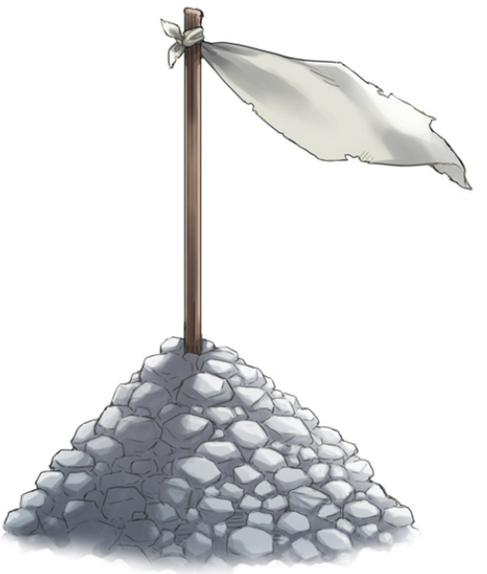

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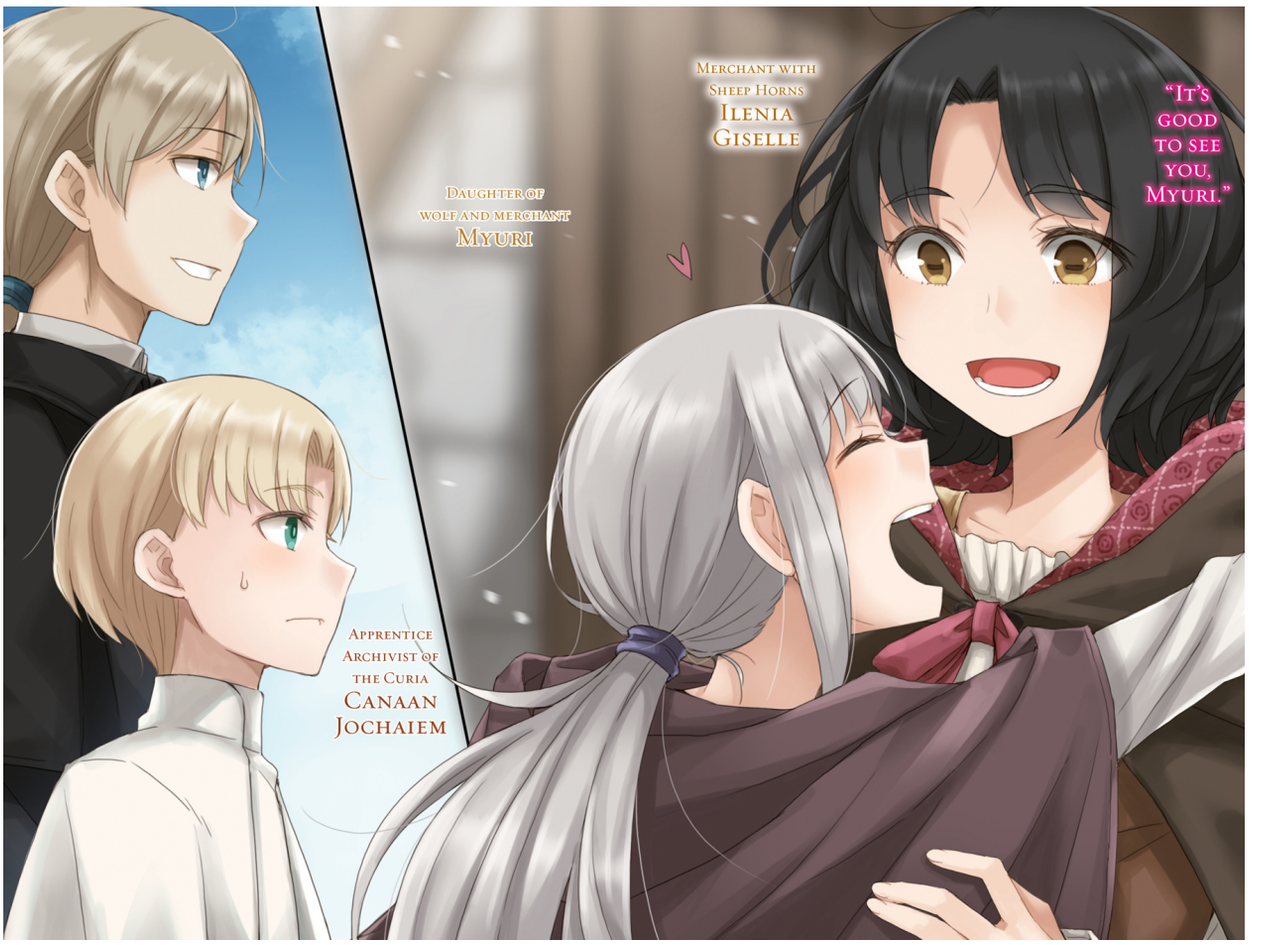
Wolf & Parchment

