



NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

By Isuna Hasekura Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura









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Vol. 9

Isuna Hasekura Jyuu Ayakura



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Wolf & Parchment, Volume 9

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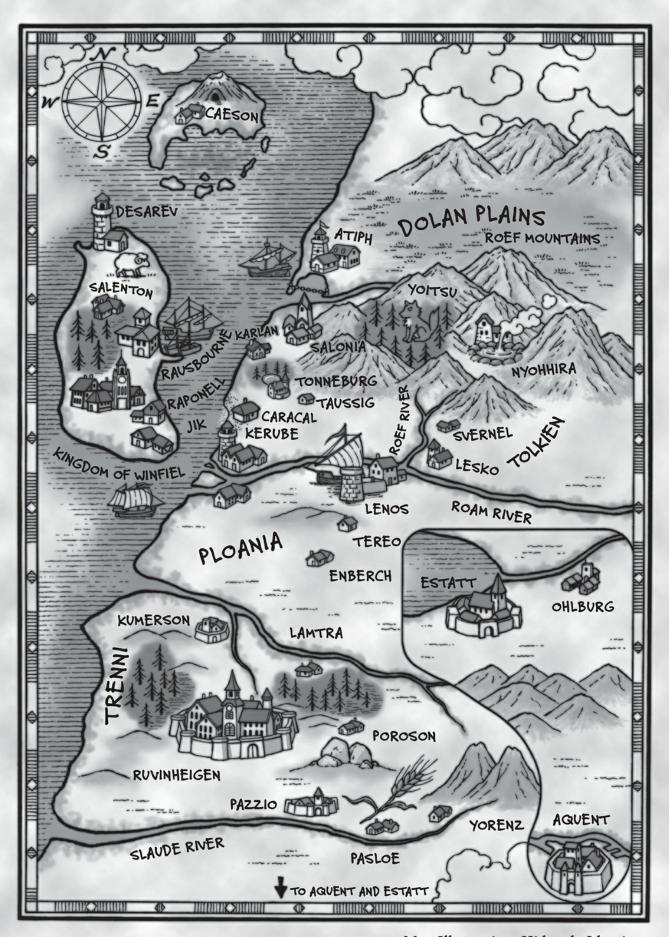
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

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CHAPTER ONE

It was said that even God himself turned his back on the sordid and violent academic cities. Aquent was one of the most famous of these cities, but even here, there were places that offered a reprieve from the tumultuous streets.

Hidden deep in the alleys of the old city district was a ruined chapel.

The Church's crest no longer hung on the wall, and the pulpit had been long since been sold or turned into firewood, but this place was still being taken care of, which meant the tranquil and noetic atmosphere endured to this day.

Much like how God was supposed to be present in all things despite not being visible, despite the absence of the Church's crest and the pulpit, this was still, ultimately, a place of worship.

Col naturally knelt on the floor, clasped his hands together, and began praying. The air was so calm, he could almost feel God's breath on his skin, and in this precious— "Broootheeer!"

A rambunctious girl's vibrant voice he had heard all too many times accompanied the bang of an opening door.

Col resisted the urge to sigh, and as he made every effort to carry on with his prayers, a delectable scent wafted his way. He had skipped breakfast, so he could not help but glance over his shoulder.

"Look, Brother! Look! This meat pie is sooo big! C'mon, stand up!"

He noticed Myuri's hair was parted into pigtails, which only reminded him of wolf tails. She grabbed onto Col and yanked him upward, putting her back into it like she was lifting the lid of a heavy cauldron. The distinct scent of smoke, freshly baked bread, and recently kneaded dough wafted from her.

Behind her stood Lutia, holding a large tray covered with a handkerchief, so he suspected they had baked the pie together.

"There's a secret to the meat! You put both beef and pork together, and theeen you add a little bit of mutton!"

Myuri was practically a professional snack-stealer back home in Nyohhira. She always fled at the first opportunity whenever anyone attempted to teach her how to cook, so she had probably considered making a massive meat pie like this less like cooking and more like playing with dirt.

Col helped Myuri rearrange the long tables that had been left behind in the abandoned chapel as she chatted happily about the process of making the pie. Once they were done, Lutia finally placed down the tray.

Not long afterward, voices drifted in from outside the chapel; Lutia's fellow students called out greetings as they brought in drinks and more food. Myuri dashed off to help them while Lutia checked on the pie and murmured, "I made up with Myuri."

She said this in a teasing tone, but she quickly drew up her shoulders in self-reproach, likely because of recent events. Many things had transpired when Col had attempted to free Lutia and her cohort from the vortex of problems that plagued university cities.

Lutia's situation in particular was complicated, and for various reasons, she had taken deliberate steps to ensure her problems would never be solved.

She had done that because the lord and lady she cared for deeply had departed this world before her, and she had lost her home. Unable to accept the truth, she did everything she could to avert her eyes from reality.

If she had been eternally saddled with the university's problems, then it was as good as freezing time, and she could remain a student forever.

But that was far from healthy. And so even though he knew it wasn't what she wanted, Col had roused her from her waking dream. She, too, knew deep down that one day, she would have to face reality, and though it was not easy, she eventually accepted Col's proposal.

And while that did settle matters quite nicely, there was still one more problem.

Myuri had been moved by Lutia's plight, and in the process of assisting in her

schemes, she had ended up lying to her brother.

Lutia was the first wolf Myuri had met who was not her immediate family, and they were even of similar height, which meant she likely felt comfortable around her. That, and Lutia's problems, held deep significance to Myuri.

Even so, Col could not overlook her deceit, and Myuri had tucked her tail between her legs, knowing she had done something bad.

Ultimately, Col did what an older brother should and doled out a fitting punishment. He had ended up using Lutia's tears to this end, but it seemed his punishment had worked a little too well.

"You came home stinking like me, and then you said something suggestive to her, didn't you? That got a response out of her, all right. She was *terrified* I might take you away from her. Do you know how many times I've had to promise her I wouldn't?" Lutia said, inspecting how well the pie had browned.

Myuri, in the meantime, had taken a crate full of food from one of the students, and was carrying it with alarmingly unsteady arms.

"For that...I apologize," Col said.

In her most rambunctious days, Myuri would have been hung upside down from her tail, cackling heartily while her brother tried to scold her, and so Col had assumed he would be lucky to affect her at all.

"But it *is* all my fault to begin with. Also..." Lutia paused, bringing her face close with a chuckle. "I felt a little smug telling her I would never take her precious brother away from her, all while keeping what you entrusted to me a secret."

"……"

Lutia smiled suggestively for a moment before she barked with laughter.

"I'm kidding, obviously."

It was true Col had let her in on a secret he had been keeping, even from Myuri, all to earn her trust.

But that was nothing more than a gesture of his faith in her. Or, at least, that was what it was meant to be.

"I'll contact you whenever I learn something about the shape of the world. It's been a long time since I've felt so enthusiastic about the pursuit of knowledge."

What Col had told Lutia a few days prior, during the height of the commotion, was the most heretical of ideas.

"It's...you know. It ties into that new continent stuff, doesn't it? Myuri's been constantly inviting me to move there."

Lutia's smile was complicated. Her eyes turned to Myuri, who was busy setting up their feast, and Col didn't miss the hint of longing in that gaze.

"I never even considered that might be a way to make a place for people like us."

There, beings like Lutia, who had to endure the loss of those she loved and respected, would no longer have to fear loneliness.

As that thought crossed Col's mind, Lutia brought her lips right up to his ear.

"And if you're going to be there, then maybe I'll consider moving."

"You—"

Before he managed to do more than sputter, Lutia stepped away.

She was already back to her normal self, giving directions to the other students as they prepared the feast.

Col stared at Lutia and sighed; apparently there were no wolves who knew the meaning of restraint. The moment they spotted a sheep, they couldn't help but tease it.

And if Myuri got a whiff of this, he would not know peace for a long, long time.

Col decided his time would be better spent helping with the preparations.

As they positioned more food and drink around the pie, the centerpiece of the occasion, the students received portions of bread and meat and went home. In their place came Canaan, Canaan's bodyguard, and Le Roi.

This feast was meant to be a thank-you for resolving the problems of the poorer students from the north, but Lutia had already paid them back plenty.

Le Roi summarized it quite neatly.

"We have managed to secure a great deal of paper, thanks to Madam Lutia's help. We should have more than enough for printing the scripture."

They had come to Aquent to acquire the mountain of materials they needed, but the vast quantities of paper required to print textbooks meant nearly the entire city's supply was normally earmarked, so it wasn't as simple as showing up and buying it all.

Moreover, Aquent was much too far from Winfiel for any of them to regularly manage future orders of paper they would need.

That was why it was an enormous help that Lutia would take up this task on their behalf.

"It wasn't me—it's all thanks to Canaan. After he gave the professors' guild a real good talking to, none of the new textbooks have to be printed anymore. Now all the classes use cheap theology books, and there are mountains of those already."

As Lutia elaborated, Canaan quickly set aside the slice of pie he had just bit into and drew up his shoulders in embarrassment.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say I gave them a talking to..."

But despite his denial, Col knew no one else who could get so impassioned in a conversation about faith. He could easily imagine the young archivist yelling at the professors who clung so desperately to their vested interests.

"The students also thoughtfully delivered this to us just now," Le Roi said as he and Canaan stood and unfolded a large piece of paper.

"Whoa, a map?!"

Myuri, who was reaching for her third piece of pie, stared at it with wide eyes.

"You can always count on an academic city! Students who have been living on the road put their heads together and drew a very detailed map. This is an invaluable gift. More than one trading company would do whatever it takes to obtain it."

It was a map of the mainland with Aquent sitting in the middle.

Myuri stared, enraptured, momentarily forgetting about the pie in her hand.

"This map exists for one reason and one reason only: helping the Twilight Cardinal gather allies."

The moment Le Roi finished speaking, an audible *gulp* echoed in the room, though it was hard to tell exactly where it came from.

Col turned toward the sound and saw Myuri stuffing more pie in her mouth.

The glint in her eyes made her seem like a warrior preparing for battle.

"As you know, the Church is concerned about their reputation, which is why they have decided to hold the ecumenical council for the first time in eighty years. Clergy from every corner of the world will be in attendance. The Twilight Cardinal has also been invited, though there is little doubt a plot is afoot. If we wish to win this fight, we will need all the help we can possibly find."

"Prepare for battle!"

Col rapped his fist against Myuri's head, reminding her to swallow before speaking, all while praying God would find room in his heart to forgive this rambunctious child.

"We will not be crossing swords, but a certain phrase does come to mind—a battle of wits."

Myuri had never heard this saying before, and it plucked at her heartstrings. She sat up with a shiver of anticipation.

Le Roi smiled at the excitable girl as he continued.

"Before we return to Winfiel, I believe we should keep an eye out for allies here on the mainland. I'm afraid I don't know much about the ecclesiastical world, and so I leave that in Archivist Canaan's capable hands."

Canaan chimed in with an earnest expression.

"When I was traveling the mainland on the way back from the kingdom, I encountered many who sympathized with your ideals, Master Col, and not just in Aquent. I discovered many potential allies among the nobility who purchased books from Master Le Roi."

"But we cannot make all of the rounds ourselves," Le Roi added.

Myuri's expression became pensive. It was plain to see that if they tried to visit every place detailed on this map alone, it would take months at least.

"Yes, we cannot," Canaan agreed. "That is why our main thrust will most likely consist of sending out envoys and letters. However, I believe Master Col should personally visit the key locations. And that is why we would like Madam Lutia's help, due to her connections with students and professors who hail from all over."

"We can't just go to all the nearby places?" Myuri asked.

"That is also a perfectly good option," Le Roi said. "But this sort of situation demands a unique sort of care. Much like this pie."

"Hmm?" Myuri tilted her head.

Le Roi was smiling at the girl, and one glance at him told Col where this story was going.

"Essentially, the matter of who receives the first slice and who gets what portion might become a point of contention," Col said.

Myuri, who had been listening blankly, finally understood what he was trying to say. And of course, she immediately pouted.

"What is that supposed to mean, Brother?!"

"Exactly what I said. Who was it that leaned over the table to beg for the biggest and tastiest-looking slice?"

"Rrrgh!"

Myuri puffed out her cheeks and turned away in a huff, clearly taking offense.

Lutia laughed and sliced into the pie, cutting a fourth piece just for her.

Canaan continued with a smile.

"Depending on who we ask first, some will agree to be our allies and some will become very cross with us. Typically, we should start enlisting aid from those in greater positions of power."

However, contacting high-ranking members of the clergy would almost

certainly catch the attention of the Church authorities. It was crucial they carefully select people who would keep this discussion under wraps and were likely to join their cause. At the same time, they needed to move quickly to prevent the Church from divining their intentions.

And since the path ahead of them was anything but straight, which road they should take and what order they should visit each court and church was a huge question.

It was then that Lutia spoke up.

"Since you're here, why not go straight to the imperial court?"

"The imperial court?"

Lutia stuck a large baker's knife into the table and said, "With the Twilight Cardinal's influence, you probably won't be turned away at the door. Hunt as much small game as you want; it won't fill you up. What you really want...is the head of the pack." She drove her point home by pretending to bite down like a wolf. "Plus, it wasn't too long ago that the emperor and the pope squabbled over territory. There were even rumors that they came close to dispatching troops, remember? I think you'll be surprised by how easy it'll be to win such a big ally."

Now that she mentioned it, Col realized it was not as outlandish a suggestion as he had been thinking.

It was Le Roi who replied next.

"I have heard of that diplomatic incident. Given our ultimate goal, it would be safe to say that bringing the emperor to our side is absolutely crucial. But the imperial court is easily one of the most labyrinthine places one can find. If we do go there, then we will need to prepare thoroughly."

"Labyrinthine...? Oh, I see. You mean the prince-electors."

"Yes."

Myuri had grown quiet as Lutia's and Le Roi's conversation wound on. She tugged on Col's sleeve with a terribly serious expression and whispered, "I-isn't the emperor...the one who killed the legendary dragon?"

His little sister often failed to distinguish between fantasy and reality, so he quickly explained it to her.

The aforementioned emperor ruled what the rest of the world knew as the southern empire. Its proper name was the Holy Vorian Empire and its ruler was the only individual in the world who currently held the title of emperor.

The reason this nation used such aggrandized names like *Holy Empire* and *emperor* was because they claimed to be the successor state of the ancient empire.

Once the ancient empire began to collapse, breakaway territories fought each other in never-ending wars that produced no clear winners. According to legend, seven realms grew tired of the incessant fighting and finally decided that instead of pointless bloodshed, they would choose one of their number to lead and they would cooperate to become the righteous inheritors of the ancient empire's legacy.

That was how the seven powers united the people of vast territories into a modern-day empire.

Five great noble families and two archbishops stood at the top of this new empire, and since these princes had the right to select the emperor, they were known as the prince-electors.

"Huh... Wait, doesn't that mean the empire's on the Church's side?"

After listening to the brief overview of the empire's history, Myuri had noticed there were archbishops among the prince-electors.

Canaan, who took a bite of pie and then wiped at the corner of his mouth with his napkin, explained, "It is rather complicated, but the archbishops among the prince-electors take great pride in being direct successors of the old Church from the era of the ancient empire. That pride is why they completely disregard the current pope's authority."

When Le Roi saw that Myuri still did not quite understand, he elaborated, "The gist is that the descendants of once-great people are fighting over their inheritance. The Church has a very long history, too."

Myuri nodded in understanding at Le Roi's broad explanation, but Canaan, who was a member of the modern Church, cleared his throat, as though pretending not to hear, and continued his own explanation.

"There would be no greater ally than the emperor, but whoever holds the position is little more than an elected individual. And that means appealing to the imperial throne without undercutting the prince-electors will be difficult."

Lutia nodded and unfolded her arms.

"I guess that means we do this the reliable, but hard way—going after the kings and archbishops who are the easiest to recruit."

"But we must do so quickly, otherwise the Church may get in our way. I thought you might be well-versed in the geography of the area, Madam Lutia, since you lead students from different regions."

Though some places seemed close on a map, any theoretical direct path would often be blocked by mountains and rivers.

Furthermore, the lords of larger territories often had their hands full with local affairs like festivals. Visiting the wrong place at the wrong time could mean a lot of waiting with nothing to show for it, no matter how warm the welcome. They would have to take that into consideration when they decided their route.

Lutia shrugged and quickly joined Canaan and Le Roi in conversation before the map.

As Col watched them, the sudden realization that his fight on the mainland was about to begin dawned on him.

It was not an exaggeration to say the number of allies they could claim would determine the outcome of the ecumenical council.

Just as he collected his wits, he realized the rambunctious girl who simply loved conversations like this was oddly quiet. When he scanned the room for Myuri, he found her furiously writing something on a piece of paper.

He thought for a moment she was copying the map, but then he noticed she was drawing human figures.

"What are you doing?" he asked quietly.

Myuri turned to him with a serious look.

"You're going to invade the territory of a bunch of kings soon, right?"

"...I am not invading anything. We are going to convince them."

"Isn't it the same thing?"

Myuri seemed annoyed that Col did not seem to understand at all; she took the back of her charcoal and dug it into Col's chest.

"Don't you get it, Brother?"

"Um... What should I be getting?"

"Sheesh. You really don't see anything..." Myuri wearily shook her head, then leaned in close and said, "You're the Twilight Cardinal, Brother. You shouldn't wear normal clothes—you have to wear something that matches your title!"

His current outfit consisted of simple, unadorned articles he had worked hard to acquire, saving his money for them while working in Nyohhira.

He believed there was no outfit more appropriate than the one he wore now, as the one who set off on a journey seeking to restore the Church to its proper ways. Myuri apparently did not share the sentiment.

"Look, I'm saying the kings are gonna make fun of you if you show up with that messy hair and those shabby clothes!"

Col pressed a hand to his head, wondering if he had cowlicks from sleeping, but it did not seem to be the case.

He had his own piece to say, anyhow.

"Listen to me, Myuri. No matter who preaches it, God's rightful teachings are an immutable truth. It matters little what sort of clothes I wear. Those of proper faith will always—"

—see what truly matters in my words.

He had started full of conviction, but stopped mid-sentence when he realized not only Myuri, but Lutia and Le Roi were also looking at him.

"You're the only one who thinks that, Brother," Myuri said with an exaggerated sigh and a shrug. She pointed her charcoal at Canaan and declared,

"Canaan's on my side, too."

"Oh, I, um..."

Though Canaan stumbled in his reply, he did not outright deny what Myuri said. And by the way he dressed, it was clear to anyone he was a high-ranking member of the clergy, befitting someone who worked in the Curia.

"And more importantly," Lutia said, "it's basic manners to be properly dressed when meeting someone of status."

"Ah."

The only person of noble status in Col's immediate circle was Hyland, who almost never paid much attention to matters of class. But when he considered that people who were open, friendly, and understanding were surprisingly rare, he thought perhaps what Myuri said may be correct.

However, the idea he had to clad himself in expensive clothes simply to preach God's teachings was one of the Church's justifications for its greed, which he was hoping to cure.

While Col was troubled by this contradiction, Myuri hardly seemed to notice or care; she continued scribbled with her charcoal, adding more garments to the figure on the page.

"I've heard of awesome priests who stand on the battlefield at the head of bands of knights and pray for God's protection! They can kill their enemies with a single word and heal all their allies with a single prayer to God. Then they raise the scripture above their heads and the earth splits in two! *That's* what you should be, Brother!"

It sounded like hagiographies, war epics, and her own fantasy tales were getting jumbled in her head, but Col understood she was talking about chaplains of knightly orders.

"Well, I think Aquent would be the perfect place to get clothes tailored for you. There are plenty of tailors here who cater to nobles who are thinking about joining the clergy," Lutia said.

"And I may be of some help when it comes to what the clergy wears."

After both Lutia and Canaan spoke up, Le Roi added a final comment: "Then I shall commission an illustration of Madam Myuri's ideal warrior priest."

Though that may have been a joke, it seemed unlikely Col would escape getting new clothes. The money he had on hand was probably not enough, so he would have to contact Hyland soon.

Though the current state of affairs had sapped him of his energy, there was one thing he just had to say when he looked at Myuri's illustration.

"Priests do not carry big swords."

What did she think military chaplains were?

Myuri simply pouted. "Then train harder!" she demanded, offering him advice that missed the point completely. She was being difficult as usual, and Col readied himself for what looked to be yet another exhausting conversation.

Before he could address her latest obsession, Myuri suddenly raised her head and focused on something outside the chapel.

A moment later, Lutia did the same. Then came the sound of fast-approaching footsteps.

The ruined chapel sat deep at the end of one of Aquent's alleyways, and people rarely passed by.

The new arrivals could only have one destination in mind. Right on cue, someone knocked on the chapel door.

"Miss Lutia, you have a guest."

It was a boy's voice.

"I think that's one of my kids... But a guest?"

Lutia stood and cautiously made her way to the door.

Myuri drew her sheathed sword closer to her, just in case.

"I'm sorry. I know you said you were in the middle of an important meal, but he said he wanted to see you right away," the boy explained.

When Lutia saw who stood behind him, she unconsciously took a step back.

His hair and beard had grown long and wild. His arms, peeking out from beneath his stained robe, were nothing but skin and bones. Only his eyes glimmered oddly bright.

Had he not been carrying a hefty tome under his arm, Col would have taken him for a beggar.

"Are you Lady Lutia?! My, you are young!"

The man was so shocked, it almost looked like his beard was ready to double in size. He straightened his posture and continued. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Pierre of Ashredge! When I received your letter, I simply had to come right away!"

Under Pierre of Ashredge's arm was a thick tome, and he held a long staff in place of a walking stick that showed he lived on the move. There was a sack slung over his shoulder, and his feet were bare.

The first thing that came to Col's mind was a traveling preacher.

He had heard there were priests like this, who would preach with tremendous passion on city corners to anyone who would listen. Even a pebble by the side of the road was enough of an audience.

Pierre seemed to be the living embodiment of that very idea, and he came on so strong even Lutia wasn't sure how to react.

"It is truly heartening to know there are noble warriors of God who dare to fight for justice in this sullied world!"

"O-oh, uh... Thanks, I guess..."

Were her tail out, it would have been tucked between her legs out of sheer bewilderment.

Canaan started to stand so he could help. Le Roi simply smiled as though a welcome house guest had arrived. Meanwhile, Myuri was so enthralled by Pierre's old-fashioned way of talking that she quietly recited his words under her breath.

"But I am unworthy. In fact, I am ashamed I was unable to assist with your request to aid your students. Thus, I was determined to take action even God

would be proud of, and so I have rushed to your side!"



His voice carried clear and well, likely from years of preaching.

Pierre took two steps forward, closing the distance between himself and Lutia.

"Now, Lady Lutia! Let us away to join forces with the Twilight Cardinal!"

"O-oh, uh, but Mister Pierre, shouldn't you wash the travel from your clothes before we go?"

The way Lutia spoke was unusually timid.

Pierre was talking as though there was a battle raging that very moment, but there was still quite some time before the start of the ecumenical council that would be the stage for their final battle with the Church. They were only at the stage of preparation where they were gathering allies who shared their ideals.

However, Pierre firmly shook his head and stressed that time was of the essence.

"No! We mustn't drag our feet! As we sit here talking, the Twilight Cardinal wages war!"

"Mister Pierre, the Twilight Cardinal is..."

Lutia glanced at Col as she attempted to rein in the ranting man.

Col began to stand, knowing his presence was probably the best way to calm Pierre's surging zeal, but— "I have heard! He is in the evil cathedral city of Estatt! That is where the Twilight Cardinal fights even now!"

"Um, what?"

That confused question could have been anyone's.

"Let us venture to safeguard the Lord's holy teachings! I will gladly be the foundation for godsent Saint Tote Col, and for the sake of God's righteous teachings!"

Pierre of Ashredge waved his arms about and stomped on the ground, making his beard dance wildly as he ranted.

Everyone else present was perplexed, and it was not because of the man's slight over-eagerness.

Lutia, who had done nothing but step backward thus far, instead came forward to close the distance between them.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

While Canaan, and even Myuri, stared blankly at the two of them, there came a light *smack*, rather out of place.

Le Roi had smacked his own forehead.

"It seems we've been beat."

What? How?

It seemed the passionate traveling preacher had his own share of questions.

"Whatever do you mean? Are you not gathering allies for the Twilight Cardinal to fight against the cathedral city of Estatt?"

Had Lutia any less self-control, her wolf ears might have popped out. That was the degree of shock on her face when she whipped around to look at Col.

Is that what you were planning? she seemed to ask.

"Lady Lutia, are the fellows behind you your allies?"

Since both men had majestic facial hair and they spoke in the particular manner that was unique to those who were a little too well read, Pierre came across like a more old-fashioned Le Roi.

But the moment he looked past Lutia and toward the rest of them, Col saw that beneath his joyously bouncing beard, he had the face of a surprisingly pleasant priest, the sort people respected in their local churches.

"It seems we have been dawdling for far too long," Le Roi said as he stood from his chair. "Master Col has an imposter."

As everyone turned to look at the Twilight Cardinal, he stuffed the rest of his slice of meat pie into his mouth and nervously swallowed.

Once Pierre's hot blood had cooled, Lutia and Canaan took him to the Green Gourd as an invitation to rest.

The reason Canaan went along was because, once he discerned the kind of person Pierre was, he posed a difficult theological question, and Pierre took the bait like a starving catfish. Once they arrived at the Green Gourd, Lutia wondered aloud if they should be a little heavy-handed and send the most enthusiastic students they could find to press Pierre with a flood of questions.

As they watched the whirlwind that was Pierre vanish at the far end of the alley, Myuri turned to Le Roi with a question of her own.

"Brother has an imposter?"

Though she sounded unperturbed, her eyes flashed with anger. Le Roi raised his hands to urge her to remain calm as they returned to the chapel.

"When digging through the annals of cities across the land, it quickly becomes apparent that sort of thing is not all that uncommon. And in the detailed histories of larger cities, you will always find one or two records of such people being executed."

Le Roi poured himself a drink, then grabbed a pitcher of grape juice as he gestured toward Myuri's seat.

Once Col patted Myuri on the back, she reluctantly sank into her chair, visibly eager to hear the rest of the story.

"This is a case of impersonation, yes?" Col asked.

He had heard of incidents like this before. There were tales of a saint who could preach in two cities at once, and it was sometimes considered a miracle. Of course, common sense dictated it was simply one or more imposters.

The temptation to take advantage of another's name and reputation was too strong for some to resist.

There were stories in every city of people who claimed to be an illegitimate child of the emperor, or perhaps a great noble who had gone missing in battle, or sometimes they were supposed to be the king of some faraway country no one had ever heard of before. Ultimately, when they were found out, they were strung up for the crime.

Throughout history, it wasn't unheard of for the best imposters to secure themselves positions of power, up to and including peerage.

Yet Col could not completely rid himself of his shock.

A pretender using his name had appeared.

"That is the result of the Twilight Cardinal becoming a household name." Le Roi took a light sip of his drink, then flashed a somewhat troubled smile. "It must have occurred to you during the events surrounding Madam Lutia's ordeal, Master Col. If you put your mind to it, you have the power to put in motion great things."

Lutia had buried herself in unsolvable problems in an attempt to shield herself from the biting wind of loneliness. But when Col used Canaan's contacts, and his own connection with the Debau Company, all those problems blew away like a house of straw.

They were all connections he had made as the Twilight Cardinal, and if he ever desired it, he could command a great deal of power with that name.

"And where there is power, there is greed," Le Roi continued. "If I were to call myself the Twilight Cardinal, then a great many people would come grovel at my feet. There are more than you might expect who are perfectly willing to use that power for themselves."

As he said that, Myuri's shoulders became even stiffer.

"Scarcely anyone on the continent knows Master Col's face, yet his name has spread far and wide. I was a bit apprehensive over the danger of this situation, but I had assumed it would still take a bit more time before you would have imposters." Le Roi paused to wet his throat with his drink. "Either your name has spread much too quickly, or perhaps your activities in the Kingdom of Winfiel made an easy target for swindlers."

With a sea separating the two landmasses, it was unlikely the swindler would ever run into someone their target knew personally.

"And your role is perfect for impersonation."

"My role?"

Le Roi wore a smile on his face and turned to Myuri. To be more precise, his eyes went to the paper on the table in front of her.

The quick-witted girl understood immediately.

She waved the paper around to drive her point home.

"It'd probably be difficult to go around saying you're an emperor who's slain a dragon, but if someone just wanted to imitate you, Brother, then all they have to do is put on a mopey face and some ugly clothes and they could get away with it!"

She added, quite unnecessarily, that a poor performance might even turn out to be more convincing.

The Twilight Cardinal preached virtuous poverty—anyone could easily copy him without spending any money.

"It is also very convenient you are not an official member of the clergy. If you were a well-known priest, then anyone could ask at a larger church, where they might find someone who knows your name or has exchanged letters with you."

And that meant he was an easy target for the scam artists.

"But acting like my *brother*?" Myuri asked. "What would anyone get from doing that? I'd want to pretend to be a heroic knight."

She was saying that, in her eyes, pretending to be someone so awkward and unseemly would be of little use to anyone.

"The location may be the hint we need."

"He mentioned some town with a big church or something, right? Estatt?"

Myuri leaned on the table and studied the unfolded map.

"Cathedral towns are places where the archbishop is in charge. Estatt is here, you see," Le Roi said, pointing to a corner in the map. "And the archbishop of Estatt is one of the prince-electors."

Myuri stared at Le Roi blankly for a few moments after his explanation, before she tilted her head.

"Does that mean Brother's fake is trying to convince that guy to be on our side?" Myuri said, then quickly mumbled, "Oh, but..."

"Mister Pierre mentioned the Twilight Cardinal is apparently fighting against the city."

When Col looked at the map, a terrible foreboding sank in.

"... Perhaps he is using my name to start his own fight with the Church."

A fight completely divorced from Col's own plans and intentions.

"In the best-case scenario, yes. It's very likely this individual may claim to be doing so for the sake of those suffering under the archbishop's misrule."

Myuri picked up her wooden spoon, eager to eat the rest of the pie; when she fit it in her mouth, the creases between her brow deepened.

"Does that mean...he's a good person?"

"It depends on which perspective you use to look at this." Le Roi spoke with an unexpectedly serious tone. "Historically, almost everyone who has impersonated a saint has been executed as a heretic. No matter who they wanted to save, or how righteous their cause, or whatever reasons they offer, it does not justify falsifying their identity. Some will even go as far as using fabrications to incite the masses. Such warped intentions leave room for the devil to sneak in."

In other words, people who were willing to do such a thing were the type to risk *anything* to achieve their goals.

And so whether they were doing it out of the goodness of their heart or for more sinister intentions, those sorts of people had already strayed from the path of righteousness.

Though Col already felt a headache coming on from knowing he had caught the attention of someone like that, Le Roi had called it the *best-case* scenario.

"...Then what would be the worst-case scenario be?" Col asked.

Le Roi nodded thoughtfully.

"I suppose someone using the Twilight Cardinal name to pressure the archbishop into handing over all the wealth he's accumulated. If he were to demand reconciliation money, then he could make quite a lot in a very short amount of time. Estatt is a very old and very large city. It's famous for its market in particular. The cathedral there must have quite a bit of money."

Le Roi, as a veteran of the business world, spoke clearly and frankly, which left

both Col and Myuri surprised.

"Of course, that would be a major blow to what we are trying to accomplish. And that is not simply because this imposter is targeting the archbishop, one of the prince-electors. The Church is doubtlessly searching for opportunities to hurt your reputation, Master Col. Something like this would spark a thousand rumors across the mainland in an instant."

Myuri's eyes shot open.

"We can't let that happen!"

"Indeed, we cannot."

Myuri's wooden spoon suddenly began to tear through the air as she shoveled what was left of the meat pie into her mouth. Once she had overfilled her slender throat with far too much food, she slapped the table.

"We need to go to that cathedral city now!"

Had she been any more excited, her ears and tail would have popped out.

Le Roi smiled in approval, while Col gave a tired sigh.

And just as Myuri began shouting and hollering, Lutia and Canaan returned from dropping off Pierre.

If they allowed this imposter to use the Twilight Cardinal name however he liked, then Col would begin encountering less than savory stories about himself sooner rather than later, thus making his struggle against the Church all the more difficult. Not only that, but the imposter's target was Estatt—a city ruled by one of the prince-electors who would be key in persuading the emperor.

Of course, the archbishop would be an influential voice within the organization of the Church as well.

Typically, Col would venture into such a place only after conversing with Hyland and the others to lay out a plan in detail and thoroughly prepare, but the situation did not allow them to tread carefully.

Was the story Pierre had heard about the imposter true? If it was, then they needed to figure out what he was trying to accomplish immediately. Depending on what that was, they might need to stop him as soon as possible.

Lutia left to search for wandering students who had spent time in Estatt, while Le Roi used his merchant connections to find anyone who might have more up-to-date information on what was happening in the city.

After hearing the details from Pierre, Canaan offered to go to the Aquent church to inquire further.

Col was thankful to have such reliable allies, but it troubled him that despite being the eye of the storm, the Twilight Cardinal himself had nothing to do but wait at the inn.

