

When they first met in Hyland’s manor, he had been so calm that Col felt like the boy’s aura alone would drown him, but Canaan now looked appropriately nervous for his age. So to ease the tension, Col leaned forward to whisper in his ear: “It’s God you believe in, isn’t it?”

Canaan’s eyes widened as he turned to look at Col out of the corner of his eye, before he straightened with a boyish grin.

“Of course!” he replied, throwing his chest out proudly.

He turned to the busy company loading dock, which was a hive of activity, and called out, “Pardon us! We’ve come from Rausbourne! We would like to meet with the master of the house!”

Canaan’s voice carried well. Merchants visiting to exchange wool craned their necks curiously to see, and the company couriers and wool inspectors blinked blankly at them.

“I run things around here...How may I help you?”

Col noticed an errand boy dash toward the back of the building, and not long after, a friendly-looking merchant emerged from the back counter with a cautious look on his face. He could tell that Col and Canaan were no normal visitors, due to the way they dressed.

“We apologize for intruding during such a busy time. We are here on behalf of the Rausbourne tax collectors’ association.”

Canaan only dropped his voice in the latter half of his statement so that those around them could not hear.

The head of the Vide Company, who regularly delivered wool to Rausbourne, gulped.

“Wh-why? We are not engaged in any shameful activity...”

No merchant was entirely guiltless. But Col and Canaan were not there to accuse them of adding sand to the fibers of their wool to falsify its weight, or mixing in cheap fibers with more high-quality wool.

“We know of your trustworthiness. A clue to the one we are looking for was found on one of your bills of delivery, so we ask for your assistance.” Canaan produced the paper they found at the association from his breast pocket. “Where did you purchase the paper used for this document?”

The master, seeing that they were not after him, gave a sigh of relief with a quiet apology as he took the paper.

“This...most certainly is one of our bills. This building serves as the point of origin, so...Hey, bring me those weighing notes!”

The master shouted to the errand boy, who was staring off blankly into the distance. He snapped out of it and brought over papers detailing numbers of boxes of wool. The master took the second sheet of paper and lifted it to the sky. The loading dock was dim, even at midday, but his practiced eye could see what he was looking for right away.

“Yeah, it’s the same. This’d be Thearte’s workshop. The papermakers here in town.”

“Thearte.” Canaan repeated the name and glanced at Col. “Could you tell us where the workshop is?”

“Yes, of course. His workshop is in the crafters’ district to the north of the church. It’s a bit confusing, considering all the parchment workshops in the area, but you’ll find it right away if you ask.”

The master returned the paper to Canaan, who folded it back into his pocket.

“Thank you for your help. Fair trade to you.”

The master gave a tired smile in return and saw both of them out.

Once they emerged from the shaded loading dock, the springtime sun stung their eyes. Hollande, who had been watching from an alley across the street, lifted his hand in his way of asking how things went.

“That went smoothly because you stood menacingly beside me, Master Col,” Canaan said as he raised his hand in response to Hollande.

Col had done nothing. He had simply stood there—he was certain Canaan was saying that to be nice.

“It was your gift of charisma,” he replied.

“Nonsense. You exude gravitas just by standing.”

Canaan, who acted with perfect grace before Hyland and who always kept a calm smile on his face, suddenly seemed rather nervous. When Col had that realization, he decided that did not necessarily mean Canaan’s words were empty flattery.

And there was a rather cheery look on Canaan’s face. Col hesitated voicing his doubts because he did not want to ruin his mood.

Canaan had brought them a dream—and even if it remained a dream, he at least wanted proof that he had made waves in the flow of world events. And though his place in the Church was somewhere the light of the sun never reached, he had at last seen its rays here, in this country.

Col watched as the boy strode with long steps across the street; he did not feel overwhelmed by his energy, but instead watched to encourage him.

Once they reconvened with Myuri and Rhodes, they headed to the north side of the church, just as the Vide Company had instructed. There were rows and rows of parchment-makers, fitting for a city that pulled wool in from all over, but they found Thearte’s workshop right away. Myuri rushed ahead, bards’ booklets in hand, knowing it was her turn to deal with the hot-blooded artisans. Canaan’s guard and Rhodes took up post in the back of the workshop so that

the artisan did not escape when they realized pursuers had finally caught up.

Col accompanied Hollande and Canaan in watching Myuri from afar as she showed the booklets to the dignified master of the workshop, who was flitting around busily. There were a great number of these booklets around the country, so he surely must remember the face of the patron who bought all that paper. And Myuri was the perfect candidate to weasel her way into the crafter's heart.

And so the sight that followed in the moments afterward came as a surprise.

"That *fool* finally got himself into a real mess, didn't he?!"

The man's bellow rang out over the bustle of the crafters' district; Myuri flinched, shrinking in on herself as he did.

While Col stood dumbstruck, Hollande the guard rushed across the street.

"Do you happen to know where the author of this booklet is?" he asked.

The master craftsman looked at the knight, then to Col, who had arrived a few moments later, and a bitter grimace crossed his face.

"What the hell...? L-look, I don't care if that idiot's gotten himself into trouble with some noble or another—it has nothing to do with my workshop! That's all I have to say!"

Behind the lead crafter were other artisans, watching the exchange with uneasy looks.

It seemed like the head crafter had assumed them to be catchpoles dispatched by one noble or another.

Perhaps he had feared a situation where a conflict with an aristocrat would lead to the closing of his workshop.

"So you know where the creator of this is, do you?"

Hollande, of course, did nothing to rectify the crafter's misunderstanding. And he posed his question like the loyal hound of an authoritarian noble—an attitude Col could have never imagined him taking on from his typical attitude back in the manor. Though the master crafter was shorter than Hollande, he was of a strong, stocky build, like any artisan would be, and he exuded a power

that matched the knight's. The artisans watching behind him were the same. Not only that, but there were others farther in the back who were beginning to rest their hands on anything that could serve as a weapon.

Rhodes and Canaan's guard, hearing the yell, rushed from the back alleys and stood ready to draw their swords at any moment. Le Roi rubbed his chin, leisurely taking in the scene, as though wondering what to do next.

For his part, Col wanted to ease the tension in the air, but he was the very picture of a noble's houseboy; were he to do or say anything, it would only make things worse. But considering the master crafter and Hollande, it did not seem possible to reach a peaceful resolution to the situation.

Col ultimately made up his mind, knowing he had no choice but to try, so he opened his mouth to speak, but a hand stopped him.

He turned around and saw it was Myuri.

"Hey, come on, no fighting."

She hugged the booklets to her chest, her brows drawn up, eyes wide, as she looked at the men. The tone of her voice was much meeker than usual.

Col tensed, ready for the master to yell about a woman butting into men's business, but all he heard was a low groan.

He sounded somewhat relieved, too.

"Hrrm..."

Both the master and Hollande looked away from Myuri's wide, innocent eyes.

"Hmph. I'm not in the business of making kids cry...", the master said, and Hollande eased and nodded. The artisans behind the master crafter breathed sighs of relief.

And that was when Col realized—a fight would break out if anyone else were to interject, but the master crafter could not disregard this lovely young girl's request.

"We just want to know who wrote the book. We're not going to bother you," Myuri said.

Col, too, looked to him and nodded.

The master crafter sighed, scratched his head, and said, “I know ’im. Worked here for a while.”

They had found a definitive trail of the artisan who had eluded both the booksellers and the inquisitors.

“Where? Where’s he now?”

The crafter looked at Myuri and shrugged.

“Worked here for about two years, quit not long ago. Heard he started scribe work in town after that, but...heard he quit that, too, and went to play herder on the outskirts. Hey! Which one o’ yous knows where Jean went?!”

One of the artisans who had been watching the situation from afar, a young man, timidly spoke up.

“Jean came back to town for the snowmelt. Man’s spineless—probably couldn’t handle taking care of sheep. Saw him in his cups plenty of times at the cheap pubs.”

“I saw him, too,” another piped up. “At the Reel.”

“That place?” said another. “I heard they serve moldy ale. Sounds like a perfect fit for Jean.”

As the other artisans began to add to the conversation, the master crafter jerked his chin. “You heard ’em. The Reel’s on the road leading out northwest from town. It’s an old, shabby place, and there’s a spool of thread on the sign—you’ll know it when you see it. That good enough for you?”

His eyes had stopped on Hollande.

“It is. Sorry for the trouble,” Hollande said, then turned to Col. The master crafter must have thought Col was the shot caller among the six of them, so he also turned to him with a grouchy, but at the same time appeasing, look.

Behind him stood his artisans—it was his job to protect their livelihoods.

“All we want is to speak with Mister Jean. We apologize for the intrusion.”

The master crafter folded his arms and sighed. But the annoyed look on his

face was not only for Col and his entourage, but for Jean the artisan as well.

Even as they left the workshop, the master crafter stood out front, cautiously watching them leave. Behind him, a few of the other workers were poking out their heads, expressions brimming with curiosity as they wondered what that was all about.

Then, once Col saw from afar how the master yelled at his workers to get back to work, he finally managed to speak.

“I’m glad that did not end in a fight.”

He had not expected the master to know the artisan personally, much less think of him as a nuisance to his workshop.

“My apologies, Master Col. Those methods often work best with stubborn crafters.”

“Oh, um, it’s—”

“The timing for my entrance was perfect, wasn’t it?” Myuri asked Hollande, and they shared a laugh. Though he truly seemed like a young man dedicated to upstanding work back at the manor, it seemed no person was ever purely good.

Col was terrible with these sorts of tactics, and they tired him out quickly.

“We can overcome any hardship we come across, so long as we stick together,” Canaan said, excited. He was delighted in simply being able to continue to move forward.

“So the artisan,” said Myuri, who broached the subject as they began their search for the Reel. “I got the feeling there was some kind of problem here.”

“The man did ask if he angered a noble. I wonder what he meant by that,” Rhodes wondered aloud.

“The poem in that booklet is honestly of terrible quality,” Canaan replied. “It’s likely the master crafter and his fellow artisans knew Jean the crafter was writing poetry, and probably assumed that the noble in the song must have grown angry upon hearing it.”

“Like a court jester story,” Le Roi said, and Myuri’s eyes rounded with curiosity. “Jesters serve the king, but they’re also the only ones allowed to make

fun of the king. Though they are sometimes hanged by those same kings when they're in a bad mood."

Myuri was shocked, but Canaan paid her no mind and continued with his own question.

"But would a noble request a poem from a worker from a papermaking workshop?"

"He may have gone to sell his poems if he wanted the seat of house bard. Much like how wandering scholars will go from court to court in search of sponsors for their studies."

While that made sense, that still did not explain why he was printing and distributing so many copies. And there was one other point that did not quite add up.

"Oh, but isn't the noble in the poem fake, though?"

Myuri brought up the very thing Col was wondering about and flapped the booklets in her hands.

Rhodes, who had his hand to his chin in thought, suddenly spoke up. "Maybe he was contracted to harass someone?"

"Contracted?"

Rhodes nodded, somewhat nervous with five sets of eyes on him.

"War is a knight's time to shine. Those of noble heritage, especially, see the battlefield as a place where they can make or break their family's honor. One terrible poem can ruin their reputation. Which means it is possible that the distribution of this poem could be out of spite, meant to look like it is praising someone when its true intention is to make them look worse."

"Ah-ha. That does sound possible," Le Roi replied. "Even if the name of the noble itself is falsified, it would still serve its purpose perfectly if the locals knew who it was speaking of, I see."

Upon hearing that, Col recalled how the artisan at the Rausbourne papermakers' workshop had acted.

He was furious knowing there was a shameless noble out there making

someone recite these poems.

If the poem was written in a way that made it obvious to those close to the noble in question who it was referring to, on top of being of very poor quality, then it would certainly be top-class harassment. If there was one particular noble who was ordering the harassing, then that also solved the mystery of who was paying for the printing.

“Hmm.” Myuri hummed. “But doesn’t that mean he’d already be hanged for making someone important mad?”

According to what Crafter Thearte said, it sounded as though, after quitting the workshop, this Jean character worked as a scribe, putting his printing technology to use. But he quit even that and left town to look after sheep, which suggested that he did not have the support of someone with money or power.

And when he was then unable to continue working as shepherd, he returned to town to become a drunkard at a place called the Reel. He did not sound like the plucky type to take on a dangerous job in the face of a powerful opponent.

“I’m sure we’ll find out when we meet him,” Hollande said, pointing at the road ahead.

There were few buildings beyond the limits of town, with more free-ranging chickens and pigs than people. Hanging from the eaves of a building, one that looked like it might have once been a sheep barn, was a tattered and fragile sign with a picture of a spool and thread.

“As the one responsible for your safety, I am not particularly happy with any of you going to this place.”

Just as Hollande said, the establish could not be called “nice” by any means. The walls were worn from the elements, and the roof sagged so deeply it looked as though it might collapse at any moment. It did not seem like the town guard ever ventured out this way, either; a red-faced old man sat leaning against the front of the building, dozing off.

“This may be less of an inn and more of a bandit hangout. Sometimes the townsfolk ask us to take care of them while we’re out on a mission,” Rhodes

said, unsheathing the sword at his waist in a show of caution. Myuri, her eyes glittering, immediately latched on to the words *bandit hangout* and hurried ahead.

“Let’s keep things peaceful,” Col said.

Jean the artisan had evaded the inquisitors’ pursuit and possibly even distributed booklets with the intention of sullyng a noble’s honor. And considering he never lasted long at any of his jobs and ended up a drunkard at a bottom-of-the-barrel tavern, there was a real chance that fighting could break out. Despite what he said to Hollande and Canaan’s guard, the two of them, who likely had real combat experience, exchanged glances and both shrugged.

“That is the plan, but it depends on what the man does.”

Hollande was a knightly knight back at the manor, but he perhaps seemed to enjoy situations like these more than Col had anticipated. Between the two guards, who suddenly burst into smiles, and Rhodes, who pulled his expression taut, Myuri took on an air of determination, influenced by all those around her.

Despite how much Col wished to tell her she did not have to put *that* much effort into the situation, Canaan and Le Roi, who had been watching her with delighted smiles, nodded at him, and he quickly gave up.

“First, we’re going to kick down the door, right?”

“Like a bandit?!” Col interjected, no longer able to help himself.

Hollande laughed. “Let’s go.”

And so, with Hollande at the front, they slowly pushed open the thinning door to the Reel.

The Reel was the worst of the worst kinds of pubs. Almost all the floorboards had been peeled away, revealing the dirt floor underneath, and it doubled as a lodging house—there were people curled up in blankets in a corner of the room.

In the middle of the room were two long tables, which was the only signifier that this was a tavern, at which sat a gloomy merchant shaving off the edges of copper coins; a weedy, half-naked man face down at the table, snoring; and

four rough-looking men who could very well have been bandits themselves.

Col would have never come to a place like this alone with Myuri.

“Where’s the owner?” Hollande bellowed.

The men turned to stare daggers at them, but when they realized the difference in class between them, they quickly looked away.

“He’s in the back,” replied the merchant shaving the coins. “You here to arrest some thugs? Some jewels get stolen from your lord’s coffers?”

That was perhaps the first thing that came to mind when a whole group of well-dressed individuals armed with swords came to a place like this.

“I wouldn’t be this nice if we were,” Hollande snapped. “I’d cut your right arm off first before asking any questions.”

The sinister-looking merchant pursed his lips and circled his arms around the coins on the table, as though protecting them.

“We’ll speak to the owner,” Canaan’s guard whispered to Hollande, and proceeded to the back.

While Hollande scowled at everyone in the tavern, Canaan stepped forward.

“We are looking for an artisan named Jean,” he said.

Though he always spoke with polite speech, his words were more articulated than they usually were, perhaps to give the impression of someone even more educated.

Then even those who had decided they would be losers in any sort of trouble and pretended to sleep lifted their heads from their blankets and straw mats.

“We heard he used to work for Crafter Thearte and was recently working as a shepherd’s hand.”

Salenton’s beggars, day workers, and those living hand-to-mouth lives sensed a reward might be forthcoming and began to grow restless.

But it seemed there was a reason why they hesitated to speak up.

“You will be thanked. Would anyone happen to know?”

Right after he said that, there came a loud sound of a foot stomping against the floor. One of the four ruffians, who had made this tavern their territory but begrudgingly stayed put when they realized they were no match for Hollande and the rest, had viciously dropped his foot from the stool onto the floor.

“If you’re not foolin’ around, then show us the coin.”

Col was not sure what he meant, but Canaan produced several copper coins from his pocket without a word and stepped toward the men, unafraid, and placed them on the table.

“How generous of you. He’s over there.”

The man pointed at the half-naked man asleep at the table and swiped the coins for himself.

Rhodes scoffed, and Hollande stared hard at the man to see if he was telling the truth. As Canaan reached out to the sleeping man— “A-are you taking him away?”

—there came a voice, terribly dry and cracked, like an instrument that had not been touched in many years.

“He sings us nice songs...”

There came another voice, like a groan.

“He stays here in the pits with us, and he sings for us...Even though he’s terrible at it...”

Before they knew it, all those who had been sleeping in the dim had sat up and were staring at them.

Their hair was ratty, and dirt covered their faces, but their eyes alone gleamed sharply.

“...We are only going to talk to him,” Canaan said, overwhelmed, and Hollande stepped forward to take his place. The man who was supposedly Jean showed no signs of waking; a good shake of his shoulder only earned them a quiet groan. With a sigh, Hollande crouched down and quickly hoisted the scrawny man onto his shoulder.

“Do you have a well around here?” he asked.

One of the ruffians sneered. “Once he falls asleep, he don’t wake up.”

“It’s in the back,” another said. “It’s practically dried up, though.”

Hollande gave his thanks and turned to leave with Jean over his shoulder; his steps were light, as though he were carrying a sack of straw.

Le Roi; Canaan’s guard, who had been speaking with the owner; and Rhodes followed after him. Myuri glanced at Col before doing the same.

“Canaan?” Col called to Canaan.

That freed him from his spell—he tore his gaze away from the people sitting in the corner of the tavern.

“I-I’m sorry.”

This was likely his first time coming to a place like this.

Col let Canaan leave first. Col offered a polite nod to those in the tavern and followed the rest.

“...Why did that affect me so deeply?” Canaan muttered to himself as they rounded the building. “I have stood face-to-face with saints and famous theologists.” He slowly turned to look at Col as he spoke. “But I found shock in the face of normal people. But...,” he quickly amended, “that might not be quite it.” A tense smile crossed his face as he nodded. “It seems I was excited at the prospect of finding the artisan. It felt as though I was part of one great tale.”

Col could almost hear Myuri scolding him for reading too many books.

By the time they wrapped around to the back of the building, Hollande was already splashing water over the drunkard’s face. Jean leaped up in his shock.

“Wagh! Augh!”

He looked around and quickly realized he was no longer in the dark, run-down tavern but in the open lot by the well, surrounded by strange company.

“Are you Jean?” Hollande asked.

The man gulped so deeply that the lump in his throat almost looked like it was going to leap out of his throat.

“A-are you...inquisitors...?”

That question was enough to confirm that this gaunt man was indeed the very one they were looking for. Canaan went pale, likely out of the pure joy of actually finding the one he had been looking for.

“Then you must be the last artisan who escaped to the kingdom, hmm?” It was Le Roi, who had been hanging back and out of the way, who asked this.