Vol. 10

New Theory Spice & Wolf

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




Merchant with Sheep Horns
Ilenia Giselle
"It's good to see you, Myuri."
Daughter of wolf and merchant
Myuri
Apprentice Archivist of the Curia
Canaan Jochaiem


Symbol of the Reformation, the Twilight Cardinal
Tote Col
"I believe this sky is much bluer."
"We should be much closer to God's throne here—if anyone can tell, it would be you."
One of the Seven Prince-Electors
Prince-Elector Duran
"I hear the sky in the world below is a different color. What say you?" he asked, and Col looked up in turn.


The walls were bleak, and it was barely furnished, but there were piles and piles of books. There were no grand portraits of saviors or depictions of angels on the walls. Instead, there was one enormous star chart.
"There she is," Myuri murmured. She gazed at a girl cradling a large book as she slumbered.
Astronomer
Amaretto

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Wolf & Parchment

<New Theory Spice & Wolf>

Vol. 10

Isuna Hasekura
Jyuu Ayakura

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NEW YORK

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ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt
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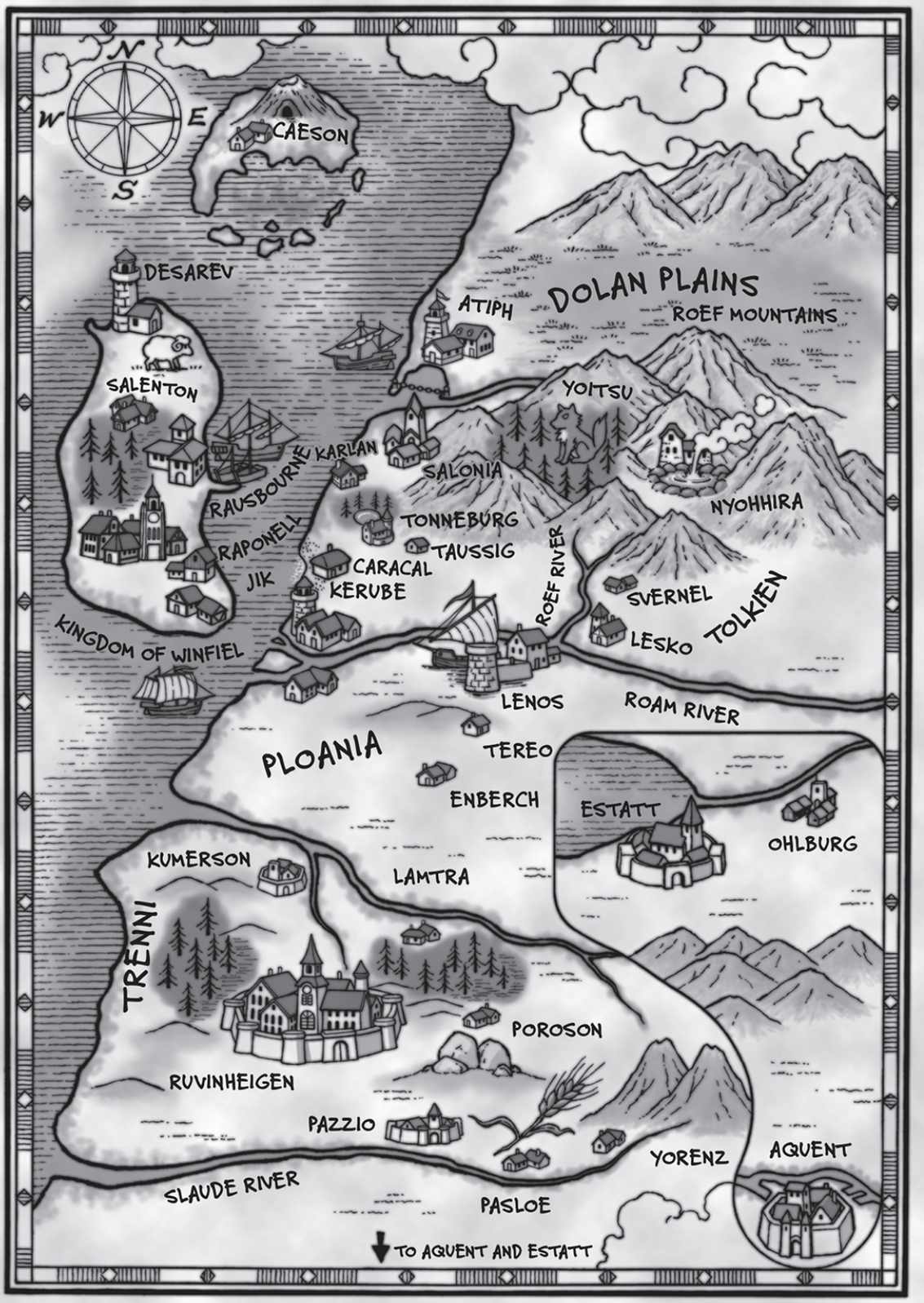
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