"And that's exactly why you have people pretending to be you, Brother."

Myuri had spent the day rushing around the Aquent markets in search of suitable travel clothes for their departure, and she returned as the sun was setting. When she found Col there alone, unsure of what to do with himself, she heaved a dissatisfied sigh.

"See? You need to stand up straight and be more assertive!"

Even though Myuri had been the one who ran in circles over childish assumptions, and who had been on the verge of tears when he scolded her after everything that happened with Lutia, now she was the one giving her brother a smack on the back.

"If you acted more like a legendary knight all the time, then it would be a lot harder for anyone to copy you!"

He was not quite sure about that, but he understood what she was trying to say.

"Legendary knights aside, the kings of old always had titles, didn't they?"

When he murmured this aloud, Myuri's ears piqued up.

"We call the most well-known kings things like, Redbeard Barbado, or Joan the Bald, no?"

Myuri loved heroic tales. She hummed in agreement.

And the girl's red eyes settled on him.

"Brother with Droopy Shoulders?"

That was indeed the perfect descriptor for what he looked like at that moment.

"Of Indigestion...? No, the Worrier? The Stickler, or maybe the Blockhead... Oh, the Clueless? In that case, then what about the Irritable?"

Her suggestions quickly devolved into her badmouthing or complaining about him. It was clear that nothing flattering would be forthcoming.

"None are any match for the Saint of the Sun."

When he said that in a tired voice, surprise flashed in Myuri's red eyes. Then she shrugged dramatically and donned a mischievous smile.

"It's okay, Brother. If you stood in front of your fake, I'd know which one was real right away."

Though he was typically very strict with her, she always met him head-on with frank, earnest feelings.

Perhaps the reason he always found himself moved whenever she did that was because it was clear, in times like these, she had inherited the blood of Holo the Wisewolf.

Still, she needed quite a lot more experience before she could truly lay claim to the name of wisewolf.

"That would be something to see."

"Hmm?"

Myuri loosened her sash that was embroidered with her knight crest and neatly folded it. When Col spoke, her eyes and ears turned to him.

"I believe it's going to be rather difficult to prove I am the real one."

""

Myuri's eyes drifted up to the ceiling on the right, then to the left, as though trying to picture the situation, then turned her attention back to him.

"Why?"

"If you stood next to an empty honey pot with honey on your mouth, then the culprit would be obvious."

"……"

Myuri narrowed her eyes as her tail swished back and forth with visible discontent.

"But if there were two of you, and nothing but an empty honey pot, then what?"

It could be possible that both of them had eaten the honey, but there would be no definitive proof.

"Unlike the saints of legend, I cannot perform miracles."

Authority was a real thing that existed, but it was not something anyone could physically touch. The scripture was full of stories about angels who disguised themselves as beggars and were rarely noticed.

"But Canaan and Uncle Le Roi could tell everyone you're the real thing, right?"

"And what if the other has companions who can do the same? A group of scammers would be more than capable of such a thing. The regular townsfolk will not know who to trust."

"Really? That can't...," Myuri began, but quickly grasped the implications. "No way... B-but you're the real one!"

She took a hurried step toward him, as though reaffirming his presence, and Col reached out with both hands to hold her in place.

"This just goes to show how much Heir Hyland has helped us thus far."

There were many in the Kingdom of Winfiel, and along the opposite coast across the sea, who had seen the Hyland in person. And even those who hadn't would pay due respect if shown a document with the kingdom's crest on it.

But Col and Myuri had gone inland, far away from the coasts. It was not unusual to run into people who had never heard of the Winfiel Kingdom.

If they entered Estatt without a plan, it was likely Col would end up being chased away as an imposter.

"Then...what should we do?"

What, indeed. That was the question Col had been pondering this entire time.

The appearance of one imposter guaranteed at least a dozen others were thinking of doing the same thing.

It would not be wrong to say this was the most crucial moment in their fight against the Church. They had even set aside distributing the vernacular translation of the scripture to better prepare for the upcoming ecumenical council.

If imposters sullied the Twilight Cardinal's name, then many people's hopes and hard work would be for nothing.

Col had a responsibility to act.

Just as Le Roi had said, it was dangerous for one's name to take on a life of its own. Col had to show the world that *he* was the Twilight Cardinal.

If this other person was truly a swindler at heart, chances were good they would refuse to admit their wrongdoing even after being exposed. There was no telling how much authority the Winfiel Kingdom's crest would hold in such a distant land, so it was doubtful Hyland's letter would be very useful in proving Col's identity. Besides, it would not be surprising if the scammer had his own set of fake documents.

After a lot of consideration, Col reached the conclusion that he would have to take relatively drastic measures.

But as he reviewed the details, all he could come up with were sighs.

That was not because he was unsure of the success rate, nor was it because of the savagery of those methods.

It was because he was picturing the *result* of his actions.

When Myuri returned from the market, she had noticed how dejected he looked. That was just the surface of his current inner turmoil.

Col knew plenty stories about the saints—he could already see how drastically their lives would change once he made himself known to the public.

Many living saints were swarmed by the faithful wherever they went and often saddled with major responsibilities by those in power, but ultimately, they could not live up to everyone's expectations and ended up living as hermits.

But Col had left Nyohhira to right the Church's wrongs, and he had received help from many people along the way.

He could not simply pretend none of that had happened and return to a quiet life.

And more importantly, Col had his very own reliable partner.

"...What?"

Myuri was infuriated by the presence of an imposter of her brother, and she looked at him with eyes brimming with tears.

Once upon a time, all she had ever spoken about was becoming Col's bride, and while he thought she had calmed considerably since then, she had recently run herself ragged because of Lutia's tribulations. She had been terrified the end of her journey with Col had been near.

That was who Myuri was.

Col had promised her no matter what happened to the world, he would always be on her side. And of course, Myuri would always stay by his side.

"Oh, Myuri. Don't make that face."

He gently wiped the tears pooling in the corner of her eyes with his thumb.

Though he looked to be an unreliable Twilight Cardinal at first glance, he was not completely powerless.

"We will find a way."

"But-"

Myuri opened her mouth to argue, but Col smiled.

This story had begun with him setting off from Nyohhira on passion alone.

He refused to be outdone by the big dreams Myuri wrote in her fantasy stories every day.

"I have learned a thing or two on our journey. There is a way."

If abandoning the adventure was not an option, then losing was not an option, either.

He understood all too well this was not the time to hesitate. And once he had steeled himself, he would see just how many weapons he had in his arsenal.

Perhaps his spirit had touched her, because Myuri stared blankly at him for a short while, sniffled, and then her ears and tail began to flick in excitement.

In the few days before their departure, Col wrote two letters.

The first one was bound for the Kingdom of Winfiel, sent via Le Roi's merchant network.

For the second one, he asked Myuri to bring a bird to the window, and he wrapped it around its leg. This particular bird was here on Sharon's orders to accompany them on their journey, and as thanks they gave it sweet nuts from the market.

"I'm kind of surprised you came up with this plan, Brother."

Myuri, who wore a traveler's cloak tied on with tough leather belt, shared her surprise after entrusting the bird with their letter. That message was not headed for Winfiel.

They needed to consult with a certain group of people about the fight they were expecting in the near future.

"I couldn't agree more," he said with a smile before beginning his own travel preparations.

According to the information Lutia and Le Roi had gathered, it seemed there was indeed trouble brewing in the cathedral city of Estatt.

But as to whether the Twilight Cardinal was involved, the answer changed dramatically depending on who took the question, so it was not clear.

"Estatt's a really busy city, too, right?" Myuri asked, twisting around to check on the sword resting on her hip.

"That is what I hear. They host a grand market, which is well-known throughout the continent. It is the perfect breeding ground for rumors, which makes it hard to know exactly what the truth is."

It was not a case of too many cooks. It was simply that even if many people visited Estatt, the stories they would hear inevitably came with bits and pieces

of conjecture, hyperbole, and jokes. The farther away from the city they were, the more impossible it would be to tell what was fact and what was fiction.

But a common point in every report was that the city Estatt and a nearby lord were engaged in some sort of conflict, so there was most certainly something going on.

Chaotic political situations made it easy for bad actors to do their work.

"It would be best if I had no imposter to begin with, of course, but an archbishop who is also a prince-elector rules there, and Estatt is the host of a grand market. That makes it the perfect place to declare myself the Twilight Cardinal."

He tightened his sash around his waist, steeling himself.

Even if this talk of an imposter turned out to be a groundless fear, they still had to act quickly to make sure no further fakes appeared.

He had to show the mainland what sort of person the Twilight Cardinal was.

Then he had to make sure everyone who saw the real Twilight Cardinal would be able to recognize imposters if anyone attempted to impersonate him again.

He had to make sure no one else would ever try to use his name and power for their own purposes.

Despite his understanding of the logic behind all this, Col was still rather tempted to hand the mantle off to someone who wanted it more than him.

In his ideal world, no one would know his face, and he could lose himself in skimming books at the front of a bookseller's shop, and the most interaction he would ever need to handle would be the bookseller clearing their throat to catch his attention.

He gave a quiet sigh, but not quiet enough to slip past Myuri's wolf ears. She took a step toward him.

"It's okay. I'll be right by your side."

She grinned, revealing her pointed canines.

"Yes. When I can no longer bear the weight of my renown, then I plan on

leaving everything in the capable hands of the Saint of the Sun."

The rambunctious girl with the ears and tail of a wolf rattled the sack slung over her shoulder.

"I am capable! I'm gonna get sooo many more marriage proposals!"

"I do not think that is where you should be focusing your efforts."

"Hee-hee-hee."

Myuri rubbed her head on his shoulder in a very wolflike display of affection.

She was overwhelming at times, but it was reassuring to have her by his side as he prepared to embark on an uncertain path.

"Anyway, you don't really need to worry too much about dealing with this fake," she declared.

"Why not?"

"If it becomes a real issue, I'll just bite him in half and bury him in the woods."

A small part of this girl was like that.

"There's no need for that," Col said curtly. "It is my wish, as your elder brother, for you to grow up into a proper young lady."

Had he said this back in Nyohhira, Myuri would have ignored his lecture outright.

But now, when she heard him say that, delight danced in her eyes, and she said with as childish a tone as she could muster, "Okaaay!"

Col had to denounce the imposter and prove he was the true Twilight Cardinal.

But he had already gotten a glimpse of just how much trouble the imposter would be simply by observing Pierre.

When Lutia told the man whoever was in Estatt was either a fake or the figment of a baseless rumor, and that the true Twilight Cardinal was standing in front of him, Pierre just laughed as though she had told him the most hysterical joke.

When no one else laughed with him, he asked in bewilderment, "Really?"

While there was no way to tell what he was truly thinking, Pierre ultimately ended up hiding away in the church as if he had been shaken to his core after learning the Twilight Cardinal was someone as unanimated as Col.

Canaan believed the man was mostly suffering from a guilty conscience and was convinced he could not tell the difference between real and fake, due to his lack of faith.

Le Roi and Lutia had smiled wryly at the news; Myuri was angry Pierre lacked a discerning eye.

But not everyone was like Pierre, who would reflect and pray when they could not tell the difference between real and fake.

That thought alone told Col this situation could easily get out of hand.

"Call me if you need me. I can get to Estatt easy. I could probably be of use to you," Lutia said when she saw them off; she deliberately peeled her lips back to show off her fangs. "But I think the little knight by your side should be enough."

Lutia smiled at Myuri, who stuck her tongue out at the other wolf out of jealousy over her brother.

After shaking hands with Lutia, they set off for Estatt. Despite her attitude toward Lutia, Myuri kept looking back at her and waving. It seemed she still had things to say to her.

And every time, Lutia kindly waved back.

"We will see her again soon," Col assured her.

Myuri nodded wordlessly. She was still not used to the partings that came with travel.

Broadly speaking, the cathedral city of Estatt was directly north of the academic city of Aquent. However, there were a few mountains in the way. Though relatively low, the mountains would still force them to take a roundabout route, since there were no good roads.

First, they would have to retrace the path they had taken from the Kingdom of Winfiel to Aquent. Once they reached the coast in the northwest, they would

then pivot east to continue along the coast, which curved drastically inward.

Estatt sat at the mouth of the river that fed into the deepest part of the bay.

The city was considered a key location for inland trade due to its proximity to the river, and a critical port for sea lanes due to the calm waters of the sheltered bay. Canaan, who was well-versed in the history of the Church, told them that in times of the ancient empire, the city developed around the old church that had been built there, which had served as an important base for military expeditions heading north.

Its storied history was a major reason why Estatt enjoyed its status as a cathedral city ruled by an archbishop who served as one of the prince-electors.

The bay, which had probably served ships carrying knights of the ancient empire to and from the city, was calm and almost looked more like a placid lake. That impression only grew the farther east they traveled, and it was not long before their feet grew muddy while the water became more akin to a lagoon than anything else.

Many waterfowl gathered in the shallows. These birds, with their long beaks and legs, left quite an impression as they elegantly scavenged for food.

The road to Estatt had good visibility and there was no danger of getting lost. It was the definition of an easy walk. There was just one little problem.

It was incredibly humid.

On the dawn of their second day of travel, Myuri awoke with terrible bedhead, and her hair was damp and refused to cooperate. She was furious, so Col had no choice but to braid it for her.

At noon on the following day, Myuri was hungry and leisurely retrieved her bread from her sack, only to throw it onto the ground moments later with a shriek. The bread she had spent hours baking with the boys at the Green Gourd was covered in a sickly blue-and-white fuzz.

In the cold and dry Nyohhira, the closest thing to mold they normally saw was the likes of moss and lichen. It was perhaps the first time Myuri had seen such an outbreak. She had probably never considered how fast freshly baked bread could become moldy when it absorbed so much moisture from the air.

Myuri's panic reminded Col of his previous travels from long ago. As he reminisced, Col collected the bread Myuri had thrown away, pinched off the mold growing on the surface, toasted the rest over the fire, and ate it. It carried a bit of an earthy taste, but that hardly bothered him.

Myuri must have thought that Canaan and his good upbringing would sympathize with her.

But Canaan had God's protection.

He grasped the Church crest in his hand, prayed, then ate the bread, whose mold his bodyguard had removed for him, while holding his breath.

Myuri seemed ready to call him a traitor. But instead, she pulled out a relatively nice-looking piece of bread, removed the mold, and toasted it over the fire. After Col whispered some magic words in her ear, she finally closed her eyes and bit into it.

It seemed telling her this was a common situation in adventure tales had a real effect.

"I have heard the waterline used to be much higher a long time ago. This area must have been a thriving place under the sea."

Myuri pouted, clearly not caring much for this old story. She sat a short distance away from the fire.

There were few hearty trees growing along the coast; the best they had were fields of silvergrass.

Burning weakly among the firewood was peat they had excavated from beneath the silvergrass.

The area around Estatt had historically been rich in peat, and while it was nice not having to worry about fuel, it seemed Myuri could not stand the peculiar smell.

"Alcohol that uses grains smoked in peat are a delicacy, and I hear it's Estatt's specialty."

Just as Col thought it was unfortunate that barely anyone in their party drank, Canaan's taciturn bodyguard hummed quietly.

"But being situated so close to the water, Estatt must suffer many floods."

As someone who had many titled lords among his extended family, that was where Canaan's mind went first.

"It must be convenient to have such easy access to shipping, but I can imagine they must have endured many a hardship in the past," Le Roi remarked.

The scenery was flat and did not seem to contain much life at a glance, but when Col glanced out toward the sea during the day, he could see ships constantly coming and going.

They were all mostly small, shallow-draft ships that glided along the surface of the water, but the coastal shipping lanes explained why he occasionally saw fairly sizable ships as well.

There were also not an insignificant number of travelers on the roads, which gave him an idea how lively Estatt must be.

But the typically loud, rambunctious girl was decidedly in a mood.

"I wish we were in the city already..."

Myuri complaining on the road was a rare and precious thing.

"I see even you have things you dislike."

When he recalled how she threw away her moldy bread, Col could not help but smile. Perhaps he should praise her for her self-control in not letting her tail out.

"You're so mean, Brother!"

She smacked his shoulder, wrapped the blanket around herself, and flopped down on the ground.

Le Roi and Canaan shared a smile before they added another brick of peat to the fire.

"We should be arriving at a post town near the city tomorrow. We will collect information there while we rest our weary bones," Le Roi said.

The rounded ball of blanket that was Myuri rustled. "The town's not going to be this humid too, is it?"

She was normally proud of her smooth, silky hair. Right now, it mostly looked damp.

Le Roi, however, kept the smile on his face and said nothing. Myuri sighed over her present lot and curled up once again.

"God has shown us the right path. This path leads us to a town where all is fair, good, and everyone who lives there enjoys equal happiness."

The one preaching in an extolling cadence was a man who was dressed as a priest and wore a gentle smile. He was the exact opposite of Pierre, whose hair was unkempt and whose personality could be likened to a lightning bolt. In stark contrast, this preacher stood on a crate with the scripture in one hand and spoke eloquently to passing travelers.

A considerable number of people on the road first stared at him in surprise, then heard the story from nearby merchants who wore knowing smiles, then serendipitously took the road to the right of the fork.

It was at the roadside post town that Col and company came across this sight. They were near enough that they were expecting to see the Estatt city walls on the horizon at any moment.

"Is that your fake, Brother...?"

Myuri's spirit had been in tatters since the incident with the moldy bread, and now she glared hard at the preacher in her displeasure.

"No. I believe that is simply a guide."

Estatt was at its busiest in the spring with the grand market, so Col had expected the crowds.

But there was another reason the roadside post town was so packed with people.

Le Roi returned after hearing the explanation from the merchants.

"This road leads directly to Estatt, but the road right leads to Ohlburg, the Town of Hope."

"Town of Hope?"

Though Canaan was not as furious as Myuri that another was using the Twilight Cardinal name, he was still angry, and his mood soured when he saw the state of the post town.

He furrowed his brow and stared at the preacher.

"The way he speaks leads me to believe he is basing his speech on the fourth stanza of the psalms in the scripture... But to say heaven has appeared on earth is a heretical cliché."

The fourth stanza of the psalm described a situation where a persecuted people were beset by disaster, but God appeared before them and led them to the Town of Hope.

There was a strong element of adventure to the parable, and it was a very popular sermon among the clergy, but it was also a very popular passage for those who styled themselves as a messiah.

"I believe your estimation is correct, Archivist Canaan. It seems our Twilight Cardinal is trying to establish a market with no taxes," Le Roi said, looking to the road on the right, the one that turned east and led farther inland. "I was told Ohlburg will be hosting a holy market, where everyone is to be considered equal. None will be allowed to act high and mighty, and only honorable transactions take place. The Twilight Cardinal apparently gives the people blessed teachings there every day."

While he spoke in all seriousness, a part of his tone made it feel like he was telling a child about the legend of the continent at the edge of the sea.

Canaan shook his head in displeasure, Myuri was furious, and Col let his shoulders fall. The imposter was not just a rumor. More importantly, he was attempting to create an open market free from any taxes.

What this person was doing was much too ostentatious for a scammer who simply wanted to use Col's title to secure his daily bread.

"What shall we do?"

Twilight Cardinal? Le Roi mouthed to Col without making a sound, a hint of mischief in his eye.

And at last, Col managed a smile despite his consternation.

"We still don't fully understand the situation, and we are not ready to face him just yet. Let us make our way straight for Estatt."

"I agree. There is no guarantee this Town of Hope will have any proper inns anyway."

That was most certainly not a jab, and that was clear from the map Canaan's bodyguard was checking as well. If they were to take the road to the right the preacher had gestured toward, they would eventually find themselves on the road following the river that flowed into Estatt, which would then take them farther inland. If they were to continue upstream, they would find a small port town, but that was not Ohlburg, and there was nothing remarkable along the way.

The post town they were currently in also sat in the middle of a silvergrass field with no proper trees anywhere, so this area was likely a vast continuation of the peat fields, where no crops could grow.

That meant Ohlburg might very well be nothing more than a campsite adjoining the temporary grand market.

They wanted to soothe the exhaustion from their journey, and they wanted to collect information, which meant Estatt was the superior option.

It also appeared the only travelers in this post town were people fascinated by the idea of a taxless market, so it was unlikely they would hear anything besides biased accounts.

"Hear me, hear me! Take your first step into a splendid world!"

The preacher's pleas to follow the right road rang loud behind them as Col and company urged their horses onward to Estatt.





CHAPTER TWO

"Ugh... We finally made it..."

Myuri collapsed on the bed as she said that, and let out her ears and tail which she had kept hidden the whole journey. After she gave them a good swishing two, three times, they fell flat on the bed.

"Do not fall asleep like that."

"Mmh..."

Her tail twitched with displeasure, but she began to peel off parts of her travel clothes without getting up—perhaps they were not that comfortable when lying down.

"Good grief."

Col took her cloak and her belt and placed them on a nearby chest.

He glanced out the window beside him and looked down at the main street of Estatt below.

"It's a lot quieter than we were expecting, isn't it?"

Estatt was known not only for being a city ruled by a renowned princeelector, but also for its grand, thriving market held in the spring and autumn, and the spring market should have been in full swing.

So, while it was hardly devoid of activity, the city was rather empty given the season.

Perhaps those who were originally planning on visiting the city had followed that preacher's suggestion and had headed for the tax-free Town of Hope.

The town of Ohlburg would not be found on any maps.

And then, there were the splendid teachings, said to be given by the Twilight Cardinal himself...

Col pulled himself away from the window with a sigh; Myuri had stripped down to her underwear and was quickly falling asleep.

Her slovenly, uninhibited behavior was exactly like that of Holo the Wisewolf. That brought back memories of his old travels again. He felt a fondness for the past, and also defeat, knowing it was probably futile fighting blood.

"Nngh... Brother, stop..."

Col grasped Myuri by the nape of her neck to wake her, but she clung to her sack, which she was using as a makeshift pillow, and refused to let go.

Perhaps the humid journey along the coast had been harder for her to bear than he had thought.

Ever since she had screamed after pulling out her moldy bread, she had not been able to relax over meals, her one enjoyment, and Col was understanding.

But he asked regardless, "We will be going into town. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

Col wanted to get their own grasp on the situation in and around Estatt before they received replies to the two letters they had sent from Aquent. He thought Myuri could use a warm meal while they were out and about, but it seemed she had no energy for it.

After another sigh, he unfurled the blanket they had packed on their horse's back, and draped it over Myuri.

He watched her twist a little, her ears flicking in satisfaction, and he could not help but smile.

"If only you were this well-behaved all the time."

He patted her head with a hint of a tease, and her ears thwacked against his hand.

When he exited into the corridor, Le Roi and Canaan were just emerging from their rooms, too.

"Oh? Where is Miss Myuri?"

"Surprisingly, it seems her exhaustion has won out."

"There are few things more difficult than a journey without a proper meal."

Journeys through the north were completely different from journeys through the south. One had to be wary of how much distance separated the sparse dots of civilization and bone-chilling cold in the north, while in the south, the enemies of the day were unsafe water and how quickly food spoiled.

For Myuri, who was born in a snowbound land and had a fluffy tail of her own, problems with food were more difficult for her to handle than the cold.

"What food is Estatt known for anyway?" Col asked, and both Le Roi and Canaan smiled kindly at him.

Myuri was a lot tougher than Col was, and thanks to the wolf in her veins, the average man stood no chance against her.

That said, Col felt uneasy leaving Myuri alone in an inn in a city he was not familiar with, and so he entrusted Le Roi and Canaan with the preliminary investigations.

Col apologized profusely to the other two, and though they reassured him it was all right, Col could not help but give light sighs while he sat beside the happily snoozing Myuri.

"I think a good part of why I can never work to my fullest is because of you."

His scolding went in one ear and out the other.

Myuri continued to sleep soundly, her wolf ears flicking as though tickled by a breeze.

There was not much he could accomplish simply sitting there, so he decided to clean their traveling clothes and throw out the food that had gone bad. Since Myuri had not been able to relax and eat a real meal on the road, Col went down to the tavern on the ground floor to ask for Estatt's specialty—eel grilled with spices, apparently. He had heard eels as big as Myuri could be caught in the bay, and it was considered a dish for feasts.

He figured Myuri would be delighted to have such an extravagant meal, and there might even be more than enough for Le Roi and Canaan's bodyguard. But when the innkeeper-cum-barkeeper heard Col's order, he looked at him with mistrust.

"Are you eating that?"

Unsure of the intent behind the question, Col blinked in confusion. Perhaps it was the sort of food meant only for extremely special occasions in this city.

While that was his initial assumption, this is the explanation he was given: "Sorry, but if you're really gonna eat this, would you mind eating it in your room? Not down here."

"Umm..." Col hesitated.

The innkeeper tensed. "We'll catch people's attention if we serve lavish food." He was so disgruntled, his lower lip stuck out slightly.

The sun was still high in the sky, so it was not an entirely odd request, even if there were few people in the tavern.

But the market was in full swing, and festivals often came with feasts.

"Is this... Is this because of the Twilight Cardinal?"

The shameless question caught in Col's throat.

But it was the only thing he could think of, and all he had to do was think back on what the preacher was saying. The man at the post town had been singing praises of the Twilight Cardinal's blessed teachings while guiding people down the road to the Town of Hope.

The innkeeper studied Col for a moment, then gave a deep sigh.

"I get he's fighting for justice, but our business isn't one that can just pick up and relocate that easily. We ordered a load of stuff expecting all the crowds the market usually brings. We're sweating here."

The reason the tavern was so quiet was not because of the time of day, but because there were few travelers.

And from what Col could tell, the innkeeper was not hopeful things would get much livelier at night.

That was because the Twilight Cardinal, who had stood up to right the Church's immoral behavior, was just outside the city, preaching about the

proper way to live. To drink and be merry would be scandalous.

But there was one thing Col was wondering about.

"To be honest, we are in the middle of our travels as well, and we have heard rumors about the Twilight Cardinal," he said, his voice hushed to show he was not a devotee of Twilight Cardinal, but on the fence, if anything. "In the post town outside the city walls, we heard the name Ohlburg. Apparently, it's the name of another town. When you mention moving shop, do you mean opening an inn over there?"

"Exactly. Butchers, bakers, brewers—sure. They can pack their stuff up in a cart and just head on over. Most of the other artisans have packed up their tools and already set up shop. The only ones sitting and twiddling their thumbs are us innkeepers, really. Oh, and—" A wry smile burst across the innkeeper's face. "The clerics. They're sticking around."

If a man calling himself the Twilight Cardinal was preaching in Ohlburg, then it was rather obvious priests from the Church would not be eager to show their faces there.

"What is Ohlburg anyway? It does not seem to be on the map..."

The innkeeper's eyes scanned the quiet tavern, then said in a hushed tone, "The Town of Hope. The promised land. And..."

His eyes seemed to be looking at something far away.

"The home of the true Church."

The pot was big enough it needed two arms to carry. When Col lifted the lid, the scent of garlic, herbs, and the sound of crackling grease overwhelmed him.

Myuri's eyes gleamed, Le Roi's and Canaan's bodyguard filled their steins with ale, and Col and Canaan prayed for God's protection before this almost violent, delectable feast.

Col cut the fatty eel into slices. When he lay them atop Myuri's bread, which she was using in place of a plate, she bit into it with a beaming smile.

He took a bite of a piece for himself, and the fat and texture made it hard to believe this was a fish.

"The town was silent. As was the cathedral."

Everyone was gathered in Col and Myuri's room; it was rather cramped.

But it was better this way, considering the delicate topic of conversation. Not to mention the obviously very popular feast dish that sat in the middle.

"It seems to be that Ohlburg is a town made in haste to accompany the holy market, which is being held in place of Estatt's grand market," Le Roi said.

Col felt uncomfortable in his chair. "Holy market...?"

The words fit together like grains of sand in bread.

"Since this is a cathedral city, all the privileges surrounding the grand market belong to the cathedral. However, the Twilight Cardinal has denounced the cathedral, saying it is corrupt of the cathedral to levy taxes and make a profit through the grand market."

Le Roi was, of course, using the Twilight Cardinal's title as a joke, but Myuri did not like that—she kept her eyes tight and narrow.

"But if they are holding a grand market outside of Estatt, would that not make them...two eels in a pod?" Col said.

The taciturn bodyguard was surprised by the inspired turn of phrase and burst out laughing.

"A young assistant priest at the cathedral told me quite a bit after I gave him an offering."

Col did not ask for further details as to what sort of offering he gave, and he helped himself to a bit more of the eel. The mouth-numbing saltiness and smell of garlic was almost addicting. He understood why, now, this was considered a local delicacy, and since eel was not considered meat, he thought it a fitting dish for a cathedral city.

"Originally, the market fees went to one noble family, but at some point, it was transferred to the cathedral. That noble family has been unhappy with the arrangement ever since."

"And so they began working with the Twilight Cardinal?"

Profits and the Twilight Cardinal.

Something about the combination did not quite add up in Col's mind, much like the idea of the holy market itself. As Myuri finished her first slice of eel, she slapped his knee.

"Brother. Did you forget *you're* the Twilight Cardinal?"

"......"

She was right. The Twilight Cardinal they were speaking of was a fake, and it was very possible this person was running some sort of scam.

And that meant it was not unusual if they were doing something that did not quite make sense.

"You need to have a little more self-awareness, Brother. Self-awareness!" she said.

There was a lot he could say in return, but she was, unfortunately, correct.

Canaan coughed lightly—the spices used in the eel must have been a little too powerful for him, and he washed it down with some wine before he spoke.

"It is plausible the cathedral was indeed making excessive profits with the grand market, causing the people undue hardship, which eventually prompted someone to rise up against them. Perhaps the name of the Twilight Cardinal is nothing more than the banner of someone who is challenging the Church."

It was not entirely unthinkable, but the conversation Col had had with the innkeeper led him to believe that might not be the case exactly.

"Another possibility is this is purely a contest for privileges."

Col felt this was more plausible, but there was one thing he was wondering about.

"I've heard about this taxless market—how exactly will that be accomplished?"

Lively places with many people, at a glance, looked prosperous and like the perfect place to make money.

But behind the scenes, these places often came hand in hand with a

considerable amount of trouble; Col understood this painfully well due to his experience helping with running the bathhouse in Nyohhira.

A crowd alone had its own problems, and cleaning up after a commotion always cost money one way or another.

It was perfectly possible the cathedral was collecting taxes through the grand market, not to make money, but because it was essential to maintaining the city.

"It depends on the circumstances, but...I believe the holy market may be no more than ground bait."

"Ground bait?"

Myuri looked up, sensing a topic about new food.

"One sure thing is the Town of Hope itself. While the nobles have lost their historic right to levy taxes on the grand market, they still likely own quite a lot of the land surrounding the city. But as we saw on our way here, crops do not grow well in the peatlands, and peat itself is not a very popular fuel nowadays, so it is rarely used. This can only mean one thing."

When Col was a child, he had traveled with a very talented merchant for a short while.

"They're building a new town to raise the land value."

It was likely an appropriate grift for a swindler to take on the Twilight Cardinal name, even if it meant risking their own neck.

"However, it is impossible to tell if the nobles are being fooled by a scammer, or if they are knowingly taking advantage of the situation, or if someone who genuinely believes himself to be the Twilight Cardinal has the backing of a noble who believes him as well."

While it still felt unreal knowing someone was using his name for their own benefit, Col knew one thing for certain—this was not going to be a simple situation.

"How does the cathedral seem to be handling the situation?" he asked.

Canaan reviewed what they currently knew.

"It felt as though saying they were using the grand market to make extravagant profits was excessive. I cannot say if they were telling the truth or not, but what I do know is that the cathedral is exquisitely grand—enormous angels dance in the stucco on the ceiling, and the nave was thick with frankincense."

In a city this big, ruled by an archbishop, it made sense the cathedral was impressive.

The teachings of asceticism rang empty here, but to equate taxes with greed felt a bit extreme as well.

The main question was whether or not that was fair.

"If anything, it seemed to be that the cathedral was hesitant to take firm measures against the Twili—against the false cardinal. Apparently, they believe a noble who owns quite a bit of land outside the city is working with someone who has assumed the name of a world-renowned Church reformist. But if we look at it from another perspective, that means a major city in the empire is cowering in face of the name of the Twilight Cardinal!"

Canaan's cheeks were flushed, either from the wine, or from the spice on the eel.

"This is proof your name has spread throughout even the mainland, Master Col. We cannot allow swindlers to take advantage right under our noses!"

Canaan was leaning quite close, and his bodyguard had to physically stop his eel from slipping out of his hands.

Myuri stared at him with wary eyes—she always wondered if Canaan was really a girl, and she was very conscious of intrusions into her territory.

"But it's not gonna be easy to prove you're the real one, right, Brother?"

As things currently stood, she was correct. And for that reason, they would have to carefully lay out a plan, and depending on the situation, they might have to wait for reinforcements.

But there was value in using this situation where no one knew who the real one was.

And one thing the innkeeper said had stuck with Col.

The Town of Hope, Ohlburg—the start of the true Church.

Was the false cardinal truly nothing more than a swindler?

"I do have an idea..."