“...Aye? Ah...I don’t know if I’m the last one, but...I am. You a bookseller? I can tell. You stink of books.” Jean scrunched up his face, making him seem like a man who had all but turned his back on the world despite being only a little older than Col. “Good grief...After all this time...”

This person had mastered a dangerous technology, one that the Church had gone to great lengths to stamp out. He spread his arms wide and lay back down on the damp earth.

“Just take me. Hang me. Do whatever you want with me...”

He gave a loud hiccup, and his eyes slipped shut, as though he was ready to fall asleep again.

Le Roi looked to Col and shrugged, as though asking what to do with him.

“We have a job for you.” Canaan spoke.

Though the ground was muddy due to the splash of water, Canaan knelt beside the man, not caring his clothes might get dirty, and took Jean’s hand. He looked all the world like a military priest comforting a dying soldier.

“...You what?”

“We need your help. Your technology could change the world!”

The Church had taken note of the printing technology’s might and attempted to suppress its use. Taking advantage of it would allow the vernacular scripture to spread across the mainland like wildfire, and perhaps even shake the Church to their foundations. That may lead the pope to reconsidering his stance, and may even hold the power to reconcile the conflict between the kingdom and the Church.

Canaan’s plea caused Jean’s tired eyes to widen.

But the light slowly vanished from them, and he pulled his hand out of

Canaan's.

"Who cares."

He rolled over onto his side, not caring that would only further cover him in mud, and laid his cheek on his arm. It made him seem as though he was not turning them down because of his principles, but simply because he had turned his back on the world.

Myuri was surprisingly weak to situations like this, and Hollande and Canaan's guard exchanged meaningful glances. On the other hand, Rhodes and his strong sense of justice looked like he was about to beat both Jean and his disposition into his ideal.

Just as Canaan was about to straightforwardly ask his question again, it was Le Roi, surprisingly, who stopped him. And his request was one that none other in the group had come up with.

"Well, either way, why not have a drink with us?"

It was the most casual invitation imaginable in that situation. But it seemed to touch Jean on a level deeper than Canaan's earnest resolve.

"...Like, with proper wine?"

"The smooth stuff, without pomace."

Jean leaped to his feet and motioned for Hollande to come closer.

"Splash me with water again."

Hollande rolled up his sleeves, ready to give him a good, aggressive splash, and heaved a sigh. He drew some water from the well and dumped it over Jean's head once again.

When they asked why Jean was mostly naked, he replied that he had either dirtied his clothes beyond repair with vomit or he had lost them in a bet. The entourage made their way to a reasonably fine tavern toward the center of Salenton and took a seat at the tables outside.

Jean's face was well known among the pubs in town—the waitress did not bother hiding her belief that their drink would be wasted on a guy like him, and aggressively slammed their drinks on the table.

“Glug... Glug...Ahhh! That’s the stuff!”

Myuri gulped as she watched, tempted, so Col jabbed her in the head.

“Good, good! Drink up!”

There came Le Roi’s friendly smile.

“You’re not drinking?” Jean asked as he tore into the jerky that came not long after.

“Let me join you, then. Miss! More wine, please!”

Despite the awkward atmosphere, Le Roi’s easygoing attitude remained steadfast. Eve once likened him to a bear attracted to the honeycombs at her doorstep, after all.

“Hey, you’re not a bad drinker yourself,” Jean remarked.

“It’s my job to drink my business partners under the table, after all!”

Jean had taken an immediate liking to Le Roi.

Hollande and Canaan’s guard had determined there would be no fighting as a result, so their hands had stopped hovering over their swords, and they took a seat at a table a short distance from them. They called over Rhodes, who was nervously frowning at Le Roi’s handling of the situation, and ordered some snacks.

Jean and Le Roi sat across from each other, and right next to them was Col, Myuri, and Canaan.

“I don’t understand,” said Jean, not quite believing they were actually drinking together, after watching Le Roi savor his wine and order lamb sausage and stew and other food. *“How come you don’t have my hands bound? Is this my last supper?”* He flashed a lopsided smile.

“It seems there’s been a misunderstanding,” Canaan interjected. *“Your fellow printers, the ones who were arrested, were not hung.”*

“No,” Le Roi continued, adding to the conversation. *“While they are unable to leave the city under the Curia’s control, I believe they are making fine livings as craftspeople now.”*

Jean frowned. "You mean they're just being kept on the payroll."

Had Col come across Jean at a place like the Reel without knowing what to look for, he would have thought the man to be unrefined and ignorant. But what he said was solid, showing he was indeed educated.

"We need your technology," Canaan said.

Jean attempted to scoff, but his own hiccup interrupted him. "You keep repeating yourself..."

"It's important. Your technology can change the world." Canaan placed a hand on the table and leaned forward to speak.

But Jean looked away, annoyed, and drank down his wine. "I don't care." He sulked. "I don't do books anymore." He reached for the freshly served lamb sausage, still steaming, and desperately shoved it into his mouth.

"Then how do you explain all the booklets you've so widely distributed?" Canaan asked.

Jean did not even look up.

"Did you work at the papermakers' in order to obtain paper at a cheaper price?" Canaan continued.

With terrible manners, Jean chewed with his mouth open, washed down his food with his wine, then stared at Canaan with dim eyes.

"What'd be faster? Me wringing your neck or for the swords at that table to stab me?"

Canaan pursed his lips and rounded his eyes just as Myuri interjected.

"There's a sword at this table, too."

Jean looked at Myuri as though he had just noticed her for the first time. He turned a defiant, violent eye to her, but a look of surprise quickly crossed his face.

"What?" Myuri asked, doubtful.

Jean cleared his throat, as though suddenly brought back to reality, and said, "Why's a little girl got a sword?"

“Because I’m a knight.”

“What?!”

Her emphatic tone caused Rhodes, who had been watching on from a short distance away, to leap from his chair.

But it did not seem like Jean would be harming Myuri, so Col turned to look at Rhodes and nodded.

“...A girl knight?” Jean said. “Nobles sure are into weird stuff these days.”

Col could tell this was not quite a drunken statement, so he was not sure how he should respond. But Myuri, the most competitive person in all of Nyohhira, raised her brows.

“Hey!”

She leaped from her seat, stamped her foot onto her chair, and took her scabbard in her hand. Her ferocity almost caused Canaan to reach out and grab her sleeve.

“Can’t you see this crest? I’m a real knight!”

The wolf crest sat proudly on the sheath of her sword—the crest protected by privilege granted by Winfiel royalty, one only two people in the entire world could use.

“Uh...*What?* A crest? And a wolf one, at that...”

Jean’s shock was a lot like that of a lowly, wandering soldier who made a pass at a traveler, only to find she was secretly a noble—it was the very picture of that sort of scenario in those stories, but there was something slightly different about it.

And Myuri, too, was surprised.

“Wait, you know about wolf crests?” she asked.

Canaan sat between Myuri and Jean—his eyes darted back and forth as he tried to get a grasp on the situation.

“Well...wolf crests in this country are...I mean, it’s the same on the mainland, too. I’ve only ever seen them in books. Is that actually real?”

Crests had their fads. Wolf crests, especially, were not in use nowadays due to the menacing air they gave off, or so they were told. Myuri, who had wolf blood in her veins, was terribly displeased with this, but in contrast, she was delighted that Jean realized how rare wolf crests were.

“And? Isn’t it stunning?” Myuri said proudly.

Jean only clicked his tongue and brought his mug of wine to his lips.

But he was not completely shutting her out as he did earlier; instead, it seemed as though he was trying his best to hold back his curiosity.

Ultimately, he failed.

“S-so hold on a second...Are you...are you from some family with ties to the ancient empire?” he asked. His tone was nervous, yet at the same time held a flattering wistfulness.

Myuri immediately cheered up and breezily replied, “I wish. But not exactly.” She lowered her foot from the chair and plopped down again. As she spoke, she pointed to Col without bothering to look at him. “A really important noble gave us the privilege out of respect for the big adventure my brother and I are having.”

Her explanation was not the *correct* interpretation of the circumstances, but it could not be called completely wrong, either.

Now that they had finally gotten a way to keep Jean’s attention, Col reckoned they should have a proper conversation with him to get him earnestly on board. But just as that thought crossed his mind, he realized Jean looked more serious now than at any previous moment.

“An...adventure?”

“Yeah!”

There was delight in Myuri’s voice. But beyond her, Rhodes and the other guards had realized that things had taken an odd turn and were watching with curious looks.

“I admit, I’m curious as well. I’ve only heard bits and pieces from Miss Eve,” said Le Roi, who had at some point put away all the food they had been served,

as he raised his glass toward the inside of the building, requesting seconds.



Though bewildered by the turn of events at first, Col quickly recalled what sort of booklets Jean had been distributing.

They were, indeed, awfully written...

“Oh gosh. Brother, what should I do?”

Myuri, who was much sharper than him, had caught on to Jean’s curiosity quicker than he had. She put on obvious airs, tantalizing Jean. When she turned to look at Col, she winked, silently telling him to play along.

If he did not handle this correctly, she would nag him relentlessly for days to come.

“Mister Jean, we would be more than happy to tell you the tale of our world-shaking adventures...if you lend us your—no, if you tell us about yourself.”

“Don’t you want to hear about ghost ships carrying human bones?” Myuri added. “We didn’t see the devil himself, but the rest of it is true!”

Jean blinked, looking back and forth between Col and Myuri.

A curious flame burned brightly in his eyes.

Yet he drew his lips into a thin line, his face scrunching up as though he had bitten into a burnt piece of meat, and said, “...I don’t deal with books anymore.”

Perhaps Col’s word choice had been wrong—Myuri’s cold stare frightened him. Jean dropped his head and gaze to the table, and clenched his fists so tightly they almost shuddered.

“But maybe I can make an exception...for something as interesting as that...”

Jean’s eyes were fixed on Myuri’s sword.

All Col had to do was recall what the gaunt, defeated man wrote about in the books he had so widely distributed.

They were terribly written stories of imaginary nobles achieving great feats in battle.

“So then, you...,” Col scarcely began.

Jean averted his gaze and raised his mug.

It looked as though he was not only raising the flag of defeat, but also sending a sign asking for help.

“Damn...Damn it,” he groaned, then turned to look at Myuri. “The tale of a very young lady knight...Damn it all, if that doesn’t sound interesting.”

The people at the Reel, who were no more than beggars sleeping in rags, had spoken up, fearing for Jean’s safety. Their reasoning was simply because he performed songs for them at such a run-down tavern.

But they did not have very high praises for his singing—it seemed the man had very little in the way of musical skill. But that alone was the key to solving the mystery of all the booklets at the papermakers’ workshop.

Those stories were never meant to harass a noble, like Rhodes suggested, or be a secret signal to gather his fellow printers again, or be a part of a conspiracy with hidden political meaning.

If they were products of pure passion, that could reasonably explain most of his odd acts—after all, Col had learned that not just from himself and Myuri, but from the Nordstone incident as well.

Jean was simply following his passion.

“I have no talent for poetry...”

But he still wanted the world to acknowledge him.

The story he began to weave was one of a man who spent half his life on that enthusiasm.

It was said that in the beginning, most boys harbor a simple desire to one day pick up the sword and make a name for themselves on the battlefield. But Jean’s body was naturally scrawny, and no amount of training gave him the bulk he needed. Ultimately, just as he barely managed to qualify for the transport corps—the troops that brought supplies to the knights and the mercenaries—he was sent to battle. But along the way, he apparently came face-to-face with death just by walking.

Even when he learned the realities of war and gave up on his dream of running around with a sword in hand, he only found his spirit more deeply

enamored with the ferocity of battle. It was because he could not be a part of it that he thought long and hard about what he could do.

Jean searched and searched for a way to get involved in battle, and at last realized that one did not need physical prowess to engage in the world of war through song. And when he knocked on the door of a workshop that dealt with books, which might teach him how to read and write, it turned out to be the very workshop that invented the technology Col and Canaan needed.

The story from there was essentially the same as what Canaan and Le Roi had told them—the inquisitors' and booksellers' hunt, except from the view of the artisans.

"That there, that thing you got in your hand? The reason I spread those books around was...woe."

"Woe?"

Myuri listened to Jean's story very intently. Though she repeated the word solemnly, she took a liking to it because it sounded odd to her. When the wild girl turned to look at Col, he gave a sigh and spelled the word for her with mutton grease on the table.

"When I was at the workshop, I'd go to the homes of nobles, looking for household bards, give them my poetry, and sing for them. But they always threw me out with a grimace. I always cursed them for being idiots with terrible taste," Jean said as he drank down his wine with alarming speed. "But it wasn't long before the Curia came a knocking, so I ran. I wasn't on good terms with the rest of them at the workshop—they called me the Bungling Bard—so I was lucky I didn't have any deep relation to them. I finally ended up here, in this town, and I took a job at the papermakers' because I didn't know where else to go. But I couldn't contain myself. I wanted others to hear my poems so bad, I used the tools I sneaked out of the workshop to make books."

It was not long after that Jean made his way to a tavern not too far away from town to find out how his poetry was doing. And when he heard the bards making fun of his work, his spirit shattered. Twice had he pursued a dream only for it to fall apart. So he threw away the technology and found himself at the bottle of an empty wine mug.

“I’m sure all my poems are bad because I made all of it up...Just once...Just once, I want to see a spectacle in action for myself, one that will excite my very soul. I know that would be enough for everyone to want to hear my poems. I just hadn’t found the right story. But you...”

By the time Jean was finished speaking, he was drunk out of his mind.

The heavens were not pitying his state, yet once noon passed, a warm breeze began to blow from the south, and the sky grew dark. Since it seemed as though rain was on its way, Hollande and Rhodes took Jean to one of the rooms in the tavern’s upper floor to care for him while also keeping watch over him.

Weariness hung heavy beneath the eaves, befitting the weather, and all those left languidly nursed what remained of their tepid drinks.

“His eyes were like a candle on a stormy night,” Le Roi remarked.

That brought back memories for Col: stumbling across an abandoned shack in the middle of his travels, watching his candle flicker in the wind as he tried to keep the wind out. It was a flame that struggled to stay lit, yet would burn brightly at the oddest moments.

It was much like a candle whose wick had grown too short and was soon approaching its end.

“Though God has determined our role in life, he has been given particularly trying trials. I sympathize with him,” Canaan said, his word choice making him sound much like a holy person, and sighed. “But there was a ray of hope for the both of us.”

“*Haum*...A story that would stir his soul, right?”

Myuri, who had failed to eat most of her meal due to the conversation, placed her slices of fried eel between two pieces of bread, lathered it in plenty of mustard, and bit into it as she spoke.

Jean had faced numerous setbacks in his attempts to find a place in the world of battle that he so often dreamed of. He was physically too thin. His singing was so terrible that even the beggars at the Reel criticized it. And just as clear as it was from the booklets that served as their clue, he unfortunately had zero talent when it came to writing the stories themselves.

Yet he had knocked on the door of the workshop and became a relatively competent artisan, so it was clear that Jean was not exactly talent/less, but that he had strengths and weaknesses. He did not acknowledge that, however, and stubbornly insisted that he was simply yet to come across the right subject matter.

Or perhaps he had indeed realized the truth, yet his pride was the very last bastion of his mind.

“He was rather inebriated when he told us all that. Do we believe him?” Le Roi asked.

Col recalled how Jean was slumped over the table, asleep, like his spine had been removed from his body.

“One could say those words came from deep within his soul,” Canaan firmly argued. He and the other archivists needed Jean’s help to complete their project, after all. “And luckily, we have someone here who can fully satisfy his hopes.”

At that, Col naturally turned to look at Le Roi, the extraordinary bookseller. Le Roi then turned to look at Canaan, who worked in the Curia’s labyrinthine archives. And Canaan turned an expectant eye to Col. Myuri was not a part of this circle—she proudly puffed out her chest.

“It seems we all have our fair share of humility.” Le Roi burst out into belly-shaking laughter, and Myuri stared at him blankly.

“I thought you might know of some valuable tales, Mister Le Roi,” Col said.

“And I thought Archivist Canaan would have access to many more books that I would not,” Le Roi replied.

“All those stories have questionable basis,” Canaan said. “But Master Col is indeed translating the scripture into the vernacular, and he is shaking the very foundation of the Church, which is an impossibly large organization. He most certainly should be written about in songs—has there ever been anything like this since the dawn of history?”

All three of them glanced back and forth at the others. But when Col noticed Myuri, the only one not a part of the circle, was pouting, he quickly put his hand

on her back.

“Is this really the time to be quibbling over such a thing?” It was an unfamiliar voice that interjected—Canaan’s guard spoke up from his spot several paces away, where he stood on watch. “Some casualties cannot be helped. Archivist Canaan, have you forgotten what you told yourself when you left the archives?”

Canaan’s guard spoke—he was more taciturn than Az, so his words lay heavy over them. Canaan always seemed to be taking things in stride, yet Col had gotten a vague idea of what he must have gone through to leave the Holy See.

“Perhaps you should stop quibbling and make your decision.”

“I...B-but Mister Jean learned these techniques for the sake of his dreams. And as a result of those dreams being shattered, he no longer wants to have anything to do with books. I am not sure if hurting him, tormenting his spirit in order to save others, is truly the correct thing to do.”

Canaan’s guard remained unconvinced, but the way he shifted on his feet made it seem as though he was searching for a compromise, and silence fell over them again.

Of course, there was no better solution than finding a way for Jean’s motivation to return, but when considering world peace was at stake here, there was an argument to be made that the suffering of one could easily be acceptable in the face of safety for everyone else.

“It’s fine!” Myuri then said, getting to her feet. “Did you see how excited he was when he heard about me and my brother’s adventure?”

It was as though she was telling them there was an obvious way to get Jean’s motivation back.

But the conflict between the kingdom and the Church, one that could easily be said had the world split into two, was at stake. That meant whatever story they told him would have to be very carefully chosen.

That said, it was still true that he had been very interested in her sword and crest.

Myuri firmly believed that her adventure with Col was simply the best, yet he

could talk her down through skills he had honed in theological debate.

“We are not invalidating you. There are many paths up a mountain—we are simply discussing which one we should take.”

Myuri sensed some sort of trickery and opened her mouth to speak, but Le Roi spoke up before she could.

“In my experience, all people have their own preferences. Which means we should not narrow it down to one single thing and put all our hopes on that; we should allow everyone to tell him a tale they have full confidence in. Other’s preferences are surprisingly hard to pin down before speaking about them.”

Le Roi traded in books—there was weight to his words.

Myuri still looked like she wanted to say something, but she ultimately pursed her lips and sat back down in her chair.

“Then we will wait for Mister Jean to awaken, and then we will tell him moving tales...Is that correct?” Canaan asked.

“Yes,” Col replied.

Canaan turned a thoughtful gaze into the distance.

It was then that Col suddenly felt a chill on his cheek, and the rest of the remaining group turned their attention skyward.

“It’s raining,” Canaan remarked.

“We should return to the inn. Myuri, have them pack up the rest,” Col said.

“But our story would make this easy,” she muttered as she shoved one last mouthful of food into her mouth, then called for the waitress.

The room was dim with the window shutters closed. Yet when the candles were lit, it only made the shadows deeper, which darkened his mood further.

“Good grief, how things have turned out...”

Col had sort of assumed that once they found the artisan, all their problems would be solved.