PROLOGUE



Prologue

There is a reason his clothes were black.

The night is always darkest just before dawn, after all.

Anyone who sees his vestments immediately understands exactly why the people call him the Twilight Cardinal.

There was a certain girl who had gotten a whiff of something along those lines from a bard who regaled many a tavern with their tales—she had spent night after night absorbed in putting these overstated passages to paper—and now, that girl stood before him.

Her brows were knit together, making for a laughably serious expression as she dipped her finger in a bowl of egg whites and ran it through his hair.

After countless little adjustments she straightened herself, took a step back, and gave a satisfied huff.

Col found all this a bit excessive, but his exasperation quickly faded. Looks counted for quite a lot in high-stakes situations.

In fact, even this mischievous, rambunctious girl cleaned up quite nicely when her iconic silver hair was plaited in braids and she slipped on pure white robes. This girl, who was sometimes referred to as the Saint of the Sun, looked him up and down, then nodded in approval.

The boy who had been waiting off to Col's right reverently held out the scripture for him to take.

Much like how a knight would hold a sword, or the way a merchant might carry a set of scales, Col took up the scripture. He understood this would help make him look the part of the Twilight Cardinal. Funnily enough, vanishingly few people had actually seen the real Twilight Cardinal with their own eyes. Coming across these eyewitnesses was almost as rare an occurrence.

And so just about anybody could claim to be the real Twilight Cardinal. It was not particularly hard to convince anyone who happened to be in earshot of this. The resulting fervor was real

enough to raise entire towns on empty plains seemingly overnight—a demonstration of the sheer power of the commonfolk's frustrations with the Church's tyranny, and their expectations for the Twilight Cardinal.

Meanwhile, the man himself had been much too naive and careless.

He realized now that it was unacceptable to allow opportunists and schemers to exploit that power. No longer could he shy away from duty and claim he was not yet ready to fill the shoes of such a grand figure.

He had no choice but to fight, even if that meant shouldering the burden of the people's impossibly high expectations.

That was his responsibility as the one who had raised the flag of this grand cause.

"Let's go, Brother."

The girl who played at being a saint held out her hand.

No matter what terrors or hardships awaited them, he could endure it all—so long as he had this little knight by his side.

And if he looked over his shoulder, he knew he would see the faces of friends and comrades seeing him off.

Col took a deep breath, and stepped forward as the Twilight Cardinal.