When Col laid out his plan, Myuri slowly stood, brandished her wooden spoon in the air, and shouted, "Let's do it!"

After filling her stomach with fatty eel and toasted bread with a satisfying crunch, Myuri promptly fell into a deep sleep and snored soundly.

In the morning, she rose before the sun, went through her sword exercises, and then jumped directly onto Col to wake him up.

"Brother! It's time for adventure!"

"Mmh..."

Perhaps it was revenge for the day before, but regardless, it was effective at getting Col out of bed. He was still feeling a little heavy after eating eel, and he groaned at the sensation. He was shocked by how energetic Myuri was—Col was sure she had eaten three times as much as he had.

"What kind of disguise should I wear? Should I dress up as the heir to a great merchant family with you as my private tutor, as usual?"

She laid out on her bed her knightly clothes, lent to her by Hyland, her saintlike white robes, and the boyish disguise that made her look like a noble's young son; she stood there in her underwear, her tail happily swishing back and forth.

"I don't mind. But...I believe you need to be a bit more prudent."

"Oh right, Brother! Go wash yourself! You smell like mold!"

""

Col's scolding fell on deaf ears, only to be met with the stinging declaration that he smelled—she had almost certainly crawled into his blankets during the night.

He admitted defeat and went to wash off at the well in the courtyard, prayed

a good deal while he was there, then returned to the room. There, he found the scion of a noble family on a leisurely journey around the world to broaden his horizons.

"Good morning," Canaan said in greeting as he entered the room—he must have heard the loud chatter from outside once they had both gotten mostly ready. "Have you managed to get some rest?"

His question came with a little smile; he could tell Myuri had been full of energy from the moment she got up.

"Yes—Myuri has, at least."

Though she could have easily hidden her hair under a hat, Myuri insisted on having braids.

There was nothing out of place about boy-Myuri wearing braided pigtails—perhaps her confident bearing made the difference.

"Good luck infiltrating the church here, Canaan," she said.

She was pleased with how her braids swayed like a tail, and so she slotted in her sword at her hip and checked the condition of its blade.

"Thank you. I will do everything in my power to see it done. Master Le Roi and I will conduct a perfect preliminary investigation into the city."

The night previous, Col had proposed he and Myuri conduct reconnaissance on Ohlburg.

Due to Le Roi's profession as a bookseller, there was no telling where or when he might run into an acquaintance. Canaan could not visit Ohlburg, considering its antagonistic stance with the cathedral—they needed him to get as much detailed information from the cathedral, after all. And so Col's thought was that the *actual* Twilight Cardinal, whose real identity was not yet known, could get a better grasp on what the fake was doing in Ohlburg, and what sort of person he was.

"What about Uncle Le Roi?"

Myuri was wondering about Le Roi, who was absent, and Canaan gave an unusual lopsided smile.

"It seems he and my companion were up late drinking Estatt's specialty liquor."

They had mentioned it was alcohol made from barley smoked in peat.

Upon hearing about the drinkers, Myuri seemed envious. Col sighed.

"You may not."

She shot up straight, as she always did when he found out about one of her pranks, and she turned to hiss at him.

"I don't think we will be in Ohlburg for very long. We should be back tomorrow, or the day after at the latest."

"All right. Our reply from the Winfiel Kingdom should arrive by then as well. We will keep an eye on things here."

With total disregard to Col and Canaan's conversation, Myuri, having been warned about alcohol, draped her cloak over her shoulders a bit more dramatically than usual.

"Men, march!" she called.

Col knew she was imitating Pierre; while Canaan smiled with delight, Col simply hung his head in exasperation.

They hopped on their horse and plodded along the road east.

Estatt was a major city ruled by an archbishop who also served as a princeelector, so unsurprisingly, it took quite a while to get outside the city walls.

While the city was north of Aquent on the map, its culture was decidedly not. As a core part of the southern empire, it was full of all things southern.

The luxurious shops that liberally used glass in their construction had all sorts of colorful hats on display, while goldsmiths and silversmiths worked all along the bridges that crisscrossed the river flowing through the city—there were plenty of things that caught Myuri's eye. Considering the city's specialty was liquor, when they passed through the artisan village and saw the copper stills being made, shiny and smooth enough to reflect the faces of passersby, she leaned so far forward she almost fell off the horse. Everything fascinated her.

But the city did not seem to be as lively as it was supposed to be; when they passed through the central square in the heart of the city, they encountered several stalls, set up for the grand market, but missing their keepers.

"I wish we'd come when it was busier," Myuri said sadly—she loved festivals. And surprisingly, Col agreed.

When they passed through the city walls, the damp breeze brushed their skin once again, and Myuri tensed her shoulders in disgust.

The reason the entirety of Estatt was thoroughly paved with flagstone was most likely not because of an excess of money. They were protecting themselves from the humidity by covering the ground.

The damp was a breeding ground for disease, and paving the ground also helped prevent floods. And of course, it cost money to maintain everything, which meant taxes were necessary.

As these thoughts rolled in Col's mind, Myuri quickly grew agitated.

"Ugh... I never got this sticky sitting by the springs!"

"Then why not put your tail away?"

They rode on the same horse, and Myuri sat in the spot between Col's arms as he held the reins. There was no one else around, so she had her ears and tail out.

At this time of year, when spring was turning into summer, her fluffy tail was a bit suffocating.

"No, I'm okay because you brush it."

Whether she realized it was warming Col up or not, she spoke plainly and shuffled her tail around a bit. That she was not as attached to the fur on her tail as she was the hair on her head was the exact opposite of her mother.

"More importantly," she said, leaning back into him. "Canaan and Uncle Le Roi aren't here. That means I don't have to hold back, right?"

After a moment, she turned to look at him. She studied him with her red eyes gleaming and narrowed.

"Only if there's no other option," he replied. Her eyes narrowed further, but that she did not immediately argue was proof she agreed; her cheeks relaxed into a smile, and her wolf ears flicked happily.

"If your fake happens to be a scammer, then I'll drag him by the scruff out to an empty field and scare him so bad he'll wet himself."

A large shadow, appearing in the dead of night.

That would be the only thing people saw before watching a man get dragged off faster than he could scream, vanishing completely in the darkness...

It would be effective, yes, but there was no way to tell what sort of rumors that would bring about.

"We still do not know what this individual's intentions are. If anything, you should be *listening* with these first."

Col laid his chin on one of her wolf ears, and she drew up her shoulders, ticklish.

"Then should I be a wolf the whole time?"

There were a number of hagiographies that featured saints with animals under their command.

The image of a young traveling priest commanding a silver wolf stirred not Myuri and her dreams, but Col's own childlike spirit he was so close to forgetting.

"There is little point in quietly conducting reconnaissance if I end up standing out so much."

Col threw up a shield before Myuri could sniff out the excitement in his chest.

"Boring."

Despite what she said, her tone was enthusiastic.

"Hey, hasn't it been a while since we've done this?"

Travel alone together, she meant.

"We have met quite a lot of people thus far."

"Yeah."

Myuri gave a little nod and leaned against his chest again.

It seemed she felt free to cling to him as much as she wanted today, since she was not wearing her knight crest.

"I don't mind having a bigger party, but...it means I have to hide so much."

"Now do you understand why I do not like standing out?"

Col was the Twilight Cardinal.

If he were to declare himself to the world, then his life would never be the same.

"I guess so."

Myuri straightened and turned around to look at him.

"But I don't think it'd be that bad, Brother."

"Is that to say because you're with me?"

When he said that, Myuri's eyes softened in a smile.

"Sure, but you know how there are so many fun stories about a princess sneaking out to have fun in the castle town while her knight protects her, right?"

"Yes, there are quite a number of... Hmm?"

Myuri always brought up examples of princesses and knights. Because she always was the one who took the role of knight.

She chuckled and thumped the back of her head against his chest.

"I hope we keep having more and more adventures!"

Her voice was so loud and bright the horse almost reared up, and he was too busy calming it down to give more than a halfhearted "Yes, yes," to Myuri.

Ohlburg, the Town of Hope.

Col had pictured it as a little community that had popped up beside the temporary market.

As it turned out, he was only half right.

What surprised him was the scale and the energy of the town.

"Wow!" Myuri exclaimed in wonder and stood from her spot on the horse's back.

Despite her unsightly behavior, not a single person glanced in their direction.

That was how busy it was. As a matter of fact, Ohlburg was very much in the process of being built.

"This is so cool, Brother!"

Back in the Kingdom of Winfiel, Col had supervised the repair of an abandoned manor so it would be fit for use by Sharon's monastery, and for their scripture printing workshop, but that was nothing in comparison to this.

A wooden signboard with *Ohlburg, Town of Hope* carved into it stood proudly on the side of the road, with bricklayers laying bricks and woodworkers hammering wooden posts into the ground just beyond it.

Muddy men carrying baskets full of earth and sand rushed by—they were in the middle of digging a well.

Among the clamor, many other people were conducting business at handmade stalls—to call them huts would be far too presumptuous considering their size and quality. Behind the steamy cookers was a pen where chickens and pigs scampered about.

If the people's faces had not been brimming with lively smiles, Col might have mistaken it for a war camp.

"It...seems to be a little more than just a temporary market."

The word "settlement" immediately came to mind, but it was scarcely a day's ride away from the beautiful walls of the cathedral city of Estatt—that made them very close neighbors indeed. It was not a remote area where people who survived a dying land came to in hopes of it being a new world for them.

Why here? was Col's genuine question.

"Ah, travelers?"

As they stood shocked by Ohlburg's muddy, squalid vigor, a voice called out to them.

They turned around to see a man dressed in a monk's habit, lightly splashed with mud.

"Welcome to Ohlburg, Town of Hope, my friends."

The man smiled and held his hand up to Col.

Col greeted him in kind, somewhat overwhelmed, and grasped his hand. Myuri shook his hand, too.

"How may I serve you?" he asked.

This was their first time here, and Col was wary of scam artists, being greeted like this, but the town around them was so loud, he could scarcely think.

"Um..."

"We're traveling around the world to see lots of things!" Myuri exclaimed with great enthusiasm as Col failed to find his words, and she hopped down from the horse. "We were so surprised! You're making the town right now!"

Myuri's smile shone so brightly, genuinely eager in her question, it did not seem to be an act. The man dressed as a monk chuckled and nodded proudly.

"Yes, precisely. This is the Town of Hope, Ohlburg. Gathered here are those who cannot bear living in a place as dishonest as the cathedral city of Estatt. We are building a new town here in the name of God and justice."

There came the sounds of hammering wood, carriages going to and fro, and people calling to each another.

It was the smiles on everyone's faces that confirmed this was no war zone, though it was just as busy.

When Col dismounted the horse, he asked, "We heard about the Twi...the Twilight Cardinal at our inn."

It still embarrassed him to say *Twilight Cardinal* himself, and he felt his throat constrict.

But the man dressed as a monk did not seem to mind—if anything, a broad

smile crossed his face, as though waiting for those very words.

"Of course you did! The spark that birthed Ohlburg came about when God brought together the lord of House Hobeln, who has been denouncing the corrupt Archbishop of Estatt for many years, and the Twilight Cardinal, who preaches God's true teachings!"

House Hobeln must have been the noble family that challenged the archbishop over the privileges surrounding the grand market.

But Col felt like he had heard that name somewhere before.

As he wondered where, Myuri spoke up.

"Is the Twilight Cardinal here now?" Myuri asked innocently, perfectly playing the part of a boy with a good upbringing. But when she glanced at Col, her eyes revealed her usual self.

"Ah, yes. He is praying for the people within our Church of the Beginning."

"Wow," Myuri whispered before turning to look straight at Col. "Brother, let's go ask the Twilight Cardinal about God's teachings!"

Myuri's look of delight was not fake.

While she was likely enjoying her own theatrics, she was obviously looking forward to seeing what sort of fool had decided to play the part of the Twilight Cardinal.

"Oh, but...I don't know if he would like it if we were to suddenly intrude..."

"Not at all! Unlike the archbishop at the cathedral, the Twilight Cardinal accepts all who seek out his teachings. He offers the opportunity for all to speak with him once he is finished with his sermons at the Church of the Beginning."

Col pictured the Twilight Cardinal surrounded by men and women of all ages, holding the hands of the sick, and cradling babies.

It did seem like a scene straight out of a saint's legend.

"You will always know when the Twilight Cardinal's sermons will begin, because the bell will toll. But I suggest going early to line up. Everyone in town will be there!"

"Did you hear that, Brother?!"

The joy in her smile was that of a hunter who had found her prey.

Col's smile in return was strained and twitchy. He turned to the man in monk's garb and said, "Thank you. I believe we will look around Ohlburg a bit before paying a visit."

"Of course. May God watch over you." The man prayed for them, then immediately spotted another traveler, and he turned to call out to them. Those who greeted travelers like that often had a reputation of being scam artists, forcing visitors to take them up on their guidance through the city then demanding they be paid for their services. But that did not seem to be the case this time.

If his monk's habit was real, then perhaps he had taken the initiative to serve this town in his own way.

"So this confirms the fake's here," Myuri huffed, then turned to look at Col. "We're going to hear him preach, right?"

"Well, I suppose."

Col's noncommittal response caused Myuri to look blankly at him.

When he saw the way she was staring, he gave a little sigh.

"I was picturing something more overtly underhanded."

"....."

Myuri blinked, then looked around them.

"I think I get what you mean."

"Are the townsfolk being tricked? All of these people?"

"Everyone looks like they're having fun."

He had a feeling the girl beside him was having the most fun out of anyone in this town, but what she said rang true.

"Shall we take a little look around?"

If a bell always went off before the Twilight Cardinal gave his sermon, then

there was no chance they would miss it.

"But, wow, the Town of Hope..." Myuri took a deep breath, then exhaled. She could not hide her excitement. "So you *can* make cities..."

From the way she spoke and the expression on her face, Col finally realized what it was she was looking at in this town.

They were going to build a country just for spirits and incarnations on the new continent. She had found the potential for turning her dreams into reality here.

"Did you bring your pen and ink?" Col asked, a slight teasing tone to his voice.

Myuri lifted her head and exclaimed, "Of course!"

Whenever Myuri asked him about certain turns of phrase in the scripture, no matter how busy he might be in the moment, Col always found himself delighted to answer her questions. Much in the same way, the bright-eyed workers and artisans also did not seem to mind when the duo asked them about their work. No matter where they went, the workers would gather, and they would teach Myuri all sorts of things.

Col knew he would only be a bother if he joined in haphazardly, so he decided to look into the one thing Myuri had no particular interest in.

Specifically, he was investigating the street sermons taking place throughout the town.

"And so God gave us not just wheat, but food for our souls—"

While the streetside sermons were in a way conventional, none of them would have been out of place if they were given inside an actual church.

Passersby came to a stop to listen intently.

Street sermons were not unusual in larger cities, but that also meant most people did not take the time to stop to listen.

Any who loitered too long were chased away by the guards protecting the city's peace, and most cities were divided into smaller parishes, which meant there were priests who looked after their people, and who handled everything from baptisms to funerals. There was very little need to stop and listen to a stranger's sermons.

But it was only the priest the locals were familiar with, not the parish leader who managed the priests, or the bishop that managed all the parishes—whenever a priest took a step up the ladder, they were drawn further and further away from their flock. Archbishops, who had the authority to confirm bishop appointments, rarely had an opportunity to speak with the common people.

Their acts were essentially that of a noble—it was most certainly not an exaggeration to say they wielded massive amounts of wealth as they pleased, rode in extravagant carriages, and often kicked away their commoner adherents like so many stray dogs.

While Col could not say if the archbishop of Estatt was that bad of a person, the man in the monk's habit who told them about Ohlburg clearly did not think of Estatt favorably.

And since this place was a gathering of those who were not fond of living in Estatt, they were particularly fervent in their beliefs.

Perhaps traveling preachers had heard similar rumors and eagerly made their way here.

Those who preached on the roadside were all clad in different types of clothes—some looked like theology professors, speaking softly with the scripture in one hand, while there were some who preached with surging passion, much like Pierre.

To test them, Col asked a question with a theological bent, and he received an excerpt from the scripture in reply. At the very least, not *all* of them were fake preachers.

Or perhaps they were veteran scam artists who did their research...

While he could at least suspect the individuals, if he did not hold a shrewd outlook, then all he could see was a gathering of people who sympathized with the Twilight Cardinal's ideas and wanted to support him.

As they strolled through the town, they came across a group of monks who seemed as though they had just happened to stop by the town on a pilgrimage, and they were fervently observing the town while exchanging words of surprise.

Artisans busily running to and fro, and merchants occupied with their business, cut between them.

Priests stood on every street corner.

Col started to feel like he was dreaming.

A quiet voice rang in his head: But you're the Twilight Cardinal, Brother.

But no one paid any special attention to him, even though he was right here.

And the one who had decided to take up the Twilight Cardinal's name had indeed gathered enough people to build an entire town. Someone had once told him that if the Twilight Cardinal put his mind to it, he could wield great power, and that was being demonstrated in reality right before his eyes.

Col glanced down at his hands. Did they truly have that sort of power? Power strong enough he could make an entire town appear in the middle of a field with one wave?

Just as that thought crossed his mind, he heard a bell ringing.

It sounded like a handbell, one without any weight, unlike that of a bell that might toll deeply in a church bell tower, but it was perfectly fitting for a town where everything was handmade.

The restless sound invited all to one place, and everyone began making their way there.

"The Twilight...Cardinal..."

They were going to hear his sermon.

With unsteady steps, Col joined the flow of people, and on his way toward the center of town, he rejoined Myuri.

It seemed Myuri had used up all the paper she had on hand in an instant—every page was crammed full of writing, front and back. And now, she had the papers turned sideways, perpendicularly writing across what she had already written.

There were also plenty of diagrams Col did not really understand, but they seemed to be tools, blueprints of stalls, and everything else under the sun. He

even spotted what looked like a map.

"Is that the layout of Ohlburg?" Col asked.

Myuri, with smudges of ink and mud on her cheeks, beamed and stuck out the paper for Col to see.

"The town I'm going to make in the new continent!"

""

This town had been built up from nothing in the mud.

Myuri's attention had completely shifted from collecting information on the imposter to the country or town she was planning on founding for nonhumans one day.

Not even a colony would be filled with such energy, so he could understand why she was so focused on it.

"You said I can't have a monastery, so I could have a town instead, right?"

For a moment, he was not sure what she was referring to. But he recalled the conversation they had when she suggested they build a monastery like Sharon and the others were doing.

"The reason I said no is because you would not be able to stand life as a nun."

"That's why I picked a town. See? Look, look at it!"

He sighed, confounded by the way she casually jumped from one thought to the next, and looked at the sketch of her dream town, which she seemed to have concentrated exclusively on.

"Is that a...bath? In the square?"

Only a girl born in Nyohhira would think of such a thing.

"Yeah. And in the north is a really big archive building and Uncle Le Roi's bookstore. In the east, there's a chapel—your favorite. And around the whole square is a path for walking, and I think it's perfect for when you need to think. See, there's a nice sunny hill over here."

Col nodded, despite himself.

A bookstore for Le Roi's stock, archives where they would be stored, and a walking path and a chapel for thinking.

He pictured the town in his head and hummed.

"It's not...bad."

"Right? I think in the west I want to put stores. And maybe workshops. One workshop will make books, one will make weapons, and then another will brew alcohol."

"Alcohol?" he asked in turn, and Myuri puffed up in pride.

"I'm not going to be a child forever."

"……"

It was a very childlike thing to say, but she was not wrong, and so Col let it pass with a little sigh.

"And what is this?"

Something that was clearly not a walking path surrounded the little town.

"The city walls!"

Myuri loved adventure stories—of course she would not forget those.

There were towers in each of the four corners, and figures holding bows and arrows stood on them.

"You won't get kidnapped in a town like this, and you can walk around the chapel and the bookstore and the walking path forever, see?"

Myuri had been so shaken by the prospect of their journey coming to an end that she had decided to help Lutia in her dark schemes.

It was not like her to mope about and drag her feet in the face of a distant end.

There was nothing more perfect for her than to innocently chase the brightest future she could possibly conceive.

"But does the town really need this?"

"Hmm?"

"If you surround it with walls, that keeps the number of people who can live there limited. I believe it can be a very good town if you were to reconsider that."

Perhaps it was a bit pedantic of him to point that out in a child's dreamlike, simple town plan. But the foundation Myuri had laid was very good, and if Col were ever to be posted as a priest in a town somewhere, a place like this would be ideal.

As that thought crossed Col's mind, Myuri took the paper back from him, looked hard at it, then hugged it to her chest.

"It's fine the way it is."

Col was about to apologize for unnecessarily bringing in an adult's point of view when Myuri looked at her dream town again, a look of pure delight on her face.

"Because it's a town just for you, Brother."

"……"

Myuri was enchanted as she held her ideal town to her chest.

A chapel, a bookstore, and a walking path meant Col could walk around these places forever.

He pictured himself standing inside the town.

It was like a little pocket garden with large city walls that surrounded it.

He could not help but ask.

"I have just one question."

"Hmm?"

Her red eyes came from her mother.

At times they shone intelligently, and at times they glinted sharply. But they were still the eyes of a child, and it was only when she was thinking of her worst ideas that they were at their most beautiful.



"Are there any entrances or exits in the wall?"

There was a path within the walls, but no path went outside.

Col thought she had omitted it for simplicity's sake at first, but...

"Of course not," she replied, then lifted it up high above her head, spellbound. "We're going to live here forever together."

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Had her tail been out, it would have been wagging furiously.

This girl's head was in the clouds, and this side of her came out every so often.

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"Redraw it."
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"What?! Why?!"

"Because."

He doubted she would actually build a town like this, but this map still came from inside Myuri's head.

He had thought she had grown past asking him to make her his bride, but she was still thinking things like this.

Thoroughly annoyed by his reaction, Myuri put the paper away in a fold of her clothes, as though not wanting him to nitpick her secret plans anymore, then went on the offensive.

"So, what were you doing, Brother? Standing around doing nothing?"

Her gaze was cold. The urge to reprimand her for being distracted from their objective was strong, but he was an adult. So he shoved that temptation aside and replied, "I was not doing nothing. I was listening to the streetside sermons throughout the town."

It seemed as though Myuri briefly understood his intentions, but her gaze drifted upward, as though trying to recall something, and she spoke with a curious tone.

"...I thought you would be happier about that. Were they boring?"

He was about to tell her streetside preachers were not spectacles like bards and musicians, but he recalled how absorbed Canaan would get when they spoke of theology, so he remained silent. He had to reflect on his own actions when observing another's.

"It was not as though they were...boring. Their sermons were very well done, and they answered all my questions accurately."

"So why do you look upset?"

Col did not know how to answer that.

Here, many preachers had come together, and the people were listening with more fervor than the average churchgoer.

They had hammered nails into the ground, built shops to which people brought their goods, and they were now conducting lively business.

What if all of this had been built under the name of the Twilight Cardinal?

Col felt like he was going to fall in the vast gap between who he was to himself, and who he was to the rest of the world.

That was likely the most apt way to express it.

But if he were to tell this to Myuri, she would likely tell him it was because he kept making himself smaller, and he knew this was a reality he himself had to accept.

And so he closed and opened the same hand he had been staring at not long ago, and said— "Listening to all those sermons made me realize I still have a great deal to learn myself."

Myuri stared at him. The way she did so was exactly the same as her mother, the wisewolf.

At last, her deep eyes, ones that could see through lies, narrowed slightly, then eventually closed in defeat.

"I don't want you talking to Canaan all the time just because you need to 'study.'"

She was likely half-joking, half-serious.

"I know," he said to the kind wolf who let him escape, and she poked him in the side.

In the meanwhile, the bell rang again, and the area around them was enveloped in zeal.

"Twilight Cardinal!"

"Grant us God's protection!"

"Twilight Cardinal!"

The voices were loud—Myuri drew up her shoulders and covered her ears with her hands.

They stood in Ohlburg's center square.

The building people had been referring to as the Church of the Beginning stood right in front of them, but the area around it was crowded with the overflow that could not fit inside. If it was this loud outside the building, then the inside must have been cacophonous.

But this Church of the Beginning was much too shabby to reasonably be called a church—it was a crumbling stone structure dressed up as a church. A part of the wall was falling, and there was not even a door on the front entrance, after all.

That allowed them to see the lectern inside from the outside; a man appeared and stood behind it.

Those inside the building seemed to have lined up early for this sermon, so they were even more enthusiastic. They immediately fell to their knees and bowed their heads. There were even some around Myuri and Col who got on their knees as well, not minding that they would be in the dirt and mud.

A solemn, weighty silence fell over the area, one that even Myuri felt hesitant to break, and the man who called himself the Twilight Cardinal spoke.

"God sent me here."

Though Col could not see his face, his voice told him that they were about the same age.

The sermon began with that line—what he said mostly lined up with what the man in the monk's habit told them when they first arrived in the city.

He had awoken to God's true teachings, journeyed to right the Church's wrongs, and after traveling the continent, he arrived here. It was here that Lord Hobeln, the one who strongly opposed the wicked archbishop, who sat upon his laurels as prince-elector, expressed how impressed he was with him.

The young man who posed as the Twilight Cardinal lifted up his right hand and pointed to the second floor of the Church of the Beginning. The people looked up, folded their hands, and prayed.

Col shifted, squinted, and saw there was a noble sitting in the special guest seating on the second floor, waving magnanimously.

A banner hung from the balcony, showing a crest of a crossed sword and hammer.

That must have been Hobeln.

"House Hobeln is trying to take back their privileges in the grand market, which they have lost. But it is not for profit. If House Hobeln takes back their rights to hold the grand market, then they are prepared to offer it all to God. In essence, he will undertake the great cause of building a new town on this land that aligns with God's teachings!"

There was a cry that held back excitement, or perhaps it was a sob of joy.

Col could hear people whispering "Savior."

"And this building will become the replacement for the corrupt cathedral—it will be the perfect place for us to restart our journey with God as the Church of the Beginning. Because—" The young man paused, drawing everyone's attention to him, then continued, "This building was left behind by the ancient empire, built by the original Church, as their front line in battle against the pagans."

Myuri held her breath.

The crumbling stone building clearly had not been left abandoned for only a few decades.

It was strange that a stone building stood alone here, in the middle of a vast bogland where trees could scarcely grow; perhaps there was once a town or settlement here.

And this very stone building had been used by the original Church, which had once inspired, soothed, and empowered people.

"Here, we will build a city that is fair, just, and follows God's teachings."

The way he spoke was refined, and with the way he held himself and moved his arms, his speech was truly convincing.

And more convincing were the old remnants of the building upon which he stood.

"Look upon Estatt. Why do they need such a large cathedral to preach God's teachings? Nowhere in the scripture does it say they may use their vast amounts of donations to get drunk on fine wines and feast on rich meats. That is a city built on lies."

Sighs of agreement and ire rippled through the crowd, and Col found himself nodding along.

"Here we have no tax, no overbearing officials. There are no priests indifferent to your hard lives, who take what little silver you have as the price for faith. We are brothers and sisters who share in God's teachings."

Col could hear gasps of wonder, and even sobs.

"We will build this town with our own hands. A town for ourselves. A town for God."

Then came cries of agreement, extolling God, and voices calling out to the Twilight Cardinal.

The people began to push forward, trying to get as close as possible to their savior; Myuri gave a little yelp and jumped into Col's chest.

Col wrapped his arms around her and stiffened his elbows, trying to make sure she was not crushed. Everyone was enthralled, and they paid absolutely no mind to them.

He knew, of course, the man standing at the lectern was not the Twilight

Cardinal.

But the way he spoke convinced Col this was no mere scam artist.

There was a possibility this was a preacher who had gotten a little hasty, who, in his anger at the Church's injustices, had gone just a tad too far pretending to be the Twilight Cardinal in an attempt to overthrow the rotten Church.

That he chose this place, where a relic of the ancient empire once stood, showed he was not doing this on a whim. The presence of one of the first churches gave his sermons on righteous faith an impressive amount of weight.

Once the people's excitement reached its peak, the man who called himself the Twilight Cardinal said: "But there is one unfortunate piece of news I must relay to you all."

The young man dropped his shoulders, and several burly looking men appeared beside the lectern.

Everyone held their breath—they had brought out another, smaller man by the shoulders, a rope tied around his neck.

"This man had been conducting trade here in Ohlburg, the Town of Hope."

The man's body was speckled with mud, and his clothes were torn.

And the thick rope around his neck marked him as a criminal.

"This town is without tax, and the people here are honest—this should be the ideal place for any to conduct business. And yet this man falsified the weight of his bread and changed the size of the cups that measure ale, all in the name of unearned profits."

The crowd reeled.

That was a rather hefty crime in any regular town, and anyone living in a settlement large enough would have been victim to a corrupt merchant like this once or twice.

The crowd began shouting insults.

"Thief!"

"You've betrayed God!"

They were demanding he be hanged in all but words; the Twilight Cardinal nodded slowly and said, "Your anger is understandable. It is true he has turned his back on God's teachings. However..." He paused, then knelt before the tattered man.

And then, he undid the rope around his neck.

As bewilderment rippled through the crowd, he placed aside the rope with a calm expression, helped the man stand, and embraced him.

"He has been punished, and he has repented. Thus, we must forgive him for his sins."

There came a gasp of awe.

The young man slowly glowered, then said, "Then what shall we do with the archbishop, who refuses to acknowledge his sins, yet is greedy for even more power?"

The people held their breath, and in that moment, it seemed they understood.

They were like loose, dry flour, which suddenly clumped when exposed to the faintest amount of moisture.

"We must come together. And we will grow in numbers as you all support this town. May God be with us!"

The people replied in chorus, repeating, "May God be with us!" "Bless the Twilight Cardinal!"

The fervent audience began to crowd around the Twilight Cardinal even more, everyone pushing harder to get as close to him as possible.

Myuri, not making the same mistake twice, skillfully slipped through the rush of people, and this time pulled Col behind her.

When they finally managed to escape the crowd, they spotted several baskets being passed around.

People put in their own clothes, coins, and some even gave their jewelry.

It traveled overhead as it passed from one pair of hands to another—a

receptacle meant for donations.

As Col stood shocked by the noise, the heat, the impact of the sermon, he noticed a figure nearby.

"Please—the Church of the Beginning would like your help."

There was a man dressed as a priest holding a basket, smiling.

Col knew for certain, in that moment, the man who called himself the Twilight Cardinal was a fake, and he felt like he had to say something.

But as he struggled to find the words, someone plopped their hat into the basket—it was Myuri.

"May God watch over you."

He then folded his hands and recited, as though he had just recently memorized the phrase.

The man dressed as a priest replied respectfully and made his way over to someone else.

Col wordlessly watched him go, desperately trying to swallow the sermon—no, the *play* that had taken place right before his eyes.

That young preacher had worked the people up into a fervor.

The sight was burned into his eyes; when he turned around to look at it again, Myuri tugged at his sleeve.

"Brother."

He followed her gaze to see what he suspected was a noble coming down from the second story of the Church of the Beginning. A few called out to him, but most were enraptured by the Twilight Cardinal in the distance, so they hardly even noticed him.

Hobeln seemed so forlorn not simply because of his emaciated physique.

He had no retinue, and he hung his head, as though he was attempting to hide his face.

"I wonder if he's real."

"…"

The man who was supposed to be Hobeln walked with a hunched back, and he entered another building near the church. His demeanor was a stark contrast to the way the fake Twilight Cardinal had preached so boldly.

Had anyone told Col *now* that this was the man who was trying to take back the rights to hold the grand market from the wicked city of Estatt for the sake of constructing his own holy town, he would not so easily believe it.

He thought for a moment that he, too, was a fake, but this was supposed to be Hobeln territory. Pretending to be a Hobeln should be impossible here.

There must have been a reason as to why he seemed so lacking in vitality.

"Hold on a sec," Myuri said. She approached the building Hobeln went into, roamed around the perimeter, then came back.

"What was that for?" Col asked.

Myuri closed her eyes, held her breath, then lightly rubbed her nose.

"I memorized the scent."

A person could imitate another's looks, but to imitate their scent was supremely difficult.

If that were not the real Hobeln, then Myuri would notice somewhere.

"So, what should we do?"

The false Twilight Cardinal was still surrounded by a wall of people.

Myuri knew better than anyone else, even Col himself, that Col was the real Twilight Cardinal.

But not even she attempted to denounce him as a fake.

She must have understood the meaning behind the warning Col gave her back in Aquent, seeing how worked up all the people were. Accusing him of being an imposter would be like splashing cold water on boiling oil. The crowd's fervor would explode.

"Let's...leave the town for now."

Ohlburg was much too full of vulgar spirit.

Col wanted a bit of peace and quiet to digest everything he had seen and heard.

Once they left Ohlburg, the land became a desolate field.

The quiet, in contrast to the lively town in the distance, made everything they had just experienced feel even more like a dream.

But past the crude, handmade townscape, Col could see a bit of the Church of the Beginning, where all the people's enthusiasm had been concentrated.

The area around here seemed to be on gently sloping land, and from a distance, he could tell the whole area was, indeed, on a slight incline. Ohlburg itself sat on a soft plateau, with the Church of the Beginning in the middle.