He could not deny, either, that he was optimistic, that if the artisan had refused to work with them, they could simply convince him.

He had not once thought that the artisan was evading the skill he mastered as a result of his dreams being so thoroughly ruined.

“I just need to tell him my story.”

Myuri, with her ears and tail out, sat improperly on the bed, munching on the lamb ribs they had brought back from the tavern.

“You may not tell him about Miss Ilenia or Mister Autumn.”

It was said that once the Church found nonhumans, the nonhumans were immediately burned at the stake. Much like witches, those poor innocents who fell under suspicion were often needlessly killed, but in their case, it was all true.

It would be terrible trouble for them if her story ended up being spread around on the off chance that Jean took a liking to it.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“Then are you going to talk about Lord Nordstone?”

Stories like that of the ghost ships transporting human bones, which she had indeed brought up, could go over very well with the drunks at the taverns. But dubious tales about living nobles would only cause trouble for the new Lord Stephan.

But as Col reconsidered, Myuri, with a rib bone picked clean of meat still in her mouth, leaned forward to pull out a sheaf of papers from her bag, and she slapped them on the bed.

“I thought about that, but I think this would be better,” she said.

Col could not keep a straight face—she had suggested her fantasy knight tale, the one thing he thought most implausible.

“...Why are you looking at me like that?”

She glared at him, eyes damp.

He did not want to scold her too much, but all their efforts would come to nothing if Jean grew frustrated with them through their thoughtless actions.

Like a sheep picking its way through a pothole-littered ground, he chose his

words carefully.

“Well...that is a detailed rendition of your dreams, no? It is often said that we should not share the dreams we had the previous night with others.”

When Myuri was of the age where she had to voice every little thing she saw and thought, he occasionally found himself unable to bear her ramblings. He tensed, certain she was going to be angry with him for bringing it up outright, but she only shrugged.

“My goal wasn’t to show him this, specifically.”

“What?”

Unsure of what she meant, Col stared dumbfounded at her. A humid breeze blew in through the open window, causing the candlelight to dance.

Myuri was the sort whose reactions came instantaneously, who could respond with intensity far beyond what was normally warranted; she reached to grip her toes, and her tail swished back and forth. The gloom on her face most certainly did not seem to be a reflection of the gloom in the sky beyond the open window.

Col was at a loss; Myuri closed her eyes and gave a deep sigh.

“These are dreams.”

He thought he heard thunder rumbling in the distance, but a cart had only passed by the window. But the sky had grown dark enough that he knew it would begin raining any minute now, and it cast a dark cloud over Myuri’s expression.

“Dreams that will never come true. You know that, don’t you?”

She had been obsessed with her knight’s story since leaving Raponell. She said what happened when she faced off against the priest and all the common folk he commanded did not sit very well with her.

An indomitable old noble clad in full armor and a silver wolf who has returned to true form, dashing through the woods.

It was indeed the perfect material for a war epic, but Myuri was still not quite happy with it.

That was because the person she wanted standing beside the wolf was someone else.

“But...”

The story in her hands was the manifestation of the best possible future she could imagine, solidified in words. He wanted to tell her this, but he faltered—Myuri stared at him, a wry smile on her face.

“When I ran through the forest with that old man with a clear enemy in mind, I was so, so excited. It was so much fun.” She dropped her shoulders; her neck seemed so thin that Col wondered if she was always this skinny. “But when we stood at the edge of the forest and the old man drew his sword, I realized something.”

“You did?” he asked.

She nodded, drawing her shoulders back up as she did. When she was little, growing up in Nyohhira, she was full of mischief, and she spent all her time swinging around sticks, pretending they were swords. Though it was not a direct result of that, she now had the title of knight for herself and trained every day in swordsmanship.

Her eyes squinted uncomfortably as she smiled at Col, as though she could not focus after just waking up.

“You’d never let me wield a sword, Brother.”

“.....”

Col, of course, had no right to be surprised by what she said. Because he was constantly admonishing her for being so tomboyish and telling her that she needed to act more ladylike.

But he had a feeling what she was telling him went beyond that.

“Well, maybe you would let me, but...I don’t know. I feel like we’d end up totally at odds.”

She reached forward, squeezing her hand around the hilt of an imaginary sword.

Her blade, the one she never let stray far from her person, the one decorated

with the crest of the wolf, leaned against a nearby wall.

“Because...try to imagine me with a sword in my hand and someone’s blood splattered all over my face. You’d be sadder than if I got hurt.”

He could picture that so easily.

The battlefield was no place for elegant nobility. When she stood beside Nordstone, the clever girl had finally seen for herself what it meant to wield a sword and what would come of it.

“If I hurt someone with my sword, or even end up killing them, then...I don’t think we could ever have fun laughing or talking anymore like we used to. There wouldn’t be any point to any of this if that happened. So it’s just a dream. It won’t ever happen.” She pulled her knees in and hugged them, then began to lightly draw her finger over the paper of her story. “Doesn’t that make it the most fitting story to tell the artisan?”

She tilted her head when she finished speaking, and her long hair slipped from her shoulders with a quiet rustle. She suddenly looked so grown-up.

Though she was full of unbounded innocence, the bottom of her clear waters was littered with the sharp fragments of reality. Myuri stood her ground in the cold water, even though she knew that moving quickly would only tear open her skin and draw blood.

“I know you and the others are only going to tell him happy stories.”

She was supposed to be the most happy-go-lucky girl in the world; she slowly turned her eyes to gaze out the open window.

Luckily, the weather did not turn into a spring storm, but a misty rain soon covered the town.

“Salty meat goes best with sweet bread. I think it’d be perfect if I told him a sad story.”

She got up from the bed and closed the window.

It almost seemed as though a great, important door was now closed to them.

“The bards told me that the livelier songs are the popular ones. But the ones that make the most money are the pensive ones.” When she turned around

again, her mischievous smile was back on her face. “Father told me that.”

“Myuri...”

“Well, that’s the gist of it.”

Her eyes dropped. She bashfully drew up her shoulders before taking the sheaf of papers on the bed in hand and tapping them on the blanket to straighten them out.

“You should buy me a treat if I manage to convince the artisan to work with us,” she said.

“.....”

“Full plate armor for me. And I mean that!”

There was no reason to hamper the movements of someone so nimble as Myuri with plate armor. But she had learned what it meant to wield a sword in battle and understood that such a thing would never happen. Which meant the only place she could exude knightliness was the ceremonial knight’s festivals—jousting tournaments.

How he should respond to her, Col did not know. As much as he wanted to discourage her from her wild behavior, she had come to understand those limits long before he noticed.

As he stood there, upset, she stepped lightly toward the door.

He hurriedly called to her: “Wh-where are you going?”

She was reaching for the door. When she turned to look at him, she shrugged.

“Don’t make that face. I’m fine. I’m not running away or anything.”

Back in the bathhouse in Nyohhira, when she was much younger and had an even harder time understanding what was going on, she would often run into the mountains after being scolded.

“Someone’s been loitering outside in the hallway. I think I need to share you. You’re so popular.”

Another mischievous smile crossed her face as she hid her ears and tail. No matter who it was waiting for them, she did not want to stay in the room when

it felt like this.

“Mother would be drinking mug after mug of wine right now.”

“You may n—”

—*Not*, is what he was going to say, but the smile on her face told him she was happy to be scolded that way.

“Instead, I’m going to ask Mister Le Roi for more really good food.”

Col was shocked—she had eaten so much not long ago—but he understood this was her way of telling him not to worry about her.

She was always so angry when he treated her like a child, and now he saw that she was indeed growing up.

She smiled—it was not a forced one, nor was it filled with joy—and with a little wave, she left the room.

When she cried and laughed and whined and ate, all he could ever see was a big puppy.

The terrible feeling of emptiness that hung in the room was not from being left alone.

It was because she was climbing the steps toward adulthood with nary a sound, and it suddenly felt like Col was the one being left behind.

Though he knew he should be glad she was growing up, he was astonished. To think he would feel so sad about it, too.

But things did not always go the way he wanted. No—perhaps he, too, was inexperienced.

Though it was far too late for him to do anything about it, he noticed that despite all she said, Myuri still had taken her knight’s sword with her.

She had seen reality yet did not forget to play within her dreams.

Perhaps it was in the mundane that Col stood no hope of matching Myuri.

And so, as the dust settled onto the floor in the room, his heart eased.

The shift in air had perhaps extended beyond the door—there came a polite

knock. Col had a general guess of who it might be from the way Myuri had spoken; when he opened the door, he found Canaan.

Canaan stepped into the room. Though Col doubted he had been listening in on the conversation, he was certainly sharp enough to be able to tell from the atmosphere that something had happened between him and Myuri. He would not carelessly ask, of course, but he still stood uneasily and idly in place.

“Oh, please, don’t stand. Take a seat.”

It was not a very fancy inn—Col offered a chair that would likely splinter to pieces if Le Roi sat on it, but after taking a glance at it, Canaan slowly shook his head.

“I actually came because I have a request.”

Canaan did not ask to talk, which felt foreboding. And since Canaan elected to remain standing, Col found himself unsure of what to do with himself. So when he took the initiative to sit on the edge of the bed, Canaan gave in and sat on the chair offered to him.

“You have a request?”

“Yes,” Canaan said. “Perhaps more an offer to form a united front, to be more precise.”

It was an odd word choice, but Canaan continued.

“With regards to swaying Mister Jean onto our side, I would like your help with my story, Master Col.”

“.....”

Col had thought that he, Canaan, and Le Roi each had stories to tell Jean that would be perfectly suited to persuade him, in their own way. He had a feeling Canaan had mentioned the story of the Twilight Cardinal being most fitting.

But he was not sure what sort of help he could give. It did not seem as though Canaan was here to ask for more specific details that rumor of him on the street gave.

“Do you...want to craft a story together, or something of the sort?”

Though Col did not outright call it a “fabrication,” that was the sense he got from Canaan.

Canaan closed his mouth, dropped his gaze, then chose his words carefully.

“Crafting a story would be an apt descriptor, yes.”

Col did not think he would say that, because Canaan did not strike him as the sort of person who would want to do that.

But the first thing that came to mind was Canaan’s guard, how he pressured Canaan in forcing Jean to use the technology. Canaan and the other archivists were a minority within the Church, and their insistence on pursuing just ideals certainly earned the ire of the majority. To bring the project to the kingdom amid such a situation doubtlessly came with trouble and danger beyond imagining.

“But it would not be a fabrication. Not exactly.” Canaan took a deep breath before settling his gaze squarely on Col. “I believe this opportunity is divine guidance. I feel God has sent me here so that I may have this very conversation with you here and now.”

Were anyone else to say that, Col would think the statement overblown.

But this boy hailed from a pure family intimately tied to the Church, to the point that there were popes in his family tree. And the faith that burned in his eyes was befitting his lineage.

Canaan said: “Master Col. You should be canonized.”

“...I’m sorry?”

Col wondered if there was a bit of a smile on his face.

“You should be canonized, Master Col—no, Twilight Cardinal.” Canaan leaned forward in his chair, his knees slipping to the floor in a kneel, and he gazed up at Col. “Become a saint.”

It did not sound like a joke.

But Col could not think of it as anything but.

“Oh, um, I...”

He thought he felt himself black out for a few moments.

Canaan was practically clinging to Col's knees, so Col pushed back on his shoulders.

"Please calm down," he said in a fluster. "I don't—ah, I don't understand."

Canaan's brows lifted, as though he was stung by Col's words. He wondered if he had misheard him for a brief second, but no—Canaan had indeed asked him to become a saint.

"I would not bring this up as a joke," Canaan said, still on his knees, speaking as though praying to the god beyond the altar. "The idea itself has remained in my head ever since I spoke about it with Sir Rhodes."

That was an unexpected name.

"With...Rhodes?"

"Yes. With Sir Rhodes, an admirable knight of Saint Kruza, though young he is. I was dazed by the depth of his love for you," Canaan said with a bit of a chuckle.

"But let us discuss the concrete steps." Canaan, a bit calmer after making his joke, rose to his feet and spoke like a young theologian at the lectern. "Right now, the Kingdom of Winfiel's division of the Knights of Saint Kruza have tasked themselves with righting the wrongs of the churches within the kingdom. Sir Rhodes and the other knights are, of course, fervently faithful. And they are more well versed in the study of canon law than the average member of the clergy. Thus, those corrupt churches who have wrongfully accumulated wealth through whatever means are successfully being denounced."

And with both physical strength and the love of the people on their side, the knights had nothing to fear.

"However," Canaan continued, "there are some who do not accept the principle of the law. That makes them barbarians who refuse to obey God's true teachings."

That reminded Col of what Rhodes said. In rural churches, where the seat of the bishop is hereditary or where illiterate priests who had never read a word

of the scripture were in charge, the authority of the Knights of Saint Kruza held no power.

“What *does* sway them, however, is your name, Master Col.”

Even if these priests were uneducated shams, they were still sensitive to social trends. They learned how things were changing out there in the wider world through the merchants and citizens they dealt with daily, which meant they had a general grasp on current events.

And that meant even those who opposed Rhodes and the other knights’ denouncements, who likened the Knights of Saint Kruza to brigands and splashed them with water, could often be swayed when they heard the Twilight Cardinal’s name.

That was because...

“That is the sort of prestige your name holds now, Master Col.”

At this point, Col understood that any lamentation or insistence that he was not that remarkable held little meaning. He had indeed left Nyohhira, joined the fight at Hyland’s side, and begun to push the boulder down the mountain with his own hands.

He had no choice but to accept that this was the outcome.

“What Sir Rhodes said could also apply to our project.”

Col had a feeling he was starting to see what Canaan was saying.

“Many may question if the vernacular scripture is the real scripture. No—I can easily see this happening, and I believe there will be strong resistance in this regard on the mainland, since the Church’s influence is much stronger there.”

A translation was ultimately a translation and not the original.

“The populace, who will not know what is correct, will believe their local priests if it comes down to it—they hold authority in the villages, after all. But with your name on it, Master Col, I believe things will be different.”

Attributing correctness based on who was speaking held a surprising amount of sway in the world. Canaan speaking of contradictions in faith versus Myuri speaking on the same topic held vastly different shades of meaning.

“B-but wait. Many already know I’m involved with the vernacular translation of the scripture, yes. But to use my name yet again when distributing the translated copies changes things. That may only intensify the conflict between the kingdom and the Church, and it would instead earn us the animosity of those associated with the Church on the mainland.”

This was not humility stemming from his lack of self-confidence, which Myuri was always frustrated with. It was a series of events he could easily imagine happening, and one he knew they had to avoid.

And Canaan, who could read a thick copy of an annotated version of the scripture once and have it memorized, had already thoroughly considered those ideas, and that was why he was here to speak with Col.

“That is where canonization comes in.”

“.....”

“If you were to be an officially recognized saint, you could wield the authority of the Church yourself.”

“.....”

Col was dumbstruck, but he could not look away from Canaan.

His earnest eyes were brimming with clear resolve and intelligence.

“Many of our problems could be solved if you were to become an officially recognized saint. If that came to pass, you could even redefine the boundary lines in the conflict between the Church and the kingdom. That is because you would become the very embodiment of the Church’s authority, Master Col!”

Col felt like it all made sense, but he found himself unable to comprehend all of it because the only thing he could picture in his mind was the ouroboros.

“What is even more important is that there may be many members of the Church who sympathize with your ideas, but the ties of obligation prevent them from openly supporting you. But if you were an official saint, they would be able to boldly offer their support without hesitation. Please try to picture it. The circumstances could change the world!”

It would be like watching a scene of winter transform into spring in the blink

of an eye.

“But...official sainthood?”

“Do you believe you are not up to it?”

The way Canaan smiled was rigid, that of a boy standing at the edge of a sheer cliff—it was as though he understood how utterly ridiculous his own actions were.

“We administer the Curia’s archives. All texts come to us, and all texts come from us.”

Since the dawn of history, there had been famous priests all over the world. As the Church spread its teachings, it needed to strengthen the union of all its believers in order to contend with the pagans. One way they managed to accomplish that back in the day was celebrating famous priests as saints.

But canonizing, the act of officially recognizing someone as a saint, did not mean God would one day descend from the heavens and his angels would blow on their trumpets to proclaim the person’s ascension to sainthood. It was a bureaucratic process where mortal hands filled out documents.

And so it was well known that there was a never-ending line of people who saved money to make their local priests into saints, putting the dignity of their region on the line, which meant the application process itself was a major business for the Church.

Canaan was very familiar with this sort of corrupt flow of money. Documents written in ink made of melted corrupt gold found their way to his hands, after all, and were put on the shelves to be subsequently cared for by him and his cohort. He was intimately familiar with the bizarre and complex process, and he was also thoroughly knowledgeable about the relationships of power within the Curia, which were often likened to a spider’s web.

No matter how much a great noble might boast, it was only God or the pope himself who could give even more credibility to this story than Canaan and the archivists.

“And every application for canonization requires the saint’s biography.”

A prospect that seemed almost like climbing a ladder that stretched infinitely upward now felt more like hopping over a puddle. Col immediately understood what Canaan wanted to say.

“You want Mister Jean to print it?”

Canaan nodded slowly. The mist of rain outside slowly seeped into the ground.

“Yes. Though we’ve seen that he has no talent for poetry, he understands how to construct a sentence, and I believe in that overly proper style of writing, even if it is ill-placed in the songs of bards.”

When Col saw Jean’s booklets at the papermakers’, he felt the word choice was far too rigid, and it felt too eager. But what if it was not for an ode or an epic, but instead for a stern biography?

That eager and stiff writing was perfect for official documents that caused the reader to sit up straighter.

“He is a writer to whom no one has paid attention. How can one not be deeply roused knowing his pen could give birth to a saint and change the world?” Canaan clenched his fists as he spoke.

Col was not as certain when it came to Jean’s interests, but Canaan, just as he inspired himself, genuinely believed in what he was saying from the bottom of his heart.

“God has put everything precisely where it needs to be. I cannot believe that you and I are here right now for any other reason besides his command.”

Regardless of how Canaan truly felt, Col knew this decision was not one to be made with haste. He could not immediately find reasons to turn down Canaan’s offer. But whether he could agree to go forward with it was a different matter entirely.

“But...to be a saint?”

Nothing about that felt realistic. And if Col really were suited to being a saint, then he believed Canaan was as good a candidate as he. Even Rhodes and Clark, too.

“I know how you feel.” Canaan stepped closer and took Col’s hand. “Because anyone who believes themselves to be suitable for sainthood would not be suitable for sainthood.”

And perhaps that was why most who were canonized were already deceased. This strangely calm thought passed through Col’s confounded mind.

“And if you were to be canonized,” Canaan said as he let go of Col’s hand; perhaps he did so to keep something from getting through to Col, “it would solve the monetary problems that plague Heir Hyland. It would also be a great help to her acquaintance’s monastery. You know quite a lot about the world of faith, Master Col. You understand what I mean.”

Canaan’s sad smile, worn down from admitting defeat to the way of the world, only made the truth of his words that much more evident, whether or not he liked it.

Because a saint was an embodiment of a miracle. Pilgrims swarmed their graves; they lay at the places the saint was said to practice their faith and prayed for miracles. Shreds of their clothing, pages of their personal copies of the scripture, parts of their quills, the pillars of their homes, benches upon which they sat on their travels—they all became relics and were sold for eye-blistering prices. One could not dress a dead saint in new clothes, but that could be done for a living saint. A new relic would be created every time they move, which essentially meant one could create and sell an infinite amount of treasure.