First, he would have an audience in the cathedral with the archbishop, ruler of this corner of the empire.

The archbishop was a person of great import, bestowed with the position of a secular noble within the empire. Winning over the archbishop would be a massive victory in his fight against the Church.

He could ask for no better adversary in his first battle.

Col walked through the vaulted hall of the cathedral and approached the great round stone table. Distinguished individuals were seated there, watching him with piercing gazes.

Yet he stood before them without an ounce of fear in him.

Chapter One



Chapter One

Boys born in small villages often swung around sticks and wanted to pretend to be a hero. They dreamed of one day proving themselves and winning glory on the battlefield.

On occasion, some boys found no passion in those dreams. They would instead devote themselves to the prayers the other children found so tiresome. They would ask for lessons from the bishop, who was the only one in the village who could read. Some eventually grew up to be merchants, notaries, or even members of the clergy.

Plenty of tales about legendary figures started out this way; it was a popular subject among bards in taverns. But everyone and everything had their strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes, those who made their dreams come true learned that things were not as they envisioned.

That was especially true for positions of great power—a common dream among common people.

"Brother…How long are we supposed to stay in this city?"

The carriage creaked and rattled as it trundled along. A thick, crimson curtain hung over the windows, immediately identifying the carriage as the property of a noble.

The Twilight Cardinal's rallying cry was righting the Church's wrongs and sweeping away the corruption and excess that had built up over decades of the Church's arrogance—as the Twilight Cardinal, Col felt somewhat conflicted about riding in such a luxurious carriage.

But just the other day, he had experienced firsthand what would happen if he tried to explore the city on foot.

Once the meeting at the cathedral had ended, Col turned down the archbishop's offer for a carriage ride back to the inn and decided to take a walk around Estatt.

When a fake Twilight Cardinal had hoodwinked the people of the city, silence filled Estatt, replacing the typical noise and bustle of the seasonal grand market. But now that those who had been

enthralled by the imposter had been doused with cold water and woken up, life had returned to Estatt.

This had been when Myuri asked to take a look around the market.

Col wanted to suggest they at least return to the inn and change first, but Myuri was about to burst after sitting through the very long meeting, and she was not particularly interested in listening to him.

Regional lords and other individuals of status attended the meeting, so Col had worn the habit Hyland had gifted to him. Myuri also wore her white robes, dressing up as the Saint of the Sun, a figure whose smile was said to cure illness.

Both their outfits were rather stuffy, but Col assumed it would be fine to take a little walk around the grand market.

It wasn't long before he realized his mistake. When he decided that greasy pork skewers clashed too much with Myuri's graceful appearance in her robes, he instead bought her some hard honey candies.

Then he looked around and was shocked by what he saw.

An unbelievable crowd of people had been staring at them from a distance.

As memories of that moment played in his head, he turned from the carriage curtains and glanced at Myuri sitting beside him.

"We will need to stay in this city for a little longer. First, we need to wait for officials to come from the Kingdom of Winfiel so that we can exchange memorandums with the archbishop regarding future matters. Moreover, the archbishop mentioned that several ruling nobles are on their way to Estatt because they heard we are here. We cannot leave until we've gotten acquainted with those nobles."

The recent commotion surrounding the fake Twilight Cardinal had happened precisely because his name had spread so far despite no one knowing what he looked like. Even if the talks with the nobles did not lead anywhere, simply becoming acquainted with them had meaning.

Of course, in Myuri's mind, conversations with important people meant delicious meals.

While they were indeed often treated to arrays of delicious-

looking dishes at every social function, people would constantly come over to greet them, ask for handshakes, offer a prayer, and even say that so-and-so's eldest son just so happens to be the right age for Myuri…And so they never had a free moment to actually eat.

Even Myuri grew listless under the constant attention, like an overstimulated cat.

Typically, she would immediately shed her saint robes and head into town with coppers in hand, but unfortunately, that was not an option.

And that was because the townsfolk knew their faces now.

"*Sigh*…I wish we could go someplace where no one knew us."

Myuri pulled Col close, burying her face in his side.