"The ground feels weird here."

Myuri gazed at the scenery as she led the horse along by the reins and Col sat on its back.

In times like this, Myuri would be typically poking at all sorts of Col's faults, but she was not. Perhaps Col seemed more visibly shaken, much more, than he originally thought he'd be.

"...That wasn't really the Twilight Cardinal, was it?"

Col dismounted, sat on a spot in the silvergrass that Myuri had stomped down and made firm for him, then posed a most ridiculous question.

"No. He didn't even look like you."

Judging by the voice that came from the lectern, he must have been a man around Col's age.

"But if it turns out you have to do stuff like that, then I don't think you'd be very good at it."

This was not her usual teasing; Myuri said this with sympathy.

After she sat beside him, she brought her knees to her chest and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"To be honest, I was a little scared, too," she murmured. Mania was the

perfect way to describe what they had seen. And there was a familiarity to that mania. "It was a bit like that night in Atiph, wasn't it?"

That was the first town after leaving Nyohhira in which they and Hyland had their first real battle against the Church.

The people there had been dissatisfied with the Church's tyranny, too, and they had been given the perfect excuse to question the Church, revealing the dark side of their emotions—they had even dressed up a stray dog in priest clothing to make a fool of the creature.

The merchant that had been brought out at the end of the sermon was much the same—if given any excuse, the crowd would have likely hanged him in an instant.

But that was going too far, Col thought.

Giving the wrong weight of bread or changing the size of the cup that measured ale was a common dishonesty and could indeed be counted among the more serious crimes, but the greatest punishment was typically a fine and perhaps being forced to sit backward on a donkey as it roamed the town, as a way of making an example of the guilty party.

A typical townsperson would have been perplexed to see that punishment be suddenly elevated to a noose, but everyone there had clearly been expecting death in the name of justice for God.

The one who had been enabling such an atmosphere was none other than the young man claiming to be the Twilight Cardinal.

"What should we do?" Myuri asked, a bit hesitant, as though conscious of what he was going through.

Col slowly closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and replied, "We will drive the imposter away."

Myuri's eyes went wide and out popped her wolf ears.

"I thought perhaps it might be someone whose faith has gone too far. Perhaps they were so focused on carrying out justice that by sheer momentum, he ended up borrowing the Twilight Cardinal's name to denounce the cathedral city and criticize acts of bad governance."

He inhaled, swallowed the lingering taste of the mania at the back of his throat, and continued.

"But after that sermon, I am now convinced. That man has no faith. He is simply a swindler who is cashing in on the people's dissatisfaction by spurring them on. And it may be my responsibility to awaken all of those who are being tricked."

Myuri, eyes wide in shock, looked as though she was about to cry.

Col had used stronger language to rally himself, in a way, but perhaps it was a bit too direct for Myuri. He panicked for a brief moment, only for Myuri to speak, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Brother... You're so...reliable right now..."

"Uh... Hmm?"

He did not mean for his voice to sound so strange. Myuri reached up and patted his head, as though stroking it.

"I wasn't sure what I was gonna do if you started whining like a coward."

She rubbed her cheek against him, ruffled his hair, then pushed him away fairly roughly.

The mischievous girl smiled, tickled.

"You seemed so impressed by the preacher. I knew things would get sticky if you were tricked by him, too."

"…"

He gave her a pointed look, and she smiled back at him.

As always, she was keeping a close eye on him.

"I know I was nodding when he criticized the Church's wealth, and it is true I felt his sermon was greatly convincing. But upon closer inspection, there is plenty that simply does not sit well with me."

Ohlburg, the Town of Hope.

It was an excellent place, but Col had traveled and seen his fair share of the world.

"If this were in a rural and isolated area, I could see a town like this being built as a settlement. But this is right under the nose of a cathedral city, ruled by an archbishop who is a *prince-elector*."

That, and it was nothing like a typical post town.

They were opening their own market, which was clearly in conflict with the cathedral's interests.

"I asked about that, too. I asked if there was gonna be a war with Estatt."

"What did the people say?"

"That the Twilight Cardinal wasn't seeking war, and that the evil archbishop would probably kneel before God's proper teachings one day. So if the archbishop attacks *them*, then that would show the whole world exactly who is in the wrong."

There were plenty of stories about those who only continued to pray in the face of a tyrant, and they eventually beat the tyrant back.

Even from the rough outline of information Canaan managed to gather, it seemed as though the cathedral was avoiding a direct confrontation with Ohlburg. That was because the cathedral was very conscious of the fact that the moment they directly opposed the one who called himself the Twilight Cardinal, the rest of the world would be fully convinced who was the bad guy.

But sometimes, force could eventually make it possible to overturn logic and established fact.

If it came to it, the cathedral city would consider military options, and history was ultimately written by the victors.

"It makes it hard to imagine House Hobeln has any powerful influence."

If that had been the real Lord Hobeln they saw, then he truly did not have the proper retinue with him.

And it appeared as though even the swindlers did not hold him in very high regard.

"And I realized there was something else that was weird, too."

Myuri seemed proud of herself.

Col asked, "Do you mean the merchant with the rope around his neck?"

In a twist, she was so surprised that her expression went blank.

"What? How did you know?"

"Because I know. I hope you remember I once traveled with your mother and father."

Myuri's assessment of Col was truly extreme.

While part of her seemed to be holding him to highs that were not realistic, she also tended to think of him as a fathomless fool the rest of the time.

"No merchant can falsify the weight of bread and change the size of liquor changing cups on his own. Do you remember what the innkeeper at Estatt said?"

All of the merchants and artisans had all gone to Ohlburg for business.

That meant this was no temporary town that had sprung up randomly on the side of the road—all of the people from the cathedral city had rushed to the town in droves.

That meant all the industries' boundaries had been kept in place from one place to the next.

The bakers did not deal in ale, nor did the brewers deal in bread.

It was clear if anyone gave it a moment of thought: that crime was a fabrication.

"And while his clothes did seem to be tattered, now that I think back on it, he did not seem to be injured."

When Col mentioned that, Myuri puffed out her cheeks, vexed.

"I only noticed that he wasn't injured—"

"And that there is no tax is, quite frankly, a lie."

"Huh?"

"After the sermon, do you remember all those baskets that were being passed around for donations? Those who were carrying the baskets even came to people who stood beyond the crowd, where we were. The entire air about him made it seem as though we could not refuse. That is exactly what a tax is."

Giving it more than a moment's thought showed that there was quite a lot that seemed fishy.

"And the hat you put in the basket—"

All of a sudden, Myuri reached out to clamp both of her hands over Col's mouth.

"Hey! You can't say all of it!"

Except Col managed to avoid Myuri's hands, and that only convinced him.

It was the act of a shrewd wolf, one who acted in place of her brother while he was too busy being overwhelmed by the acts of imposters.

"You were going to see where those items were being collected and then seeing how they were being sold, yes?"

Myuri let her shoulders fall and puffed out her cheeks, as though her ultimate prank had been found out before she even got a chance to execute it.

But she sighed deeply and reluctantly turned to look at him.

"Yeah. Thieves always have some kind of hideout."

The moment Myuri knew the merchant who had been committing injustice was, in fact, just an actor for the spectacle, her brain had raced. This was the same girl who had almost instantly discerned the territories of the bad boys back in Aquent.

A closer examination made it obvious the supposed Twilight Cardinal was not the only scammer—he had accomplices.

And their next move had to be uncovering their den.

"So, how do we find their hideout?"

There was nothing more reliable in the world than the way Myuri smiled in situations like this.

The sun was very warm during the day, but it was still chilly at night.

And they were in the silvergrass fields—the slightest breeze filled the air with a mournful whistling. As Col stood here, it brought back memories of how helpless he had felt as a wandering student.

Perhaps he was still a child, dreaming of being called the Twilight Cardinal.

As these thoughts crossed his mind, there came the peculiar sensation of something crawling along the ground and the sound of grasses being parted. When he looked up, a wolf's head popped out from the grass.

"I found it."

She quickly shook herself off—some dirt from the grass had gotten stuck to her fur.

Col stood with a frown, all to make sure Myuri would not see how relieved he was to see her like this, and brushed off his rear. He then turned to gently stroke the neck of the horse, who seemed more uneasy than him.

"Wait here for a little longer."

He did not think the horse understood his words, but Myuri was with them, so he figured it would get across somehow.

The horse stamped once, twice, still clearly worried about the silver wolf.

"Aren't I more comfortable than the horse?"

The wolf let him climb on, and she posed that question to him as they rushed through the silvergrass field. Perhaps the horse they had rented from Estatt was a mare.

"What was the hideout like?" Col asked, not entirely comfortable continuing their earlier conversation. Myuri leaped suddenly, and he almost fell off.

"There are so many little rivers everywhere. I'm gonna get muddy."

Col nodded, leaving it at that.

"It was a lot like that old church."

"A ruin, you mean?"

"Something like that. There was a cave in the ground that I guess they dug the mud out of—I think they were taking stuff inside. I could smell alcohol, grilling meat, and I could hear instruments and girls laughing from inside, too."

"I see..."

It was the most stereotypical image of thieves.

If an inquisitor came through and discovered the Twilight Cardinal and his band of fools, things would get rather sticky.

"But the cave was a little weird."

"Was it?"

Myuri walked with Col on her back, and she stuck her nose up toward the sky.

"I think there are multiple secret entrances. I could smell meat coming from a place farther out in the field, too."

Only a wolf could detect something like that in passing, but it was still strange Myuri found that questionable.

"It is not all that odd for thieves to secure secret passageways to ensure their escape."

And they were quite familiar with people who were very cautious individuals, like Eve. He thought Myuri was the type to love things like secret passageways.

"Yeah, but, that's not really it...," she said and then came to a sudden stop. "See, like here."

"Hmm?"

She kept advancing at a slowed pace, but she firmly tapped the ground with her front legs as she did.

"There's a whole bunch of stuff buried throughout this entiiire field."

"…"

Col could not see very well in the dark, so he slipped from Myuri's back and leaned down to the ground to see.

Processed stone, not natural rock, was buried in rows beneath the dirt.

"Is it the foundation for a stone wall?"

That was his first thought, but Myuri, still in her wolf form, deftly shrugged.

"All the stone buried around here seems to lead to the church in Ohlburg. It'd be a really long wall if that's what it is."

Col followed the direction in which Myuri turned her head, and he could see the faint lights of Ohlburg burning in the distance.

"And these things were stretching from your fake's hideout, too."

"…"

And the hideout had apparently been unearthed from the dirt.

Col pictured a bird's-eye view of the land, and murmured, "Citadel ruins?"

Myuri's large ears and tail piqued. She had just been sketching her dream town—an eerie one with no entrance or exit in the walls that surrounded it.

"I have seen wall ruins like this on hilltop strongholds before..."

Of course, he was not talking about the next part of Myuri's dream; he was picturing how much trouble it would be in the event they decided to arrest them all, if they were using an abandoned stronghold as their base.

But the stones at his feet were a bit too precarious to be the foundation for a wall, and there was another thing that was odd.

"They spread over much too wide an area. And it's also strange the foundations have been left relatively untouched while the walls themselves are completely gone."

Myuri dipped her head to sniff the stones, then said, "I thought it might be a secret underground passage."

"A passage?"

"Some sections seem to be hollow inside, and the faint smell of meat was seeping out. So I thought maybe they used these to surprise the enemy from behind by following the passages."

They did look like the remains of a passage when she put it that way, but he had a feeling it was a bit too narrow to crawl through.

Well, perhaps a passageway like this was a piece of cake to traverse for a hunter who specialized in burrowing animals, like rabbits.

But all Col could think of was Le Roi, fallen upside down in the waterways of the crumbling noble manor.

"I would believe the underground passages for escaping a siege would be deeper. And I think the scale is much too big."

Col crouched and brushed his hand against the stone, partially buried in grass and mud; Myuri's nose rubbed up against his shoulder and she plopped her chin on him. Though she was not as big as Holo, she was too big to fit under the "cute pup" category, and she was heavy.

"Sure, but they said the ancient empire used this place as a base in the war, and I bet it was a crazy battle."

Canaan had said the same.

There was considerable distance between Estatt and this place, but the sea level was said to be much higher long ago, which meant the shoreline back then would have been farther inland. With that thought in mind, it was not odd to consider that Estatt itself might have been closer to this very spot.

So perhaps once, there was a military base that was attached directly to the city, and served as the final line of battle in the intense wars with the pagans... or something like it.

"It does not quite seem to fit, but I cannot think of any other reason for what it would be used besides battle."

"It's definitely for battle."

She pushed down on his shoulder with her chin as payback for figuring out the false Twilight Cardinal's fraud before her.

"But if this ruin dates to the time of the ancient empire, then there may be records in the Estatt archives. We should investigate when we return."

That was because Estatt was the city that served as a forward base in the era of the ancient empire, after all.

We would know right away with Canaan's help, Col thought, and the weight

from his shoulder disappeared.

He turned to see Myuri looking at him curiously.

"What's gotten into you? I didn't think you'd be interested in stuff like this."

Though she always demanded he listen to all of the stories *she* wanted to tell, she was oddly fearful in these situations.

"Because I believe it may be one of the things that has made the swindlers more convincing."

"Hmm?"

Myuri lifted her head, comparing the spot they were in to the distant lights of Ohlburg.

"These ruins were built in a time when no lavish cathedrals existed in the world. Back then, the Church existed only to spread faith, and knights of the empire traveled alongside the great Church Fathers to bravely make their way to the farthest reaches of the land in pursuit of their noble mission."

Myuri loved tales of adventure. She understood what he was getting at.

He could see her silver fur stand slightly on edge.

"I doubt the fervor in Ohlburg came solely from the imposter's good sermon."

That was because there was something else that resonated so powerfully with them, something no one could deny.

Perhaps what caused them to grow so excited was the breath of the ancient empire.

"Is there...a legend here?"

Though he felt the affectation was a bit too strong, what they wanted to say was essentially the same.

And they, too, would need to get many of their allies involved in the near future.

"They are using my name. I'm allowed to reference their methods in order to gather allies, no? Words alone have their limit. With the ruins of an ancient church at our feet, it will be very clear what our intentions are," he said as he

stood, and just as Myuri did, he looked to Ohlburg.

Though now it was a featureless plain of silvergrass, knights and priests had once gathered here and warred intensely with pagans. After vanquishing their enemy, they built a base here, then pressed northward—many people had passed through these lands.

Perhaps the faint breeze was the whisper left behind by those who once traveled across this land.

Things that could be seen and touched possessed an indescribable power.

"But if that were the case, then I still do not understand these swindlers."

Myuri, who had been gazing at Ohlburg's lights as though they were the distant past, turned her huge frame to look at him.

"Don't you think they're quite adept at a strange number of things for being mere scammers?"

Myuri stared at him, then shut her eyes for an extended moment.

"But that's what we're going to find out, right?" She huffed, and her red eyes gleamed. She was more than ready.

"Yes. Let us go, like the knights and priests of old once did."

Myuri's jaws parted in surprise, then her tail began to wag, and she pressed her nose into his lower back.

"Wh—Myuri! Stop that! It hurts!"

In recent years, he was scarcely able to hold her when she flew at him in girl form, and now he felt in actual danger when she was in her wolf form.

Perhaps he had gone a little too far in comparing them to the people of the past, here, in this very place where those tales once played out in the time of the ancient empire.

When Myuri finally calmed, Col hopped on again, and he did not forget to whisper to her, "This is *just* an investigation. We will be routing the enemy later."

Her wild, red, wolf eyes turned to stare at him, and in lieu of an answer, she

rushed forward.

She was still a bit too rambunctious to call herself a knight—Col's sigh became wind, and vanished.

The field was empty, but if Col were to stand still and really strain his ears, he could hear the faint sounds of music and laughter. There were no houses around them, and perhaps a superstitious individual might think it was the spirits having a party.

It was, in fact, a fantastic place for the scammers to make their hideout, but it was also rather convenient for Col that their hideout was so far away from Ohlburg.

Myuri howled, one that was somewhat reserved yet loud enough to be heard, and the out-of-place music came to a sudden stop.

A wolf? Roaming a plain like this? Are we sure it isn't just a stray?

After a brief pause, where Col was almost sure he could hear voices saying those things, there came the creaking of wood from a corner in the towering grasses, and light poured out.

Grass had been carefully mounted on the door, so it was not easily discernible at a glance.

It was pushed open, and people poked their heads out from the underground stronghold like field mice.

But the night outside was no different; the silvergrass only occasionally swayed in the breeze.

There came a sigh of relief—*Man, it was nothing*—and the door began to swing closed.

There was another howl.

And this time, it was closer.

"Hey—"

"Are we sure it isn't a stray dog?!"

"Who cares! Check the other doors!"

The conversation was panicked, and the door shut with a loud noise. Col even heard it being bolted.

The third howl had a hint of delight to it—it was as though Myuri could smell their growing panic even from a distance. All her big brother could do was sigh as he watched everything unfold through the stalks of tall grass.

It was not long before Myuri appeared, walked atop the ground that covered the underground stronghold, sniffing loudly, then turned to look directly at Col.

Her red eyes, a gift from her mother, shone bright, and her tail, which she typically did not give too much care, stood proudly and whipped back and forth. She turned to the sky and opened her mouth again.

She held nothing back for her fourth howl—even Col felt intimidated hearing it like this. The silvergrass, completely at the mercy of the nighttime breeze, shuddered as well and rustled in unease. When the echoes of her howl vanished, Myuri whirled around and stood before the door from where the men had peeked out.

"Grr! Grrrrrr!"

She growled, wolflike, but at the same time not in a manner he had ever heard before, and scratched at the door with her claws.

Watching as a nonparticipant, the way Myuri's tail whipped back and forth as she clawed at the door only made her seem like she was pretending to be a cat scratching its claws on wood, but those inside likely felt nothing but dread.

The grass peeled away, the wood scraped, and the light from inside poured out.

Col could hear faint yelling and screaming. When Myuri glanced at him, he thought she was smiling.

"Hruff! Woof! Hruff!"

Her labored breathing was deliberate; she stuck her nose through the crack in the door.

The people inside must have been frightened out of their minds at the sight.

The howls and the rough breathing made it very possible it could have been a

hungry stray.

But what stuck its head through the crack in the door was a wolf the size of a bear.

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"Hruff, hruff, hruff—"
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Myuri stuck her nose through the door, but then quickly drew out her head and stepped back.

Those inside must have been hoping this devil of a wolf had lost interest and was readying to leave.

But Col could tell Myuri was counting the seconds.

The mischievous wolf suddenly lifted the upper half and front legs of her body, like a scythe, and then brought them down hard on the door.

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"Grrrowl! Broughhhh!"
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She made a show of ripping the door to shreds with her front paws, and as she growled like hell's guard dog, she gently tore into the broken door with her teeth.

A wooden door was like a sweet made of nothing but eggs and flour when at Myuri's mercy, and it broke apart with satisfying cracks.

But there was a good reason why she refrained from going inside and instead spent ages loudly dismantling the door.

Her tail wagged happily in contrast with her terrifying growls; when the door was no longer fit for purpose, she finished it off with a stomp of her paws, then looked at Col.

"The coast is clear, Brother."

The poor moles had apparently escaped safely through their secret passageways.

"You went too far," he said, exasperated.

Myuri, satisfied she got to play the part of wolf to her heart's content, began to wag her tail with enthusiasm and nudged at him excitedly, just like a dog mistaking a scolding as an offer to play.

"Is it empty inside now?"

Col briefly peeked in to see what looked exactly like a feast interrupted by an attack.

"I...don't smell your imposter anywhere. He probably has his own hideout somewhere in the town."

Chairs were overturned, mugs had fallen, steam rose from still-warm soup, and there were many candles burned to stubs.

With her keen nose and ears, Myuri stepped inside and deftly sniffed out some drumsticks or some other food from the tables as she wagged her tail, signaling for him to follow her.

"It's rather spacious down here...and all made of stone."

He had imagined something tighter and more like a natural cave, but all he could picture before him was a stone building that had sunk into the ground.

But when he looked up, something struck him as strange.

"The ceiling...is also stone?"

If this were a ruin from the ancient empire, then it was reasonable to think the structure had slowly sunk into the ground over countless months and years.

But the rounded ceiling was made of a flawless interlocking of stone. And when he looked very closely at the wall and floor, he saw the gaps between the stones were perfectly and neatly filled in.

This was unlikely the thieves' handiwork, so it had likely been built this way from the start.

"It's almost as though this is..."

He looked at the sad sight of the interrupted feast in this underground stronghold, and a new thought suddenly occurred to him. What if this place had not sunk over the months and years, but was instead built underground to begin with?

But for what purpose?

It was too orderly for hermits who intended to simply conduct ascetic training

and highly unlikely to be any part of a church.

As those thoughts crossed his mind, he felt damp air on his right hand.

Myuri rubbed her nose on him, then waved her head, signaling him to follow.

The hideout did not have doors cut into the walls like a regular building, but was instead all connected with oddly narrow corridors, which could hardly be called hallways.

Vague memories of something that happened when Col was a wandering student came back to him. He was so hungry he dug a hole in the embankment by a river, chasing a large rat, and crawled inside its burrow. This structure bore a surprisingly close resemblance to that.

The thieves were using the open spaces connected by the corridors as living spaces and storage areas. Some places held stacks of alcohol and food, while others held all the items collected from donations. There were a few branching paths here and there, and one of these corridors had marks on the floor, as though something big and heavy had been dragged across it. Col followed the trail with his eyes to find a large crate overturned.

Spilling out from the inside were gold and silver coins.

"That must have been quite the exercise."

They must have attempted to take the entire crate with them in the panic of Myuri's attack, but they had been unable to lift it due to its sheer weight, dragged it instead, and then ultimately pushed it over.

He could picture the conversation: Just leave it! But—! Wolves don't eat gold —just run!

Col prayed for the poor, sinful thieves, then rushed after Myuri as she pressed ahead.

When he caught up with her, she stood with her head lowered before one room, sniffing the air that seeped from it.

After a moment of that, she lifted her head, turned to look at Col and begged to be petted, so he did. And that was when he heard a person groan from inside.

He tensed, but Myuri had apparently been waiting for that reaction of his. The mischievous wolf grinned, stood to her full height, then gently pushed open the thin door with her nose.

This room was unlike the other storage and communal spaces they had passed thus far—this was someone's private room.

The only light was from a candle, burnt to the bottom, glowing weakly, and Col could only see the faint outlines of things inside.

But the air of the room stank of things even *he* could pick out—booze, grease, and the characteristic human stench of someone who had given up on everything.

A gaunt man lay face-down on the table.

It was Hobeln.

"Alcohol and ... gambling."

Scattered across the table was an unorganized mess of cards and dice.



Altogether, including the overturned ones, there were four chairs. There were also the same number of steins, still filled with ale, which meant they had been gambling until the moment of the wolf attack.

The fact the man had been left behind meant he must have passed out in the middle of the match. Either way, it seemed like all the respect he had been paid was all for show, and the thieves did not consider him one of their own.

His right hand still gripped his booze-filled stein, and his left hand grasped a piece of paper.

Col glanced to Myuri, silently asking if he was asleep, and then held his light up to the man.

The paper was very old, and there was a picture on it.

"A well?"

Like a hound eager to eat her master's food, Myuri propped her front paws up on the table and peered at the paper.

Col also thought it might be a well, but it was a bit oddly shaped for that.

As he wondered what it might be, Myuri's ears suddenly pricked.

"……"

And she glanced at him.

Perhaps the thieves who made their temporary escape had come back to check on things.

"You go back first, Brother. I'll go get my hat," Myuri said, then dashed off into the darkness.

Your hat doesn't matter— But before he could open his mouth to say that, she was gone.

He dropped his shoulders.

He gave one last quick look around, and with his eyes adjusted to the dim, he spotted an emblazoned banner on the wall.

Swords crossed before a shield was a common design, but upon closer look,

he found it was not two swords, but one sword and— "One...hammer?"

He thought it was a strange crest for a noble house, but he quickly snapped back to the present when Hobeln groaned again, and Col quickly retreated into the corridor.

He stepped over the overturned crate and the spilled silver coins, relying on his memory to make the turn he thought was right, and went back the way they came.

At worst, he would take the wrong path and Myuri would come running for him. He buried the lower half of his face in his cloak, just in case he happened to run into the thieves, so they would not see his face.

Then, he came to a dead end.

He could hear a voice echo in his head—You're so stupid, Brother.

The moment he thought about turning back, he suddenly realized this was not a wall, but a very sturdy door.

Or perhaps, this was their treasury.

Though he had no intentions of stealing from them, he figured it would not hurt to know what sort of assets they had at their disposal. So he pushed the heavy door open with his shoulder.

The first thing to hit his nose was the smell of metal.

He thought of the fervent faith the people of Ohlburg had as he wondered just how much they had accumulated, and he could feel his anger toward the scammers reaching a boil.

Col and his allies were not fighting the Church for money.

They were fighting the injustices of the world so they may live a nobler, more righteous life, so they may walk the correct path God had set out for them—and then he smelled something else.

Pig fat.

That smell had very little to do with gold and silver coin.

But he knew in which situations the smell of grease might go along with that

of metal.

It was the one thing that rambunctious girl loved, the thing she cared for every day with the same passion she gave her own hair— "These...are..."

The candlelight illuminated an extravagant store of weapons, an amount that was wholly unneeded for a simple scam.

"What is...the meaning of this...?"

It was far from unusual for those who devoted themselves to evil pursuits to arm themselves; it was the sheer *number* of weapons that caught Col by surprise.

Every inch of the room was covered in weaponry, from his feet to the ceiling.

"…"

This was not someone who was pretending to be the Twilight Cardinal to afford a few days' lodgings and food.

In the beginning, Col thought it might be.

But Ohlburg was a town practically overflowing with faith, and this hideout was the real thing, based in the ruins from the ancient empire.

And all these weapons...

Col gulped, took a slow step backward, then whirled around on his heel.

He had no memory of how he managed to get outside.

The next thing he knew, he was outside the hideout, and Myuri was close behind.

Her little hat sat on her wolf head, a chain of pork sausage hung around her neck like a massive necklace, and she had a large piece of jerky in her mouth. She was clearly satisfied.

Col stood staring blankly, unable to fully digest what he had seen in the hideout; Myuri, however, seemed just the same, and he found himself bursting out in laughter at the sight. That was when he realized he felt like he could breathe again.

"They had a whole barrel of honey, too," Myuri said, after changing back into

her human form and stroking her spoils of war.

They left the hideout and set up camp on top of a hill at around the halfway point between Ohlburg and Estatt. It was thick with grass and was nice and airy—the perfect place to spend the night.

Furthermore, Myuri had not even blinked when she stole the food—though Col scolded her for stealing, she quickly countered by telling him it would be strange if a hungry wolf came for food, only to leave without touching anything.

She saw she had turned the tables when he failed to muster a response, and she said, "Or should I just have thrown their food around and wasted all of it?" He had no choice but to admit defeat.

"But more importantly, Brother—"

She insisted that warming herself with a blanket alone was much better than warming by a peat fire, so she had done just that. Wrapped in her blanket, she pushed her shoulder against Col's as they sat side by side.

"What did you find?"

Myuri was sharp even under normal circumstances, so she had immediately noticed her brother had been acting strange—though anyone could tell as much given the way he had been staggering around the outside of the hideout.

"……"

But Col found it difficult to answer.

He could explain what he saw, of course—swords casually bundled together like firewood, spears leaning against the wall like silvergrass.

There were also numerous bows and arrows, and frightening things like battle-axes.

There had been helmets, shields, and a panoply of armor, both metal and leather.

And then, there was the drunkard.

"Do you think those people truly are nothing more than simple swindlers?"

While Col had been quietly thinking, Myuri rifled through their things to pick

out a piece of hard cracknel that would not mold in the humidity. When he spoke, her wolf ears and eyes turned to him.

"Whahoo 'oo eem?"

Her teeth were still stuck in the cracknel when she asked in turn, What do you mean? and she snapped off the rest of the biscuit.

"After we parted ways, I took a wrong turn. The room I ended up in held a vast number of weapons."

Just as she had opened her mouth to take her second bite, Myuri's hands stopped.

"Weapons?"

"There were clearly far too many if they only intended to arm themselves."

Myuri looked at the biscuit in her hand, then dug her fangs, sharper than any weapon, into it.

"That's proof that place was used in the wars in the time of the ancient empire."

"Do you mean to say people have cared for those weapons, with plenty of oil, continually for centuries?"

Myuri bit into the biscuit, which crumbled and cracked loudly and ominously under her teeth. Then finally, she shrugged.

"No. Just that it's a good place for fighting."

Col was momentarily dumbfounded before he asked in return, "Do you think they plan on fighting Estatt?"

"Do they have any other enemies here?" She looked at him flatly. "Their commander's probably that noble guy."

At a glance, Hobeln looked like nothing more than a recluse, but he should have some sort of status.

But if that were the case, then it invited more questions.

"Is a commander the sort of person you can casually leave behind?"

"There are a lot of bad guys like that in stories about righteous knights. The leader of the bad guys always ends up abandoned by his underlings, and then he has to beg for mercy."

Stories were stories and not reality—but Col knew there was no point in telling her this. Instead, he heaved a sigh and murmured, "Something is strange about this."

"You think so?"

The next thing he knew, there was only a little bit of the cracknel left in Myuri's hand. She furiously munched on it, and once she threw the last piece into her mouth, she brushed off her hands.

"I'd say the problem got a lot simpler, because your fake turned out to be a genuine scammer."

"....."

Myuri had said Col only saw a fourth of the world.

He knew nothing of girls, which left half.

And the half of that half he often failed to understand...

"I think it's all a lie," she said.

...that half was malice.

"Someone saying he's you to trick a bunch of people, then collecting money from them? I think all of it's fake."

A wolf raced out from the dark of the forest, red eyes thinned into slits like two smiles.

"Who's your enemy, Brother?" she asked.

Col looked up.

From their elevated spot on the hill, he could see it in the distance—the shadow of the spire of the great cathedral, reaching to the heavens.

The candlelight there burned all night long, faintly visible in the darkness.

"It's all being orchestrated by Estatt?"

Myuri gave no answer.

But she rested her head on his shoulder, signaling the end of the conversation, and pulled the blanket tighter around her.

The reason they had rushed here from Aquent was precisely because they could not have this person pretending to be the Twilight Cardinal do irreparable damage to Col's reputation.

And so what would the Church do, who were so desperate to drag down the Twilight Cardinal from his pedestal?

He had seen plenty of clowns who would sarcastically ask, What would you do if you wanted to be a prophet?

"Make the prophecy come true yourself."

The tip of Myuri's ear tickled his cheek, as though teasing him.

In truth, the scammers were very skilled. Too, too skilled.

Beyond the silvergrass growing over the barren peatlands, the shadow of Estatt stood out above the sea of darkened mud.

*HAPTER ** HREE



CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, they returned to Ohlburg to check on the town.

It was as lively as before, still overflowing with faith, and the Church of the Beginning was packed for morning mass.

The Twilight Cardinal seemed to be somewhat sleep-deprived, but they were too far away to really make out any details. The priests nearby also seemed to be a bit tired. Perhaps he was going a bit too far assuming they had stayed up all night preparing for another wolf attack.

Now, everyone around him seemed to be a swindler, but Myuri, who was presently doing her own thing, was sharp—she would surely be able to tell the difference between real and fake preachers.

He knew the collections basket would come straight to him once mass was over, and so he left the Church of the Beginning before that happened.

He left Ohlburg before waiting to meet up with Myuri because the air in the town was much too thick; he did not want to stay long.

None of them, including his fake, were small-time scoundrels hoping to make a quick coin. They were a group of organized swindlers. And what were they going to burn when they fanned the people's anger into a roaring blaze?

He remembered what Myuri had pointed out, and all the weapons he saw in the darkness last night.

It was very likely the one to give the command to take up arms would be the man who called himself the Twilight Cardinal, and it would be those who worshipped the Twilight Cardinal as a savior who would arm themselves.

Simple scammers trying to make money had no need to do such things.

And that meant what crept beneath the feet of those whose faith was being fanned was the shadow of an unsightly plot.

Those who trusted in the name of the Twilight Cardinal were possibly in danger.

"Broootheeer!"

After leaving Ohlburg, Col made his way back toward Estatt, leading the horse on foot, when something slammed into him from behind. It clung to him, and this annoyed him. But he understood that Myuri saw he was sinking into his own darkness, and that she was doing this on purpose.

And so he swallowed whatever scolding he might have normally given her and asked, "How were things with you?"

Myuri held freshly grilled meat and freshly baked bread, wrapped in large leaves, in both her hands.

She had brought her spoils of battle from the night before to the shops and bartered.

"I think there's about ten scammers in all. And if we count the people who weren't in the hideout, there were another ten who I thought could be a part of it."

Myuri had left her scent all over the hideout in last night's attack.

She could, to a point, pick out those who had been there, even the next day.

"At the very least, it would be exceedingly reckless to attack Estatt with so few people."