Much like how one ancient king was said to have been able to turn everything he touched into gold, they would be able to transform Sharon and Clark’s struggling monastery into a great pilgrimage site.

“I...cannot force you, of course,” Canaan said, his head hanging listlessly.

If Canaan were the type to do everything in his power to accomplish something, they would have Jean on a cart with a bag over his head on their way back to Rausbourne right about now.

But if he were sharp enough to do that, then he would have never come to the kingdom. He would have used his position within the Church to make himself an obscene amount of money and come up with a plan to drag down

the Twilight Cardinal, who was a clear hindrance to his business.

Canaan was here. That fact alone served as the root of his unbelievable plan.

“It is but one possibility, Master Col.”

But it was a big possibility, one with tremendous might behind it.

Col found himself frozen before its greatness, and he could not even move, entranced by Canaan’s eyes.

“...It’s gotten chilly.”

Col remained unmoving, so it was Canaan who dropped his gaze first and changed the subject. He turned to look at the closed window, beyond which came the dripping sound of the rain.

“Miss Myuri said she will be going with Mister Le Roi and the others to drink at the establishment across the street,” Canaan said with a smile. It did not look like a forced one. “Join us when you can.”

I have given you the treasure map. Now it is up to you to plan our voyage.

Whether Canaan was actually thinking that was unclear; he gave a short bow and left the room.

“A...saint...”

Even when Col said the words himself, they did not feel real. Not even the knight tales Myuri wrote had a turn of events this unbelievable.

But reality’s stepping stones continued on into the darkness.

And Canaan’s map showed him that at the end of all his hops and leaps was the key to solving all their problems.

How long had Col sat alone in the room, lost in thought? It was only when the candle flame flickered out that he snapped back to his senses. He lifted his head to see it was still raining outside. It was no longer a mist—it was now raining in earnest.

The Kingdom of Winfiel was known for its sheep, which meant the land was lush with the grasses needed to support the sheep. The inland parts of the country were wet and rainy. While it snowed plenty during the winter in

Nyohhira, there was surprisingly little rain. Fog was a more familiar sight to him.

As he cracked open the window and gazed up at the sky, he felt a little strange knowing it had been so bright and sunny earlier that day. The thick clouds now blotted out the sun. But when he dropped his attention to the tavern across the way, its lights, music, and laughter filled the streets.

Though he could not see the future, he could at least take charge of the day and decide to enjoy it.

He moved to close the window as those familiar words rolled around in his mind, when a girl, mug in hand, peeked out from under the eaves of the tavern with listless movements. When she nonchalantly turned her head upward, she noticed Col and immediately beamed.

It seemed she had sense enough not to yell at him, but she did give him a large wave, telling him to come over quickly.

Col waved back in acknowledgment. She was right. He would not get any good ideas by staying in the room.

Well, he was not waiting for ideas, exactly. He had to make a decision.

If they were able to secure Jean's cooperation, they would not have to worry about hiring an unbelievable number of scribes. But making copies of a book as thick as the scripture would still cost a pretty penny. It was unclear whether Jean alone could manage the printing process entirely by himself, which meant they would need to pay a hefty sum for assistants and the creation of the printing tools. And every last coin was to be borne by Hyland.

But if they were unable to get Jean's help, the enormous, unparalleled monetary burden would likely stop them in their tracks.

Which meant Canaan's idea was not simply to restore Jean's motivation. If Col were indeed successfully canonized, that would give them a means to solve the monetary problems that would doubtlessly come up in the future.

Not only that, but if he really were awarded the title of saint, it would also solve the problem of the shaky authority of the vernacular translation itself, which was something he had not considered until Canaan brought it up. As Rhodes said, there were plenty of priests who could not read, nor who had ever

come in contact with God's teachings. They needed to use the name of a famous, powerful figure as a weapon to get the copies of the translated scripture into those people's hands.

The title of saint was powerful in that regard. Of course, given how those people were considered to be the bearers of miracles, many saints were only canonized posthumously. Many historical popes must have given the title to living people in the past, only to later get in trouble when they were scrutinized for inappropriate behavior. Canaan was attempting to use history's teachings against them.

Of course, Col questioned whether he could actually go through with it. But if he did not, they would lose their path forward. If all went well, the results could indeed change everything.

Or perhaps the reason he hesitated so was because he had been picked up by a traveling merchant as a child. It was under that merchant's hand that he learned to weigh every factor upon the scales before making a decision.

If he did become a saint, what would rest on the scales opposite him?

What would he ultimately have to give up? He could not even imagine his heart alone would be good enough.

But the reason he could not brush off Canaan's project as foolish was not simply because the massive potential profits they stood to gain. If he were to accept, there was a good chance it would light a fire within Jean.

What aspiring poet could possibly resist a tale as outlandish as this?

And if they managed to get Jean on their side with this ridiculous drivel, then Myuri would not have to share that tragic story with him.

Perhaps speaking of one's own dreams that would never come true to another in the depths of despair was the right thing to do, in the sense that it created a sense of closeness. But Col wanted Myuri to keep her bright smile, to approach things positively. He did not want her to smile sadly and share her broken dreams with another. She wanted her to use it as her way of complaining about him, as her own selfishness, like she always did.

If he were to become a saint, he had a feeling both Jean and Myuri would lift

their heads from their bundles of paper and look to him instead. Myuri's eyes may glitter, astonished that her straitlaced brother could pull off something so grand. No matter what hardships may come after, nothing could be greater than Myuri's smile.

Canaan's idea was ridiculous. It was, but Col was starting to think he should send a letter to Hyland and have an earnest talk with her. He did not know how long it would take to get Jean motivated, but judging from his behavior, he also did not seem to have any intention of suddenly running away. Col likely had time to speak with Hyland about how feasible the idea of becoming canonized might be.

But then, it was not clear if it was a good thing if he had the time to do so. This was not something Hyland could easily call good or bad, and even if she did say it was a good thing, that did not ultimately change the reality that Col had to make the decision himself. To have extra time meant he had that much more room to overthink, and his time spent suffering would only be drawn out longer.

Perhaps, in that case, he should speak with Myuri and make his decision sooner than later.

If Myuri found it interesting, that alone would be enough to spur him onward.

Once he made up his mind, he fixed the window, which he had not closed properly, checked that the candle was indeed out, and exited the room. The inn was dark, owing to the clouds and the rain, and since the majority of guests were either still on the way or out working in town, it was quiet inside.

The dining hall on the first floor, where Myuri had eaten a big serving of eel the night before, was closed, and the kitchen was still. It was dark and rainy outside, making it seem even more deserted—the empty feeling tugged at him, so he quickly walked past.

The chairs, hanging upside down off the edge of the tables to allow for cleaning, looked like dead trees in winter.

He was passing through the dining hall, set on reaching the lively establishment on the opposite side of the street, when he heard something fall in the far back of the kitchen.

It was likely a mouse searching for food, or a cat trying to catch said mouse. Normally, Col would have not paid any mind to it, but considering the wind and the rain, he reckoned he may as well close the windows.

He slipped back toward the kitchen, as though drawn in by the stillness, and peered inside. There were no signs of heat; as he thought, it was quiet and empty. The back entrance never had a door to speak of, so he could see through to the inner courtyard.

It was then that he spotted, on the packed earth at his feet that served as the floor, traces of something being dragged across the ground.

The tracks led past his feet and into what looked like the pantry, ahead of him and to the right. Perhaps the cook staff had decided to follow up on the big eel from the night before and order a large catfish—maybe the catfish was in its tank, making a ruckus.

What a problem it would cause if it were to escape, and Myuri would certainly find the story interesting if he told her.

As he poked his head into the pantry, the smile on his face froze.

“Wha...?”

There he found the innkeeper, bound tightly with rope.

In the second that followed, he thought he felt shadows move on either side of him, only for his vision to suddenly be enshrouded in darkness. By the time he realized some sort of sack had been pulled over his head, a powerful blow struck his solar plexus. He fell to his knees, unable to breathe, and he felt rope curl around his entire body. He was astounded with himself when, in his panic and bewilderment, he began picturing the preparation process for cured meat.

I need to yell, he desperately thought. He tried to open his mouth, but all that bubbled from the pit of his stomach was a sob and a bitter liquid.

He could not breathe. Feeling quickly left his limbs. A reddish darkness overtook his vision, not only from the sack but because he could not breathe.

“_____”

Myuri, he thought as he called for his knight. But perhaps it was simply a

vision dreamed in the moments before unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR



CHAPTER FOUR

Col awoke with a jolt. He felt like he had been in the midst of a long dream, but he also felt as if he had been asleep for only a second. But as the blood began to circulate in his head again, his memories slowly came back to him, like drops of water spreading through paper.

The first thing he thought of was that, perhaps, he had stumbled across a robbery that was being carried out while the weather was bad and there were few people on the street. But if that were the case, then there was no reason he should have been kept alive, much less taken away to another location. They should have left him there with the innkeeper.

So then...had he been the target? What came to mind at the same time was what Rhodes said about how assailants had attacked the Knights of Saint Kruza under someone else's orders.

By the time his thought process reached that conclusion, there came a distant but loud stomp, accompanied by even louder speech.

"I'm telling you, you got the *wrong guy*! What the hell are you people doing?!"

There came a muffled murmur after that, but the voice sounded terribly unsure. Perhaps whomever it was, was making excuses.

"Ugh, I don't care anymore!" The first person yelled again. "Stop acting without my permission! Get out of here and go have a pint or something!"

The stomping footsteps stopped before the door, and there came the sound of the latch being undone. It was at this point that Col at last realized the reason he could not see was not because his eyes were closed, but because the sack was still over his head.

"I swear...Good God. Who the hell did they bring back?"

The words themselves were vulgar, but there was something refined about

the speaker's enunciation and vocabulary. For that reason, the situation did not terribly frighten Col, nor was he overly surprised when the mystery man ordered, "Untie him."

The sack was unceremoniously ripped from his head; his eyes pricked at the flood of light, but he quickly got used to it—it was only candlelight.

When he glanced around, he saw he was not in a desolate bandit hideout, which is what he had been picturing, but a rather nice room with strangely fine furniture. There was even a tapestry on the wall depicting a knight fighting in battle. The open window showed that it had stopped raining.

"Goddammit."

His attention drawn by the heavy sigh, Col finally turned to the man standing in the middle of the room, staring at him. He was rather tall, with broad shoulders. Col noted his coat and the sword at his hip; when he spotted the sheep crest on the sheath, he was perplexed.

Was the man royalty?

When that thought crossed his mind, points of knowledge connected. He had a feeling he knew who the man before him, who scowled sourly, was.

"Who the hell said, *Oh, I think he's some kind of servant?!'*"

The man scowled like a beast, his sharp glare sweeping over the men who shrank under his gaze, plastered to the wall beside the door. All of them were much too well-dressed to be bandits.

"Of *all* the people you could've taken, you brought back the worst possible one. I've seen this guy's face from a distance before."

When Col looked up, he saw the man's brown eyes were fixed squarely on him. There was no hostility or malice in them, only an acknowledgment that he was facing trouble.

"So, uh"—he scratched at his head before resting his hands on his hips—"we made a mistake."

Then please let me go.

Col's thought must have reached him; the man gave a deep, deep sigh.

“We don’t mean to put you in any danger...But I guess you wouldn’t agree to pretending like nothing happened after tying you up and spiriting you from the inn, huh?”

It still felt like there was a large weight pressing down on his chest; Col felt nauseous when he tried to take a deep breath.

But he no longer had any doubts as to who his kidnapper was. He knew Col’s face, and the displeased look he wore the second he realized who sat before him greatly narrowed down the candidates.

“You...are...”

There was a dull pain in the pit of Col’s stomach, and the inside of his mouth felt grossly sticky.

The man held up his hand to stop him, and nodded.

“You’re the Twilight Cardinal, aren’t you?”

“...Heir Klevend.”

The man lifted his hands to his shoulders in a comedic manner. “I bet my half sister’s painted a pretty awful picture of me for you, but I guess this isn’t the best situation for me to defend myself.”

The second heir to the throne once again glared menacingly at the other men, who were desperately trying to make themselves seem invisible, before directing another heavy, disappointed sigh at the floor.

“But we can’t change what’s happened. I doubt this is going to be a fun conversation, but I guess that depends on how you decide to cooperate.”

Klevend jerked his chin at one of the men, who brought over a chair, and he plopped down on it.

“You hungry?”

The way he spoke made him sound like a mercenary captain.

It did not seem food would sit well in his stomach after being punched in that exact spot, so Col asked only for water to rinse out his mouth.

Klevend’s men brought over meat and bread, and Klevend busied himself with

it.

Those who had been standing, moping in the corner, had been sent away, one by one, with individual slaps to the head a little earlier.

“Let me first say that they were apparently hoping to kidnap that guy from the Holy See.”

After spending a moment with his food, the prince washed it down not with wine, but with commoner’s ale. There was a strange caginess to his words, considering how sloppy his movements were.

“...You make it sound as though this has nothing to do with you.”

Klevend, according to Hyland, was a two-faced snake, one who could not be trusted; the man only laughed, his shoulders shuddering as he did so.

“Hmm? Well...carping’s par for the course in the royal court. Can’t help the habit of choosing my words carefully.”

The way he gave an embarrassed laugh with his stern face would probably amuse Myuri, Col thought.

“I didn’t give the order. You have to trust me. They cooked up their plan under the influence, and by the time they were sober, they couldn’t go back on what they planned in front of one another, so they went ahead with it. That’s all.”

He picked out a piece of meat with his pinkie from between his back teeth while he spoke, which made his explanation sound all the more realistic.

“‘Cause they found out we have a visitor from the Holy See. And those fellows apparently thought he’d be the nastiest guy with the calmest face.”

While Col was not surprised that they had been aware of Canaan’s presence, it sounded as though they were not aware what sort of person he was. It was hard, of course, to imagine someone that important would be a boy, and if there was any who fit the bill according to what they saw in their heads, the only sensible choice was Col.

“It was raining, not a lot of people out on the roads, and all the strong-looking guards had left. The inn just so happened to be empty. The innkeeper drank too

much that afternoon, forgot to order more, and fell asleep. It was the perfect chance for the guys to show off their pluck and outwit your buddy.”

Col, too, vaguely remembered when the rope came around his stomach. That would have indeed been the perfect opportunity to kidnap him.

But there was something that bothered him.

“Were you...completely aware of all our movements?”

Klevend narrowed an eye and stared at Col, as though trying to see through him, and then shook his head.

“I wish I could say I was, but we have no idea what you were up to. A friend in the Knights of Saint Kruza let us know that someone had come from the Holy See. And when I heard that he was apparently making deals with my sister, I was shocked.”

Col’s expression clouded—information on Canaan was leaking from the knights’ order. It was unlikely Rhodes was double-crossing them, but when he recalled why the prince before him had formed a faction and was acting in secret, it was not all that surprising to think the prince had collaborators within the order.

“I suppose that means there are members of the Knights of Saint Kruza who are hoping for war between the kingdom and the Church.”

Klevend shrugged. He did this not to avoid answering, but because it was obvious enough that he felt no need to confirm the statement. That was because the Knights of Saint Kruza was an order created to fight, and it was not so strange to think they had no place in a peaceful world. It made sense they would get along fairly well with Klevend and his followers, who had little hope of taking headship of their families and whose only hope for achievement lay in raising their banner in battle.

That would mean the attacks on the knights that Rhodes had told him about were either a charade the order executed themselves or the work of an insider coordinating with Klevend.

“We had a guy patiently watching my sister’s mansion, and we learned you’ve been plotting something, but we don’t know what. Then suddenly you got

horses, and the whole lot of you came all the way out to Salenton. The report said you were looking for someone around the workshops, but for what?”

When Klevend professed having someone watching them, Col thought it was a lie. He doubted Myuri would have failed to notice. Or perhaps he had someone on the inside of the manor walls, and he said that in order to draw attention away from them. People were often coming and going from the manor—merchants, menders, all sorts.

Yet he reckoned Hyland had been on alert as well, and Klevend was no ordinary boorish insurgent, after all.

“I...cannot tell you what we were doing.”

“I thought so.”

Klevend stirred in his chair, and Col steeled himself, ready to be hit. But the prince had done nothing but shift in his seat, and he rather seemed hurt by Col’s reaction.

“Hey, c’mon, trust me at least a little bit, will you? What sort of things has my sister been feeding you about me?”

Hyland had described him as a treasonous man, one who would do anything to take the throne for himself, even go so far as to foment civil war.

But according to Sharon, he was more like the leader of chivalrous outlaws who saved those who had fallen through the cracks of the system.

The prince before him was brazen and behaved in a crude manner, yet he chose his words with surprising care—he could easily be both.

“I understand why she blew the circumstances of her birth out of proportion, and why she shows excessive loyalty to my dad and my big brother, but I honestly can’t stand how she acts like there can be no imperfections in the world. I applaud you for putting up with her.”

Hyland isn’t like that, he thought, but from a distance—no, from close-up, it could certainly seem like that. The Twilight Cardinal was nothing more than a foolish big brother to Myuri, after all.

“But whatever you’re doing here in Salenton can’t be that important. Our

destinations are different, see. If we fought every time we ran into each other, there'd be no end to it."

Nor did Klevend seem like an imprudent tyrant.

So Col was not too surprised by the next thing Klevend proposed.

"I guess our meeting was God's work, eh? What do you think—want to work with me?"

He crouched forward, shrinking his larger frame down uncomfortably. It seemed as though he might open his mouth wide and swallow Col whole, but he instead held out his hand, offering what appeared to be a gentle handshake.

"Would that entail you making amends with Heir Hyland?"

Col did not say this because he genuinely believed it would happen; he said it to demonstrate that he would not be appeased.

That was because he would never betray Hyland.

"That...won't be easy...", Klevend said, genuinely troubled by the thought.

Col could not help but smile.

"I think the reason she hates me is because we're similar."

Col was surprised to hear that, and Klevend, in turn, was surprised by his reaction.

"Hey, what's that look for? There can't be any reason besides that."

"Well, ah..."

"No matter how good at anything she was, there was no place for her in the court because of her birth. No matter how much she was betrayed in her life, she still remained the very picture of earnestness. The permanent stain of vexation she hides with that veil of loyalty to the king. By that I mean..." He paused, a sad, sympathetic look crossing his face. "She's jealous of me. She is constantly troubled by the circumstances of her birth, and that shows in all her actions. I doubt she'll ever admit it, but I can't think of anything else. She's a good person; you know that. Think about it—she'd normally be sympathetic toward me and my people, wouldn't she?"

This prince had been raised as a spare for his older brother, just in case he was needed to safeguard the royal bloodline's succession. Those who followed him were the second and third sons of other nobles, and they were being idly kept around for similar reasons.

Indeed—thinking of his circumstances alone made it somewhat easy to imagine Hyland reaching out to them and offering help.

“But she may not like our methods.”

“...You are trying to start a *war*.”

Klevend calmly shrugged. “What else am I supposed to do? Till the fields? The ones my dad and brother patrol on horseback?”

But it seemed he had already thought of those things.

“But most of the boys understand the reality of it. That if they don't want to die like dogs, their only real choice is to work the fields.”

“Then—”

Col was interrupted by his sad smile.