The people knew her face, and her hair was eye-catching even under normal circumstances—she had no hope of taking a leisurely stroll throughout the city.

And despite that, she was not the type who could bear to wait by herself at the inn, so she followed Col to all the meetings at the cathedral.

As a result, it was places like this carriage, where no one else was looking, that she was all over him like this. Col wondered what the people would think if they saw the Twilight Cardinal and the Saint of the Sun acting like this out on the street.

When he had bought her the honey candy at the market, the townsfolk had reportedly interpreted it as a display of the pure, pastoral love between brother and sister, but the Saint of the Sun was not so proper, and of course, the Twilight Cardinal was not so holy.

"Do you understand now why I said I didn't want any fame?" Col asked. He wore a small smile, but not because he enjoyed scolding Myuri.

It was because despite how much of a hassle fame was, it did have its benefits.

When they had originally dropped by the cathedral for research back when they were working to dispatch the imposters, entering the library required following a troublesome set of procedures and a sizable donation. But now they could come and go as they pleased, *and* they were allowed to borrow any book they wanted.

On that particular day, Col had taken out a valuable theological commentary on the scripture. As he treated every turn of the dusty pages like the tome was his dearest and greatest treasure, Myuri growled at him resentfully.

“We can’t even do what we want…”

The only places where they could act freely were in the carriage, at the inn, and at the warehouse Eve was renting.

Everywhere else, people were always watching. And whenever Col and Myuri were spotted, a crowd would quickly surround them to complain about illness, ask for good luck, or plead for God’s blessing on just about anything.

Col and Myuri could not find safe refuge at even the inn sometimes; a great big line would quickly form outside their room if the innkeeper was not careful.

“There are plenty of books in the cathedral library. I thought you were delighted you could go as you liked.”

Myuri was truly fed up with all the meetings, so she took every chance she could get to slip away and hide in the library. There were plenty of battle records and war chronicles there to keep her entertained.

But apparently there were swarms of people who wanted to catch a glimpse of the Saint of the Sun at the library.

The priests keeping the peace at the library had reportedly shooed away all the obvious gawkers, but they could not completely erase her from sight. And that meant Myuri had no choice but to sit up properly when she read her books; lounging around while chewing on jerky, letting her tail thwap the bed as she read at her leisure, was but a dream within a dream. She was terribly discontented.

“*Sigh*…And Uncle Luward was supposed to teach me sword fighting, too.”

The usually energetic Myuri was gone; now she was limp as moldy bread.

Though Col felt bad for her, he hoped this would temper some of her wild energy and teach her to be more ladylike.

With that thought in mind, he settled his hand on her head in a perfunctory manner and said, “Well, now you get to experience how it feels to be a princess plotting to escape the castle, don’t you?”

Myuri stopped whining, elbowed him in the side, and then sulked a bit before dozing off.

Just when it seemed as though Myuri was about to burst from the dissatisfaction of spending every day doing nothing but going back and forth between the inn and the cathedral, there was finally a lull in the meetings.

For the first time in a long while, Col and Myuri took the chance to visit the warehouse Eve was renting.

If they were to visit without adequate preparation, the townsfolk would swarm the warehouse, and they would have to call in the city guard; they could not simply drop by as they pleased.

And so Myuri was in the courtyard, working hard on her sword swings as though she were cutting away her frustration.

The rest of the adults gathered on the first floor of the warehouse to discuss future plans.

It had not been long ago that the warehouse had been empty and quiet; now it was filled to the brim with cargo. With the Twilight Cardinal's official backing, Eve was working hard and handling a great deal of business.

And so the first thing on the agenda was to move some cargo out of the way to make room, after which a long table was brought in so they could unfurl a large map over it.

The person practically hovering over the map, writing all over it, was one who was more excited about the Twilight Cardinal than anyone else—Canaan.

"With this much support from the nobility, I believe it will be easy to not only gain support from the Estatt archbishop, but from the other prince-electors as well."

What filled the map were the names of all the nobles who had traveled to the city just to see the Twilight Cardinal.

"In fact, inquiries are coming in not just from those under the archbishop's jurisdiction, but from all over the empire. Everyone is watching you, Master Col!"