And that meant all those weapons and armor were not meant for that group.

Their purpose was to the rile up the populace, saying it was for the sake of protecting faith and the faithful.

"And I heard something bad about Ohlburg," Myuri said as she unwrapped the packaged leaf—a delicious smell wafted from the inside. "I told a wicked-looking merchant I accidentally donated something really valuable of mine, and that they wouldn't give it back when I asked for it. And he told me something straight away."

Col was unsure if he should praise her for that or not, but what was certain was he could not belittle her judgment and acting.

"It sounds like everything that gets donated to them is sold off in other cities. When I bought pepper from him, he told me it'd get sold off to a town upstream from the river that flows through Estatt. And he told me the same thing you heard about taxes. Came here 'cause they heard it was a no-tax market, but that ain't it at all! These scoundrels're askin' for donations day in and day out, and them depraved priests are just makin' quick cash for themselves! Business here's finished!"

She started imitating the merchant partway through.

He could vaguely picture the merchant's face—teeth missing, deep wrinkles set in leathered skin.

But there was one word that stood out to him.

"Pepper? Did you say pepper?"

Myuri was in the middle of working on a big bite of the grilled meat, her mouth stuffed.

There were black specks dotting the juicy red meat.

Myuri turned away in a huff, stuffed her mouth full of meat, as though telling him she was busy at the moment.

"Don't tell me you used the gold from last night to—"

"I told you! I didn't steal any!" Myuri said, took a piece of bread from her hand, then shoved it in Col's face. "I just traded what I couldn't carry!"

""

It did not seem as though she was lying, but it was still hard to outright say that the way she relieved the hideout of its meats was not stealing. Then again, it would be much too suspicious if their rations remained untouched after a wolf attack, and it would be even worse to purposefully waste food—her excuses were perfectly logical.

He had felt like, in the gaps between justice and justification and her brother's judgment, she had become like bits of ground pepper.

"Anyway, we know for sure now that your fake and his friends aren't committing crimes just because they feel like it. I also asked about House

Hobeln."

The bread was slightly soggy, perhaps due to the heat coming off the freshly grilled meat. Col bit into it, then looked at Myuri.

"The merchant told me he's a fallen noble who's at the end of his rope. He has debts with all the merchants in Estatt, and he said even his manor got taken away. He was in the hideout because he had nowhere else to go."

Last night, there had been one poor noble left on his lonesome after all the other swindlers escaped the hideout.

His territory was peatland that could barely sustain any crops.

And if he had nowhere else to go, then the crest hanging on the wall of that room was not a sign of respect from the rest of the band. That banner was Hobeln's final reminder of his past.

"The scammers lured him into their scheme and are using him. And even though he knows this, he can't leave after everything that's happened, so he wallows in self-pity by drinking... Doesn't that fit him perfectly?"

Myuri had traveled, learned the joys of stories, and had even begun to pen her own tales—her vocabulary had clearly grown. But it seemed to Col that all she learned were dangerous words, and that gave him a headache.

And the problem was the words *lured*, *used*, and *wallowing in self-pity* fit what he had seen all too well.

The only thing left to do was find out what, exactly, was causing the blackout drunk noble's pain—was it the scammers' greed, or Estatt's cruel intentions?

Regardless, this was not something they could overlook.

It was not because his cohorts were using the Twilight Cardinal's name to their own ends. They were fooling people, and they were trampling this poor noble underfoot.

There was no justice to be found here.

"God knows."

Col took the piece of bread Myuri traded for and bit into it.

It was clear there was some sort of serious plot afoot, but all the clues they had managed to get their hands on were too big to chew on. They would have to cut up the material they had managed to get and rearrange the pieces until everything made sense.

Their latest discovery was that buried underneath the feet of those who gathered in Ohlburg was an alarming cache of weapons. That was the main thing on Col's mind as they returned to Estatt. Fortunately, one of the sharpest minds in the world was waiting for them at their inn.

"Miss Eve!"

Col had wondered who it could be when he spotted the oddly ornate carriage outside the inn, but Myuri knew right away and she rushed forward for a hug.

Surprisingly, Eve was not wearing any elaborate clothing, but she was accompanied by the umbrella girl, who could not exactly hide her natural beauty, and Az the bodyguard, who was a man of few words but had also gently taught Myuri swordsmanship. Myuri hugged both of them and went around to say hello to everyone.

She must have been overjoyed seeing everyone for the first time in a long while, and was enjoying the surprise itself.

Col approached the table to offer his greetings as well.

"I did not think you would be coming yourself."

The letters he had sent from Aquent to both Hyland and Eve reported that an imposter of the Twilight Cardinal had appeared and detailed their tentative plans to combat the problem. He had also requested to lean on their connections and knowledge so he may make himself known to those in power on the mainland as quickly as possible.

He had assumed a messenger with a letter would come, so he was shocked to see the great merchant herself.

"What do you mean? My cute little boy is about to make his debut in every court worthy of being called one. Do you think I'd stand on the sidelines for this?"

Eve smiled devilishly, and Col could only return a peeved one. It was then he realized Myuri was staring at him. Her face told him she considered herself another one of her foolish brother's guardians.

"The moment you appear in any court, the local traders with any sort of influence will start rushing over. I need to let everyone know exactly who this little lamb belongs to."

He spotted Myuri nodding along to every word Eve said. Col hung his head and quickly said, "There is one problem we must take care of first."

"An imposter, was it? I hear about cases like this all the time, but to think someone I know personally is a victim." Eve stood and jerked her chin. "I have a room by the harbor. We'll talk there."

She began to brisky walk out, and the innkeeper bowed incessantly toward her; Col surmised he had been given a very generous tip.

Myuri joined Eve and the others in the carriage, while Col rode the horse he was borrowing and followed behind. On the way, Myuri occasionally stuck her head out to look back at him and wave enthusiastically. Col had no choice but to wave back.

The carriage went straight to the western part of the city, and eventually went past the walls.

Though they were already outside of the city, the roads were paved and it still looked like they were in town. The harbor had gotten farther away from the city proper as the coastline receded, and the district that connected the two could have been called a whole other city.

This area was noticeably less bustling than inside the city walls, and after a short while, placid waters soon came into view up ahead.

"Always a warehouse, I see."

The carriage came to a stop before one of the buildings that lined the water.

Eve shrugged in response to Col's comment and quickly went inside. When he hurried after her, who should he find waiting inside but Le Roi and Canaan.

Once everyone took their seats around a big table, Col told them what they

saw in Ohlburg.

Myuri spoke enthusiastically about discovering and infiltrating the hideout.

Her excitement grew with every word, and Col knew she would end up spinning some tale about fighting a dragon in its underground lair if he let her; he picked a good place to interject.

"At the moment, we have two primary concerns: the possibility that the drunkard in the hideout was indeed Hobeln himself, and the massive array of weapons."

Myuri pouted, her story interrupted. But she had been so absorbed in the telling she had begun to sweat, so when Canaan handed her a cold drink, she accepted it and behaved herself.

Le Roi was the first to respond.

"That must be the lord of House Hobeln. The bookworm nobles in the city told me about his manor being repossessed. I do not consider it odd at all to hear he has gotten himself wrapped up in a plot happening in his barren lands and was found blackout drunk in the swindlers' hideout."

It would have been very simple if Hobeln turned out to be the mastermind, but Col remembered how Hobeln left, back hunched after the fake Twilight Cardinal's sermon, and how drunk he had been at the hideout. The chances he was behind everything seemed wildly low.

If anything, it seemed far more likely he had gotten involved against his will, and he was being used.

Eve spoke next.

"A lord who cannot feed his people is no lord. The most that can grow here is grass to feed livestock, and even that is questionable at best. I often hear of floods in these parts as well. There are a surprising number of lords who find themselves in terrible straits, tied to land that brings them nothing but hardship."

Col could vaguely picture Eve wearing a cold smile while forcing those unfortunate nobles to take out loans from her. He shook his head to banish the

imagery from his mind.

"That seems to be the case here," agreed Le Roi. "Moreover, I have heard that caring for the land was even more of a handful in the past, when the sea level was higher. I believe the rights surrounding the grand market were handed over to the city generations ago due to how difficult it was to manage these lands."

Col had seen for himself the challenges a place like this had to offer. The damp alone had been enough to drag down Myuri's mood. One thing did strike him as odd, though.

"My experiences in Nyohhira give me some idea how difficult it must be to run the grand market, but Estatt seems to be handling it well, no?"

The cathedral in the city was massive, and the light burning through the night in the spire could be seen even from the outskirts of Ohlburg.

That was the light that seeped from mountains of wealth.

He thought back on the raised voices he heard in Ohlburg that criticized the cathedral.

"The Church itself is a lot like the grand market to begin with. It's different when a ruling noble does it."

When Col looked to Eve for elaboration, she shrugged at him and continued.

"People go out of their way to attend, even if it means trouble for themselves, and they even donate. Do you know how much easier it could be if they don't need to collect the funds they need to run the market as taxes?"

Baskets had been passed around after the sermon in Ohlburg, and people were practically fighting each other to donate. Of course, people took a different attitude when it came time to pay taxes.

"If they support the fake Twilight Cardinal and let their followers come together naturally, then they could easily copy the cathedral. And in that case, the weapons make sense."

Myuri reacted to that last bit immediately.

"They do?"

There was a clear gap in power between Ohlburg and Estatt. Anyone with half a brain could tell there was no way they could win against Estatt, and that was exactly why Myuri had come to the conclusion this was all being orchestrated by Estatt.

If that was the case, it did not matter what Ohlburg's chances of victory might be. They simply wanted to show the Twilight Cardinal had instigated a war. And by doing so, they would be telling the world the Twilight Cardinal was a dangerous individual who threatened those in power.

That would certainly explain why the band of swindlers were collecting weapons.

But Eve was seeing something Myuri wasn't.

"I know you love war stories, little lady. When one party conducts a siege, how much more power do you think they need compared to the defending party?"

Myuri was tearing into the pork ribs. She chewed, swallowed, then said, "I usually hear ten times more..."

"Then they could hold their own pretty well."

Eve wet her lips on the liquid that filled her cup, made unusually of glass.

Col wondered what the wicked merchant was trying to get at, so he and Myuri both tilted their heads. But Myuri quickly leaned forward.

"Oh, right! You mean it isn't about attacking the city, but defending themselves against the city?!"

"What?"

Col was taken aback, and Eve flashed a meaningful smile.

An overwhelming difference in strength.

If those perspectives were flipped, then the existence of those weapons took on a totally new meaning.

"It's open ground, and at a glance the whole place looks unfit for defense, but the land is unsettled. If they force the attackers to go around the underground shelter, then the invaders are going to have an awful time in that terrain. Soldiers on foot will get stuck in the mud. Knights in heavy armor will sink. Their horses will slip and fall. A total fiasco. That town won't fall so easily."

Myuri nodded along, and Col agreed it did make a certain sense, but he could not quite bring himself to believe it.

Eve stroked her chin pensively before continuing.

"But the real question is whether they think they can survive a straight fight. That I'm not sure about."

Myuri looked disappointed by this.

"They could just be buying time, collecting as many donations as they can before they make their escape."

There was a huge difference between refusing to give up easily and deciding to never give up no matter what, but the idea of buying time seemed to fill in the gap between them nicely.

The people of Ohlburg had come together through sheer will and the depth of their faith. Estatt was quiet due to how many had left for the religious town that had sprung up seemingly overnight, and it was likely the gap in their military strength was closing fast.

But Estatt was an imperial city ruled by a prince-elector first, and a cathedral city second. Its sphere of influence likely included lords far beyond these bogs, ones who ruled over fertile land. The numbers Estatt could mobilize would be sizable.

They would not sit back and remain silent while someone built a town right under their nose and then undermined their grand market.

That meant there was plenty of possibility the other prince-electors' armies could be called in for backup, and even if Ohlburg did decide to resist the siege, they did not have even a one in a million chance of victory.

Then was it all like Eve said? Nothing but a way to save time by collecting donations and offerings before they run?

"I would like to discuss that point," Canaan said. He had remained silent until

that moment.

Out of habit from working as a member of the clergy, he stood and cleared his throat.

"I pretended to be a pilgrim and asked the priests about the recent goings-on, and it sounded as though Ohlburg is looking for something greater than the rights to hold the great market."

Eve's eyes narrowed slightly, and Canaan continued.

"They have reportedly asked for the key to the city."

Myuri cocked her head at the word key, and Col raised his voice in surprise.

"They can't be seeking full authority to govern...can they?"

People often likened foolishly bold acts to a little fish trying to swallow a whale.

That was exactly what this was—Ohlburg asking for the key to the city was essentially a signal that the little cluster of huts and stalls wanted to *be* Estatt in name and essence.

Right as Col fell silent at the sheer audacity of it all, he felt a tug on his sleeve.

It was Myuri, who was evidently irked she could not follow the conversation.

"Um..." Col struggled. "The key to the city is essentially a symbol of a city's autonomy and authority. So..."

"If they're serious about asking for the key to the city, then that means they intend to replace the massive city of Estatt with that little shantytown built on the mud."

While Myuri took a deep breath and expanded like her tail, excited by the unbelievable idea, Col only grew more and more confused.

If the band of swindlers was only meant to serve as a part of Estatt's greater plot, like Myuri theorized, then their demands seemed very poorly thought-out indeed. Even the tales the bards sang in taverns were a little more realistic.

Or was it because they thought only something as outlandish as this could properly demonstrate just how dangerous the Twilight Cardinal was supposed to be?

What bothered him the most was the possibility this was *not* some devious plot concocted by Estatt. That would be far more mysterious.

First, there was the question of whether Hobeln could come up with something so audacious in the first place. That, and Col found it hard to believe those swindlers were genuinely after the status of prince-elector and wanted to claim it for themselves in that little gathering of huts in Ohlburg.

Even Myuri, dreamer that she was, would laugh at such a story.

The clues they had on hand simply weren't adding up.

Hoping to gain a new perspective, Col decided to take a bird's-eye view of the situation. That was when a certain memory crossed his mind.

He recalled what Canaan had told him after he had gone out to gather information on the day they first arrived in Estatt.

"According to what Canaan said...the cathedral is watching and waiting to see how they might deal with Ohlburg."

These people had built a town right under their noses, had interrupted their grand market, and were apparently asking for the key to the city.

Normally, a lord of the empire would quickly suppress any dissidents to maintain order and authority. When Canaan had told him about all this, he had been thrilled—he said Estatt's hesitancy must have been due to fear of the Twilight Cardinal's influence.

But what if that was not the case?

"What if Estatt is not afraid of the Twilight Cardinal, but instead suspects someone is feeding Ohlburg ideas—or more specifically, feeding the swindlers ideas?"

The union between Lord Hobeln and the swindlers was not enough to explain everything about this odd situation. But that would not be the case if they were not the only actors on stage.

Once Col pointed that out, Canaan replied sheepishly, "Yes. I got a little ahead of myself in that regard... As I gathered more information from those around

the city, I knew everything was exactly as you said, Master Col. As obvious as it sounds, not everyone in this city is like the scarecrow priests that appear in comedies."

Col and his companions were not the only ones who were standing vigilant, ready to use every last reserve of wisdom at their disposal.

"Everyone has already surmised the Twilight Cardinal in Ohlburg is not the real one."

Which meant Estatt was not afraid of Hobeln, much less of the Twilight Cardinal.

What they were truly wary of was—

"They think it's an obvious trap someone set up for them."

Myuri's eyes shone so brightly, Col thought her ears and tail might pop out.

"I know how this goes! First you deliberately set up a conflict, force your opponent to make the first move, then use it as a justification to declare war, right?"

"If this is political theater regarding the position of prince-elector, then it's possible," Eve added. Both of them loved horrifying stories like this, and they were very much on the same page.

That would certainly explain how skilled the scammers were. It also neatly explained the weapons.

What left a bitter taste in Col's mouth was that if they were right about this, then the people who had banded together believing in the name of the Twilight Cardinal were nothing but sacrificial, disposable pawns.

And if that possibility was correct, then no matter what he had to—

Right as Col's mind started racing, the unrivaled bookseller, who had been sitting beside Canaan with his arms folded, gently interjected.

"Master Col, you mentioned they were using a ruin from the ancient empire as their stronghold."

"Ah... Yes."

Col was flustered by the conversation suddenly pivoting to him, but he couldn't deny the story about the Church of the Beginning the imposter spoke about had left an impression on him.

"I believe it is simply to enhance their authority while preaching faith. They have made crumbling ruins the place where they will preach and styled it as the Church of the Beginning, all because it might be a church that was built in the era of the ancient empire, before the Church began to rot," Col went on to explain.

"Hmm," Le Roi hummed. "And that fact itself did not seem to be wholly fictional, did it?"

His question was meant for Canaan.

"I believe so... It is historical fact that this entire region was the front line in the wars against the pagans back in the era of the empire. And a church was always built on the grounds of the knights' barracks, so it is entirely possible. But..."

What significance does that have?

As everyone looked at him, Le Roi spoke up.

"In that case, could it be simpler than that? Is it possible this could be nothing more than a farcical story? It is a ruin from the ancient empire, after all."

When he said *farcical* in that old-fashioned way, Le Roi turned to Myuri and grinned. He could have easily been her reading master in that moment, but Myuri looked at him curiously.

"Now, Madam Myuri. This is an ancient ruin. What does that bring to mind?"

"Hmm...?"

Myuri tilted her head, but then her eyes snapped open, as though she had been struck by lightning.

"Oh!"

The bookseller shook with laughter, and he spoke as his gaze swept over the others.

"Everyone, to think the ancient empire left behind ruins only would be a hasty thought."

Myuri had always been a dreamer, but it was without a doubt Le Roi who was encouraging her imagination. The rambunctious girl, having been under the tutelage of this terrible adult, stood up with such force she almost knocked her chair over.

"Ancient treasure!"

"Yes, precisely! Perhaps these swindlers are blinding others by gathering a great many people so they can quietly dig up their treasure."

"Th—"

That can't be it, is what Col was about to say, but he immediately realized the validity of the hypothesis.

The only ones fooled by the fake calling himself the Twilight Cardinal were those who never left the towns or villages in which they were born. Merchants who dealt in trade and priests who had contact with the network of churches spread across the world knew better than to take those claims at face value.

Conversely, it made sense the cathedral was being very careful with how they dealt with the situation, considering the possibility this was an obvious trap set up for them by a hostile party.

Even the swindlers had to know their story would come to a swift end if they decided to attack Estatt in earnest, and there was no way they didn't realize how nonsensical it was for them to ask for the key to the city.

What if this whole series of events was to convince people there was something going on behind the scenes? Had Estatt taken the bait completely?

Just as Lutia had said, the southern empire and the pope were embroiled in their own quarrel over territory, so those in power in the empire would be wary about the presence of potential enemies.

The swindlers slipped into the gaps in people's hearts—what if that was exactly what they were looking for?

They were obviously aware they would be called out for impersonating

someone, and it did not seem like they had any intent of protecting Ohlburg if push came to shove. They were buying time until they dug up treasure, and so long as it was busy and lively enough no one would question their activities, that was good enough for them.

In short, Ohlburg was bathed in lies from beginning to end and would vanish in the light of dawn, like a fairy city.

Hobeln and the faithful were being used as a pinch of truth that would give the whole lie some substance.

Col was shocked by the boldness of such a brazen plan and sat there holding his breath.

"That would make for an interesting story," Eve said with a sigh, rousing Col from his thoughts. "Do you honestly believe that?"

She stared coolly at Le Roi, who only gave her a delighted, meaningful smile in return.

Myuri watched the exchange in shock.

"The Twilight Cardinal's name draws so much attention. Using it to dig up a treasure they aren't even sure exists? That's ridiculous. They would have realized there must be a better way."

Le Roi finally let out a hearty laugh, and Myuri, left out in the cold, stared at him reproachfully. Col felt a bit of the same way.

"Oh-ho. Pardon me. But even as unbelievable as treasure might sound, we mustn't discount the possibility there are reasons for them to be attached to that land specifically. I simply cannot help but think about the ruins. From what Master Col tells us, these swindlers are quite skilled. They are much too prepared for this to be a whim, so I believe we must always consider the possibility they chose to build Ohlburg in that spot *because* of its location. However, I admit that might be due to how much I prefer tales of adventure to the theater of politics."

That seemed to hit a bit of a sore spot for Eve, who thought of plots among nobles with sparkling eyes, but she just shrugged lightly. Myuri, who loved both kinds of stories, was the only one angry there was no definite conclusion as to

which was the truth.

As he watched the exchange, Col suddenly murmured, "Treasure..."

There was the wild tale Le Roi mentioned, and Eve's cold dose of reality.

There had to be a reason why that band of swindlers had decided to build Ohlburg where it stood and a reason why they decided to use the Twilight Cardinal's name.

The key lay in the word *treasure*.

"Master Col?" Canaan said.

Col replied, "Could ancient ruins and treasure be a real possibility?"

All four of the others stared at him with wide eyes. It would have been less shocking if anyone else in the room had said it.

"Yes. Yes, the treasure must exist."

Myuri immediately looked anxiously at Col as he kept murmuring. Perhaps she thought a fairy was showing her an illusion.

"All they have to do is bury it."

Myuri immediately scrunched half of her face.

"Hey, Brother? What are you talking about? Who'd gain anything by doing that?"

Col did not waver. When he flashed a smile at her, she drew back in surprise.

"Because they would make quite a lot of money. Assuming that is why they've invoked the name of the Twilight Cardinal, after all."

"Huh?"

That was when Le Roi's hand struck his own cheek with a loud *smack*. At the same time, Eve had tucked in her chin in a surprising gesture of vexation.

The two merchants picked up on it straight away.

"I see, that is certainly one way to do it."

"What? What?"

Canaan was perplexed, and Myuri was upset she failed to see where this was going. She turned to glare at Col with a pout. Things like hidden treasure and moneymaking should have been distant concepts for her straitlaced brother.

She was not wrong, but Col knew much more about the world of faith than Myuri did.

Even the less-than-savory parts.

"Could they be planning on digging up a relic?"

"Relic...?" Myuri repeated the word curiously, and then her gaze snapped to the sword at her waist.

Relics were holy things, physical manifestations of God's miracles.

For example, a fragment of a pedestal an angel was said to have once descended upon, or an item a saint wore once upon a time—what they all had in common was that they were terribly valuable.

Pilgrims would come from all over to lay eyes on a miraculous relic, and it would also boost the Church's spiritual authority. The draw was so great even questionable items could fetch eye-watering prices.

When they spoke about relics before, Col had told Myuri about a legendary sword that had the bones of a saint set in its handle. At the time, Myuri had glanced at Col's arm like she wanted it for herself.

Her older brother was the Twilight Cardinal, after all.

It would be the *perfect* relic!

"So the Twilight Cardinal's going to dig up something he buried himself and convince everyone it was a miracle. How garish."

It was funny Eve was the one who said this, and that fact didn't seem to be lost on her given the amused expression she wore.

"It is just one possibility, and that would not fully explain the cache of weapons, but it does explain everything else reasonably well."

Perhaps they were for the guards that would make sure the relic would not be stolen after it was dug up?

"Either way, there are several possibilities as to why the Twilight Cardinal's making such a big ruckus out there." Eve tilted the glass cup in her hand in thought. "It would not be too difficult to silence this imposter permanently, but we can't make much progress without knowing what they're after and who's backing them."

Col nodded and said, "Any plots involving the position of prince-elector would be too much for me. However, we can look into any possibilities related to ruins and relics, can't we?"

He looked at Canaan with a question in his eyes.

"Ah, yes," Canaan replied. "There is a sizable archive in the cathedral. There might be records dating all the way back to the ancient empire there."

What were the ruins, really?

Col thought they were simply being used as a convenient location to boost their legitimacy, but now there was a genuine possibility the ruins had something to do with the core of the swindlers' plans.

"I brought it up to liven the conversation, but I suppose it wasn't a bad idea after all."

Le Roi laughed, and Myuri gave him a biting look.

"So is there really treasure or not?!"

Myuri took offense at the way Le Roi laughed. With a little sigh, Eve placed a small bowl full of sugared candies in front of Myuri to cheer her up.

The day after they had their meeting at Eve's rented warehouse, Col and company went straight to Estatt's cathedral.

"Whoa, it's huuuge!"

Everything was new to Myuri when they first left the deep mountain village of Nyohhira.

While her curious outbursts had lessened as she grew used to travel, the great cathedral from which the archbishop ruled was enough to ignite her curiosity. There were cathedrals in the Kingdom of Winfiel just as grand, but this one had several annexes, making it seem like a city within a city.

"I took a little peek yesterday, and the library was fantastic. There is a collection of crests from the knights who once gathered in this holy city and then set forth northward."

That was enough to make Myuri's eyes gleam.

There were plenty of people coming and going from a cathedral this big, but most left once morning mass was over, so it happened to be very quiet at the moment.

Canaan, pretending to be a journeying theologian-in-training, led them into the cathedral.

They took one step into the nave, and Myuri's jaw fell open when she realized just how high the building went.

The ceiling rose far above them, yet they could clearly see the detailed expressions on the painted angels' faces. The sheer size and scale had that effect on people, and the innocent, rambunctious girl recoiled slightly at the sight.

"Have you awakened to faith?"

Myuri gulped, then squared her shoulders like she refused to admit it had affected her.

Canaan smiled at Myuri, then veered to the left of the nave before making his way to one of the annex buildings. These were all the facilities that kept the cathedral in operation from day to day.

According to Canaan, the cathedral was mostly empty, but when they came to a long, wide corridor, that was not the case at all. There were all sorts of people —many priests, of course, but there were also groups of civil servants, perhaps envoys dispatched by distant lords, as well as well-dressed merchants.

Perhaps cathedrals of this size were typically more filled with people.

After all, here in Estatt, the archbishop alone wielded the power to confirm bishops. Furthermore, due to his high position within the Church administration that put him in charge of a vast diocese, the archbishop had clergy calling upon him day in and day out.

On top of that, the archbishop oversaw the municipal governance of the city, and due to his position as prince-elector, many secular lords also had business with him, as he was the ruler over a wide swathe of imperial land.

Consequently, all sorts of people came and went on a regular basis at the cathedral, so no one fussed over the details when a young theologian-intraining happened to meet the son of a wealthy merchant and his private tutor on his travels, and then asked to peruse the cathedral library, since the two were studying the history of every place they visited.

"Your name here, please... All right. And your donation here, please. How to handle the books, you ask? Ah, you say you've studied in Aquent, yes? You should be all right. Please show this slip to the librarian. Next."

It was very clerical.

The wealthy-looking couple standing in front of them in line, incidentally, disagreed with their relatives regarding the family inheritance, so they had asked to see the annals of one town in particular in order to confirm their lineage. And they were likely planning on donating to the cathedral on the way home and securing a powerful ally.

Cathedrals with long histories often served as the foundation of community memories.

Even this stone building, which had to be reprimanded for excess on occasion, had withstood fires and floods throughout history, and had maintained these valuable records continuously into the present day.

As they walked through the stately stone building, they spotted all sorts of workers busily rushing to and fro. This was how the peace was kept not only in the grand city of Estatt, but within the surrounding territories as well.

Ohlburg could not possibly assume the role and duties of this cathedral, and it was unrealistic to think they could maintain much of anything without taxes.

The sermon held in the Church of the Beginning was not a misconception simply because a swindler had been giving it.

It was much too radical—unrealistic idealism.

Yet the people had accepted it without question and were zealously in support of the idea.

In short, if they let this situation smolder, then the world would soon assume that was what the Twilight Cardinal also believed.

Col knew it was naive of him to hope people would understand without him needing to speak. The Twilight Cardinal needed to make himself known far and wide.

And because he had been too late in realizing this, that had given an imposter the opportunity to appear.

Thus, it was Col's duty to expose the plot.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

And he walked down the corridor to the library with strides wide enough to rival Myuri's.

"Records from the era of the ancient empire?"

When Canaan handed over the slip he received at reception and announced what sort of books he was looking for, the librarian parroted the request with a frown and sighed.

"I ask you to not pay any mind to the nonsense they preach in Ohlburg. If there truly exists a Church of the Beginning, you would be standing inside it at this very moment."

It sounded as though Col and his party were not the only ones who had come to investigate the veracity of the Church of the Beginning.

After giving that tired warning, the librarian took them to the bookshelf.

Inside the library that was far too grand to be described by words like *big* or *massive*, other visitors were fervently flipping through books. Every volume was attached to a nearby shelf by chains, and the librarian undid the locks on three tomes with a rustic key and placed them on the reading table. He then attached the books to the chains on the table. There were small gargoyle carvings on the shelves, standing guard against book thieves.

"God be with you," the librarian said briefly, then promptly left.

"...It sounds like many people have checked the same book."

All the books in the library made the same crinkling noise when a reader flipped through the pages, but the ones on the table were pliant and supple.

"It seems the question of who has the most legitimacy must always be answered by the past—the nobles in front of us were the same."

Strangely enough, the town had not moved over the years, and towns that sat at the mouth of a river, especially, often suffered drastic topological changes due to accumulated sediment, so it was not terribly unlikely the crumbling building was once a church.

"I wonder if there's anything about the hideout."

Rather than the history of the region, Myuri was more fascinated by the possibility an imperial relic was buried in the mud. Col recalled the town with no exit that she had drawn, and he prayed the ruins were not the remains of a wall.

Regardless, she quickly flipped open a book of her own, but immediately leaned back in her chair.

Col glanced at the book, wondering what was wrong, and quickly realized it was written in ecclesiastical script.

"Ugh... Brother..."

Though she had flawless command over the vernacular, ecclesiastical script required a completely different skill set.

"Canaan and I will read. You check the pictures for anything that might be related."

While these were annals, they were not conveniently lined up by era, but instead a series of articles written through the years casually bound together by virtue of time and place.

It was not unusual that things completely unrelated to events meant to be recorded in the annals ended up mixed in with everything else simply because it was written in the ecclesiastical script. Sometimes the reason was nothing more than a desire to keep all the tomes a similar length.

Myuri drew up her shoulders, sat in front of the book as she muttered complaints, and Col and Canaan began their work in earnest.

There were a few typical sermons that began with firm words: *You, the impious who conduct trade in the church.*

But when it came to churches as big as the cathedral in Estatt, there were plenty who came peddling food at noontime for the worshippers and those who worked in the cathedral.

The cathedral was connected to several buildings, and there were stunning courtyards resting in between.

Myuri found a sunny spot, and that was where they had lunch.

"I don't really understand."

Canaan's offhand remark spoke for everything.

"A little trading community has stood there since ancient times, and that was where the ancient empire built their frontline base. The church was soon established after that, and it soon became the center of faith and the subjugation of pagans... Or so it said."

When they connected the messy collection of anecdotes together, that was generally what the history showed.

"I was a little surprised to see that House Hobeln has been a family that lived on the land for the entirety of those records."

"So I guess he's supposed to be important."

The man thought to be the current Lord Hobeln had been blackout drunk within the hideout.

As Col brushed off the breadcrumbs stuck to Myuri's cheek, he said to Canaan, "House Hobeln must have been in charge of the nameless village here before the old imperial knights came. It said he improved the swampland and made it habitable for many people, and his merits earned him peerage."

"But wheat would not grow on the land, and they suffered many floods. So they decided that the grand market should be under God's protection and transferred the rights to the cathedral..." It was normal for the victors to write history, so it was not entirely unthinkable that as the cathedral grew in power when the pagans were pushed farther northward, they subjected House Hobeln to unreasonable demands to weaken them.

But Eve had said the grand market was not as lucrative as it seemed. Considering that, there were very few landowning nobles who were adept at trade, so one could naturally assume House Hobeln had admitted defeat and voluntarily handed the rights over.

"So then, what's the underground hideout and the buried stones, then? Ruins of the village? I was really looking hard for pictures of the ruins we found under the mud in Ohlburg."

But among the illustrations, there were very few showing any scenery. The most she found were illustrations of knight captains making their triumphant return, and vague shapes of buildings in the background.

"While I am not certain about treasure, I could reasonably guess they are the ruins of a base thrown together when they happened to be surrounded by the enemy."

Judging by the scale of the ruin, all Col could think of was something made with war in mind.

But on the other hand, there were no records of large battles, and the old stories in the annals were mostly about the establishment of Estatt's cathedral.

What was now the cathedral and the city of Estatt was apparently once a small island in the middle of the sea. When the vast areas around the river flooded, many people escaped on boats to the island, and naturally, a church was built as the foundation of their faith. Faith also likely brought many people together.

And as the sea receded, the small island connected to land, and the island was restyled as a city, and the rest is history.

Not only that, but the island had firm bedrock, and so most of the stone that made up the city was said to have been quarried from under their feet. An old illustration Myuri found told them it was more like a little hill in the past.

"But I feel like I've heard the name Hobeln before..."

Col thought he might find his answers there, but he did not.

Perhaps when he was a wandering student, he just so happened to pass through the region without realizing on his way to the academic city of Aquent, and that was where he heard about him.

"I've never heard of him," Myuri said.

That meant the family was not particularly well-known for their feats of arms.

Perhaps Col really had just heard about them on his travels as a child.