“I want to shine just once in my life. Is it wrong to wish for that?”

He had wielded a sword in his hands, ridden horses, been told he may head the family one day, or at least find success in battle, all from a young age. And he had grown up believing that, only for the rug to be pulled out from under him.

Just moments earlier, Klevend looked like a crude but good-natured young man; now the fires of anger burned deep within his eyes.

“I know peace is better than war. We're not bloodthirsty sellswords. But we've put up with all sorts of hardship just for a chance of shining in the limelight. Then before we even got a chance, the world changed. Even though I know there's no point in clinging to nostalgia, we need some kind of catalyst to effect change and forge a new path.”

His brown eyes were an awful lot like Jean's. Though the light had long gone from Jean's eyes, the essence was the same.

A thought suddenly occurred to Col—perhaps Myuri had made the same eyes, too. While he lay sick with fever in bed, perhaps she had taken on the same look as she gazed out over the harbor in Raponell. Her keen insight had told her that her brother would be more upset about her cutting down someone with her sword than if she were to be injured in the same way. She was clever and strong, so she gave up following that path herself. But that choice had consequences—and when she could not contain herself, she instead took up the pen.

Not even Jean had been able to abandon his yearning for the thrill of battle, and he began to use dangerous, banned technology to print war stories. At this point, Col had a feeling he understood why he quit Thearte's workshop and ultimately decided to play at shepherd. One big reason he had attempted to separate himself from printing was because he spotted several bards laughing at his poetry. But Jean, in his own way, tried to give up on his dreams and desperately threw himself into another person's life. His true misfortune was not that his dreams were dashed, but that he could not find a new way forward, which left him with few ideas besides becoming a drunkard at the Reel.

And the same went for Canaan and the other archivists.

They were sincere and never let the temptation of gold cloud their vision; they could have easily manipulated documents and directed a portion of the Church's riches into their own pockets if they wished. Instead, they entrusted Canaan with their will and sent him off to the Kingdom of Winfiel because they could no longer stand idly by and simply watch.

If they would not pick the wrong path, then they wanted proof that they martyred themselves on the right one. It was that thought that led Canaan to leap into a pitch-black river, only for a miraculous stepping stone to appear in the center of the current, one he had not expected. And that was where he was now.

Canaan had fully expected to die when he jumped in the river, but he planted his feet firmly on the ground and leaped again with all his might. What he called for then was Col's canonization. Col, in turn, had been overwhelmed by Canaan's hand, his spirit.

When Col thought of it that way, he realized there were many people around the world who were struggling, ensnared by fate.

They were everywhere, always within arm's reach.

And Col did not even have a sure grip on Myuri's hand at this point, either.

"If we work together," Klevend said, drawing Col out of his thoughts, "then a whole lot of people will find their happy endings. That's how I feel about it anyway. What do you think?"

Heir Klevend did not necessarily know the particulars of the Twilight Cardinal's situation, nor did he fully grasp what was going on with Jean and Canaan. But Col had a feeling he understood why Klevend brought it up.

The conflict between the Church and the kingdom was at a stalemate, and it was clear this was not a favorable situation for anyone.

The Church and the kingdom were essentially black-and-white, and the conflict would not end until one had completely blotted out the other. That meant war, and Col and Hyland were fighting so desperately to avoid that. But for a great many people, their actions were getting in the way of progress.

Klevend was pursuing a new way to shatter this stalemate.

"Of course, I'm not asking you to betray my sister. You two should keep pursuing God's proper teachings, and my boys aren't opposed to that at all. They're honest believers who go to church—they're not barbarians or heathens."

"...What about the throne? For which you are willing to cause civil war."

Klevend's eyes widened, and he lifted his hands.

"Exactly. I've done what I can in all kinds of things, but the one conclusion I keep coming to is war. I want to shine brightly at least once before I give up my claim to the throne and live a normal life working in the fields or in town. And what am I supposed to do to accomplish that? It isn't like I want to start a civil war because I can. It's not like my family wants to keep a vice grip on this country through bloodshed. So forget about that for a second. Sounds like my sister thinks of me as a usurper starving for blood."

It was at this point that Klevend paused. It was this pause that made Col realize this young man was naturally suited to be a prince.

“There are a lot of people like us who are upset about the same stuff out on the mainland. So instead of having family feuds on this tiny little island, shouldn’t we work with them to get the Church wrapped up in a big mess to wash away all the discontentment, so there isn’t any more trouble like this in the future? That’s why we have this fight between the Church and the kingdom in the first place.”

Civil war could tear a country to shreds. Klevend saw it as a last resort. And if all the nobles across the world were experiencing the same thing, they could give war a different meaning.

That was precisely why the conflict between the kingdom and the Church was the biggest history had ever seen.

Klevend’s field of view was broad, much like Sharon’s when she flew in the sky.

“You approach things with a practical mind, like a merchant, don’t you?” Col remarked.

Klevend shrugged like he was casually thanking him for the compliment.

But while Klevend’s thoughts did seem to make sense in a way, Col also felt that it was doing nothing more than carelessly turning a little fire into a bonfire. Was a war that spread across the entire world and involved the Church really that much better than a clash within kingdom borders?

Klevend sighed, his body shrinking with the exhale, as though he had peered into Col’s mind.

“I don’t think we should fight however and whenever we please, of course. The reason the kingdom and the Church are all wishy-washy at the prospect of an all-out war is because they know the tragedy that will come from it. All those bald-headed old men ever talked about was a time when it was constant war, you see. That’s why I was wondering if we could work together to plan something out.”

“.....”

Col regarded him dubiously, and the prince heaved his sturdy shoulders.

“If you raise your own flag,” he continued, “those unhappy with the Church will gather around you, kingdom or no. You and some important Church people can talk, plan out a battle somewhere. A big one, the kind sung about in epics from the time of the ancient empire. Now that the long, drawn-out war with the pagans is over, I doubt there’s anyone left who wants to wage genuine war without the prospect of gaining territory. The only ones hoping to stir up fighting now besides us are merchants who want to make some quick coin or people who made big promises and can’t back out now. That’s why there are idiots on the Church’s side, too, like the kind who kidnapped you but then sent me letters in tears because they didn’t know what to do next. The pope and the cardinals, too, have trapped themselves in their own webs of mutual interest.”

Col’s gaze dropped to Klevend’s feet, and that was when he at last realized that his shoes were covered in mud.

If he were to see his back, it would likely be even dirtier, covered in mud kicked up by the horses.

Klevend had gotten the report and rushed over as quickly as he could.

He was observing the situation in his own way, racking his mind for a way out.

“But think about it: If there were a war that would leave its mark in the annals of every city, town, and village, unhappy children of nobles would give up on their dreams of living by the sword and be satisfied. And at the same time, both the kingdom and the Church could use their participation in such a big battle as pretext to pull back from the brink. It’d all end in a draw, and we’d live happily ever after.”

It was a picture-perfect ideal, and Col had a feeling it was achievable. Both Eve and Myuri would insist that they would need to give both sides a justifiable reason to back down for this conflict to ever end.

Amid it all, Canaan had arrived with a plan that could solve this problem without sending the kingdom and the Church to war. And with Jean at their side, their dreams could become reality. But there was no guarantee it would go well, and if it failed, their final hopes would rest on Klevend’s plan.

“The problem is this will not happen naturally. Not everyone out there is as sensible as Hyland, and not everyone can stomach constant hardship and still act like they’re okay. More important, I don’t think it’s right. I think she should say and do whatever she wants to do, and say no to whatever she doesn’t.”

Klevend had stopped calling her “my sister” with that undercurrent of contempt, and outright called Hyland by her name.

And the woman he spoke of was one Col could easily picture in his mind.

“If God made our world, we should be able to shine at least once in our lives. Don’t you think?”

That was a dream of an adult who had not yet outgrown their more childish phases. Though Col could logically come to that conclusion, it made him think—if that was all it was, then what was happiness?

Of course, even if Col could not immediately come to a decision regarding Klevend’s idea, he knew it was not something he could pretend to have never heard. He understood it was something he needed to consider seriously, no matter how much ruminating it took.

So when he stared squarely back at Klevend, the prince slowly blinked, as though offering his thanks for listening.

“I’m going to do all I can in my power to manage my followers so that you trust my words. I don’t honestly want to start a civil war just to kill my own people,” he said, then dropped his gaze to his hands. “But please don’t forget that we’re not the only ones out there in the world like this. There are tons of people out on the mainland just like us, and they’re antagonizing the Church more than we are. We probably don’t have as much time as we think we do.”

What he said was similar to what Canaan had said. That was why someone needed to take the lead before chaotic fighting broke out. But Col still could not bring himself to see war as the right thing to do. And this plan would make it difficult to root out the corruption in the Church, which was the primary goal of Canaan’s plan.

They had pursued Jean since Col personally considered Canaan’s plan to be the optimal solution. In fact, now that he knew that Klevend was not as evil as

Hyland made him out to be, he almost wanted to ask if he would assist with Canaan's plan. As the child of royalty, he was perfectly capable of reading and writing.

By the time that thought crossed his mind, he realized he had something he needed to ask Klevend.

"...If we were to resolve this conflict without causing a war, what would you do?"

The prince looked as though he was staring in the face of utter defeat.

He gave a troubled, tense smile.

"If that happened, then...we'd probably go for broke."

That meant he would likely be taking his chances charging full tilt at thick castle walls.

If that were to happen, Col would likely be standing on the opposing side, with Hyland.

"Must you start a war?"

If they encountered each other on the battlefield, Col had a feeling he would be asking the very same question.

"What choice do we have? We're an island, surrounded on all sides by the sea. If we can't do it on the mainland, where else are we supposed to go?"

The moment Klevend said that, a sharp shudder ran through Col's body, as though his rear had been pricked with a needle.

"Huh? Hey, what's wrong?"

The prince and his men did not hate the king as much as Hyland suggested, nor were they desperate for chaos. Which meant...yes—there was a place more suited for them.

"You mentioned wanting a place to shine with sword in hand, yes?" Col asked.

"Hmm?"

"You would have no need to exchange blows with another if you had a place to shine with your swords."

Klevend shrugged, and Col continued.

“You do not mind whether you face the Church or the king himself. Which means you do not mind if you face neither.”

“Sure, but...is that possible in a war? Are we supposed to fight ghosts?”

Col shook his head.

Warriors did not always wield their blades in battle.

“It would not be for battle. It would be for adventure.”

“Hmm...?”

“Before the birth of the Winfiel Kingdom, I heard that the Church’s knights and the warriors from the ancient empire were allies when they arrived on these shores.”

Heir Klevend had lost his words for a moment, but he ultimately regarded Col with suspicion.

“That was a long time ago, back when they said the island didn’t belong to anybody. I heard pagans did actually live here, but...But...?”

At that point, the clever prince made a face as though he had found the dead in the dark.

Though he certainly had coconspirators all over the country who were willing to feed him new information, he still looked shocked.

“Are you talking about the continent that might exist at the edge of the sea?”

It took courage to acknowledge it. That was because it was something Myuri loved to talk about, something spoken about only by those like Nordstone, who were illuminated by the madness of the moonlight.

“I heard there was a speculator talking about that in the court, but...Hey, don’t tell me you seriously believe it exists?”

Heir Klevend had put his intellect to work, eventually coming up with the idea of war as the most peaceable conclusion he could think of. Not only that, he had invited Col to join him as a comrade in executing his plan.

In short, even if the prince’s methods were different, his end goal was not all

that different from Col's. As the conflict between the kingdom and the Church would slowly come to its conclusion in the near future, there was a very high chance that he would prove to be a valuable ally in preventing things from going in the wrong direction.

But if he were to mention that he believed in the existence of the new continent, it would only invite the doubt that perhaps the Twilight Cardinal did not believe in God out of sincere faith, but because he was a fool who believed in anything and everything. Once Klevend considered him a knobheaded fool who would believe anything he heard, the valuable bond that happened to bring them together would be severed in a flash.

Not only that, the expression on Klevend's face made it clear that there was no point in denying it now.

Then what was he supposed to do? He thought of Canaan, who came to his room and brought to him the plan to make Col a saint.

He then recalled he had a companion, one who leaped into the frigid seas with him, did he not?

"Is the one speaking of this at court a noble named Nordstone?"

It seemed Klevend had not been expecting Col to breach that subject. The shocked prince nodded, despite himself.

"Y-yeah, that rings a bell. A weird noble with a lot of odd rumors about him... Wait, I think I heard you paid him a visit before. Is that right?"

"I had heard whisper of the new continent since before meeting with Lord Nordstone."

That was not a lie. But he decided not to mention that he did not entirely believe it, thankful Myuri was not around to sniff that out.

"And I thought that perhaps the existence of a new continent may serve as the key to resolving the conflict between the kingdom and the Church. That is because they are arguing over the tithes, which the Church is using as their own reward for winning the war against the pagans. There, instead of fighting over limited portions, they may find opportunity to gain something entirely new—perhaps then this conflict can be water under the bridge."

“.....”

It was Klevend's turn to take in what Col said, hesitating over whether he should say something.

He looked like a barbarian ready to push forward with a rough and reckless plan, and indeed, Klevend was a realistic strategist.

Col had at least been ready to show Klevend how realistic his thoughts were.

“The new continent may be ridiculous sailors' idle talk.” Col paused to swallow, and realized his mouth was dry. “But if...if there was enough evidence for us to believe in its existence...”

Klevend was doubtlessly connected to similarly discontented elements on the mainland. That meant he could possibly convince all those trying to rile up the Church on the mainland to venture to the new continent together.

And if they manage to undermine the supporters at their feet, then those at the top of the Church, who were predicting war, would have no choice but to change their tune, which was precisely what Canaan's plan aimed to achieve.

Col thought Canaan's plan was marvelous, but he would be a fool to assume there was only one path up a mountain.

“In that case, would you assist us?”

Col had no idea if they truly had not meant to kidnap him. But at the very least, Klevend had not attempted to harm him unnecessarily and instead used the opportunity to try to win him over. And even if that were an exaggeration, he still spoke to him, hoping to find understanding.

That said, it was clear Klevend did not expect the victim of a kidnapping to bring up the most ridiculous of topics.

Klevend brought a hand to his mouth and hummed.

“I know how I can be, but you...”

He looked like he had seen a frog with five legs, but the prince, who was uncouth at first glance, seemed to have enough curiosity to consider how far that frog could go with five legs.

“No, more important, the new continent? Hmm...”

This conflict between the kingdom and the Church could be considered the smoldering embers of the war against the pagans. And Klevend and his ilk, who could only shine on the battlefield, were desperately trying to use those embers to make their swords shine just a little bit brighter.

But the war with the pagans was over. And Col believed that meant they needed a new way to solve problems that did not involve war—one that was more suitable for a new age.

“I think I underestimated you,” Klevend said.

“How my head is in the clouds, you mean?”

Klevend stared blankly at him for a moment before a wry smile cracked across his face.

“And I’m not going to let you upstage me.”

Though the genuine vexation on his face was due to how he had seriously considered working with his counterparts on the mainland to start a war on a scale no one had ever seen before, he was still self-aware enough to realize it was a plan not even for his wildest dreams, one he had to laugh at.

He leaned far back in his chair, his eyes roaming the ceiling, as though looking for spiderwebs.

“It’s a ridiculous idea, and...it’s honestly laughable. But an adventure is a good enough idea to make me laugh.”

If he brought Myuri along to talk with Klevend, they would certainly get along, Col thought.

“And that won’t put me at odds with that stubborn Hyland, will it?”

The reason Col hesitated to give an answer at first was because of the globe he saw at Nordstone’s, the one that suggested the world was round. If that turned out to be a valuable clue in their search for the new continent, that would force major revisions to the Church’s doctrines and may endanger the faith itself. Hyland was a strict believer—it was unclear if she would approve of that.

But much like Canaan's project, the search for a new continent would at least let them avert an all-out war, and it would avoid a scenario where the kingdom had to surrender to the Church.

And the most important thing was that if the globe did cause problems of faith, that was an arena where Col could fight.

Even Myuri's incompetent older brother could stand bravely on the battlefield of faith.

"I believe it will go well."

The reply he gave was as a man of faith, who could give no definitive answers besides the righteousness of God. That brought a smile to Klevend's face.

But then he said, "She's a real blockhead, that sister of mine. If you end up on opposite sides, you'll find it harder than trying to persuade God himself." He sighed. "We each have our own purposes. And you—I mean, my sister does, too."

They also had Canaan's project to think about; there were many out there in the world who were doing their absolute best to solve their own problems, just like they were.

"Right now, me and my sister's purposes are black-and-white—they'll never mix. But you've got your own weird intentions, and that could very well become the bridge that connects us."

"I hope so," Col replied. And feeling the need to add one more thing, he continued. "But I believe this rests on whether we can find evidence of the new continent's existence."

"Of course. But better to have alternatives than nothing at all, right?"

In that moment, an image of Myuri's face flashed in Col's mind—of her and the knight's tale she called a dream that would never come true.

Indeed. He wanted this to be a nice alternative for their reality. He didn't want nothing but sad smiles and dreams that would never come true.

Col had more than enough reason to believe that Klevend could be a valuable ally. All he could hope for was that the prince, too, would be aware of the bond

that brought them together.

“There are many paths up a mountain.”

“I would hope so,” Heir Klevend said as he leaned forward, extending his right hand. Col’s eyes widened in surprise, and Klevend offered a playful wink.

“We don’t have any witnesses here,” he said. “So we’re not really shaking on anything in particular. But it’s good enough confirmation that we don’t hate each other.”

Surprisingly, trust often came down to simple gestures like this.

“O-of course.”

Col reached out to shake the rugged hand. It was unfortunate that no one was around to see this, but perhaps that was good for the time being.

“So...Enough fun chat about the future. We have a grim present to talk about.”

“What?”

Even after all they confided in each other? Curiously, Col looked at Klevend, who returned his look with an astonished one that reminded him of Myuri.

“You *do* remember we kidnapped you, right? We haven’t solved that problem.”

“Oh...”

“Kidnapping you was an honest mistake, of course. We’ve got plenty of young guys who have older brothers bagging cute wives and enjoying all that nobility has to offer. Meanwhile, the second and third sons under my wing have no marriage prospects themselves and they’re desperate to stand onstage at least once in their lives. It was something they couldn’t back down from because they were competing for pride, because they were showing off to one another, but we’re getting impatient now that we’re losing sight of the future. So they’ll lose their minds if they don’t do *something*. That’s how they got the bright idea that this was their chance to start war between the kingdom and the Church, without thinking too hard of the consequences, obviously. That’s how they hatched this plan to grab the guy from the Holy See.”

And contrary to what that illogical plan might suggest, the kidnapping went surprisingly well.

Despite the target being the wrong person, of course.

“We’ve managed to have a good discussion, so let’s say I just apologize and send you on your way. What happens then? Hyland hates me, *loathes* me, and I know she sees me as the source of all evil that’s taken root in this country, and she has a point. And if anyone were to kidnap the Twilight Cardinal *now*, who do you think she’d think did it?”

Even if a suspect was not present at the stabbing, anyone who spouted curses and waved around a dagger would typically be considered the most likely culprit.

“We need to get you back home safe. And when I say *safe*, I’m mostly talking about keeping my people out of harm’s way.”