Canaan had been acting the part of a loyal private secretary during all the meetings and talks.

There was an astounding number of towns, villages, and

churches within the territory Estatt ruled over, and dozens of people submitted requests to meet Col each day. There was even a significant number of notable lords as well, and that meant Col quickly lost track of who was who right from the start.

It was then that Canaan proactively wrote down all their names, spoke with officials who had special petitions, and whenever they were invited to a special feast in their territory, he skillfully turned down the offer with the appropriate apologies and excuses.

Canaan had evidently learned how to act this way working at the Holy See, which was also constantly filled with people who came bearing many a petition or appeal. With noble grace and a dash of aloofness, he deftly handled all the invitations by politely assuring each one they would certainly attend if they ever had the chance.

If Col were in charge, he would agonize every time he had to turn someone down, thinking it was rude, and would probably end up giving in to persistent petitioners. Other people who saw this happen would then invite him to *their* home, and he would soon reach a point of no return.

Col knew his personal knight was not much use in this department, so having such a reliable helper was a lifesaver. However, Canaan's role meant he was typically by Col's side for the whole duration of these sorts of meetings, and that did create one problem.

Whenever he met up with Myuri to return to the inn, the wolf girl would stare at him suspiciously and begin sniffing the air around him loudly and theatrically.

She would then spend most of her time in his personal space, not necessarily because she missed him, but to reassert her territory.

With a tired sigh he let his gaze flit over to Canaan, who was beginning to write down the names and locations of more nobles who might end up joining their cause, only for someone else to call for him.

"Master Col, you have quite a mountain of inquiries as to when you'll be putting your teachings to paper." It was Le Roi, the bookseller. "I think it might be time to pick up the pen," he added with a friendly smile.

His inviting smile belied his incredible cunning—he was the one who had suggested in the first place that if Col were to write a book criticizing the Church, it would sell like hotcakes.

But the archbishop himself had said something similar. More specifically, he had told Col the Twilight Cardinal should write down his thoughts as soon as possible.

"I agree with Mister Le Roi's idea!" Canaan exclaimed enthusiastically as he lifted his gaze from the map.

Canaan admired the Twilight Cardinal so much it always put Myuri on edge—and of course, this came from a very real problem.

Rumors about the Twilight Cardinal were spreading in places and ways the man himself was oblivious to. And that meant the general impression the people had of him was so exaggerated they believed he could talk to dry grass and make flowers bloom, or that he could summon dark storm clouds and bring down lightning on any corruption he saw.

Silly tales like that were not even the worst of it, since some were causing active harm to his image; apparently, there were rumors of him carrying around the grim reaper's scythe, beheading evildoers wherever he spotted them.

Merchants and the like from towns that were not very well connected had even approached him, clutching their hats, and pleaded to him with the most sincere expressions—

"We would like to obey God's teachings, but, O Twilight Cardinal! It will ruin our livelihoods if profits themselves are banned! Please, have mercy on us, Twilight Cardinal!"

But assumptions like those were not limited to rural towns or those without much outside access.

The archbishop and other clergy of Estatt had acted in a similar manner.

After the incident with Ohlburg, it was hard to forget the looks on their faces when he asked them to be lenient with the imposter and Hobeln, who was being manipulated by the imposter.

The archbishop himself had thought the Twilight Cardinal had been traveling the world in search of evildoers so that he could bring down the wrath of God onto these wretches.

That was when it really struck Col that he needed to collect his

thoughts and write them into a book so he could correct the misunderstandings about him that were circulating throughout the world.

But he was reluctant.

“I am eager to challenge the Church, yes, but I am not particularly interested in spreading my personal thoughts…”

And he knew no matter what he wrote, it would still invite misunderstandings and misconstructions, and that scared him.

He recalled the moment he had turned around that day, when he and Myuri had leisurely been walking around the grand market, when he had bought her that honey candy.

Myuri had, of course, realized there were people following and watching them, but she had apparently not thought they would be so enthusiastic about it. In an unusual change of pace, she had acted like a real little sister and hid behind him.