"But what are we gonna do now?"

There were three of them, and so they had finished reading through the annals.

But they were unable to find anything that stood out as a clue, so perhaps they should return to the library, even if it did not seem fruitful.

Or perhaps Le Roi found a book that could help while he was dealing with the city dilettantes.

Or maybe they simply chose that piece of land because it seemed to suit the act of the Twilight Cardinal.

When that thought crossed her mind, Myuri swallowed her piece of bread with a large gulp and said, "Okay, then, there's a place I wanna see."

"There is?"

"I asked one of the peddlers, and he said if we want to learn about the history of the city, then there's one thing we gotta see in the cathedral!"

Col and Canaan exchanged glances.

Myuri beamed and said, "The underground graveyard!"

The image of a pleased wolf with a bone in her mouth flashed through Col's mind, but reality was a bit different.

Among the muddy landscape, there was one spot said to have been a small island with solid bedrock.

As the sea receded and the island connected to the mainland, a lot of the stone was quarried from the island to expand the city into the flood-prone land, and sturdy buildings were built on top of it.

And it was said the remains of the cut-out rock were made into vast catacombs.

In the time of the ancient empire, this city was used as the frontline base in war, and was later made a part of the southern empire, so they were not left wanting for bones with which to fill it.

The peddler had apparently told Myuri the Estatt catacombs were a hidden gem where one could see the entirety of Estatt's history of wealth and glory.

Myuri loved adventure—she was already excited by the word *catacombs* alone, but Col and Canaan soon realized the peddler was not exaggerating out of pride of one's hometown.

"……"

The entrance to the catacombs sat in a particularly old part of the buildings connected to the cathedral.

Even Myuri fell quiet when she felt how different the air was here.

The dark hole led underground, almost like an entrance to hell itself, and it was cordoned off by an aged and massive portcullis. The priest who looked after the catacombs had on his hip a large metal key that looked like a small club.

The portcullis was opened for them after giving a not-insignificant donation. When they stepped through, they were greeted by a stone staircase dirtied by sediments of time that could not be fully removed, unlike the rest of the cathedral, which was kept rather clean. A cool wind came from the darkness below them, along with the scent of mold.

The gloomy priest trudged ahead with a candle in his hand, and the writing on the wall were all passages praying for divine salvation. The writing alone was ghastly, and of course Myuri's expression was tense; she gripped Col's hand so hard, it hurt. "This was all written by those who evacuated into the cathedral in the event of major flooding and waters that rose terribly high," the gloomy priest told them. The combination of the spring tides and excessive rain meant the cathedral floor was once covered in water. The people must have crowded in here thinking the water would not get in, considering this was the resting place for great saints.

Myuri, who was raised in the mountains and only thought of flash floods and landslides when she heard the word *flood*, seemed oblivious to the fear of water rising past one's feet.

As they went deeper down, the neat stone staircase vanished and became one that was carved straight into the rock. The walls were no longer covered in plaster, and it felt more like a cave.

Col almost thought they might encounter bats, but this was not a natural cavern, so luckily, no such thing happened.

When they reached the bottom, there were several large candleholders carved into the wall, and candles, which had been left in this place, were lit with the priest's candle.

"Whoa." Myuri gasped despite herself.

More light illuminated the sight before them, revealing a long, narrow passageway.

Mortuaries like beds were carved out on either side of the passageway, and they covered the walls from floor to ceiling.

"These are the graves of the great people throughout history who devoted their lives to developing Estatt. Please do not disturb their rest."

The gloomy priest spoke mainly to Myuri, and then walked forward.

Some of those at rest grasped swords over their torso, and some held books—perhaps the scripture. Some had bronze plates that noted the name of the deceased and their date of death, while some plates simply said they rested here due to their great donations.

Most of them rested with their skulls exposed—empty eye sockets, grinning

teeth—but several still kept their skin, to the point where they could easily imagine what they looked like in life.

Canaan stopped before bodies with the names of priests, and Myuri stopped before the corpses of knights.

All those who rested here were counted among the greatest of their eras, and they had carried out critical work in life. But now they rested here as nothing but bones, having finished their job and earned their rest.

It reminded Col of a phrase from the scripture: from ash to ash, from dust to dust.

One who slumbered surrounded by fine burial accessories, for example, held what looked like a rusted crown on his stomach. The bronze plate told them this was a king of a country he had never heard of. It was a country like seafoam, rising to the surface of the turbid waters of time for only a brief moment.

The priest moved deeper down the corridor.

The catacombs were rather large and the corridor extended into the distance, but the priest came to a stop because there was someone of particular import there.

That area was a little wider than the rest, more like a square than a narrow corridor, and the mortuaries here were a little larger than the rest.

"These are the archbishops of the past."

Some were laid to rest lying down, and some were standing up. All wore dignified clerical robes, and the accessories adorning them glinted eerily in the candlelight.

But they all seemed darker than they should have been, because they were all tarnished.

They were not of gold, or silver. The patina that looked almost like bluish mold told Col these accessories were made of copper.

Did they not choose gold accessories as a sign of humility?

But Col stared at them reproachfully, because they obviously did not seem to

hold back on their desire to dress finely regardless, then Myuri tugged on his sleeve.

She pointed to the only one among all the archbishops in their priestly garb who wore civilian clothing.

"Hobeln the First?"

Though the writing was faint due to the dust and verdigris clinging to the plaque, that is what it said.

The *First* likely referred to the Lord Hobeln who improved the land and was first to be granted peerage. The cathedral would have been built long after his death, so he had been moved here from his original resting place. It must have been done when the cathedral was built to give them the legitimacy to become a proper noble house and the power to rule a large swathe of land.

Hobeln the First held a sword in his eternal slumber. Copper coins lay scattered by his pillow and on his clothes—perhaps an offering left by other visitors.

Col wanted to whisper in his ear, Your descendant is currently being mistreated and used by swindlers.

He knew if he woke up in that moment, Col could have asked him about the ruins, and he lifted his gaze.

There, on the wall right above his mortuary, he saw a little picture painted with ancient brush strokes.

"What is this ...?"

He lifted the candle in his hand, and it illuminated a faded, yet eerie image.

It had apparently been painted for some sort of ceremony.

People encircled what looked like a large well in the middle, worshipping it.

Above the well was God, holding a shining sun in his hands, and below the well was a person facing the viewer, holding a sword in the right hand, and a hammer in the left hand.

Col had seen the combination of sword and hammer in the scammers'

hideout.

The Hobeln crest.

"We saw this well-thing in the hideout, too," Myuri said quietly to him.

The passed-out, fallen noble had been gripping a small piece of paper in his hand. On it was something that had looked a lot like this. In essence, it was something important to House Hobeln—important enough to be recorded above Hobeln the First's grave.

God stood above the well, holding the sun.

And Hobeln, in exchange, held a sword and a hammer.

Not a shield. A hammer.

He had been apparently given peerage in recognition of his efforts to develop the land, so perhaps he was a craftsman who had some sort of unique specialty, and not a decorated warrior.

That meant one could possibly think House Hobeln were well-makers, considering the piece of paper drunk Hobeln held, and the picture in front of Col at the moment.

But could a well-maker accomplish such great feats?

If nothing else, this place clearly was not lacking in water.

That there was *too* much water was causing people trouble, not too little— The second that thought crossed his mind, Col sucked in a breath.

He almost let out a noise, and so he quickly covered his mouth with his hand.

But he had still done so audibly, so the priest turned to look at him with a reproachful eye, and Canaan craned his neck to look at him.

Myuri lowered her light to look at the floor, wondering if her silly brother had been shocked by a spider or a centipede.

But no.

Col understood what the well was.

He now knew why Hobeln's name sounded so familiar. He immediately

understood the significance of the hammer in his crest.

And suddenly, Hobeln the First's enshrinement took on a completely new significance.

Especially all the things placed on him and by his pillow.

If he were to lean forward and strain his eyes into the dark, Col could imagine how things were in the days of yore.

And just as floods washed all sorts of things away, the slumbering archbishops' accessories suddenly made sense. They had most certainly not chosen to go with copper accessories out of the virtue of humility.

Myuri, who was illuminating the floor, looked up at him with a flat look, as though assuming her foolish brother was panicking over a weird misconception once again.

"I know Hobeln's name," Col murmured, and Myuri tilted her head. "He's always been a great help to us in the Nyohhira bathhouse. It's the name of the water pump."

"The water pump?"

"Which means that place in Ohlburg is not a church. It's a—"

Hobeln the First slumbered soundly.

Etched into the coins scattered around his mortuary showed what Ohlburg used to look like.

And the scammers crept into the scenery.

They most certainly had business there, in that land.

With the treasure buried beneath the mud.

But what had kept Col's impatience at bay was because he knew if his hypothesis was correct, then there was still something big that did not quite add up.

Canaan stared at him wide-eyed now, but yesterday, he had said: *Not everyone in this city is a scarecrow*.

Just as they were not the only ones coming to the library to research their

history, they could not be alone in finding clues here, in this mortuary.

"Which means..."

Why did the swindlers build Ohlburg there?

Why did the swindlers choose to use the name of the Twilight Cardinal?

Why did Estatt not attack Ohlburg?

And why did none other than *Eve* come out all this way herself?

"Brother? Wait—Brother?!"

A terrible, terrible feeling sank in his chest, and he bolted.

He did not care that his candle went out. He was headed for the surface.

He had overlooked something big.

Col left the catacombs, as though rushing through the entirety of the muddy land's history, from beginning to end, in one fell swoop, and exited into the cathedral.

He could hear "Brother!" echoing after him from below, but he knew Myuri would have no problems catching up to him.

There was something important he had to do.

The reason Hobeln's name sounded so familiar was because Col had used it before.

When they were building the bathhouse in the hot spring village of Nyohhira, Col had helped with all sorts of jobs—from recruiting workers to building the facilities themselves. The most annoying part of any job was making sure the spring water that seeped from the ground did not get in the way of work.

When that happened, they used water pumps, the sort often used for mine drainage and field irrigation, and they were called by the name of the inventor —Hobeln.

"Water pumps... Yeah... Now that you mention it, I've definitely seen that name on mining equipment. I see. That's the name of the noble family here."

Col went to speak to Eve.

The reason House Hobeln had so much power here was because his family had invented the water pump to save this land, where the drainage was poor. Or perhaps, a nameless other person had invented it, and his family had claimed it as their own achievement and managed production.

They were used all over the world. These pumps included a rod that was inserted into a cylindrical metal tube, which fit into a metal plate embossed with a spiral pattern along the rod. As the rod spun, the plate would spin, drawing out the water.

What made this exceptional was that it was a cylindrical apparatus, and it could be placed anywhere easily, even in places too small for a water mill, or places where water needed to be drawn out over a certain difference in elevation.

Additionally, by fitting the gears together in a certain way, the spiral plate could be operated with one's feet, enabling even the weakest child to carry out the important work of water drainage. Even someone as weak as Col could do it, too.

The construction of the bathhouse in Nyohhira would have been hopeless without this. Holo the Wisewolf was powerful, but whether boulder-crushing strength could drain groundwater was another question entirely.

"Then, there is what we saw in Ohlburg."

After running from the catacombs, Col left Myuri and Canaan behind to go straight to a large mercantile company in Estatt. There, he obtained a map of the area, sat down on the side of the road, and just as he was drawing out the underground ruins Myuri had found and the location of Ohlburg, the other two caught up with him.

That long, narrow stone structure in the ground was not the remains of an underground passage or castle walls.

As Col asked himself why Hobeln the First held the symbol of nobility, the sword, in his right hand, but did not hold the symbol of protecting his house, the shield, in his left hand, and instead held a hammer, the answer appeared to him on the map.

Because rust was an ever-constant concern and because it made them easier to manufacture, water pumps were often made of copper.

And where the copperworks were developed was where the copper was produced.

"The ruins in Ohlburg are the remnants of a large-scale drainage facility. But considering crops don't grow in the peatlands, the drainage was never meant for fields. What the scammers call Church of the Beginning," he said, pointing to a spot on the map as he spoke, "are likely the remains of a copper refinery. I believe that entire area must have been the location of an open-air copper mine."

The burial goods of all those who slumbered in the catacombs were practically all copper. Even though the archbishops could not hold back their desire to decorate themselves even in death, they chose to do so not in silver, not gold, but copper.

Canaan and Myuri, especially, were skeptical of the explanation, and Myuri in particular wanted treasure to be buried there, so her eyes were particularly sharp when she looked at him.

But Col was convinced.

First, there was the sword and hammer on the Hobeln family crest, and that the family made a name for themselves through water pumps.

Then, there was the mortuary in which Hobeln the First slumbered, and the situation around the grand market.

The land was fruitless and prone to floods, yet it was said Estatt's grand market did so well because of the cathedral. Even if there might have been better places to hold the market, people would gladly face any trials and tribulations to go to a church.

And that would have held true in the past, too.

Before the ancient imperial knights even came to this land, a community of people already lived here, and why did it serve as a key for trade in those days?

It would have been much more appropriate to have the trading post farther

inland, or even on the little island that would one day become the cathedral. So then, why had the settlement been sitting in the flood-prone mud? What compelled them to build there, of all places?

In a time when the shoreline was farther inland and the land was covered in more water than it was now, there was something *there* that caught the attention of the ancient imperial knights and led them to set roots down there.

What if those scammers had set up camp precisely for whatever *it* was now, too?

"It has to be a copper mine."

Col's explanation was enthusiastic. Eve stared at the map hard, rubbing her chin.

"It's been a while since I've heard of an open mine... There used to be so many mines like that. You used to be able to set fire to a mountain and watch the silver flow out of it like a river."

"I believe there's little traces of it left today due to many years of sediment accumulation, but I believe House Hobeln managed the copper mine, and their family must have been in charge of the copper processing as well. People came from the surrounding areas in hopes of getting some of this copper, and as a result, that may have caused the area to become a trading post. But the question is, can one truly become a noble out of skill alone? There are few accomplishments that can be symbolized by a sword and hammer on one's crest. And one of those accomplishments can be...this."

Col showed Eve what was in his wallet.

"Coin embossing, huh?"

There had to be an adequate reason as to why people would go out of their way to build a village in a barren land like this.

Not only that, but since it had also become the front line in the war against the pagans, they had to be able to procure food and whatnot in order to support the knights afterward.

And since it could not be grown in the area, it had to be imported.

Imported goods cost money. But the production of copper could solve that.

That was because skilled coppersmiths who could emboss coins were already here.

"And copper mining cannot be done discreetly, unlike digging up buried treasure."

"You're saying that mining needs many hands, but having Ohlburg around is a good distraction?"

"They're fussing over ruins by calling it the Church of the Beginning. If they need to dig up a second or third convenient ruin, then plenty would gladly volunteer to help."

Col had hastily drawn the locations of the ruins on the map he had bought from the merchant company.

He slapped it down onto the table and enthusiastically told Eve about it.

This was the answer to the question of why the swindlers were there.

Eve gazed at the map, then slowly lifted her eyes to Col.

"Let's say that is what they're after. They're probably prospecting right now if they're after a mine, so a quick investigation would reveal that in no time. But I think it's the most reasonable explanation for all of this, too. That said..."

Eve leaned back deep in her chair and folded her hands across her stomach.

She stared quietly at Col for a long while, then said, "Is it worth rushing over here, though?"

There was even a faint smile on her face.

Both Canaan and Myuri fidgeted because of the strange tension in the air.

And Col replied clearly, "Yes."

He inhaled, then exhaled.

"Because you are here to keep an eye on me, aren't you, Miss Eve? You are here to make sure I do nothing too extravagant or reckless until business is done. And you plan to restrain me if the situation asks for it."

Myuri and Canaan were shocked; they looked back and forth between him and Eve.

Eve's eyes narrowed, and she lifted her head.

"Are you calling me a traitor?"

Myuri looked on the verge of tears. But Col was not angry—if anything, he gave a tired, light burst of laughter.

"I would do no such thing."

He then pulled out his own chair and took a seat.

"Miss Eve, you and Heir Hyland are only trying to carry out your roles."

Myuri looked at him with unease; she did not know where this was going.

What was Eve plotting?

Why had she come to monitor the *real* Twilight Cardinal?

"The prince-elector archbishop and his cohort should already fully grasp the situation."

Col was confident this was true because he himself had come to see what was going on.

Eve smiled and jerked her head, urging him to continue.

"The real reason they are not attacking Ohlburg is not because they do not know the swindlers' intentions. And I do not think the shadow of whoever might be backing them is even among the biggest reasons."

Col was, of course, standing in opposition to the Church, but he did not hate them.

The last piece of the puzzle had slotted nicely into place when he saw the graffiti at the catacombs entrance.

"The reason they will not so easily take up arms is because of the people who have gathered in Ohlburg, isn't it?"

Canaan and Myuri looked back and forth between Col and Eve, holding their breath.

And then Eve shrugged, as though in defeat.

"It is. As they say, the stupider the child, the cuter they are."

Perhaps that was her own way of making a joke, but this cathedral city was run by the clergy.

Col and the rest were not the only ones worried about the fates of those in Ohlburg.

What suddenly came to mind were the unmanned stalls set up in Estatt's plaza. No one was coming to the grand market they had gone through the trouble of setting up, and Myuri was not the only one saddened by this.

"The scammers have played their flute to lure people out there. Ultimately, they've been preaching criticism of the cathedral for days and days now. This could be—"

"A rebellion," Col murmured, and Eve nodded slowly.

"If this were a genuine rebellion, the Estatt authorities would've swiftly taken care of it."

Eve dropped her gaze to her hands, tired, then looked at Col.

"Twilight Cardinal."

"Hmm?"

"Nice name. I wonder who gave it to you."

Eve gave him a dry smile as she leaned back in her chair.

"Regular people would never even dream of resisting organizations as large as the Church. No matter how unhappy they may be, they would simply say they have to learn to live with it, like the weather." The extraordinary merchant, who had traveled the world and accumulated towering stacks of gold for herself, simply shrugged. "You can see the light beyond the city walls. This long night, one that's lasted since the day they were born, looks like it's going to finally give way to dawn. Everyone rushes to the eastern gates. They start yelling—praying, celebrating a dawn they've forgotten to even wish for. They don't want darkness to fall again."

Eve's eyes softened, and she smiled kindly.

"It seems kind of stupid to just leave this city and gather in places like Ohlburg, doesn't it? But it's hard to resist the hope that something might change. It's not often you come across opportunities like this in life. It's a given that you're always surrounded by familiar neighbors, going through days that never change, living the same life your parents and their parents lived."

When she said that, her gaze grew distant; Col thought he saw shadows of the young noble girl she once was in her eyes.

"And then, you hear of things that sound like adventure stories that endure history. You realize you might become one of the characters in those stories. You'd go, no matter what."

Eve's teasing gaze settled on Myuri.

But what she said allowed Myuri to understand more deeply what she saw in Ohlburg.

The fervor in the town was not pure faith.

There was a chance they could stir the cathedral, something they thought would always be there, from the day they were born to the day they would die. That excitement was the real root of the enthusiasm.

"It looks like the cathedral left the swindlers alone at first, because they thought it your typical money-grubbing scheme. But as more and more people flocked to them, the situation shifted. Now it was more like dealing with a group of faithful. That was when they panicked, asking the Winfiel Kingdom if there was any possibility the real Twilight Cardinal was involved. That was when they seriously looked into whether it was an assassination plot set in motion by political rivals, but the situation has only grown since then. Before anyone knew it, this has become an issue that can no longer be resolved by simply catching the swindlers and stringing them up. Doing that now would undoubtedly mean an armed confrontation with the people of Ohlburg. That could only end with the cathedral turning their blades on their own people."

Not only that, they knew the townsfolk raving about taking down the cathedral were being duped by the swindlers.

"Then is that proof that...the reason Estatt looked like it was standing idly by is because the prince-elector and the others of the cathedral are not villainous characters?" Col asked.

Eve nodded. "I was surprised too, but they're all priests at the end of the day. Lip service and good intentions aren't enough to govern a city of this size, so they do what they must and earn the people's ire all the while. Folks must look at them like they're a den of evil. Frustratingly so, even if they *are* good people."

It sounded as though she was in contact with a high-ranking clergy member from the city. Since it sounded as though the cathedral was reaching out to verify the Twilight Cardinal's identity, Estatt must not have originally had any antagonistic tension with the Twilight Cardinal or the Kingdom of Winfiel.

Either way, when the kingdom replied that whoever was there had to be a fake, the kingdom authorities must have assumed the matter had already been squared away. But that was not the case at all—if anything, it was Col's letter that alerted them to the reality it had morphed into something much more concerning before anyone had even realized. And so perhaps she then hurriedly asked the long-distance traders who traveled through Rausbourne, heard tell the situation was spreading quickly through the mainland, then rushed over in shock.

And then, as she asked about the details from the people of the city, she came to learn of the cathedral's troubles.

"The reason the cathedral is *still* dragging their feet is because they're even now looking for a way to peaceably resolve the situation without hurting any of the people being fooled. But there's no way to do it. Because they predict a lot of resistance, and more importantly, everyone currently in Ohlburg loathes the cathedral. Even if they did manage to safely disperse everyone out there, their authority as local rulers would be greatly marred if they end up welcoming those people back into the city without addressing their misapprehensions. And so they'd need them to repent, at least in name only, but...I don't think that's possible."

In any other situation, Col would want to applaud their fair nature,

considering they were working as people of the clergy while also managing their territory as secular lords.

But the problem here was that the Twilight Cardinal's name was now involved.

"The kingdom does not want any more untoward rumors spreading about the Twilight Cardinal than what is already out there. Once Ohlburg starts looking and acting like a real town, what do you think the rest of the world would think? There's a chance they'll think the Twilight Cardinal traveling the continent to right the Church's wrongs is just an excuse to rile up the people and claim land for the kingdom."

And that was why the kingdom started pressuring Estatt.

Put down the false Twilight Cardinal immediately. No matter what sort of gruesome measures must be taken.

"We rushed to collect as much information as we could through your letter, but there's only one way stories like this can end. No matter how you dress it up, Estatt is part of the empire, and this archbishop prince-elector is a statesman who rules by the sword. He only has so much power as a priest. It's reasonable to assume he will send his army into Ohlburg, cut down all of those who resist, and then slay the false Twilight Cardinal. There is no other way."

After a long bout of speaking, Eve lightly cleared her throat, then sighed, "And the only difference there is whether it's happening sooner or later."

She looked at Col, annoyed and bothered.

"And so when we got your letter saying you were coming here, we thought of the worst possible outcome. It wasn't hard to picture you reaching the truth shortly after you started looking into things here in the city. You're both skilled at the end of the day, and just like we thought, you figured it out almost immediately."

Perhaps she wore a scowl because she remembered they were the ones who had uncovered her scheme.

"And I bet you'd be thinking, we have to save the poor lambs in Ohlburg."

Col could not find the words to speak, and Eve did not sound as though she was pressuring him, either.

She sounded as though she was talking about how the sun set in the west and then rose again in the east.

"And then you'd rush the cathedral without thinking about the consequences. And once that happened, the nightmare would start."

The problem would swell like bread dough that had baking powder added to it.

Because in Estatt's eyes, that would mean the real Twilight Cardinal was making himself an ally to rebels.

And then they would begin to wonder if the imposter in Ohlburg was an ally of his to begin with—one he was working alongside with to meddle with internal affairs.

As a result, Estatt, as a part of the southern empire, might raise a flag of hostility toward the Twilight Cardinal. And it was very possible the other imperial cities would see that and follow suit.

There was also a chance that would not happen, of course, but instead of placing their bets on that, there was a way they could wrap this up peacefully and surely.

"Those swindlers are a careful lot, so we can't afford to cut corners in our plans. It would be stupid of us to take risks. And so I'm here to inform Estatt of the kingdom's intentions, so rumor of the Twilight Cardinal doesn't spread any more than it already has, and to keep a tight grip on your reins at the same time."

They were not to make matters worse.

Even if it meant taking on the dirty role of herding the pitiful masses into death's maws.

"Col."

The way Eve said his name was surprisingly serious.

Those earnest eyes were one of the reasons why they did not speak of this to

begin with.

"You cannot have everything."

And it was a supremely greedy merchant telling him this.

He knew that, of course.

They had to take down the imposter as soon as possible, but the townsfolk who had been duped because of their religious fervor would likely not listen to Col if he simply called out the imposter for what he was.

As a result, wretched fighting would break out and many people would lose their lives in a pointless battle, but that would ultimately solve the problem.

And then once again, the Twilight Cardinal would be seeking out those in power to stand beside him at the ecumenical council. Estatt would be the first of those candidates. Because once the imposter appeared, the first thing they did was ask the kingdom if he was the real thing.

That meant he had to act smart and think of the consequences of his actions.

Even if that meant placing faith to the side.

"Good grief. Hyland's going to have to give me additional privileges, because this role *really* isn't worth it," Eve said in a way that would make a child cower, and then began to pressure Col. "I know this goes against your principles. I know you're not going to be happy with this. And I don't care if you hate me because of it."

For the greater good.

So that the faint gleam of light from the eastern gate became the sun and would light up the darkness.

Myuri, beside Col, stirred. It was as though she was unsure if she should grab Col's sleeve or not.

She was smarter than he was, so she knew well what Eve meant. Canaan, who sat on the other side of her, was the same. If anything, he was much more tenacious than his looks made him out to be, since he had come to the kingdom in an act of betrayal of his former home, all for the sake of true justice.

And yet the reason they both remained silent was because they understood Col.

It was not long ago that Col was nothing more than a little lamb, happy to simply enact his own justice in his innocence.

But at some point, he had grown. And more people began traveling with him.

Much in the way he had to accept that a child would one day grow into an adult, there were other things he had to accept.

"But...," he said.

Eve's lips tensed, and her eyes glinted dangerously. Myuri, too, grasped at his sleeve to keep him from rushing ahead out of control.

But he knew this, and so he said, "Please give me time."

He put his hand on the table and leaned forward, toward Eve, so that he was looking down at her.

Eve did not break eye contact with him.

Her cold eyes stared straight at him.

"I can't imagine how you're going to save them."

By them, she was talking about the people being fooled by the imposter.

Perhaps she was talking about a way to bring rationality back to them.

"You can't just convince them they're being tricked. We're at the point now where they've been taken in by the imposter's rhetoric and fully believe everyone in the cathedral is pure evil. They'll have to show complete remorse to be accepted back into the city without complication. The cathedral's been wringing its hands precisely because they haven't found a way to do both."

There were two barriers he had to cross.

And both were terribly high.

"Of course, if doing what you feel like you need to do makes you feel better, then I'm not going to stop you. If you go on recruiting allies for the ecumenical council, you're going to have to accept unsatisfactory deals a lot like this one. But you really—"

Eve, too, leaned forward into Col's space as he hovered over her.

She had always been kind to him as a child, but there had always been distance in the way she treated him.

That came from the difference between adult and child.

But now, that distance was gone.

"It's all right. I do not plan on stepping down from my role as Twilight Cardinal."

Even if he could not prevent tragedy, he would not sit around whimpering.

Eve only kept staring at him.

Col could tell Myuri and Canaan were holding their breath, but he had a feeling Myuri was worried about something else, and he almost laughed.

It was Eve whose eyes softened first. She let loose the breath she was holding, and then leaned back into her chair.

"My present to you for growing up: I'll wait three days."

Eve looked at her hands, thought about something for a moment, then looked back up at Col.

"But on the night of the third day, I'm going to go tell the cathedral council about you. I'm going to tell them a very troublesome lamb has come right to their doorstep. They're not stupid, and they'll understand their problems are only going to get more complicated. And you know the empire and the pope are having their own little tiff. And if they decide to stand against the Twilight Cardinal, they'll end up isolated from the conversation the rest of the world is having. And when they think that far, they'll stop acting like priests and start acting like rulers. They'll put their precious religion aside and assemble a warband."



Col finally pulled back from his position across the table and sat in his chair.

Myuri stared at his profile with a sharp gaze—she was both telling him not to make her worry and telling him not to go too far without her.

"Thank you."

Had he put his thanks in a sourer manner, that might have made Eve feel better.

Eve was putting in so much effort acting the part of a villain because she was a good person at her core.

"How about a meal?"

With a strained smile, Col turned down her invitation.

Myuri did not say a word on the way back to the inn. Canaan was quiet, because he could tell this was not a situation where he could brush her aside and say what he liked.

The moment they entered their room, Myuri slammed her fist into Col's chest, and clung to him so hard it almost hurt.

She was a smart girl and knew perfectly well what, exactly, he was preparing for when he declared he would not be stepping down from his role as Twilight Cardinal. And on top of that, they had been given a grace period of only three days. Perhaps she was angry that she, a knight, had been left out of the conversation when they made that decision.

Myuri immediately pulled back, rushed into the hall, and stopped Canaan as he was about to enter his room.

"Help us, Canaan! We've got to find a solution!"

Canaan beamed. "Of course!" he said before bursting into the room in high spirits.

There was a considerable difference in age between Col and the other two, yet in his eyes, Col felt like they were much more grown up than he was. Ashamed by the kindness they were showing him, he said, "Please grant me your wisdom. I want to save those being fooled by the bad people."

He grabbed the desk and dragged it to the center of the room and placed a piece of paper on it.

The people of Ohlburg trusted the imposters, had been filled with religious zeal, and had crossed a river they should not have.

They had to find a way to safely bring them back to this side of the river.

Of course, the priests of this city had pondered on how to do that but had come up with no good ideas; now the situation had become one where they had to quell it as quickly as possible.

Eve had told him that he could not have everything.

There may be one or two things he would have to forsake for his massive goal of fixing the Church. But once he had grown used to doing so, he was certain he would no longer believe in God. No—perhaps he would stop believing in himself first.

And so he had to resist that as much as possible. Though he knew it was foolish, getting through this fight believing, to the line, that truth will win out in this world, was the only way he could remain himself.

"It would not be difficult to denounce the imposter as an imposter. Arresting him would be the same."

He winked at Myuri.

If Myuri put her mind to it, she could turn every last one of the swindlers into sausage meat in the span of one night.

"But that would have the opposite effect on the enthusiastic people."

"It is said saints are created upon their death."

Canaan knew a lot about the history of the Church, and he knew of plenty of situations where heresy had been involved.

When it came to these things, it did not always end with the death of their leader.

If anything, their leader often became deified or martyred, which only strengthened their bonds, and that was when the true subjugation of the

heretics began.

"And it's unlikely those in Ohlburg would readily acknowledge they were wrong. And that is preventing Estatt from offering them forgiveness."

As a ruler, it was impermissible to make allowances for their people, who were so viciously insulting and slandering them, without punishment. If they established a precedent where they could do anything with impunity, there was a chance it could happen again, and the nobles would soon begin to challenge the cathedral's authority once more.

And because of that, Hyland and the other leaders of the Winfiel Kingdom sent Eve over. Because they expected Estatt to become the Twilight Cardinal's ally, it would be terrible for all of them if the city could not maintain political stability.

The problem was simple, and there were several solutions.

But the answer that Col, Myuri, and Canaan wanted was the most difficult of them all.

"We will bring sanity back to the people of Ohlburg. And then they will display repentance to Estatt."

Somewhere in his rational mind, he knew this was impossible.

Regardless, Myuri and Canaan drew their quills from their pockets in concert.

Like knights drawing their blades.

"I'm gonna tear out Miss Eve's eyeball."

What a savage thing to say. Col wondered where she learned that.

Canaan giggled. Myuri huffed, then turned to look at Col.

He was not alone.

And so there were times the pen was indeed mightier than the sword.

*HAPTER OUR



CHAPTER FOUR

Many, many people had given this matter quite a lot of thought.

And so Col came up with as many ideas as he could.

They could hire someone to go to Ohlburg and spread rumors about them being imposters. But if they were going to go with such a roundabout, complicated method, then they could hire a group of priests to hold theological debates with them. Either way, Col did nothing but think and think.

And what he learned rather quickly after doing something like this was that it was easy to come up with about five ideas. Ten was exhausting. By the time they reached twenty, his head hurt.

And once they reached the thirtieth idea on paper, they were writing down things like sending in a wild horse plastered with papers that said *HE'S A FAKE*, and Col no longer knew how or why they had thought that was a workable idea.

The first day passed in a blink as they sat thinking. On the second day, Le Roi came in to say hello—or rather, come to check in on them—after he had apparently heard about the situation from Eve.

Because there were three people here who all had the tendency to get lost in thought together.

"Please do not work yourselves too hard."

Le Roi opened the window shutters, and the sun was already high in the sky. It hurt Col's eyes.

The grace period of three days Eve had given them was not the amount of time it would take to prevent the cathedral from putting together a military response. It was because she had estimated that was roughly the amount of time it would take for the foolish trio to completely burn out.

Once they had squeezed themselves out to the limit without proper food or

sleep and were mentally exhausted, it would be much easier for them to accept harder decisions.

"Miss Eve is presently investigating the imposters' backgrounds with a liaison from Estatt. With her mercantile knowledge, she may find a company name an authority figure might be using as a cover, so we might learn who's backing the imposters before long."