Though Col did not know how sizable Heir Klevend’s forces were, they would not escape a fight unscathed if Hyland, who was firmly on the side of legitimate royal authority, decided to retaliate with force. They would only assault the walls of the royal castle if they truly had no other choice and nowhere else to go.

And it was very easy to imagine what Hyland might think once she received the report that Col had been kidnapped. All he had to do was recall how cold her eyes were when she heard about the attacks on the Knights of Saint Kruza and his subsequent suggestion that the culprits came from Heir Klevend’s camp.

“Even if I tell you not to say anything about what happened today, others might not listen to you. It might even be the perfect excuse for the gallows.”

“...Heir Hyland is a rational person.”

Despite what he said, Col had no real confidence in the statement. He pictured her rising to action out of concern for Col’s safety, and that was when he realized there was someone else they needed to be more worried about. This person’s fanaticism went far beyond that of Hyland’s. He pictured crimson eyes glaring down at him, and a terrible fear shot through him, as though the ground had opened up at his feet and plunged him into the darkness.

“Th-that’s right. Heir Hyland is not the person we need to worry about!”

Col stood from his chair, and Heir Klevend stared at him dumbfounded, shocked by his sudden movement.

“Where—where are we? Are we far away from Salenton?”

It had been raining, so it was unlikely she would be able to follow by smell alone. But due to the remaining snowmelt, the roads had been soft, even if they were not overly muddy. The rain was enough to make them even more pliable, meaning those who carried him off probably left behind clear footprints or the tracks of the cart or the trail of horses.

“This is one of my guys’ houses, a few hours from Salenton. You worried about the tracks or the horse prints? We’d probably only get people chasing after us in the morning. The rain stopped, but the moon’s not out. By the time the sun comes up, the shepherds will be up, and they’ll have erased all traces of this little escapade.”

It was unlikely they would be pursued. By humans, at least. When that thought crossed Col’s mind, he whipped around to look out the window.

Though the Kingdom of Winfiel was covered in plains, forests were often left intact surrounding noble manors, for firewood or in cases of emergencies. The manor that Sharon and Clark were planning on turning into their monastery was the same. No matter how strongly he wished for it to be raining, the silence of the end of the shower hung outside.

Col gulped and strained his eyes to peer into the woods.

As the darkened foliage swayed and rustled, he spotted one pinprick of light.

A single owl hooted and flew off.

“What’s wrong?” Klevend asked.

“.....”

“Hey, you’ve gone white.”

They already knew where he was. Myuri’s true strength and speed could carry her from Salenton to Rausbourne in an instant. And from there, she would go straight to Sharon’s house, violently demanding the eagle’s assistance. A flock

of birds would then immediately take to the skies, calling the other birds around Salenton as the rain eased, conducting their search in and around the town. If he was going to hide, he would have to go underground, much like the fox family on the monastery grounds.

And once Myuri and the others knew his location, this place would no longer be safe.

Not for Col, of course. For Klevend and his men, even though they were not the enemy. It was better to think of them as valuable allies with the same objective—people who could help resolve the kingdom’s problems and end its conflict with the Church.

“We need to r—”

Col stopped himself and clamped his mouth shut. *Run?* On their human legs? On horseback? It would not matter how they ran—they would still leave a trail. They would be fleeing from a silver wolf and birds that ruled the sky. It was much more dangerous for them to leave the manor and split up.

Though Col wanted to believe that Hyland would listen to Klevend’s excuses, he needed to keep in mind that Myuri was much more prone to flying into a rage when she heard the news that he had been kidnapped.

Col was not confident he could remain calm if their positions were flipped after all.

“Hey, you’re overreacting. You’re not telling me you left a trail of bread crumbs when we took you, like in those fairy tales?” Klevend asked with a lopsided smile, sensing that Col’s reaction was not normal.

Col wondered how he might be able to explain, but all he could come up with was something basic. “Among my companions is a trueborn hunter, native to the deepest mountains.”

That wording seemed to be particularly effective on someone who lived in a nation of plains.

Klevend must have pictured a forest hermit, someone who was scarcely different from a magical witch, the sort he might hear about at a tavern.

“Would this hunter be understanding about all this? Would he get that this was all a mistake? I guess we *were* genuinely targeting the envoy from the Holy See...”

“.....”

If Col tried to protect Klevend and his men, there was a good chance Myuri would assume he was being forced to say that. But the more likely and more dangerous situation was that she would be so filled with rage that she would not listen to Col at all. She was clever, but she did not have the calm that her mother the wisewolf had. She may drag each and every one of Klevend’s men out into the dark of the wood before Col could say anything.

Col often thought about how he only noticed Myuri’s presence when the rest of the manor was empty.

What could they do? It was a bit too premature to work hand in hand with Heir Klevend, but it was clearly wrong to strike them down like common highwaymen. And more important, if Canaan’s plan did not go well, Klevend would be a powerful ally if the new continent was their last hope.

And if there was anyone here and now who could help them, it was Col.

“You can’t run. She *will* catch up to you. And if I am not with you, she will likely not listen to anything you say, and pass judgment.”

Considering the incident with the Knights of Saint Kruza, it would not be surprising if the king had already issued certain orders.

Even if Klevend was not so easily put to death, that was not necessarily the case for the second and third sons of lower-ranking noble houses who accompanied him. It was not entirely impossible that they could be beheaded on the spot.

“And it is my companion you need to be worried about. At this rate, all of your men will be attacked without a sound from the darkness.”

Klevend’s face was tense, and his gaze subconsciously flicked to the window—evidently, he was taking Col seriously.

“Bring everyone inside, lock the doors, and close the windows. If we manage

to calm her down a bit, we should be afforded some time to talk.”

If possible, they should all gather in one spot, like the great hall. It was now, with Myuri as his enemy, that Col finally understood how valuable she was as a companion.

“A lockdown, huh...But that won’t solve our problem in the end, will it? Will Hyland forgive me once she sees my face? Even with you vouching for me?”

Of course she will, is what he first thought, but he considered how his feelings were not necessarily shared by Sharon and Hyland. Col could not say with complete certainty that what Klevend feared would not come to pass.

“Could I tie you up again and go with the classic, *If you want this guy to live—you know?*”

“But that would guarantee we would never be able to cooperate...”

“If nothing else, you trust me, right?”

As Klevend’s brown eyes bored through him, Col felt as though he understood why so many people had flocked to his side.

“I could act bad, and it would make sense to show that I’m just an evil person to the core.”

Perhaps it was a joke, but Col also knew that the common perception of the prince was not a bad one.

A band of men who were willing to cause a civil war purely for self-interest would be treated very differently.

“And in exchange for your freedom, I’ll request leniency for my men. If my sister truly is a servant of God, she can’t go back on promises she’s already made.”

Klevend’s perspective was much broader than Col’s. If the mastermind behind a civil war escaped beyond the kingdom’s borders, it was clear that a witch hunt for any of his followers who remained behind would take place. And even Col did not think that was right.

Col was very well aware that what Klevend and his men were doing was not *good*, yet he could not say that they did not have their reasons; had they

successfully managed to kidnap Canaan, he could not see them doing anything bad to him. It was very likely that all they were planning to do was threaten him, tell him that the relationship between the kingdom and the Church was awful, then let him go.

Even if they should reasonably be punished, he did not think a beheading was an appropriate punishment.

But even if it was an act, to tie Col up and take him hostage would only turn the gap between Hyland and Klevend into an impassable abyss.

“There must be a better way,” Col said to Klevend.

The leader of the chivalrous scoundrels shrugged. “You’re a good guy,” he said, his tone teasing. Perhaps he sounded that way because he had already made up his mind.

But his good graces only served to spur on Col’s temper.

“But if we don’t do *something*, we will never resolve this misunderstanding!”

They had their own reasons for what they did, and that was not something others could disregard. The conflict between the kingdom and the Church was catching countless people in its wake, whether or not they liked it. And Col knew that if he could not retain an open mind for others’ circumstances, then he could no longer keep his faith.

“But what are we supposed to do?”

That was the question. Heir Klevend and his men were now suffering the consequences of their actions.

That he kidnapped Col was a fact. That he and his men were considered a sinister group was also a fact. Not many would be satisfied with the excuse that the kidnapping was a mistake.

Which meant...

They had to make it so it was not a mistake.

“What if we pretend I came to you because I wanted to speak with you?”

“Uh...Hmm?”

Klevend's thick eyebrows knit together.

"If we say I came here of my own will, Heir Hyland would lay down her arms."

When Col thought he saw the tension leave Klevend's eyebrows, he realized the prince was looking at him in disbelief.

"For what purpose? To betray my sister?"

That would look to be the case. He would have had to been in secret communication with Klevend for this excuse to make sense. But Col, of course, did not want to be thought of as a traitor to Hyland. And perhaps it was arrogant of him to assume so, but he did not think Hyland would believe him. That was how Klevend saw his half sister's disposition, after all.

But Col did not flinch at the prospect, because he felt there was *something* along this line of thought. He felt like he saw stepping stones atop a river that pushed all toward a bad ending.

"What if my objective was to seek reconciliation between you and Heir Hyland?"

He threw a stone in the dark, hoping to find the next landing.

It would certainly not be out of the blue if he had been secretly planning on meddling in that manner.

"Hmm...Is that something you'd sneak away to do? No matter how many arrangements you'd made with me, you'd probably take more deliberate steps before meeting. Especially since I don't know how you'd sneak past this powerful, terrifying companion of yours and how worried about you she apparently is."

"Oh."

Klevend was right. Col did not need to say precisely how worried Myuri would be if he suddenly vanished from the inn.

Klevend did not seem particularly enthused because he was telling him not to worry about it anymore. It was as though he was saying that he was meant to be blamed in this situation, that whatever happened to him was not something Col should fret over.

Though Hyland and Klevend were only half-siblings, it was in this regard that Col was starting to see the same blood manifesting in the prince.

“I need...a reason...for why...I’d come here...myself!” Col said, spurring his mind into action.

What would be a good reason for this situation?

Klevend and his men could not escape, and if a face-off with Hyland and her people was inevitable, Col needed a good enough reason that could allow them both to sheathe their blades. He needed a legitimate reason for suddenly leaving the inn and spending time with Heir Klevend, who was supposedly their enemy.

He needed a plausible reason that could explain this convoluted secret meeting.

“Please think of something! You have your own companions, don’t you?”

Klevend never referred to those who followed him as his inferiors.

He was second in line for the throne, perhaps the third most powerful person following the king and the heir apparent, yet he came running, boots muddied, the moment his men called him in when things took a nasty turn. He was not a bad person.

Col was humming in thought when Klevend finally sighed and said, “I feel like our positions are reversed...All right, sure. I’ll do this for the guys.”

Klevend gave a strained smile, then hunched over, placing his hand to his chin.

“Right. Why were you in Salenton in the first place?”

“...Hmm?”

“You said you were looking for someone, right? Couldn’t we use that as an excuse? For example...maybe I reached out because I had an important lead.”

It was a good idea, but there was a big problem with that.

“We have already found him, however.”

“Oh, godda—”

—*Dammit*, is what he was going to say.

“But we did encounter a problem. This individual had his own reasons to give up on the future. We need his help, but he has absolutely no motivation.”

“Hmm...What if we were the ones who could help solve his problems?”

“.....”

“Nah, can’t be that convenient, can it? Forget about it.”

“.....”

Col could not answer, because the stone he had thrown in the dark had collided against something with a loud clatter.

“...No.”

“Hmm?”

“It can. It can be.”

It was Klevend’s turn for his eyes to go wide.

“Don’t be silly. You don’t have to say things just to make me feel better.”

“No! It can be that convenient! It can!” Col shot from his chair and shook Klevend’s shoulders. “Wait a moment...Yes, that’s right. That’s right! Why didn’t I think of this? I should have thought of you straightaway when I heard Mister Jean’s story.”

“...What?”

“Both this artisan and you *need glorious battle*.”

Klevend gave Col a dubious look. Col tried to explain himself, but his thoughts had not yet solidified, and he felt as though he was simply splashing about foam when he tried to grasp something solid. Jean’s and Klevend’s stories could be tied together with the prospect of war.

But for what reason would Col have disappeared from the inn without a single word to Canaan, Hollande, or even Myuri? He needed a convenient excuse that coherently tied everything together.

“This artisan wanted to stand on the battlefield. But he has no physical

strength, so he tried to be a part of it through song and poetry.”

He was unsure if he explained it properly, but Klevend gave an understanding nod.

“Some of the guys are like that. Nobles tie their souls to battle. And if you’re born with a weak body, that’s your only choice. Which means...maybe you wanted to introduce us to the artisan? To show him the hope of causing a war? But I guess that’s, uh—”

“Strange, I think.”

Col was indeed working with Hyland to *prevent* a war.

But it was not the wrong approach.

That he wanted Canaan’s proposed project to take form was not wrong. That was why he then reached out to Klevend and his men, their supposed enemies, to get Jean back on his feet. That sounded reasonable enough.

But that would mean changing course and actively trying to start a war, which he had been firmly against until this point.

If he truly did not care how he came across, he would not have accepted Canaan’s wild proposal or considered canonization. Because if they indeed succeeded in making him a living saint, that would solve all their money problems. The restoration of the monastery grounds and keeping it running would be trivial concerns.

With Col’s sainthood and Jean’s help, printing all the copies of the scripture they wanted was not a difficult prospect at all. Which meant that if he was deliberately holding a secret meeting with Klevend, it would either have to be for reasons that surpassed Canaan’s proposals or for something that involved both of them.

And then there was Myuri. Why would Col leave the inn without telling Myuri?

That was the biggest point of contention.

This was different from how he kept quiet about the globe, one that showed the true form of the planet, that he saw at Nordstone’s manor. Because this

would mean he was making big decisions on this journey without her.

When he thought about how much the prospect would hurt her, his heart ached like a blade had sliced through him.

Still, it was Hyland who valued Col's relationship with Myuri more than anyone else. If Col was unable to successfully explain himself to Myuri, she would immediately sniff out his deception and would not pay his excuses any heed. That would, in short, lead straight to Klevend's execution.

"Either way, you needed a story of a gallant battle in order to cheer up that artisan. You decided to reach out to us because you heard we were planning to start a war," Klevend said, arranging his thoughts. "That would be like trying to fit a big, round fruit into a small, square box. It looks like it might fit, but it won't. And just what kind of war are we planning anyway?"

Indeed—what sort of war? A fight that was showy enough to convince Jean to join them, something big enough to ignore Canaan's plans, something clandestine enough that he had to act without telling Myuri.

Could whatever he came up with answer to all three of those factors?

"First, considering what I've heard you've been getting up to, it can't be a real war. And that already makes this tough."

"Yes...Yes, you are correct."

A flawed, exiled prince returning to his homeland to take back the throne at the end of a long and arduous journey was one of the most popular tales in any tavern, but to suggest actually playing that out was a bit too unnatural. Because that ran contrary to their goal of asking for Jean's help.

Perhaps Klevend was right—maybe to play out a little scene in which Col was tied up again, steeling themselves for however Hyland and the other royals may condemn Klevend, was all for their sake.

But if that were to happen, it was very likely that Klevend and his men would never step foot in their homelands again.

And Col did not think that was right.

"Twilight Cardinal, I know what kind of person you are. And you've learned

what kind of person I am from me, not from my sister,” Klevend said, straightening his hunched-over back.

The flash of hope he had seen had sunk into the dark torrent of the river.

“If we’re putting on a show, we should do it before we get surrounded. And if Dad...If the king sends the royal army, there’s nothing we can really do.”

He was right. Col watched Klevend stand; the only reason he stuck to rolling thoughts and ideas through his mind was because it was Klevend and his men who would be put in mortal danger. Only Col had the leisure of thinking, as he was the only one whose safety was guaranteed.

And Klevend’s idea would explain everything, nor would it hurt Myuri.

“Sorry if we end up tying you up over and over, though.”

Col tried to laugh in response, but he was not sure if he succeeded.

Klevend scratched at his head and turned to leave the room.

The breadth of his shoulders was wide—he was a knight who had protected and was responsible for a great many people.

As Col grasped at the crest of the Church around his neck, a symbol for which he was supposed to feel reverence, Klevend spoke again.

“I think it’ll help ease their minds, but maybe I’ll write a letter to my sister to tell her that you’re okay, and...Hey, what’s wrong?”

His hand hovered over the door as he turned to look back at Col, and for a moment, he was taken aback. Col stood, as though only partially listening to what Klevend was saying. His eyes were fixed squarely on one thing in the room, and he could not peel them away through his own will.

He was looking at a particular piece of furniture, one that was a staple in noble houses. It was something often found in cold stone buildings, not only to keep the chill from seeping in through the walls, but also to show off one’s family’s glory to guests.

“...What’s wrong with the tapestry?”

The tapestry was woven with a great assortment of colored threads and

depicted a specific scene. Many knights rode on horseback, their spears pointing at one another, fighting before a castle. But it was not a bloody scene of war, and there was an odd sense of spectacle to it. There were musicians playing trumpets behind the knights, and there were women holding flowers around them. Atop the castle stood the king, the queen, and other distinguished individuals, and colorful banners flew around them.

Because this was an event for knights, modeled after war—

Col remembered what Myuri spoke of.

It was a battle for knights, held as a flashy festival.

“A jousting tournament.”

That was where all their answers lay.

“It can work.”

“What?”

Klevend looked between Col and the tapestry once, twice.

“It can work,” Col repeated. “I had an extreme reason for coming to see you here.”

As though God led me here, he did not say. Canaan would have said something like that, however, but not even Canaan waited patiently for the word of destiny to come to him. He had marched forward on his own two legs and found his own path. Even when Myuri gave up on her dream of wielding a sword in battle, she found a place to write down her dreams on paper.

That meant Col should not give up, either.

Those predisposed to thinking only in ideals had to occasionally mix in reality. Otherwise it would be like trying to fit a large, round fruit into a square box, or like Myuri trying to fit an entire feast into her mouth.

“I have a problem I need to solve. And at the same time, the feud between you and Heir Hyland is a loss for the kingdom. In accordance with God’s teachings, I am obligated to ask you to reconcile. I will not allow you two to sever ties.”

Klevend drew up his shoulders and objected with a voice much too quiet for his stature.

“I’m telling you, *she’s* the only one who thinks we’re feuding—”

“A trivial point!” Col snapped, and began going through his plan from the beginning.

The key was a jousting tournament. With that in place, Canaan and Myuri would leap from Jean and onto the tournament, and its excitement would reach Klevend, too. It should neatly tie everything together.

“There was...a specific reason...*why* I had to come here.”

Col began to speak of himself as though he were someone else.

Klevend let go of the door and sighed.

“Are you gonna tell me?”

The moment Klevend took his seat, he raised his hand to ask a question, as he must have done plenty of times as a child to his tutors.

While Col was in the Salenton inn, one of Klevend’s men came to him out of sight of everyone else to make contact. It was a very dangerous encounter, considering their positions, so they orchestrated a plan that made the innkeeper think the inn was being robbed, all to avoid the small chance the incident would spiral into rumor.

He apologized for the terrible worry he caused everyone. Especially to Myuri—he was ready for whatever complaints she had for him...

After writing that all down in a letter, he handed the message and a handkerchief he so happened to have on him to one of Klevend’s men, who took the night roads back to Salenton. If Myuri was lurking nearby, she would notice his scent, and if she was sharpening her fangs back in Salenton, then she should get the message. Either way, she would know that he was safe.