The thought of expressing his thoughts to these people frightened him, and he also felt like it was presumptuous of him.

Though he had made the decision to bear the name of the Twilight Cardinal, he did not yet have the strength needed to carry the full weight of the title. If he were to take on such a weighty duty all at once, his legs would give out.

“Then what about street sermons?”

The suggestion had come from Pierre, the wandering priest sitting in the corner of the warehouse fervently reading the scripture.

“Street sermons are fantastic. You feel the true pleasure of directly guiding people onto the path of God! Why don’t we hold a sermon with all three of us, including Mister Canaan?! I feel it would be worth competing with the both of you if you were to join me!”

Pierre was adept at getting those who typically did not listen to stop and consider God’s teachings—his passion earned him vague smiles from both Canaan and Col.

But the reason he was in Eve’s warehouse was because Col had been relying on him a great deal recently.

Supporters of the Twilight Cardinal were not the only ones who came to the cathedral. Some visitors were here for sight-seeing—including a number of rather critical lords and nobles. Whenever these people offered barbed words along with their

handshakes, Pierre would appear. He would always rush to the scene, scripture in hand, as if he were heading into battle. Col found this surprisingly reassuring.

Then a dry clap rang out in the warehouse.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m glad to see you all hale and hearty, but you need to settle on what city we’re going to next. I need time to prep, you know.”

Eve stepped into the hall—she was the one who had been clothing, feeding, and housing Col and Myuri, and the one who oversaw the extensive groundwork that needed to be laid down. As Hyland’s representative, she was the one taking care of the more secular affairs for the Twilight Cardinal’s entourage.

“The most sensible thing would be heading to one of the remaining prince-elector’s territories next,” Le Roi proclaimed as he looked down at the open map. “I believe talks would go smoothly if we spoke to an elector who is on good terms with the archbishop of Estatt. We could also make our way to the other cathedral city within the empire, but I do not recommend taking that route. What do you think, Archivist Canaan?”

With a smudge of ink still on his cheek, Canaan replied with an earnest nod.

“I agree with Mister Le Roi. Brothers who share a house might choose not to listen to one another. The Estatt cathedral, especially, has traditionally fought the Holy See for authority, and it would not be unusual for the opposing cathedral to be on much friendlier terms with the Holy See.”

When the ancient empire was expanding its territory, the priests who had accompanied the army built a church, and it was said to have served as the foundation for the city of Estatt.

And so it was said Estatt’s cathedral was either built at the same time as the Holy See, or was perhaps even older; of course, it was recognized as having great authority, and as a result it was not on especially good terms with the central governing body of the Church.

“So,” Canaan continued. “Since we’re gathering allies for the ecumenical council, His Grace the archbishop has suggested we visit Prince-Elector Gobrea, since he’s well connected.”

“Gobrea…I’m pretty sure he’s the most powerful prince-elector in the empire,” Eve murmured. She folded her arms and stared at

the map. “If we get him, then that means the other electors will follow. And if we get the majority of the electors…then the emperor himself will side with Col, too. Assuming all goes well, that would make it the easiest route.”

Col wished he could earn most people’s support by accurately preaching on the wrongdoings of the Church, but those in secular power often decided what side to join for political reasons.

And that meant he had to be careful how he played his pieces on the board.

He would probably never grow fond of this sort of business, but on the day they had exposed the imposters, as he watched the muddy floodwaters surge from the diverted river, he vowed to play the part of the Twilight Cardinal.

A bitter taste had begun spreading in Col’s mouth and he swallowed hard before he said, “Then let’s go with that. Can I trust you all to get things moving?”

He felt as though nothing about him had changed since leaving Nyohhira.

But people with power had flocked to him and were offering their assistance. And it was their help and reach that allowed him to cover every corner of the open map on the table.

“Of course,” Canaan said.

“Naturally,” Le Roi said.

“You have my help as well,” Pierre said.

Once the others had given their consent, Eve spoke last, like the head of the household. “Getting used to being in charge yet?” she asked, a tease in her grin.

Col shot back a wry smile of his own, one he felt was a little more grown-up than the ones he used to give her back when she called him *Little Col*.