Simply knowing a copper mine existed did not necessarily mean they could actually mine for copper. And they would need to get materials from *somewhere* if they were building huts in the town.

If someone was offering their knowledge and money, then there should be a trail they could follow.

"The city nobles also believe war will be starting soon, so they have been making preparations for such. I've been going around asking for information in exchange for rare books."

Le Roi rushed busily around the room as he spoke—he was handing out bread and drinks to Myuri, who stared at the paper as she sat on the corner of the bed, heavy bags under her eyes; and Canaan, who sat in the corner of the room cradling his knees and head in an attempt to get all his ideas out. Perhaps this was exactly how he worked back in the papal archives in the Curia as well.

"Estatt seems to be devising a strategy to force a siege. And once Ohlburg runs out of energy and supplies, they believe the town will eventually come around and admit defeat."

If the people cooled from the fervor the imposters pushed them to and showed the intent to repent, then the city, both as a church and as a governing body, would accept them despite their mistakes.

"Miss Eve had the same idea, however. A siege would only drag this whole thing out, and there is the very real concern we might let the swindlers escape in the meanwhile. There are plenty of ruins in the area that would make very convenient hiding places, no?"

There were large drainage channels from when the area was a copper mine.

"And as that drags on, we may draw unwanted attention."

The reason Eve came to the city, ready to shoulder everyone's hatred, was precisely for that.

There may be lords on the mainland who sympathize with the Twilight Cardinal's thinking.

Some might be as zealous as Pierre, and may come rushing to Ohlburg when they found out the poor servants of God were surrounded by Estatt soldiers.

"These three days of leeway is how long Miss Eve will wait."

Someone else, another meddlesome individual, might come to Ohlburg at any moment.

Eve was a merchant, and she was sensitive to the opportunities she could take; in her eyes, knowing what to do yet choosing not to act on it was painful.

And on top of that, how would she feel if she was just a moment too late simply because she had to stand still all for the selfish requests of a little fool?

"Miss Eve likes you a lot more than you may realize, Master Col," Le Roi said brightly, but there was slight exasperation in his demeanor, too. The kind man was a merchant who dealt in dangerous books for a living, and he was much more sensitive to danger than the average person.

Perhaps the reason he came to check on them in their room was because he did not trust them as much as Eve did, and he was here to see if they were planning on recklessly rushing into Ohlburg.

"I will return if I learn anything else."

Once he was finished doing his part in caring for them, that was all Le Roi said before leaving the room.

All that was left was the oddly bracing morning air, and a listless sense of exhaustion.

"Perhaps this is what Miss Lutia felt like," Col said after taking two bites of his bread. He placed it back on the table and gazed out at the blue sky beyond the window.

"The problem is reaching a resolution, but that is beyond what we can reach right now."

The name of the Twilight Cardinal had grown too big.

And those beyond scope could no longer bother with little affairs.

Whether he wanted that or not.

Instead, larger presences were expected to walk in the correct direction and become guides for those who follow in their footsteps. Col had a feeling that in things to come, there would be fewer and fewer opportunities where they would be using every ounce of knowledge they had to brave danger, like their adventure had been thus far.

He did not particularly like adventures, and he believed it was better to not have any sort of danger at all.

But then, a thought came to him.

Perhaps the reason Myuri had been so shaken in Aquent was because she had been plagued by this very sentiment when she had heard "the end of our journey."

"Everything about the world has been recorded in books, but...not everything in reality has been written down."

It was Canaan who murmured that.

"There will be many more hardships in your future, Master Col."

He stood up, pulling out the roots that seemed to have grown from his rear and had kept him immobile, then spoke bashfully.

"I am not sure what I can offer you, but I will continue to support you as best I can."

Col smiled at him, took his hand, and thanked him.

He thought he could feel Myuri staring daggers at them as she munched on her bread. But when Canaan let go of his hand, his shoulders dropped, tired.

"That said, I really am not much more than a bookworm," he said. "I am not very good at coming up with my own ideas. I am going back to the cathedral library to see if I might find any hints in the inquisitor records. History occasionally shows us examples of surprising forgiveness, after all."

Canaan twisted, as though forcing his stiffened limbs to stretch, and staggered out of the room. When he opened the door, his guard was sitting in a chair by the door. His guard gave him a tired look, briefly acknowledged Col with a dip of his eyes, then closed the door.

Once it shut, silence came, and the faint murmur of bustle from the city drifted in through the window.

Myuri sat perfectly still, staring at the paper in her hand.

"Myuri?"

She was so quiet Col thought she might be sleeping, but she slowly leaned back and lay down on the bed.

"None of this is fun," she muttered to the ceiling. "You'll solve whatever problem's given to you, and you'll punish all the bad people."

If he added that to her typical harsh judgments about him, then he could create the ideal person—he smiled when that thought crossed his mind.

With a quiet exhale, Col sat beside her.

"We still have two days."

Myuri's shoulders twitched, perhaps because she was not expecting him to say that.

She must have thought he was going to say something overbearing, like "The world does not always go the way we want."

Myuri peered up at him, and Col smiled in return.

"I think I'm starting to learn how to act like a big brother," he said.

Or perhaps he was simply growing up.

It was not about ideals or reality, but a formidability in wielding both.

Myuri, unimpressed, drew her lips into a thin line and rolled over, looping her arms around Col's waist.

Her tail popped out and thumped against the bed in displeasure.

By the time it calmed, she said, "Lutia already knew that fangs and claws are

useless."

Though she did not write it down on paper due to Canaan's presence, Myuri, of course, was thinking about those possibilities. She could simply rush to Ohlburg, bite the arses of all the imposters, then run around freely in order to wake up all of those who came to attack her.

Even if she fought in a way that would make the most legendary heroes go pale, that would still not solve the problem.

And Myuri herself understood that.

"They're not useless. They have their time and place."

Myuri groaned, dissatisfied, because she sensed it to be a sort of placation.

When she did this, Col suddenly remembered something about Nyohhira.

"When we were building the bathhouse, Miss Holo was like this quite a lot, and Mister Lawrence comforted her."

"She was?"

"Her claws had accomplished the great task of finding the spring water. But they could do nothing when it came to more delicate jobs. She used to watch me bitterly whenever I worked the pump."

Myuri sighed and pressed her face against his waist again. The only sounds in the quiet room came from her tail hitting the bed and the bustling city outside.

Col placed his hand on her head, and he lifted a corner of his mouth in a tired smile.

He was not the only one who felt like what he could do was of no use for the world.

He sunk his fingers into the silver hair and swished it around in sympathy.

The movement of her tail slowed, then gently came to rest on the bed, weakly puffing and shrinking.

She must have fallen asleep.

Col reached for the blanket balled at the edge of the bed and laid it over her.

As he gazed at her tired, sleeping face, he felt bad for making her go along with this for another two days.

No—he had a feeling his understanding would only cause her disappointment.

Because even he would feel like something would be missing if this wild girl suddenly became a prim and proper young lady one day.

Col gave an exasperated smile and stood from the bed.

He collected the scattered pages of notes and looked over every contrived idea, one by one.

Despite how difficult it was to come up with each and every one of these ideas, a lot of them seemed stupid, or obvious when written down.

But as he flipped through the pages, the same floaty feeling he had when he was patting Myuri's head cooled and hardened.

In two days, the cathedral would give their orders, and the troops that would march on Ohlburg would begin their preparations.

Those who believed in the name of the Twilight Cardinal would meet their end in the mud.

There had to be a way.

A way to prevent a battle. A way that could convince the people to accept they had placed their trust in a fake, and then beg for forgiveness from Estatt.

Or one last resort to show there were beautiful things in this world before he became the Twilight Cardinal in earnest—no, before he finally became an adult.

But as he flipped through the papers, all he saw were things that told him there was no such thing.

The Church, once hard as an oak, was now slowly crumbling, and he thought that perhaps to become thoroughly corrupt was a lot like this.

And there existed noble-minded people even in a world like this. Even here, in Estatt, those in power had used every ounce of their knowledge for the sake of the thoughtless, yet pitiful, masses.

He turned his gaze to the ceiling, gave a deep sigh, and thought, *This is not good*. He told himself this was not enough to give him ideas, and he dropped his eyes to the papers again.

There was ridiculous idea after ridiculous idea written in Myuri's handwriting—they had been slapped on the page, perhaps written at around dawn, out of tiredness and irritation that she could not think of anything.

They ranged from things just as terrifying as war, like setting Ohlburg on fire, to things almost out of a fairy tale, like gathering up all the strays in Estatt and dragging Ohlburg into confusion.

He flipped through with a strained smile, and saw something else.

"Inundated..."

This land has long suffered floods, and Myuri had gotten a glimpse of the fear people held for it from the remains of the scribblings at the entrance to the catacombs in the cathedral. If they were to see a flood with their own eyes, and not in words, then the people would understand that God was angry, and that the one they believed in was a fake.

But as he thought about how they would have to pray for rain in order to make that happen, he saw that Myuri's angry scrawl continued.

Col found himself blinking because what was written there was awfully detailed.

"Is this...the land?"

There was a picture much the same as her dream village that had no walls, but he could tell by the labels it was of Ohlburg and its environs. There was a circle around Ohlburg, labeled "low." Around that, she had written "high."

Then, she had drawn a diagonal line from Ohlburg to the north.

When he looked at this, he felt a hunch brewing.

He lifted his gaze to look at Myuri as she dozed off, then started to look for something else.

It was the map he had showed to Eve.

The one of Estatt's surroundings, wherein he had drawn the large, ancient imperial drainage paths.

He looked at Myuri's map, then back at his.

"The river..."

Heading north from Ohlburg would bring one to the river.

And Myuri had written so on her map.

High.

"…"

She had just been talking about her claws and fangs, about how this power proved useless in this day and age.

As she dozed, Myuri had forgotten Canaan was present, and had written down exactly what had come to mind.

My claws could put a hole in the river.

She would cause a flood.

Col put a hand to his mouth.

Ohlburg was the old site of a copper mine and had likely been abandoned after countless floods and welling of water. And after many months and years, it had been completely submerged in mud.

But it was not enough to flatten the topography, and Col had even noticed himself the landscape of days long past still hung on when he had gazed at Ohlburg from afar. And Myuri's keen wolf senses helped her understand the lay of the land in an instant. Perhaps she had gotten a grasp on the area around the river when she had run around there, searching for the scammers' hideout.

Myuri's note continued.

Brother was so unbelievably angry at me when I broke the pond on the mountain behind the house. He's so stupid!

Myuri had caused countless mischief, and it was only when he read that did he remember the incident.

She wrote more.

We can just blame the river flooding on the people digging up the ruins.

Compared to her other absurd plans, this one was oddly specific.

Myuri had seen what they were doing with her own eyes, and it was essentially an extension of what this wild child had done in the past, so of course it reflected that.

But the reason he held his breath was not because he recalled how faint he had felt at the time.

"Perhaps the cathedral has not thought of this yet...?"

Because that would mean knocking down the embankments of the river. If anything, it would be considered a despicable idea by people who had spent their entire lives fighting against floods.

And how they would break the embankment was a genuine question. If anything, it was less that they would be destroying the embankment, and more that they would have to dig a large drain into the flat riverside.

But Myuri could perhaps accomplish the feat on her own. Though she was nothing in comparison with the wisewolf, her wolf form was imposing in its own right.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt her unbelievable prank was a fitting way to get the people of Ohlburg to wake up.

There was one thing they always said—stop dozing, go wash your face.

It was good that the river was to the north.

If they were to cut through the embankment here, then the water would flow south to Ohlburg, and then continue westward to the sea.

The people would head west to escape the water as well, and what was waiting for them there was— "Estatt."

In that moment, memories from Nyohhira played out clearly in his mind.

Together with the other children, Myuri had broken the pond out of pure curiosity, and then had apparently gotten swept up in a furious torrent of water. She then came to the entrance of the inn, soaking wet and covered in scratches, looking like the dead.

Despite how faint Col had felt, Myuri was relieved, and began sobbing aloud.

That was right. In the moment, Col did not have the will to get angry.

He recalled the scent of algae from the pond when he hugged her out of relief that she was safe.

Which meant...

"Which means...?"

Perhaps Estatt would be the same.

And to make matters worse, the land was muddy, one where everyone shared the fear of flooding.

Though imprudent of him, he pictured the sight in his head—the masses chased away by the water, seeking salvation.

And then, the merciful priests who would take them in.

"The fourth stanza in the psalms... The tale of the Land of Hope..."

There were details they would have to cut back on. In essence, they were artificially creating a flood, and there was a chance the result would be even worse than war.

But it was worth looking into.

Because he would not be able to make such ridiculous and outrageous plans once he grew up.

"Myuri!" he called as he rushed to the bed.

Myuri grumbled. Col shook her shoulders, then lifted her up into a sit.

She looked very cross with him.

"I know how much you love playing in the mud," he said, shoving the paper to her face.

Slowly, her eyes widened.

They headed for Ohlburg on horse.

Their actual destination was a short distance from Ohlburg, to be more precise, and with Myuri at the reins, she had it galloping at a terrifying speed. She would not listen to him even when he asked her to slow down, and so he gave up and simply clung to her lithe waist.

Myuri proceeded through the pathless wilderness unerringly—perhaps she had memorized the surrounding geography when she had been searching for the scammers' hideout.

Before long, they finally arrived at the riverside road north of Estatt.

The river itself flowed from the east, connecting inland by wrapping around Ohlburg.

As the horse breathed hard, Myuri stood on the saddle, squinted her eyes and gazed into the distance.

When she did this, it almost seemed like she had been riding horses through the open fields her whole life, though she was born and raised in the mountains.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed, then sat back down. "We can flood this whole area."

Those destructive words slipped from her mouth with such ease.

"I have a feeling they used the dirt and rocks they dug up at the mine here to stop the flow of the river here," she said, looking at her feet. "When I was looking at the pictures in the annals, I thought it was weird because I saw a few pictures that showed the river flowing in a different direction. But I guess they had to change the flow of the river if they were going to be digging holes in a place that floods a lot, so it makes sense."

The river ran from east to west, and the ground alongside it was raised slightly.

And if they were to look toward Ohlburg from there, then it was clear Myuri's idea was no laughing matter.

"My claws could break this down."

The village children had often played like this.

They would stop the flow of some little creeks, or sometimes they would free up the flow by clearing fallen leaves and branches.

"If your fakes are digging up ore, then we can definitely blame the flood on them."

At some point, she had hidden her ears and tail, and there was a serious expression on her face.

This sort of disaster once happened frequently here.

"Once the people in Ohlburg learn the water's coming, they'll probably drop everything and run. I don't think...floods have a very good place in the people's memory here."

The entrance to the catacombs in the cathedral still had graffiti from those who had escaped the water.

When the sea levels were higher, water had reached those places countless times.

And every time it did, they got on boats, or swam to Estatt, which was protected by stone. And each time, they were thankful.

The relief of standing on firm stone, not sticky mud or bogs that swallowed all that came close, gave a relief that affirmed the presence of God more than any sermon.

Col knew of a sad fact.

Praying held no power.

If a flood threatened Ohlburg, the imposters would have to give themselves away.

Because prayer would not stop a flood.

And then the people of Ohlburg would forget about the Twilight Cardinal and run.

There would be no need to send in soldiers.

Ther would be nothing they could do but run in the face of a natural threat.

"And then, that's when the ... sawlm? Stanza four? From the scripture?" Myuri

said hesitatingly as she turned to Col.

She had never shown an ounce of interest in faith, but it seemed Canaan had told her about this. Even the gracious lessons in the scripture were divided into fun and unfun stories in her mind.

And it seemed stanza four of the psalm was a fun one.

That was because it was a tale of adventure, of people beset by natural disaster setting off for the promised land.

"You...probably can't lead them, right, Brother?"

If the people realized the actual Twilight Cardinal was here, their fervor would simply transfer from the imposter to him, and none of their problems would be solved. If anything, if he tried to advocate for reconciliation with Estatt, then it was more than likely the people of Ohlburg would begin calling *him* an imposter.

"I could have thought of a proper plan if you were a little gentler on the horse."

Col gave a little jab. She could communicate with the horse, so she had urged it to unbelievable speeds.

But standing here on this desolate land, he knew right away who it was that should take on the role of leading the people.

"I know the perfect person to lead the people seeking to escape the water."

"Who?"

"Lord Hobeln."

Myuri's lips parted slightly, then her gaze drifted up and to the left.

"But...he can't be reliable, can he?"

"He is the one local lord the people of Ohlburg have placed their trust in. If he were to take the lead, then the people would certainly trust that he would be guiding them to safety. And when they escape to Estatt, we can use the story of a local lord standing tall between the people and the cathedral to mediate."

This was a role no one else could take on.

Col himself, however, was uncertain if Hobeln could do such a thing, or if he would even cooperate in the first place. But he was their only choice.

And their one mistake was that Hobeln was not, in fact, happily working alongside the scammers.

He was being used and looked down on. Col believed if they created an opportunity for the imposters to be arrested as such and give him a role to lead his people, who were also being manipulated, into safety, then he would be happy to work with them.

And while it was nothing in comparison to what Myuri could do, the role was still much too heroic for Col.

"So, it'll probably...go...well?"

When Myuri first came up with this idea, she was sleepy and scarcely conscious.

Perhaps now, standing here on the site where the deed would be done, it was finally sinking in just how ridiculous the whole plan was.

Would the flood of water be only just enough to scare people? That was what Myuri was worrying about. It was not going to be a flood that would cause them pain, like the people who were at the entrance of the cathedral catacombs.

Throughout her whole life, she had done things without any afterthought, only to be scolded and often ended up crying.

It seemed she, too, had grown up.

"It will," Col responded confidently.

And now it was Myuri's turn to be nervous seeing her brother so confident.

"B-but, it'd be easy to knock down the embankment, but really hard to stop the water. If more water comes out than we expect, then we might not be able to stop it once it starts."

Standing here, by the river, they could see the land where Ohlburg sat seemed rather low.

If they were to break the embankment, the muddied water would flow in like

a torrent.

"And then the whole town of Ohlburg is going to be thrown into chaos, right? That Hobeln guy was just one drunk old man, though. Even if he managed to threaten your fake and his friends ahead of time and got them to cooperate, there's only like ten, maybe twenty of them. Would that be enough to bring everyone safely to Estatt?"

After listing all those doubts, Myuri took a deep breath then added, "And the bad guys in every story are such sore losers until the very end. When the water comes and it's chaos everywhere, they might run, or maybe they'll get desperate and use the weapons they've been hoarding."

As her older brother, Col wished at times like this she would read books that were a little more ladylike, such as cooking, or raising herbs, but he had to admit the knowledge she had collected from reading so fervently was certainly being put to good use.

"But thinking about the townspeople, the soldiers from Estatt can't lead them to safety, can they? Could all of Miss Eve's friends handle it?"

Of course, her feeble brother did not count among them. Canaan was unlikely to be able to take on the role, nor was Le Roi.

They had too few actors for the massive scene they wanted to perform.

A battle could not be carried out with only a handful of people.

But Col did not panic.

And he was a little surprised Myuri did not notice the solution.

"This must be because you spurred on the horse too quickly and stimulated my mind. I have thought of this already."

He kept prodding her for how she handled the horse; she frowned up at him and slapped him on the back, but the way she immediately grasped his clothes was full of expectation.

Col smiled at her in return, then reached out to her.

It was the small pouch of wheat hanging from her neck that he curled his fingers around.

"What is your name?"

Myuri's head was tilted down to look at her chest. She only lifted her gaze to look at him, wide-eyed.

"...Huh?"

Myuri.

Her name had been passed down across a long history.

Her red eyes rounded like the full moon.

"Oh!"

There was a way to flesh out this ridiculous plot.

Col himself may have been powerless, but his acquaintances were not.

Because that was where the Twilight Cardinal's power truly lay.

"Uh, um, wait, s-so, Brother, you—"

The whole plan was reforming itself in her head. Excitement and expectation for what was to come, and the way her very soul shuddered at the prospect of facing this hardship head-on made it difficult for her words to catch up.

Myuri was a girl who always moved at full speed.

His role as her slightly obtuse older brother was to gently encourage her forward.

"Yes. And that should solve everything."

He put a hand on her back and turned her toward Ohlburg.

"Let's give this story a good ending."

Myuri gave a voiceless cry, threw her arms around him, then quickly stepped back.

She leaped onto the horse with great energy, then reared the horse like a skilled knight.

"Get on, Brother!"

"Please don't go too fast."

While she did help him get on the horse, his little knight, of course, ignored what he said.

The horse they were borrowing from Eve bolted off at full speed, and Col clung to Myuri in a panic.

But he was not as afraid of what was to come because he had a feeling he, too, was more excited about it than anything else.

After hearing about the plan from a very confident Myuri, Eve pressed a hand to her forehead, as though enduring a headache.

The woman stared at Col ruefully because she knew if Myuri was the one telling her about the plan, then that meant it had her brother's approval.

But considering the plan itself, it was not something they could carry out of their own accord if Eve did not approve.

For example, arranging for the Estatt cathedral to take people in.

In the eyes of the people of Estatt, who ruled over this land for many years in Hobeln's place, for the river embankment to break and flood the land was nothing more than terrifying. And taking in those who were just barely escaping with their lives would require concrete planning.

They needed to prepare carefully if they wanted to cause just the right kind of commotion outside.

When they told her all this, a somewhat vexed look crossed Eve's face, and she looked just like Myuri when she realized she had been outwitted.

And there was one last thing he needed to tell her—the most important thing that would make this plan a success.

"And so I'd like you to begin preparations for receiving the Myuri Mercenary Company, Miss Eve."

The name of the wild girl they knew today had once belonged to a wolf who lived long, long ago.

Myuri the wolf was once active in the era of spirits, as Holo the Wisewolf was, and a warrior had founded a mercenary group using her name, which had survived into the present day.

And that same name had been given by Holo to her daughter.

The Myuri Mercenary Company had a storied history and legends of their own, and was still a well-known name in the north.

They would need many hands to keep their aggressive plan under control.

The most powerful people Col knew were none other than these mercenaries, who had inherited the name of Myuri from ancient times. The moment he had heard there was an imposter of himself, he had sent a letter to the Myuri Mercenary Company, just in case. That was one of the two letters he had sent from Aquent.

But just as how someone drawing their sword in the middle of a city would cause problems, the presence of a purely military force like a mercenary group alone could cause problems. Eve had to speak with the cathedral, otherwise things would only get more complicated.

And hiring them would cost them quite a bit of money, but a great merchant sat in front of him.

"Boy, aren't you the tough boss," Eve said after dropping her shoulders. There was something of joy in her voice.

Once they received Eve's approval, they sent a letter to Aquent.

As they proceeded with the plan, it became clear they still needed a few more hands.

And so Col asked Lutia to send Pierre over.

As things moved in preparation for their plan, days passed—it was three days after they had sent along the letter with one of Sharon's bird friends.

The innkeeper called Col to the first floor. When he went down, he found Pierre standing there, as though he had come straight away and without rest on his journey, fury bursting from his expression.

"Pierre of Ashredge has arrived!"

Col was just thankful he did not shout, Twilight Cardinal, Your Eminence!

Regardless of how Myuri pressed both of her hands over her ears in

annoyance, Col grasped the hand of his reliable ally and took him to their room.

"I am glad you decided to come, Mister Pierre."

"I would never dream of not coming! I should be ashamed of myself—my faith was lacking, and I was unable to see how pious you truly are! And to think your imposter has set up this so-called Church of the Beginning—what insolence! How shall I be of service to you?!"

Pierre had been holed up in the church ever since he went to Aquent. After receiving the letter, Lutia gathered a draft copy of the vernacular translation of the scripture, one Col had left behind for the students, and showed it to Pierre to convince him.

Only an abridged translation was making its rounds across the mainland. No one had the more complete version yet.

And so when Pierre saw a portion of the draft, he understood right away it was the real thing.

Pierre made one of Col's fleeting dreams come true—that the right thing would always be the right thing, no matter who in what position said it.

"If I were to reveal my identity and denounce them, the problem would only grow more complicated. Instead, I would like a local lord with the trust of the people to denounce them in my place, but he has grown despondent and lost the will to fight evil since he came to believe God has abandoned him."

Once Col gave a brief overview of Hobeln's situation, Pierre nodded in understanding.

"Leave this in my hands. I am rather adept at forcing God's protection onto those whose ears have been closed!"

Myuri, who had her hands over her ears because of how loud Pierre talked, removed her hands in surprise, and then quickly found joy in his vicious expression.

Another two days passed after Pierre's arrival. The city of Estatt was abuzz; there were suddenly more people clad in armor and riding on horses.

The cathedral received Eve's persuasion, and after a conference, they

accepted every aspect of their idea. Perhaps they had done so in order to make sure the kingdom, and by extension the Twilight Cardinal, would owe them an obligation.

Either way, as the plans rushed forward, Col and company gathered in Eve's warehouse once again.

"I've got a general idea of who it is that's backing the scammers."

"Who?" Myuri asked, and Eve grinned.

"The Ruvik Alliance."

Myuri tilted her head, but the first image that flashed in Col's mind was a large ship left to the mercy of turbulent waters beneath blue skies.

"Is their current plot a way to kill two birds with one stone? To sully the name of the Twilight Cardinal while making money?"

"I laughed so hard when Hyland told me how you made a fool of them."

Myuri tugged on Col's sleeve, and Col told her they were the mercantile alliance that had been allied with the Church when they were dealing with Autumn, the whale spirit. They were an alliance of merchants, once crowned the most powerful in the world, and legend had it they had caused the downfall of a large country in a war surrounding trade concessions.

"They're deeply entangled with the Church's rights and privileges, but they're hurting pretty bad right now, thanks to you."

"...Me?"

Col wondered if it had something to do with what had happened in the northern islands, but Eve's eyes instead softened with delight.

"You preach asceticism, so the Church can't lavishly waste its money like it used to. That's why their most extensive merchandise has stopped selling. Their business is on shaky legs these days."

Myuri must have recalled how violent they had been back in the northern islands; an expression crossed her face that read, "Serves them right."

"It's not clear if there was a group of swindlers that saw their current state

and approached them with a plan, or if they're the ones that sought out the swindlers themselves, but either way, they managed to come up with this plan as a result. Like you said, they get to make some cash while lowering the hated Twilight Cardinal's reputation. Either way, it's an outsider's plot." Eve sighed. "It probably wouldn't be very hard to convince Hobeln."

She then put her hand on the plan manifest and tapped it.

"We'll get Hobeln to join us and make him remember what he really is. He'll then indict the imposter calling himself the Twilight Cardinal, and then warn them that God will punish them for sullying the ancient church. The people in Ohlburg likely won't believe him—if anything, they'll probably get furious and call Hobeln a traitor. But just as he'll have foretold, the flood waters will come. They'll be terrified. But the one who will save Ohlburg from the muddy waters and take them to the promised land...will be none other than Hobeln himself."

Eve heaved a heavy sigh, one strong enough to lift the page that detailed the entire thing. She had likely been shocked by how absurd the plan was each time she read it over.

Eve was surprisingly realistic; she glared up at Col.

"And it'll be the mercenary company that plugs the gaps in this ad hoc plan if need be."

Col nodded firmly.

Eve loved secretive plots, but this was completely different.

Clearly bothered by all of this, she rose and led Col and Myuri out of the warehouse.

She stood there, displeased, and scowled at the people who were just stepping off a ship.

"I don't even want to think about how much it costs to hire someone with legitimate money."

Mercenaries were appointed to important positions in wars between cities, and the scope of their fees reflected that.

All they had to do this time was pay for their transport, their food, and their

lodgings, but that alone came with a hefty fee, and Eve wore a bitter expression on her face, considering accounting was her duty.

Though it was a necessary expense as they prepared for the ecumenical council, she was still exasperated by the fact even battles of faith cost this much money.

"Uncle Luward!"

Regardless, Myuri spotted the mercenary captain, Luward, and dashed toward him at full speed.

Luward, who had been giving commands to his men, showed no ounce of hesitation as the rambunctious girl flew at him. The grizzled man caught her with ease. Myuri must have thought of Luward as a toy with which she could be as rough as she wanted and he still would not break. He lifted her up with both hands high into the air, then placed her on his shoulder.

"Good to see you looking well, Little Miss."

Luward was not all that big, but he had enough strength to be worthy of being called the leader of a mercenary company.

"You too, Col," Luward began, but then theatrically cleared his throat. "Pardon me, Twilight Cardinal. It delights me to see you in good health."

"Oh, please stop, Mister Luward," Col said.

Luward burst out laughing, put Myuri down, planted both hands on his hips, and gave a dauntless smile.

"I'm glad I can be of service to your family again."

The Myuri Mercenary Company was a band of seasoned warriors, well known in the north.

Scammers could hardly be considered their typical enemy, but they were likely experienced in bringing together and leading panicking people in emergencies.

"But this sure is a hell of a plan you've put together. We've used similar tactics before, but only really to keep enemy forces from crossing key rivers. You're flooding an entire plain, aren't you? And you want us to lead every single

person in that town out of there."

"But it's nothing compared to marching through a blizzard, right?" Myuri pointed out.

Luward pounded his chest, as if saying "Of course." He then found Eve, and said his hellos to his employer as mercenary captain.

As that was happening, Canaan, who had been helping Eve by coordinating with the cathedral, returned. When he saw the mercenaries gathered at the port, their unique aura enshrouding them, he looked worried. For those like him, mercenaries were also known to be trouble.

When Col told him they could be trusted, Canaan nodded, yet oddly, he remained hidden behind his bodyguard.

"It's been boring job after boring job lately. Let's put on a real show!"

Luward was getting his men motivated. It was only moments after that Col spotted Myuri in their ranks, getting just as riled up as the rest of them.

Prayer could not move boulders, nor could God protect against falling blades.

The plan written on paper was no more than a few smudges of ink and a sprinkling of details—reality was complicated and hard to predict at the best of times.

Col thought he and Myuri made sure their ridiculous plan was airtight, but that was only because they had only come up with it in their minds, and they were generally ignorant of the world.

And yet their goal was to destroy the embankment of the river to flood a piece of land lower than the water level, and at the same time make sure there were no casualties. Even the most open-minded god would look on with disbelief.

And while the famous Luward mercenary company would be helping them, there was no way to tell if they could keep a plan of this scope completely under their control.

Praying for God's protection was not enough; they sent people out to Ohlburg and the surrounding area, looking at every minor geographic detail, up until the

very last minute.

As Luward and the mercenaries refined their plan based on the lay of the land, they picked out a few escape routes, and the sheer ridiculousness of the plan became increasingly obvious.

The important job of knocking down the river embankment, of course, fell to Myuri and her peerless strength as a wolf.

They did not have the time to bring in tools to trigger a sudden flood without catching anyone's attention.

And when Myuri attended the strategy meeting, she, too, looked earnest.

Luward also said he wanted to use that very same wolf strength to close up the broken embankment as well. If they did not put it back to normal, then there was a chance the damages would grow even worse. Luward's men were adept at that sort of engineering work—digging and filling holes—during siege warfare; when Myuri was meeting with them with regards to that, Col saw tension on her face he had never seen before.

Canaan and Le Roi were in communication with the cathedral, working out the details of how much damage a planned flood might cause, and how they would receive the people fleeing.

Together with the people of the cathedral, the people who had ruled Estatt as lords for many years, referred to past records and even put together a plan to ready soldiers and ships nearby, just in case.

When Eve saw how much all this would cost, she scowled and kept her quill in hand as she audibly groaned.

Col, on the other hand, almost felt overwhelmed when he saw just how many people were working toward a singular goal.

This whole plot had been set in motion not to simply remove the swindlers from the picture and save the people who were being tricked, but ultimately to protect the name and reputation of the Twilight Cardinal—himself.

Even if someone told him he had to accept reality for what it was, all he could muster was bewilderment.

But they were far past the point where he could mask his uncertainty as humility, and he had a feeling they would face hardships like this many more times in the future, on even bigger scales.

Once the Church knew the Twilight Cardinal had begun his activities on the mainland, they may earnestly begin fighting back. In order to fight back, he would need to get the help of many people—or even use them—and do things far beyond what he believed himself capable of.

At times, he might have to take responsibility for things he had no involvement in, and his great power may bring about consequences he did not want.

He had to get used to this.

He had to find the nerve to play the part of the Twilight Cardinal.

Col thought he had prepared himself for all of this, but on the night before everything was to be set in motion, he was not so sure anymore.

No one was sleeping in Eve's warehouse; and in one such room, Myuri said to him, "I thought every boy wanted to be a general when they grew up."

It seemed Myuri had noticed his flagging spirit.

"But you're going to be giving commands with Uncle Luward on a nearby hill, right?"

That was the plan, yes, but in reality, he had no part to play in the plan, so it was their way of keeping him out of harm.

"I'm gonna be playing a huge role! I hope you'll be watching!"

It was Myuri's job to break open the river's embankment.

Though she would have veteran mercenaries with her, there was no doubt this would be a dangerous job. Because if any of the mercenaries got caught in the water, she would have to be the one to save them, and if the water were to suddenly overflow beyond what they were expecting, she would even have to jump into the water with sacks filled with stones to block it.