When Col told Klevend of the plan, Klevend immediately folded his large warrior’s form into a ball and groaned, but eventually he said, “This seems to have a better chance of success than making you a hostage...”

Col declared that, if worse came to worst, he would stab his own throat in

order to save Klevend and his men, and Klevend clapped him on the back with a taut smile.

Though he doubted the door would be torn down and the manor mobbed by soldiers that night, he still slept on the ground with Klevend's men in the great hall.

Col was on edge, of course, and awoke at the slightest sounds, but he finally started to relax as dawn broke. He went to a window on the second floor to see how things were outside.

It was humid due to the rain from the previous night, and as he breathed white puffs into the purple sky, a single, beautiful eagle came and landed on the windowsill.

"Thank you...for the trouble."

The feathers over eagle-Sharon's body fluffed briefly before deflating in a sigh.

"How...is Myuri?"

"That's your first question?"

Her beak would never bend, but it almost seemed as though it curved in a smile.

"I think I've worried her terribly..."

Sharon blinked, then tilted her head to the left, to the right.

"It's almost impossible to tell if a wolf is smiling or growling."

She meant that, either way, when her fangs were bared, the corners of her mouth always pulled upward.

"Hyland and the rest of them will be here in the afternoon. You'll see how she is yourself," Sharon said, peeking into the room past him. *"Doesn't seem like you're being treated badly."*

"No. Everyone has been very kind."

She gave him a flat look.

"It seemed they got the wrong person to begin with."

“And is that excuse going to fly?”

Sharon’s tone brought about images of Hyland’s stern attitude.

“It will.”

“Hmm?”

“They say the ground hardens after it rains.”

Sharon turned to see the dawn breaking through the rain clouds.

“You did help us at least once, after all.”

“And now, all I am doing is getting your help.”

It would be a lie to say there was no humility in his statement; Sharon turned a rather sharp gaze toward him.

“You sure are. I was ready for bed when that dog came bounding in. Can you imagine how hard it was to keep this away from Clark?”

Col could see it clearly in his mind.

“I offer you my sincerest apologies again, but I think this will solve the problems with the monastery. You will forgive me if it does, won’t you?”

“.....”

Sharon stared at him for a good while, before she eventually spread her wings.

“I’m expecting a divine miracle.”

Then she flew away.

It was not long afterward that there came a knock on the door, and Klevend poked his head inside.

“Sorry. Were you in the middle of morning prayer?”

“Oh, no. There was a simply beautiful eagle at the windowsill, so...”

Klevend craned his neck, then gave an impressed hum. “Heard stories about saints like that,” he said. “There were priests who went around proselytizing to birds, sheep, even snakes and spiders.”

As embarrassing as it was, the casual remark reminded Col of Canaan's plan.

The plan Col had in mind, the one that would neatly tie everything together, only left out Canaan's proposal for Col's canonization. No matter how much he thought, that was the only thing that stood out; yet that was in part because it was such a big deal, yes, but also because he had something else in mind for that.

He could picture Klevend and Hyland setting aside their differences and shaking hands.

But the thought of him being worshipped as a saint was something he could not only *not* picture, but was not something he could earnestly think of favorably.

Of course, he knew this was not a decision he had to make depending on whether he *liked* the idea, so he decided to seriously consider it once all this had died down.

"Anyway, I've woken up the guys downstairs, and they're getting ready. They should be all cleaned up and ready when my sister's forces arrive."

They needed to act not as besieged bandits, but as nobles facing off against other distinguished individuals.

"Looks are important when it comes to battle."

Klevend was large, with a thick beard, very much the picture of a bandit leader—it made perfect sense when he said so.

"Well, no use worrying any more than we already have. Get something to eat."

He clapped Col's shoulder like an old friend, then turned to look out the window, at the path winding down the gentle slope.

Just as Sharon said, it was once the sun passed its zenith in the sky that upon that very path marched an entourage, headed by a horse clad in metal dress.

"Chins up, boys. We have the Twilight Cardinal on our side!"

That was Klevend's manifesto, one that caused a strained smile to jump onto Col's face, but this was a life-and-death situation for them. This was essentially

a real war. All of them wore serious expressions. Even the ones who had gotten embroiled in a contest so fierce that it ended up with Col in ropes—their cheeks were bruised, which meant Klevend certainly had given them a piece of his mind—were among them.

Klevend had said that all of them should shine at least once in their lives.

Col agreed. And he was no less nervous than the rest of them.

That was because he could not picture what sort of faces Hyland and Myuri would be wearing.

“Let’s go.”

Col pushed open the manor’s double doors, and a flood of midday sun poured into the great hall.

But he marched forward against the flow, and once his eyes grew used to the light, he saw them.

“So you didn’t run.”

Though she was not dressed in full plate armor, Hyland wore an iron helm, bracers, boots with spurs; the broad sword at her hip was likely anything but ceremonial.

Behind her stood several dozen foot soldiers.

“Of course we didn’t. We have no reason to,” Klevend replied, once he saw that all his men were out of the manor.

“His Majesty has issued a decree.”

Hyland jerked her chin, and Hollande, who had been waiting by her side, unfurled a piece of parchment and held it up to them.

Col and Klevend and Klevend’s men could not read it from where they were, of course, but they could see the red stamp on it.

“You are to be arrested once your insurrection is confirmed.”

Behind Hyland were a dozen or so horses, and foot soldiers clad in armor and brandishing spears outnumbered the horses by almost three times.

Even foot soldiers could reach this place from Rausbourne if they marched

overnight, but it was more likely that Hyland used her royal power to raise the troops of nobles in the Salenton area.

But Myuri was nowhere to be seen. Col had been convinced she would be here, eyes wide and upturned, hand on the sheath of her sword, but he did not see her. Both Canaan and Le Roi and the others were absent as well, and that worried him deeply.

“Insurrection? Then there won’t be a problem here,” Klevend said, glancing at Col. “The Twilight Cardinal and I spent all last night having a good talk. I didn’t know how things were going to turn out, you see. I apologize for keeping the meeting secret.”

Hyland’s expression did not change at all upon hearing that; she turned her attention to Col.

“Are you okay?”

Her tone was not casual like it typically was; Col found himself straightening upon hearing the hard tone of her voice.

But now was not the time to be scared.

“Yes. His Highness and I had a very productive talk.”

Hyland nodded and rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. “The Twilight Cardinal has been busily engaged on behalf of the kingdom. Have you anything to say with regards to kidnapping him from Salenton?”

All those standing behind her visibly readied themselves for battle. Those standing behind Col and Klevend were clearly spooked by this, but Klevend did not even flinch, of course, and Col intended to keep a brave face.

Col took a deep breath and spoke.

“It seems there has been a misunderstanding.”

He took a step forward.

“A misunderstanding?”

Hyland furrowed her brow and turned her attention to Col. That was the first time she had ever looked at him that way.

“Heir Hyland. Did you receive a report regarding the problem we faced once we arrived in Salenton?”

Hyland nodded carefully.

“I did. You found the artisan, but he was going to need convincing in order to secure his help.”

“Yes. And so meeting Heir Klevend was our answer to that.”

Then Klevend cleared his throat and interjected, “I happened to hear what people have been whispering about in Salenton. Sounded like people thought the attack on the Knights of Saint Kruza was our fault, so I sent my guys to say hi.”

His wording was just vague enough to make it seem as though it was not a clear lie, but due to Klevend’s rough speech, it sounded plausible enough.

“But let’s forget about the knights for now. That won’t get us anywhere.”

“Then what?”

The Twilight Cardinal had been taken away by the prince who many believed was more than willing to start a civil war. The situation could not be explained away by simple logic. That conviction was clear in Hyland’s eyes.

She obviously appeared worried for Col, but it seemed more like she was being dragged along by her yearslong feud with Klevend instead.

But if Col could explain this situation well, then the two of them could reconcile.

He took a deep breath and said, “Heir Klevend’s cooperation is essential in obtaining Mister Jean’s help.”

“...?”

Throughout their conversation, Hyland’s frown had only grown deeper, yet she seemed about to recoil because she was aware that his idea was going to be beyond her imagination. But a large, round fruit could still fit perfectly in a square box.

“I was wondering if we could hold a jousting tournament.”

It was a festival for battle that showed off all the hard work that knights and those who wished to be knights went through every day.

It was something he originally would have never even considered, yet the seed of the idea had remained rooted in his mind thanks to Myuri.

“Jousting? But, Col, you—”

Hyland had likely not considered that at all. As he caught glimpses of her normal self, he spoke quickly, getting in his say while he could, and talked in the most exaggerated manner he could muster.

“I think the festivities will be delightful. Because we all know what sort of rumors there are surrounding Heir Klevend in this country. Do you understand how many people will be enthralled to see if you or the first prince can land a hit on him?”

This shameless idea invoked what Le Roi originally spoke to Col about. All eyes were on the Twilight Cardinal these days—if he were to publish a book reprimanding the Church, it would carry an unbelievably high price tag. Such an idea would have never come from within Col’s own mind.

But the world’s attention was, at the end of the day, still drawn to the vulgar.

“And it is not only Heir Klevend. Everyone here has trained day in and day out, adopting manners befitting a knight. All they want is place to show off all they have achieved. Is that not right?”

Hyland, of course, knew of their situation. She could not be unsympathetic. Klevend himself had said that Hyland was simply being stubborn.

“It would be an event that would go down in history. And of course! We will need a pen to record all the knights’ valiant battles.”

Jean’s interest had been piqued by Myuri’s status as knight, which meant that he would doubtlessly be drawn in by this as well. The royal family could officially commission him to put the event into writing. And in exchange, he could perhaps lend them his knowledge...

And in the worst-case scenario, if Jean did not offer his help, this plan had the power to push the scripture copy project forward regardless.

Because—

“And why don’t we hold the tournament on the grounds of the new monastery?”

Hyland no longer had the words to respond.

Her eyes remained rounded as she stared at him.

“The manor was said to once house famous knights who hailed from the ancient empire. I believe a lively event would be perfectly fitting. Countless bards would compete to sing about it, and it will become a place of renown throughout the kingdom. A great many pilgrims will flock to its doors, and festival-lovers throughout the country will generously fund the event.”

It was a rare opportunity to watch history unfold around the so-called rebel prince said to be the mastermind behind an insurrection against the protectors of the throne. And it would not be a bloody war that would upturn the lives of regular citizens—it would be a jousting tournament, one gilded by flowers and trumpets.

There was no stage more suitable that could offer guiltless enjoyment, and every noble throughout the country would want to take part in this legendary event.

“I believe it will also bring in enough money to allow us to restore the monastery beautifully. The mountain of donations will be enough for us to shape it as we wish.”

The *mountain of donations* would serve as the funds that would pay for the labor for making copies of and distributing the scripture, even if they could not secure Jean’s help. And if they did get Jean’s help, then nothing could stop them.

“However—” Col cut himself off, his torrent of words finally coming to a stop.

Why did he spend an entire night at Heir Klevend’s house in such a friendly manner? Why was it impossible that Heir Klevend was an agent of rebellion? What Col said had been explanation enough at this point, but it was likely that Hyland was firm in her assumption that the villainous Klevend was putting words in the kind and sweet Twilight Cardinal’s mouth. That was because there

remained the question of why he vanished from the inn, keeping his destination a secret from even Myuri.

But Hyland had already realized that path was closed.

Because she was very well aware, perhaps even more than Col, how much passion burned in Myuri for knights.

“But as Heir Klevend said, there is much distrust between our parties. Only God knows how this will turn out. We must conduct these talks carefully and logically. We must not allow our emotions to sweep us away, and even if it does end in a permanent severing of ties, we must not allow grudges to remain and fester.”

Hyland’s expression grew sourer and sourer. It was all perfectly sound logic, yes, but they could both picture the face of one who would attempt to cast that all aside.

“But considering the topic, the prospect is a delightful one, is it not?”

Col thought he heard the forest brush rustle a short distance away; he deliberately kept his gaze from drifting in that direction and continued.

“That rambunctious girl will try to make this a reality, regardless of the realities. Even if she ends up forcing me to give in to Heir Klevend’s demands.”

He doubted Myuri was that much of a child, but there were plenty of prior incidents that made him unable to say it was impossible.

And so, unfortunately, Myuri had to take the blame here.

If she were here, it was almost certain she would be unable to calmly handle the negotiations over organizing a jousting tournament. Her eyes would gleam, she would stand on her toes, and he could even see her with her ears and tail flitting about, even when they should be hidden.

And if, on the off chance things did not work out with Heir Klevend, Col would have no confidence in himself to make rational decisions. He would go along with anything just to prevent the light from being snuffed out of her eyes. Hyland could picture this well.

“I believe you can see the very same, Heir Hyland. How she would whine and

complain and do whatever it takes to keep the plan from falling apart, how even if it ultimately did not work out, she would beg to hold a tournament of our own instead.”

And Hyland, who was especially sweet on Myuri, would start to think of even more unnecessary steps to obtain the necessary funds even when she was already strapped for coin.

Of course, whether this sort of future was unavoidable did not matter. It held enough weight in this particular situation, and more important, it was convincing for Hyland.

All sorts of things could explain why the Twilight Cardinal vanished from the inn. If the truth was not clear to anyone but God, then he had to pick the explanation that came with the greatest shock and joy.

“—You...” Though Hyland was at last regaining her composure, her expression suggested she was still not yet back on firm ground as she spoke. “You...*truly*—”

Hyland did not have the words for the swirl of emotions in her chest.

But Col did not think what she held within her was a bad thing.

“I take full responsibility for my selfish actions. But as one who sympathizes with your hopes of spreading God’s righteous teachings, I say to you this...”

Col turned aside to take Klevend’s rugged hand, and walked forward. Though neither Hyland nor Hollande moved, the soldiers behind them flinched, and there came the clatter of metal on metal.

Col brought Klevend before Hyland, and Hyland gave Col a deep frown. Col, however, could already tell—she was doing her best to put on the biggest frown she could muster.

Perhaps she had been doing so from the beginning.

“Those bound by blood should be on good terms.”

That was not something one should say to grown-ups, and in their case in particular, this was no business for anyone outside the royal family. But the two of them most certainly had the sense to realize that if they had the power to do anything about it, they would have done so long ago.

All Col had to do was recall the standoff between Master Crafter Thearte and Hollande, and how it was consequentially solved.

Col was not as cute as Myuri, but he was certainly just as innocent.

Perhaps the two of them had been waiting for a chance to reconcile, much like the kingdom and the Church.

And if Col could serve as that chance, he would not mind being scolded for meddling afterward.

“And now, please shake on your reconciliation.”

Col had played the part of mediator plenty of times back at the bathhouse in Nyohhira, between Myuri and the other village children. The faces Hyland and Klevend wore were perfect projections of those children, and they both turned away in a huff. Yet they continued to glance at each other, trying to gauge the other. Col looked between the two of them, as though silently offering to listen to all their grievances.

Perhaps satisfied with that, Klevend extended a hand first.

“I don’t really have anything against you.”

It was only for a moment that Col thought it was something high-handed a big brother would say.

“But I can’t really say I was much of a brother.”

Col knew not how the two of them got along as children.

But this was not an impassable gap.

Hyland stared at Klevend’s hand, then turned to Col again.

“...I may hate you forever.”

Her serious blue eyes still fixed on Col, she grasped Klevend’s hand.

“I wish you’d given me time to prepare for this emotionally.”

They both gripped each other’s hand, and perhaps due to the difference in weight, Hyland was the only one who moved slightly with the motion.

And when the shell came off, what emerged was a troubled smile.

“Our siblings are going to be shocked.”

“...To think, a jousting tournament...”

Klevend was rebellious to the core; he was grinning from cheek to cheek, evidently pleased by the prospect of shocking the other royals. The more earnest Hyland was rather deflated, worrying over how this incident might appear.

“What? Your stock with the people will shoot right up if I were to bow my head like I’m supposed to. Sounds like everything’s going to go well to me.”

When she heard that, Hyland’s frown only deepened.

“This is why I hate you.”

Klevend’s grin only grew, and Hyland let her shoulders fall. But their hands remained grasped in the handshake, and the soldiers in both camps seemed relieved that this would not end in a fight.

“So, ah, Heir Hyland...,” Col began. Though this matter had been appropriately settled, he still had work to do. “Where is Myuri?”

Hyland, who was wiping at the tears pooling in the corner of her eyes—perhaps from the lifting of the weight that had weighing on her for many years—smiled at him, as though getting revenge.

“I think you should be upset.”

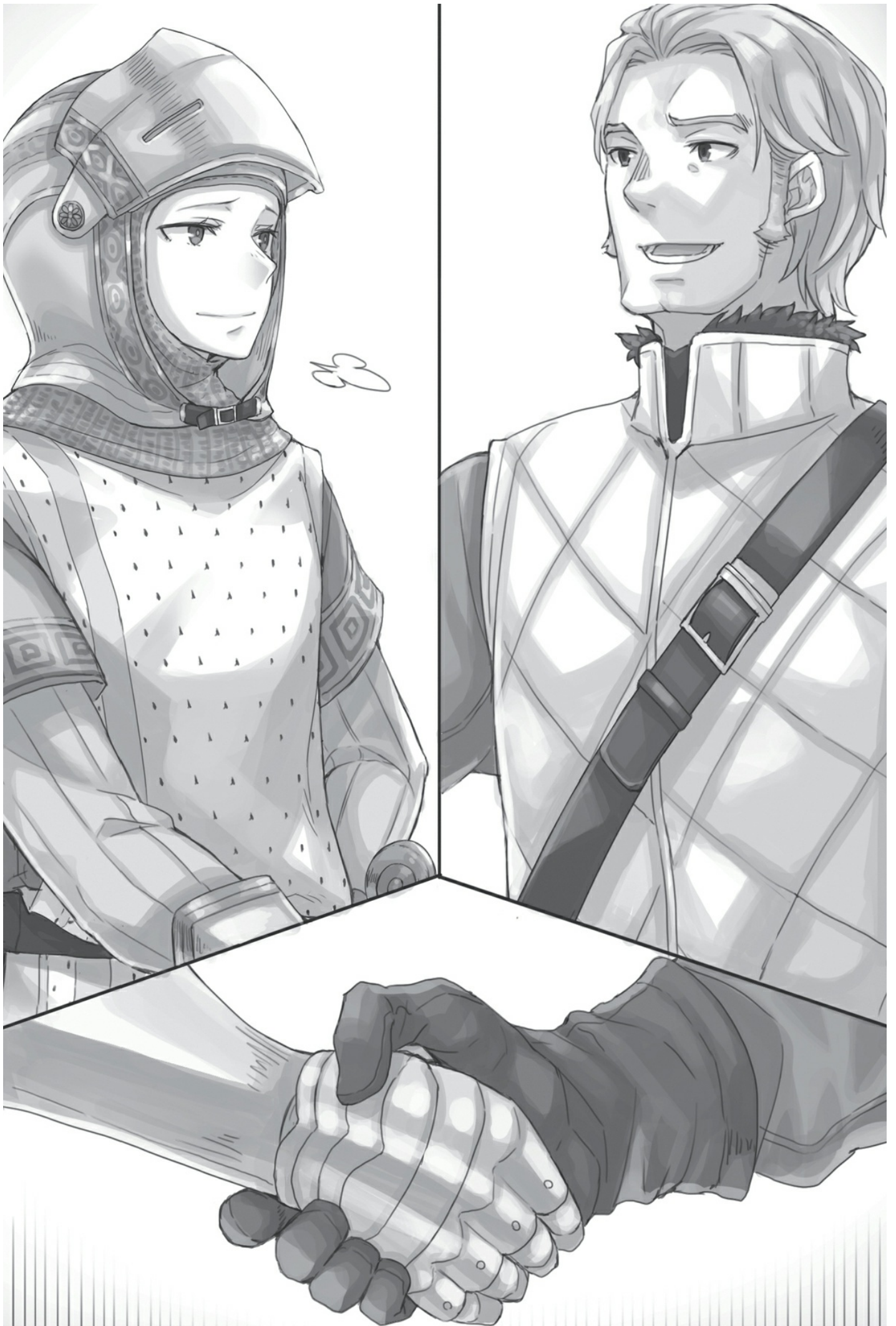
“.....”

All Col could do was give a half-hearted smile in return; Hollande, who stood beside her, looked at him like an older relative disappointed in his recklessness. Sharon had not told him about Myuri, either.

The foliage in one spot of the forest was still rustling, and Col straightened himself as he glanced in that direction from the corner of his eye.

This had to be what it felt like to venture into battle. It would have been much more reassuring if Myuri were with him, but when that thought crossed his mind, Col realized how much of a fool he was. That thought brought a smile with it. But in the moment he stepped forward, not toward the guillotine but toward the maw of a wolf, he truly did wish he had Myuri by his side. If she

were with him, he doubted he would be afraid even if he were headed into real battle.



But he considered that was, perhaps, a bit too selfish of him.

Because Myuri knew that they would never venture into battle together. She had pictured herself bathed in the blood of another she had cut down, pictured how her brother might look seeing her like that, and gave up on ever wielding her sword in open battle. Yet it was perhaps apt to call it incredibly twisted for him to think it perfectly normal and natural to have her by his side if he were ever to march into battle himself.

But as one who was all book smarts and no street smarts, he was very likely underestimating what real war would be like.

While that may be the truth, another truth was that he could picture her so firmly in his mind beside him as they made their way to battle.

And if they were never to stand side by side in a fight, then who was the silver girl who stood at his side now?

He squinted at the sight, carefully taking Myuri in—her ash-silver hair fluttered in the wind, and a confident smile rested on her face.

“Ah...I see. I see now.”

He realized that he had always been expecting something from her. And with the greatest jousting tournament in kingdom history on the horizon, he clearly expected the rambunctious girl to whine about taking part. Thinking about how he would calm her had been a headache-inducing problem, but the answer had been there all along.

It was Canaan, surprisingly, who had given the last push to help the round fruit fit into the square box.

Canonization was a dream of unimaginable proportions that Col thought would never fit into the box.

And even if it would never fully fit into his mouth, there was another who dreamed bigger than anyone else.

“All sorts of roles need fulfilling in a battle,” he said, adjusting his clothes, straightening his posture. “A jousting tournament will need a guest of honor.”

At last, the round fruit slid nicely into the square box.

Perhaps it was a bit of an exaggeration to say that the reason his first step was unusually long was because he was excited to see the astonished look on Myuri's face.

Epilogue



EPILOGUE

Jean, who had once sulked so terribly that he refused to wake up after being splashed with water while sprawled on the ground by the well behind a cheap tavern, now wore a fine dress and had taken up a position as an apprentice chronicler. As a royally appointed chronicler, he had already been paid a visit by passionate guests—participants in the jousting tournament or those supporting the participants—hoping to secure more space for themselves in the records. Despite how hard he tried to keep himself together, Jean almost tripped over his own nerves.

Though repairs to the monastery were not completely finished, the building itself had connections to knights who had once come from the ancient empire, which meant its run-down state held a special sort of flavor. So they focused on cutting back the wild grasses, fixing the worst flagstones, reinforcing the crumbling structures, and turning the grounds into a tournament venue.

Horses clad for battle trotted in circles, carrying fully armed knights. It was clear that even the most pristine of places would be covered in dirt and dust in no time.

After the chance meeting out at the manor, Hyland and Klevend had reportedly gone to the king to inform him of what happened. According to hearsay, the king was so shocked it almost seemed his heart would stop, but since one of the kingdom's fears had now been cleared up, his happiness was overflowing.

And the eldest son, the one next in line for the throne, took up the challenge; he was apparently delighted to have the chance to show that he was not becoming king simply because of a difference in birth, and he was more than happy to show his little siblings that he was indeed skilled enough to carry on the family name. If the discontent came from losing out on the inheritance simply because of a difference of a few years, then a big brother who pushed his little siblings aside because of it had brought its own trouble.

The princes' declarations created a wave of excitement far beyond anything they could have imagined.

And since tensions with the Church were still high, they wanted to spread word of the resolution of one big problem throughout the rest of the world as quickly as possible, so preparations for the tournament progressed at a dizzying pace.

People flooded the kingdom, even before the tournament itself began, and many stalls popped up here and there, not only on the monastery grounds, but in the surrounding villages as well. They even heard that every single inn within a couple days' travel of the venue were completely booked. Col did vaguely remember worrying over whether those who had been dozing at the Reel in Salenton were chased out.

Eve, who had invested quite a lot into the monastery, was in high spirits—and had generously provided the tournament's prize pool. And Clark, who had been silently pulling up weeds alone not that long ago, was now technically the head abbot of the venue, and had been receiving all the esteemed guests in a dreamlike daze.

Amid it all, at the far end of the canal into which Le Roi had fallen headfirst, sat the quieter northern building; on the second floor, Myuri was giving food to the fox kits, and Col clapped his hands at her.

"Come now. Sit in the chair."

Myuri's wolf ears lay flat on her head, and her tail swished in displeasure. Col had, of course, heard about what sort of things she had done on his behalf after he had been taken away. She had been genuinely worried for him.

And the fact that he was ultimately unharmed seemed to, in a way, only fuel her displeasure.

Though it had been nearly two weeks since the talk at the manor, she remained unhappy.

"Myuri," Col said, tired. The fox kit sniffed Myuri's hand, licked it, then darted out of the room. Myuri finally got to her feet, then tucked her tail beneath her long white robe.

“I’m never going to forgive you, Brother,” she said.

He was not certain how many times she had essentially said the same thing Hyland had said to him.

But every time she complained, she typically flew to cling to him and bury her face in his chest.

She was like a demon, one who told a priest they would never be rid of him, no matter what reasons they had or how hard they tried—well, not quite that bad, but it was close enough. Col was indebted to her, to the point that he would obeying all her selfish requests for a while.

And one of those was dressing her in a way that would wake her.

“I should at least have a helm, right?! I’ve heard of goddesses of war who have them!”

There was indeed a northern pagan legend that matched that description, but Col ignored her and somehow managed to wrangle her into the chair.

“You would look mighty strange wearing a helm with that.”

“Then give me a sword!” she whined.

Col grasped her head, pointed it forward, then began to run the comb through her hair. With the great effort of many others, they had this pure-white robe made for her for this very day. Her neck peeked out from the collar, and it was smoother than usual due to the light coating of makeup on it.

The small nails on her hands had been filed and polished the night before, and in exchange for all the care he would be giving her on this day, he finally managed to bring Myuri out to the venue.

“I am deeply sorry for foisting such a heavy responsibility on you.”

“Hmph.”

Myuri looked away in a huff. But it did calm her for a while, so he combed out her hair and began to braid it.

“Man, I wanted to take part.”

But it was only for a few short moments that she stayed quiet. She

immediately spoke up again and began to kick her feet.

“Sit still.”

“Grrr...”

She deliberately puffed out her tail, dragging up the hem of her robe, showing off her pale legs. He knew she was trying to bait him into scolding her, but he would be unable to keep up if he fell for it every time.

“Listen to me. Would you be able to compete at your size? Have you seen the real knights?”

As nimble as Myuri was, she would still be going up against warhorses and fully armed knights in a jousting tournament. It was very clear that she would not fare well at all without more raw strength and endurance.

“...You’re always like this, Brother.”

She meant to tell him that he was no fun, always bringing up reality.

Myuri was a dreamer, like a puppy chasing a butterfly, and her expression was fully unsatisfied.

“But you also say the stupidest things at the weirdest times,” she said, turning back to look at him, which caused the neat braid he was so close to finishing to come undone.

“Agh, Myuri!”

“Hmph.” Myuri huffed, as though she was saying, *Serves you right*. “You’re making me do something you were originally supposed to do, right? This means you have to do eeverything I say from now on.”

She had been saying this very thing ever since she heard about the jousting tournament and ever since he spoke with her about this day. Col was aware he had no choice but to accept everything she said, especially considering how he made her worry so.

That said, he had simply been unable to tell her as of yet, and he had his reasons for that, too. That was because he could not picture what sort of reaction she might give him when he did.

But Myuri's selfishness was beginning to reach an extreme, so perhaps this was the perfect opportunity for that.

"I cannot deny that this meant you ended up shouldering the canonization, which was Archivist Canaan's idea."

The reason Myuri was present at a jousting tournament without a sword in hand, wearing a pure-white robe and even wearing makeup, was on Col's request. These sorts of tournaments needed to be held in a particular person's honor, so he had asked that she serve that role.

Common in jousting tournaments was a well-known noblewoman, the one who was holding the event, to whom the participating knights would profess their love.

But to the masses, this particular tournament was a mock battle between the rightful heir to the throne and his rebel little brother. They had to carefully consider to what, or whom, this battle would be dedicated, lest seeds for future trouble remain.

Canaan insisted that of course they should take this opportunity to have the Twilight Cardinal sit in the seat of the guest of honor and accept the dedication of martial feats on God's behalf.

But it was Eve, who was approaching this event as show business, who expressed disapproval; no matter how popular the Twilight Cardinal was, she pointed out that the people would not find it exciting if a knights' festival was being dedicated to a man. Col, of course, hated being in the spotlight, and there was no point if the tournament was not as successful as it could be. And after debating various options, he presented an alternative.

It was an idea he had come up with when, after Klevend and Hyland had made amends, he had made his way to see Myuri, who was held down in the brush by Canaan and Le Roi to make sure she did not leap out at him.

Myuri would sit in the seat of the guest of honor. And she would become the face of the new monastery, in a way, as a saint.

"Picture it: Knights will ride their horses and brandish their spears all to see you smile."

It was a dream for the common town girl, but Myuri only pouted.

“But I want to be a knight!”

Her wolf ears, which were still out, whacked at his hands as he divided her hair.

Col dropped his voice and said, “But I thought you gave up on going into battle?”

He thought he heard her inhale sharply. Tension evaporated from her shoulders, and when she turned around to look at him, there were tears in her eyes.

“Are you wondering why I am so mean to you?”

Myuri dreamed of being a knight, and she had in fact obtained the title herself. But the moment she put herself in a situation where she might have to genuinely wield a weapon, she understood the impossibility of it all.

Not only that, it was not being hurt that feared her the most, but being bathed in the blood of someone she injured. She realized she could not do it when she pictured that—how kind and smart Myuri was.

That said, she could not give up on her dreams so easily; in a surprisingly ladylike move, she took up the quill and began to document her ideal tale. She did so with passion, even though she understood that her dreams would never come true.

She was upset that he would go out of his way to point all that out to her explicitly, but he had his own secret reasons that led him to coming up with the idea of putting Myuri in the jousting tournament’s seat of honor as a saint.

Myuri did not know what those were, so she felt as though his broaching the painful subject was his way of scolding her.

“...Are you mad because I’ve been too selfish?” she asked, her wolf ears drooping.

This happened often in Nyohhira. If there was any reason this intelligent girl was far off from inheriting the title of wisewolf from her mother, it was because she would always make merry and go too far.

Col offered her a smile and gestured for her to face forward again. Hesitant, she did as told, but still tried to look back at him.

He had wanted to wait until the match was over, when everything had calmed down, to tell her, but not everything would always go as planned.

Once he had finished braiding half her hair, he stepped around to face her from the front.

“Myuri.”

“...?”

She flinched, believing her brother had so touched on her dream of being a knight so indifferently as punishment for going too far again.

Myuri looked up at him with sad eyes, and that was when Col realized he had gone too far.

“There is good reason—no, a personal wish behind why I wanted you to take on the role of saint.”

“A...personal wish?”

There came a distant, prolonged cheer; perhaps, as the tournament began, all the knights clad in their heavy armor were entering the arena. As he took in the distant noise, he wiped away the tears at the corner of her eyes.

“Do you remember after Heir Hyland and Heir Klevend shook hands,” he said, “and I stepped forward, ready for you to chomp down on me?”

“.....”

She did, indeed, recall; a curious look crossed her face.

“I was so, so scared,” Col continued. “It was then that I genuinely wished I had you by my side. Even though I had gone to confront your anger.”

Myuri squinted, one corner of her mouth quirking upward in a lopsided smile. “How does that work?” she asked.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” Col said. “But it’s true. Because you have always, always been by my side whenever I march into the scariest of places.”

Myuri blinked, unsure if she should be angered or amused by what he said.

“And I thought that, if we had to head into a real battle, I would feel the same way.”

Her eyes widened.

They were like gems, beautiful, with a powerful shade of red—a gift from her mother.

“And that was when the thought came to me: It is not impossible that we may one day find ourselves standing on the battlefield. And I have no doubt you will be at my side when that time comes. That thought did not strike me as strange at all.”

He strained his eyes, picturing in his mind’s eye Myuri as she would be when she stood by his side.

And what he saw was *her*, just as she was now.

“If you stand in the same position as me, then you could indeed stand on the battlefield and join a fight.”

Myuri opened her mouth, searching for words.

Col leaned forward slightly and grasped her hands.

“War involves so much more than swinging a sword about. That applies to a knight’s order as well. Have you ever heard of a war priest?”

Myuri did not care for faith. But she was endlessly interested in things that could be found in knights’ tales.

“I doubt I would suit the role very well, but you would be simply divine with scripture in hand, inspiring the knights to greater deeds. Picturing you soothing injured soldiers almost makes me want to call you an angel descended from heaven. I know you had to give up on the possibility of heading to battle with sword in hand, but—”

But he could not continue. The moment he felt the world spin, a heavy *thud* collided with the back of his head.

“Brother, you dummy!” Myuri exclaimed, her arms wrapped around his neck in a tight, tight hold. “Just when I was...I was...”

She pressed her face into his chest, nails digging into the fabric of his clothes.

He wrapped his arms around her smaller frame and sighed.

“Just when I was...trying to give up...”

“It is not fair if I am the only one to pursue my dreams.”

Myuri lifted her head, revealing a stream of tears over her cheeks.

“I know it is a bit different from the world you imagined, with gleaming swords and braying howls, however.” Col wiped her tears away with his thumb, but they just kept coming. “There will be many jousting tournaments in the future. Once you mature, grow up, and learn to ride a horse just as well as all the other knights, perhaps you can enter one.”

When he thought back on her mother the wisewolf’s human form, he doubted she might ever achieve a physical stature suited for a female knight, but that did not mean it was necessarily impossible.

“More than one.”

And it was hard to think of anyone who was worse at giving up than Myuri.

“Yes. If you do not get injured, then more than one.”

Myuri pursed her lips taut in response to an adult’s scolding, but then quickly dipped her head to hide it again.

“Brother, you...idiot. Meanie!”

“I know, I know.”

He patted her back and gently ran his hand over it. The hairs on her wolf tail stood on end, lifting up her robe. He tried to push it back down, knowing it was much too indecent for the saint’s role she was about to play, when there came a sudden knock at the door, and it swung open without waiting for an answer.

“...You busy?”

The cold eyes belonged to Sharon.

“I believe you will understand me when I say this is not what you think it is,” Col said.

Sharon shrugged, strode into the room, and saw Myuri, who was paying zero attention to Sharon's presence while she remained clinging to Col. She gave her a good thwack across the back of the head.

"Get ready. We're going over last checks for the opening ceremony with Clark."

"....."

Myuri was clinging tightly to Col, like she was trying to extract the marrow of lamb ribs whose meat had long been consumed, when she suddenly sat up and glared daggers at Sharon.

"Chicken!"

"Mm-hmm. Sure. Just get ready. *You*—you spoil this dog too much. Ugh, fine. I'll do it."

"No! I want Brother to do it!"

"Be quiet. You know I deal with orphans every day. You're nothing new to me."

There was a hint of amusement in Sharon's demeanor; she snatched the comb from Col's hand and started to run it through Myuri's hair. Myuri whined and complained and thrashed about, but she ultimately calmed down and let Sharon do it.

"And I know you have better things to do than stand there staring," Sharon said.

Col stood.

"I will see you later," he said to Myuri.

Myuri, who had turned away in a huff, slowly brought her attention back to Col in a way that would not interrupt Sharon's work.

"I'm going to make you regret not marrying me."

And if that was what she had to say, then all was well.

"I am looking forward to seeing what you are like as a saint."

"Grrr!"

She was the only one who knew how foolish the Twilight Cardinal was; he was the only one who knew how childish she was. As he left the room, those thoughts in his mind, he spotted the fox kit at the end of the hall.

If they cleaned up the grounds, then the kit, too, would be gone from this place.

He did not want that to happen, and that applied to everyone else in the world.

He was sure now that the conflict between the kingdom and the Church could find a peaceful resolution.

Col held that belief in his heart as he made his way from the quiet northern building and toward the southern grounds.

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's me, Hasekura...I feel like I've written a very similar afterword introduction recently. It's been three months since the newest volume of *Spice and Wolf*, and nearly nine months since the previous *Wolf and Parchment*—I have put out a lot of books this year, haven't I? That might be normal, though, or generally on the slower side...

Well, this volume of *Wolf and Parchment* turned out to be quite long. The opening itself was more than one hundred pages long! It's been a very long time since I found myself getting excited over that. It was not meant to be a terribly complicated plot, but there were many things I wanted to write, things that would be exciting for the plot, and things I had to write, and I truly get the sense that we've reached the middle part of the overall story.

Surprisingly, I think things have made great progress forward. I have a general sense of how things are going to go in later volumes, so I am very pleased. Pleased, yes, but that does not mean I'm not a little anxious over whether I'll ultimately be able to tie it all together with my own skill. And so, as an author facing the rising action of his series, I can sympathize with the fear Col feels in the face of the great movements of the world.

And for those who have already read *Spice and Wolf Spring Log*, I am relieved that I was able to call on the foreshadowing as to why Myuri was famous in those volumes. To tell you the truth, when I wrote *Spring Log* first, I kind of went along with the vibes, and afterward I really did not know what to do with myself.

If I have one regret over this novel, I suppose it would be that I wasn't able to introduce a new female character. Sometimes I'm proud that I introduced so, so many female characters in *Spice and Wolf* who led Holo to being jealous. In contrast, I've brought in characters like Sharon in *Wolf and Parchment* who have fun bantering with Myuri, and I think that has its own kind of charm, too. Miss Sharon is a very reliable character when it comes to storytelling.

And as I write, I have run out of space.

I'm going to work hard and pray that the next volume will be within nine months, or even six months...I hope you pick up the next volume of *Wolf and Parchment*.

Isuna Hasekura

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, Volume 7

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SHINSETSU OKAMI TO KOSHINRYO OKAMI TO YOHISHI Vol. 7

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