Col would have fainted if he heard about this back when he was still in Nyohhira, but now, he swallowed the urge to stop her.

Myuri was certainly capable of such a feat, and they would need her strength.

And most importantly, Myuri wanted to show off her power.

"I bet Lutia will be so angry when she hears I got to put my fangs and claws to good use."

Myuri regarded the other wolf spirit as a bit of a rival. Or perhaps she felt that rivalry because she saw Lutia as a bit of a big sister.

As those thoughts crossed his mind, she stared at him. She sighed, then stepped behind him.

"C'mon! Chin up!"

She smacked his back, and he straightened up.

She folded her arms and looked at him flatly.

"Look at you. No one's gonna believe you're the real Twilight Cardinal!"

He tried to smile, but could not, though he did manage to look somewhat proud.

"Those who know, will know. At the very least, Mister Pierre believed I was the real one when he saw my translation."

Myuri made a face like a cat who had just smelled something awful and drew up her shoulders.

"I bet people are going to start thinking Screaming Pierre is the Twilight Cardinal right about now."

Pierre, now with a strange nickname courtesy of Myuri, had left Estatt not long ago. He was on his way to the swindlers' hideout along with the most elite of Luward's men and Az.

At that moment, they should have been making a surprise raid on a certain hideout, rounding up all the swindlers, and giving Hobeln a strong talking to.

By dawn, they would also be taking advantage of the dark of night to arrest the miners digging up copper under the pretext of unearthing ruins.

Then, in the morning, when the imposter would give his regular sermon after being thoroughly admonished, Hobeln would accuse him of being an imposter.

Once they saw the people of Ohlburg begin to stir, they would break the embankment.

Considering the power of the Myuri Mercenary Company, it was unlikely things would fail up until that point.

If they could successfully complete step one, which was raiding the base and humbling the scammers, then one of Sharon's bird friends would give them a report. Once they received the message, they would leave Estatt.

Right now, they were waiting. Col was still nervous despite how much Myuri was teasing him, and that frustrated the rambunctious girl—her guts were almost as steely as her mother's.

Then, there came a knock at the door.

It was Eve and Canaan.

"Did we get a message?!" was the first thing Col blurted out.

Eve gave a strained smile. "Calm down. Our general's not supposed to be on edge."

Myuri, standing beside him, gave a big sigh, as though completely agreeing with her. Col shrunk into himself.

"I believe Mister Luward is our general, not me..."

"I see. It's just like Canaan told me."

"...?"

Eve stared at him, exasperated, while Canaan stepped into the room. There was a folded cloth in his hands.

"While you will not be giving your name this time around, Master Col, there will be a considerable number of people barely escaping with their lives who will see you from afar."

The next thing he noticed, he saw Luward standing behind Eve and Canaan.

"Us mercenaries have caught glimpses of the shadows of our guardian spirits many times through storms and blizzards."

Col's gaze drifted from Luward's joyous smile back to Canaan's hands.

"The people will talk. They will tell tales of someone who watched over their trial from afar, after they had been duped by an imposter and were enduring God's wrath," Canaan spoke as though he were reciting a verse from a hagiography, his cheeks flushed, and he placed the clothes on a nearby table.

Myuri immediately gave a gasp of admiration, and Col looked at Eve in surprise.

"I didn't arrange for this. After Hyland read the letter you sent her, she took the opportunity to send them to me."

Lying on the table was a terrifyingly fine piece of clothing.

It was dyed a black that seemed like it would pull everything in, and it was subtly embroidered with gold thread. It was a garment as solemn as it was dignified.

"Though it is different from the style of any church or monastery, it is a truly magnificent priest's habit. While it does not have the emblem that denotes any position within the clergy, no one will look at this and doubt your holiness."

Though Canaan wore a white habit, since he worked at the pope's feet in the Holy See at the heart of the Church, the priestly garb sitting before Col was solid black.

"And here's your message from Hyland."

Eve handed him a piece of paper. And though it lacked any sort of official seal, Hyland's fine handwriting read: *The night is darkest before dawn.*

When he read it aloud, Col became painfully aware of how Hyland must have felt when she put this together for him. He truly felt like he had made it this far because of the bond he had built with someone who should have been far beyond his reach.

"Not a bad idea to start with looking the part."

The Twilight Cardinal, the world's dawnbringer.

He recalled what Myuri said back disparagingly to him in Aquent when they had heard an imposter had appeared.

He understood now. If rumors of the Twilight Cardinal always included

descriptions of an outfit like this, then very few could easily imitate him.

The excitement on Myuri's face urged him to take off his coat, and Canaan helped him change.

It was like a robe in style, and that made it easy to don and doff—it was well thought-out.

It was held together not by a sash, but by hooks, perhaps a way to give the garment as little ornamentation as possible.

It undoubtedly cost quite a bit of coin, but it exuded an elegance that did not give that away at first glance.

The fabric was fairly rigid, which meant it naturally straightened and steadied his posture.

And when he closed the collar, the minor tightness instead felt comfortable.

Canaan then brushed back Col's hair with pig fat or something of the sort.

"Ah-ha."

That was Luward.

Eve folded her arms, looked back and forth between him and her own clothes, and her lips folded into a frown. It seemed she was starting to feel competitive about the quality of her clothes as a merchant.

Canaan, after helping him dress, looked around the room. Once he found what he was looking for, he placed it in Col's hands.

Holding the scripture as a prop like this made him feel, quite honestly, embarrassed, but he knew this was his duty. He breathed deeply.

And it was times like this Myuri was typically the loudest; when he turned to look at her, he froze.

"……"

Myuri's face was bright red.

"I-is something wrong?" he asked and leaned forward.

Myuri's eyes widened and she took a half step backward, then dropped her

gaze like a young girl.

Well, she was a girl, but Col was bewildered by her reaction—he had never seen her like this before. It was then they heard heavy footsteps from the hallway. It was Le Roi.

"If I may, everyone, it is time."

He had likely received a report the mission was a success from those raiding the hideout.

The Myuri Mercenary Company and Eve's guard knew of nonhumans, so they could communicate quickly by making use of Sharon's bird friends.



Col and company, too, had to leave for their early morning mission.

"Oh my, I hardly recognized you, Your Eminence," Le Roi said easily before taking Luward and Eve out to prepare for their departure.

Canaan exclaimed with excitement, "It truly suits you!" before leaving after them.

All who remained in the room were Col and Myuri, who still had not said anything.

"Come now. We're going, too," he said, but she did not move.

With no other choice, he took to one knee and gazed up at her from below.

"You are my knight. You will protect me, won't you?"

Myuri's eyes widened, her ears and tail popped out, and her fur stood on edge.

She then squeezed her eyes shut, hunched her back, and clasped her hands firmly on his face.

"You can never change your clothes."

"What?"

"Never! You can never take those clothes off, okay?! Promise me!"

Though overwhelmed by her desperate attitude, it seemed as though she was not disappointed it did not suit him, and that relieved him.

"Am I all right like this? I don't have a great sword."

Myuri's ideal warrior priest could heal their allies' wounds with prayer and split the earth with their voice alone.

She pulled her lips into a thin line, jerked her head back, squeezed his head tighter, and dug her nails into his skin.

"You're so mean!"

And then, she clung to him in a tight hug.

Though Col was not certain about the particulars of Myuri's taste in clothes, it seemed Hyland had it pinned down.

He embraced Myuri in return, patted her head, then stood.

"I'll be watching you work from afar."

It was a dangerous mission that, if he were still back in Nyohhira, he would have gone pale just thinking about it.

But Myuri, after wiping away the tears welling in her eyes from excitement, took a deep breath, and placed her hand on the sword at her hip. She beamed straight up at him.

"I've got this!" she said.

An expression that would have given him nothing but anxiety back in Nyohhira now only gave peace of mind.

He plopped a hand on her head, had her put away her ears and tail, and they, too, left the room.

If, and only *if*—in the absolutely strongest meaning of the word—the legend of the Twilight Cardinal would be written down, he was certain this moment would be the turning point.

When they came down to the loading dock-cum-living space, they found Eve and her group, Le Roi, Canaan, and the mercenaries waiting for them.

Luward looked at Col and immediately fell silent.

Even Col's blockheaded self could tell.

After checking on Myuri, who was retying her sash, the one with the wolf crest, Col spoke.

"Guide the lambs who have been led astray by my imposter. I need the strength of all those present, for the sake of following God's true teachings."

He paused, took a nervous breath, and continued.

"This will be a dangerous mission. I pray God watches over all of us."

There came a silence afterward, and Col wondered if he had said something wrong. But the cheer that came in response, almost powerful enough to crack the windows, blew his worries away.

Eve, her underlings, Canaan, and Le Roi remained to organize and oversee

those who would find refuge in the city.

The townsfolk were surprised to see such a big group of people leaving in the middle of the night, but it was not a terribly uncommon occurrence in a big city like this, one ruled by a prince-elector, so it did not cause much commotion.

The guards at the city gates had already received word from the cathedral, and so they let the group through with friendly faces.

The night was cloudy and there were no stars visible in the sky, but to the Myuri Mercenary Company, who had fought their way through the mountainous northlands, it was no particular detriment.

The company proceeded forward with confidence, and once it came to the hour of night when even the grasses and trees were asleep, they arrived at a hill overlooking Ohlburg in the distance.

Here, everyone would take their places in accordance with their roles.

The air grew more and more humid, signaling oncoming rain, but this did not stop their plans.

Everyone, with their own parts to play, began to distribute carts and supplies and head off to their stations; Col could no longer sit still, and he grabbed Myuri's arm as she helped with preparations.

"Be careful."

Worry was the same as treating her as a child.

Col thought she might not like it, but she instead smiled shyly.

"Just watch—you won't have to worry. It'll be an amazing story."

Everyone present either already knew about Myuri's true form, or had heard about it and did not mind, so her ears and tail were out.

Her eyes gleamed brightly, and he could see her canines beneath her lips whenever she spoke.

She was in such a state of excitement that Col would have been anxious about her at any point before this—and he was unbelievably worried, in all honesty—but he managed to stamp that all down.

"I know," he said. "Please work carefully enough that I don't get these clothes dirty."

Myuri stared at him blankly for a moment before smiling, tickled.

"You'd only get in the way if you had a part in this plan. You don't look like you're very good at swimming."

She was still her normal self.

"And please do not jump at me while still covered in mud."

That seemed more likely than anything.

And the clothes he was wearing at the moment were much too expensive to get dirtied with mud.

"Sure, but if the plan goes well, then you're going to wash my hair for me, right?"

Myuri's hair and fur was the color of ash dotted with silver flecks, inherited from her father. It would be rather time-consuming to wash if it got muddied.

"Yes, yes. I will."

Myuri grinned. One of the mercenaries called to her, and she turned to him to reply.

Then, just before she ran off, she threw her arms around Col in a hug, like a wolf catching its prey.

"...You smell like Blondie," she said as she stepped back, a displeased look on her face, and then rushed to join the other mercenaries.

Col watched her energetic form as she left, until he could no longer see her in the dark of night.

The next thing he knew, the campsite around them, filled with people and things not moments before, felt a lot quieter and lonelier.

"Col—ah, I mean, Twilight Cardinal."

When Luward called for him, Col could not help the awkward smile that rose to his face.

"Please, don't call me that."

"You sure? The practice is important."

When a mercenary captain said that to him, it was much more convincing.

He took a couple of chairs from his attendant, set one by Col, then sat in the other next to him, and jerked his chin up.

"I hated it when people called me *kid*, but once people start calling me *captain*, I get all kinds of itchy."

Col looked at Luward in surprise, and the look he got in return was a soft one.

"Don't tell the guys."

"O-of course not."

But Luward quickly gave a light laugh, placed his hand on Col's shoulder, and shook him gently.

Col thought of him as the most apt person to be called a general in this entire field, but even he had moments of insecurity and self-doubt.

Which meant there was nothing for him to be embarrassed about when he shuddered at the thought of the position he now held.

And what he was meant to do was not fiddle restlessly in a seat he did not find comfortable, but instead accept this was how it was meant to be and sit still regardless.

There was yet a little time before dawn when the operation would begin, but he thought of the people beyond the veil of darkness that were working on getting things ready as he stared at the darkened earth.

Myuri must have already been waiting and ready by the river.

She would most certainly already be in her wolf form, joyously digging her claws into the soft earth.

Though he wished she would not get too covered in mud, when he pictured her rushing at him all muddy and dirty, he could not help but smile.

When his eyes darted back, they met with Luward's attendants', who stood next to Luward.

The boy shrunk, almost apologetically, but there was one reason why Col could not look away.

"Is that...Myuri's?"

In his hand, he held the sheaf of papers containing all the stories Myuri was writing.

"The miss told him to write down every detail about the Twilight Cardinal's condition."

""

That girl... he thought as he looked to the boy with the quill in his hands and said, "Please write down, Not tense, calmly waiting for sunrise."

The boy looked at him wide-eyed, and Luward laughed.

In the meanwhile, Sharon's bird friends, who were acting as go-betweens for each mercenary unit, came one after the other to deliver letters by the faint torchlight.

Luward, after reading over all of them, informed Col that everyone had assumed their positions without a hitch.

All that was left was to wait for the swindlers, who had been told to cooperate with the plan if they wanted to live. Morning mass should be starting any minute now.

According to the letter, Pierre had successfully convinced Hobeln, who repented and thanked God in tears.

And so Col prayed both to God, and those who once had been called gods, that all would go well.

Despite how far away Ohlburg was, Col heard the faint sound of a bell, perhaps because of the wind. It was then he finally realized he had nodded off at some point.

He hurriedly straightened his position in his chair and noticed it was growing brighter around him.

But when he put his hand to his face to rub away the drowsiness, he noticed

how damp it was.

When he looked up, he saw the sky was covered in thick clouds.

"This weather must mean God is on our side."

Luward, who had been feeding Sharon's bird friends while unfolding the area map, noticed Col stirring and called to him.

"Perfect weather for a flood."

Though it was not raining quite yet, it could do so at any minute.

To be chased under such heavily laden skies would only amplify the fear.

"All right, men, pack up. Get the horses," Luward commanded, and the mercenaries sprang into action.

"Can you ride a horse, Your Eminence?" he asked Col.

"The wolf spoke to my horse before she left."

Luward shrugged, then hopped on his own horse.

Col struggled a bit to get on his—the one he had ridden many times since coming here.

And as he waited for the next order, the mercenary at Luward's side cupped his hands behind his ears, listening for the noise in the distance.

"Captain, the commotion has begun."

In the middle of the scammers' morning mass, Hobeln was supposed to accuse them of being imposters.

Around them were all fervent believers who trusted that this was the Twilight Cardinal.

Though he had mercenaries protecting him, Col could not help but feel a bit of a stomachache when he thought of Hobeln's fear.

But Hobeln would likely hold his ground until the last possible minute in an attempt to keep his family name from sinking into the dirt.

Or did he get pointers from Pierre on how to accuse them?

Or had Hobeln been too scared to do it, and so instead Pierre was screaming

in the imposter's face?

Either way, as the scene inevitably grew more chaotic, things would get out of hand.

Col wondered what sort of faces the swindlers were making as they stood on the podium.

Were they frustrated their plans were falling apart? Or were they nervous about whether they would be allowed to live? Or were they scheming on ways to escape?

It was likely that part would ultimately be recorded as conjecture in the official records. On the other hand, the mercenary apprentice was recording in detail, on Myuri's orders, what Col's face looked like.

He tensed his expression so she would not laugh at him later and waited for the next development.

"There's a bird. Let's head to the river for now."

Chaos was spreading through Ohlburg after the accusation, it seemed.

And then, once the blood rushed to their heads, they would be splashing all of them with water, as one did with fighting cats.

"Man. This is giving me the chills, and nothing scares me!" Luward said.

He turned his horse around and headed north.

After riding for a bit, Col felt a drop of water hit his cheek.

A mist-like rain had finally begun to fall.

Past the horse's head, as it dashed through the grasses and kicked up darkened earth, he spotted the gray, featureless river.

In the distance, there were several ships docked along the shoreline.

But farther upstream, what Col saw caused him to hold his breath.

"Now that's a sight," Luward said, almost unintentionally.

A deep, dark ditch had been dug into the ground among the sparse grass.

Even from this distance, he could see spouts of earth spring up from the ditch,

and Col thought he was catching glimpses of a white tail.

The mercenary standing on top of the embankment was slamming down what looked like a giant hammer.

After one, two strikes, the earth at his feet crumbled away, and just as he, too, seemed like he would fall, another mercenary pulled him to safety.

It was strange that it made no sound.

But Col could see with his own eyes the water was beginning to flow, forming a deluge that rushed down the ditch with ferocious speed.

Myuri stayed in the ditch until the last moment when she hopped out, and the muddied waters danced through the earth.

The flow of the water destroyed the embankment, and even more water flowed through the broken parts of the embankment, speeding up the destruction.

The next thing he knew, a huge swath of ground was already covered in muddy water, and it was only growing wider with every passing moment.

Col grew nervous wondering if they would be able to put the embankment back together, but Myuri and the mercenaries were already working in tandem to prepare for that step.

"It's fine. We'll be protecting the little miss. Lady Holo would rip out our throats if something happened to her," Luward said with a smile, turning to Col.

Col almost asked to suffer the same fate if that happened.

"And now Ohlburg— Oh, would you look at that."

Col turned to look where Luward was pointing to see a group of horses in the distance. They were people who had seen Hobeln's accusation of the imposters and heard his prophecy about the flood, and had come here on their horses.

But they must have noticed the water rushing toward them at their feet. They hurriedly pulled to a stop, decided not to proceed any farther, then turned back.

The land here was low from years of mining, and once water reached this

terrain, it would work like a water channel. And if necessary, the underground drainage channels could carry water just like they were designed to.

They galloped away at top speed, and soon vanished from view.

"Let's go, Mister Luward."

The muddied water flattened the grasses and silvergrass like a swarm of mice as it rushed down the hill.

As they followed the flow to Ohlburg, Col tightened his grip on the reins.

Col would not be the one, personally, to save the people.

But he had to see this through.

"O God, please protect them. O God—"

As he murmured his prayer, the horse rushed forward.

And when they arrived at the hill overlooking the town of Ohlburg, they found the town already plunged into chaos.

"The water! The water's coming!"

"Head for the cathedral! That's the only place that will save us from this divine punishment!"

As the people raced about in confusion, the mercenaries shouted from outside the town to chase them out.

Some ran with only the clothes on their back, while some ran hoisting bags that were bigger than themselves.

There was even one who ran holding their large cooking pot—there were all sorts.

Eventually, the rush of people began to take proper shape. Several priests stood atop crates, gesturing with their hands and bodies as to where the road was.

It seemed there were not only scammers in the town, but real priests among them, too.

The people followed their voices, and when they found the path they were

meant to take they began to walk, and others fell in step behind them.

Col squinted as he watched, and he spotted someone on horseback waving a banner and shouting orders to the people—that was probably Hobeln.

His family had used their pumps to drain this land, which had once been completely underwater, and made it livable.

Such historic authority must have been hugely helpful when it came to persuading the masses.

The people of Ohlburg had fallen into a panic, their energy ballooning and threatening to burst and scatter them in every direction, but the traffic was slowly taking proper shape again, falling into one stream of people heading west.

Col most certainly felt guilty he had shattered their innocent hopes.

Those who were there to do trade, and many who were there for work, likely had to give up a considerable amount of their livelihoods.

There were some who had tumbled to the ground as they ran, and there were even a few who sat limply on the back of the mercenaries' horses.

The road to the cathedral dipped downward for a short while, and while they were headed downhill, they would likely be fighting the fear that came with running from the water. The path would start curling back uphill at some point, but it was still quite a bit of a distance on foot.

The water had already reached the northern edge of Ohlburg and was painting the ground a muddy brown, as though it were a living creature.

There were people around the arrested Twilight Cardinal imposter demanding he be let go, but they gave up at the very last moment and ran for their lives. Once the mercenaries had him and his accomplices tied up and on their horses at the rear of the procession, they finally headed west, spraying water as they moved.

Among them all, there was one horse that remained there, standing. Even from far away, who it was stood out—it was Hobeln, gazing at the Church of the Beginning.

One of the mercenaries called to him, and he regretfully turned his horse around. The water was growing ever higher, and already reached the ankles of the horse he was riding.

Though it was likely the imposter had forced him into cooperating with them, he must have been secretly hoping, somewhere deep down, it would restore his family to greatness.

But he quickly set his horse into a canter, as though shaking off the bad dream that was Ohlburg.

And thus, Ohlburg, a town once brimming with fervor and energy, was rendered a husk in minutes.

Without any people around, the collection of shanties and huts looked like nothing more than a shabbily built settlement. No sight could be more convincing that faith and fanaticism could be so feeble and fragile.

Col wiped away the raindrops from his face, then told the note-taking attendant to note they were not tears.

Luward, who had likely experienced countless retreat tactics under the employ of many lords, looked as though he had grown used to seeing such devastation.

Despite how flat the water looked, it was undoubtedly flowing fast.

Col and Luward set off, too, so they would not end up caught in the deluge.

And the fast-flowing water had already caught up to the tail end of those people venturing on foot. It seemed as though they were giving in more and more to the sense of despair.

The sharp-eyed mercenaries had chosen a path along a little ridge among the lowlands, and so while the people would not end up swept away by the water, the fear that led them to run away on foot would be very real.

Col did his best to hold back the urge to cheer them on as he followed at a safe distance from behind, and before long, he started hearing hymns.

Someone had begun to sing in order to squeeze out every last ounce of courage they had, and soon everyone was joining in.

Luward, holding a giant wolf banner, drew his lips back in a wry smile at the bold display of faith in the face of terror, and his attendant, who still was pure of heart, held his breath in awe.

In the sky above the people as they walked across the barren landscape, chased away by water, Sharon's friends flew in circles like angels.

If this were to be illustrated in the annals, then it would surely strike a chord with the people who read it.

"Your Eminence," Luward said, trotting alongside Col. "It's your turn."

He spoke briefly, and turned to look at Col.

Luward was giving commands with regard to the operation as a whole, but Col was present for an even greater purpose.

Perhaps this had developed a little differently than how he had hoped things would go.

But his destination was the exact same as it was when he left Nyohhira.

"Of course."

He kicked the horse's side, gripped the reins, and galloped off. Luward allowed him to get a head start and did not immediately follow, letting the distance between them grow.

All he could hear were the horse's hooves, the horse's breath, the wind cutting his ears, and the faint sound of rain hitting his cheek.

And the hymns of those seeking salvation.

He had looked at the map ahead of time and he had been briefed on the geography. He made his way to a hill a bit higher than the rest as he carefully chose which ups and downs of the landscape to take. And then, he spotted a bird above his head—it seemed to be leading him.

He had a feeling this was Myuri's suggestion. Her big brother was foolish, unreliable, and whatnot.

Col looked up to the bird and waved at it with a little smile. It flew in a little circle before leaving.

His destination was right below where the bird was. This was about the point in their journey where the people would realize the land was starting to slope upward. Though there was still a ways to go to their destination, they should have been able to see the cathedral's spire from that point.

Col stood atop the hill, and from there, he could faintly see the procession. He was not there to do anything in particular—not that there was anything he *could* do in the first place.

But that alone still played a role.

Luckily, the rain was not very strong; the misty droplets were, if anything, perfect for the mood.

"O God, grant us salvation."

As he murmured this, he lifted his right hand.

All the people who had been looking at their feet raised their heads, simply because they could now see the cathedral spire.

All Col was doing was standing in the distance and silently pointing toward their destination like a fool.

Though the rain was not coming down very hard, the droplets made it hazy, like mist hanging in the air. It was unlikely anyone expected to find a person standing there.

But Col almost felt as though he could sense a few people's eyes on him. And he did not mind if it only turned out to be his imagination.

He pointed more firmly to the west, to where the people were headed.

He smiled faintly, because he had a feeling he now understood why Myuri was so insistent on writing stories every night.





EPILOGUE

Once those who escaped the mud of Ohlburg set foot on solid flagstone, they apparently all sank to the ground in a heap.

The people from the cathedral had been waiting for them ahead of time; while the refugees had been worried about being arrested, the cathedral instead warmly accepted them and guided them to different churches in different parishes across the city.

Those who happened to be visiting Ohlburg from far away got help from the mercenaries to find lodging at inns Eve had prepared ahead of time.

The priests who had shared in the Twilight Cardinal's fervor hesitated somewhat when they were face-to-face with people from the cathedral, the very thing they had so aggressively accused of being evil, but both parties were ultimately people who followed in God's teachings, so they accepted the hand offered to them.

But the moment Hobeln passed through the city gates, there was a bit of a disturbance.

Not in a bad sense, however. Once the people of the city learned the group of people who suddenly came pouring into the city were those who had been chased from Ohlburg due to a flood, they recalled it was Hobeln who once saved this land from water and began treating him like a savior of sorts.

When Col saw how bewildered Hobeln was when the people began to suddenly fuss over him, he nodded firmly because he knew exactly how that felt, and Luward gave him a flat look.

When they arrived at Eve's warehouse, several birds just happened to be landing nearby right at that moment, bringing a damp letter that told them the reconstruction of the river embankment was now finished.

To briefly describe what Col had done thus far, he had left the city on

horseback, taken a quick nap, watched the plan unfold, and then pointed to the people's destination like a fool, even though he had no way of telling if anyone was watching.

Despite it all, he was exhausted. While Luward was busy preparing to welcome back his men as they returned, and as he rushed busily all over the warehouse to praise his troops for safely getting the flock of people out of Ohlburg like shepherd dogs, Col sat down in a corner of the warehouse and almost immediately gave in to unconsciousness.

His consciousness only returned to him when there was a giggle that tickled his ear.

"Oh, he's up."

Myuri's familiar face was covered in mud.

"...Agh, my back..."

As he tried to stand, his whole body ached. It was likely because he had spent a lot of time on horseback, which he did not do often, and perhaps because he had been more tense than he had realized while the plan was being carried out.

"Why? You didn't do anything."

He had no excuse for her.

Once he managed to sit up straight and look around, he saw those who had taken on the most difficult jobs had returned safely—there were piles of muddied clothes and tools scattered here and there.

"Were you all right?"

He had a feeling he did not need to ask, but he did so because it seemed like she wanted him to.

She was not wearing her typical clothes, but her errand boy outfit, since it did not matter how dirty those got. And they were so caked in mud it almost made Myuri seem like she was wearing armor. She grinned.

When she did, flakes of mud cracked and fell from her face.

Her hands were also encrusted, and her hair was dyed an earthen brown.

"What about bathing?"

"The rest of the guys went swimming in the sea, but it's too cold."

How precocious it was of her to call the other mercenaries "the guys." She squared her shoulders as if she could tell what he was thinking.

He smiled at the sight and finally stood.

It was then that he finally noticed the state of his bangs.

There was a clump of mud in his hair. Myuri must have played a little prank while he was sleeping.

"I didn't touch your clothes," she said. "It'd be bad if they got dirty."

When she said that, he looked down at his clothes, and realized it would have been smart if he had taken them off before sitting down.

"C'mon, get changed. The water's already boiled."

"Hmm?"

He turned to look at her, as though asking what he could possibly use hot water for, and Myuri's expression quickly soured.

"I'm only joking," he said with a smile.

A deep frown crossed Myuri's face.

"You're like...an adult now, Brother..."

"I have always been an adult."

In response, Myuri snorted like a veteran mercenary might.

And since she was still known as the Saint of the Sun, he knew the world's estimations of another could never be reliable.

"Oh, you're up."

Then came Eve, underling in tow.

She held a bundle of parchment in her hands, a quill sat tucked behind her ear; the wrinkles between her brows were likely so deep because her head was hurting over how much this commotion was costing her.

"You've got a discussion with the cathedral waiting for you tomorrow, so get cleaned up."

"Oh ... Okay ... "

Though it did not seem the cathedral was antagonistic toward the Twilight Cardinal, it was clear this was not going to be a fun, heart-to-heart discussion.

Col and company were not totally uninvolved when it came to Hobeln, who was suddenly incredibly popular with the people. And there was the whole unexpected deal with the rights to the copper mine to discuss as well.

On top of everything else, whether the archbishop of Estatt would agree to be his ally would be a bellwether of their odds for achieving their ultimate goals.

There was no room for failure, and he did not want people holding the Twilight Cardinal in contempt for being so young.

And standing before the young Twilight Cardinal was a rambunctious girl all covered in mud.

The only reason he would be able to stand undaunted before the archbishop would be because he would have this guardian by his side.

As he turned to make his way toward the courtyard—where the water was apparently waiting for him—in an attempt to cheer her up, Myuri suddenly shouted.

"Oh, that's right! Brother!"

As Col pushed the muddied girl away from him when she stepped in close, he asked, "What is it?"

"You threatened the boy I asked to be my secretary, didn't you?"

"Secretary..."

He did not quite understand what she meant at first, due to the overstated word she used, but he knew she was talking about the mercenary boy with whom she left the bundle of papers containing her stories.

"There's no way you could've been that impressive. You ended up falling asleep because you were so nervous, and then you panicked when Uncle

Luward woke you up, didn't you?"

Her passionate red eyes held more might than when her gaze was cool.

"...Did a bird tell you that?"

Or perhaps the horse at his side told her.

When Col asked, Myuri shrugged with such vigor that even more mud flaked off her.

"I see everything you do, Brother!"

Just in the way that he saw through everything she did.

"I could ask the same of you. I hope you were not so engrossed in digging holes that you caused problems for the mercenaries."

"I didn't! Everyone complimented me!"

"But if you do something so horrific in Nyohhira again, I will shave your tail bald in earnest this time."

Unlike Col, Myuri most certainly did a little dance when she saw the way the water poured out.

"I-I won't."

Her response did not carry the same energy she had moments earlier.

Of course, the wisewolf was in Nyohhira, so it would likely turn out okay.

"But...," she said meekly beside Col as he began to walk. "I did kind of learn that fangs and claws can't accomplish everything."

"……"

Myuri looked up at Col and offered him a small, grown-up smile.

"I could only break a small part of the embankment. Even though I thought if I gave it my all, I could do so many amazing things."

She could now laugh at how narrow that childlike view was.

But Myuri looked at her hands, flexing them.

As though seeing where in this world her spot was.

"It seems you are growing up as well," Col said. "That makes me happy."

""

Myuri lifted her gaze from her palm to Col, then grinned.

"Just let me know when you want to get married, okay?"

"I'd be happy to help prepare you for your wedding."

Myuri pouted, moved to reflexively smack his shoulder, but stopped herself.

"Come on, Brother! Go and change!"

"I think I will wear this outfit whenever I need to reprimand you."

"You're so stupid, Brother! Meanie!" she said in a flurry before running off.

Col smiled at her, and at last, he finally divested himself of his Twilight Cardinal shell.

As he looked around, wondering where to place it, he heard a loud voice calling for him: "Broootheeer!"

It was a little too early to deem her an adult.

In the end, he left his clothes with one of Eve's employees when they passed by; he rolled up his sleeves and made his way to Myuri.

If there were to be a hagiography of the Twilight Cardinal, then a tale of him washing the saint's feet would be an admirable one.

"Ugh! I wish I could be in the hot springs!"

Col looked to Myuri as she complained and complained and told himself anew he should perhaps ask Pierre how to make a child whose ears were closed to the teachings of God listen to others. Hello, it's me, Hasekura. My shoulders are stiff, and they've been really hurting, so I am in pain when I have to change clothes or roll over in bed.

As of writing this afterword, I've only seen the rough sketch of the cover image, but I think Col is going to look very, very cool this time around. I think he acts cool in the story, too...or so I hope I've written him that way. The greatest objective of their journey has finally come into view, so it seems he's starting to finally act like a protagonist.

And now I'm starting to wonder how many volumes are left in this series, and at the same time I'm at the age where I start thinking things like, how many more years can I keep writing?

When I first debuted, I felt like I had an endless road in front of me.

I would love to reach 100 books published, but even if I manage to write three books a year, that's still seventeen years. I'm not even halfway there yet...

And when I realized Dengeki Bunko would be reaching its 50th anniversary at around that time, I shuddered. I bet AI with full human rights will be writing light novels by then. I wonder if humans will have a place anymore.

I think we'd start selling books like, "Written by a human!" Like they're traditional handmade craftwork. I feel like there could be a short story collection about Als talking about how there's a warmth to human-written stories. There probably already is.

I wrote all that so quickly, but I still have half a page left...

I really have nothing to say. I see many authors who often get asked to write essays and columns, and I think it's incredible they can do that. Oh, I ordered a fugu hot pot set through the hometown tax, so I'm looking forward to that. If I never release a next volume, please blame it on the fugu.

I once received a tip that if my hands stopped moving, I should write that

down. And so now I'm writing that my hands stopped. And now I filled two lines.

I think I should just aaaaaaaaaaaaaa to fill up space. People would be very angry with me if I did that on a manuscript that cost manuscript fees, but it's probably fine for the afterword, right? Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa...

Almost there!

Five lines left!

Four!

Three!

Two!

I'll see you in the next volume!

Isuna Hasekura

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