The officials from the Winfiel Kingdom arrived.

The fight against the Church had originally begun because the Winfiel Kingdom had spoken out against their tyranny, so the world knew them as the leaders of the movement.

It was also widely known the Twilight Cardinal was on friendly terms with Winfiel royalty, and he had the royals’ backing.

But society was rather picky when it came to fame and renown.

While many of the mainland lords were not particularly fond of the Church, that did not necessarily mean they were happy the Kingdom of Winfiel was leading the charge.

To make matters more complicated, the Winfiel Kingdom and the many territories that stood opposite it on the other side of the strait historically have always been deeply involved with one another, for better or worse.

Even if they decided to recruit those who agreed to side with the Twilight Cardinal in a heartbeat, there were still plenty of problems they had to sort out first. Col was completely clueless when it came to the subtleties of these situations, so he needed the help of these officials—the professionals in this sort of business.

As these bureaucrats surrounded him, and Col slowly transformed into the Twilight Cardinal, they at last penned the official agreement that confirmed the Estatt cathedral would assist the Twilight Cardinal.

Then, right as he felt like one weight had finally been lifted off his shoulders, the officials from the Winfiel Kingdom saddled him with an armful of letters.

When he brought them all back to their room at the inn, Myuri looked at him with a disgruntled half smile. Half of the thick bundles of parchment were letters from Hyland, after all.

They were filled with worries about their travels—had they fallen ill? Were they eating properly? A good portion of them were also reports—the printing of the vernacular scripture was going well, and soon they would be able to support the Twilight Cardinal's cause from afar; the Knights of Saint Kruza, who Col and Myuri had once helped, were visiting every corrupt church within the kingdom and knocking sense into them, et cetera.

More than a few were addressed to Myuri, of course. Before leaving the kingdom, Hyland had taught her how to act like the Saint of the Sun—one of these letters included detailed instructions on etiquette so she could continue refining her act.

Surprisingly, the bundle included a seasonal greeting from Hyland's older brother, Prince Klevend, and even a letter from Sharon.

It was addressed to Myuri, of course, sharply advising the little wolf stop overworking her fellow birds.

Myuri seemed pleased reading the letters from Hyland, but the letter from Sharon caused her to pick up her pen like she was arming herself for battle.

Meanwhile, the meetings at the cathedral moved toward a more businesslike atmosphere due to the presence of the Winfiel officials, and so the number of lords who came by to say hello began to dwindle.

Col and his companions were already preparing to move to a new town.

This was the brief moment of rest and calm before they ventured off again.

Col was sitting quietly in the inn room, for the first time in a very long while, flipping through the scripture, when a pigeon landed on the windowsill. A letter was attached to its leg, and he assumed it was part of Myuri and Sharon's cross-strait spat.

But the pigeon did not smell of the sea, and its wings did not seem as though it had been battered by the ocean winds.

Instead, it smelled terribly dry and dusty, and unlike the city pigeons who were spoiled with choice for food, there was a sharpness to its features.

Myuri, who had been lounging on the bed and writing her latest fantasy knight tales, lifted her head and nudged closer.

"Who's it from?"

"Wait just a moment."

Col undid the paper wrapped around the pigeon's leg.

On the small scrap of paper was even smaller writing.

"…It's from Vadan."

"What, the mouse?"

Myuri peered at him curiously. Vadan was a so-called rat of the sea—a mouse spirit, one who piloted a ship that ventured far from shore, and who had recently collaborated closely with an eccentric noble in a smuggling ring.

But even Col's nose could tell this pigeon did not smell like the sea at all.

Myuri drew her face in closer to the pigeon, and the pigeon seemed rather displeased by that.

"What did he say?"

The pigeon craned its neck back, ready to escape at any moment, and Myuri stepped back. She grabbed a handful of beans from the sack and scattered them on the windowsill as a reward for the pigeon.

"Let's see, it says…"

As Col's eyes skimmed the brief message, he cut himself off.

The pigeon was much less wary after receiving its treat, and so Myuri ran her fingers over its feathers. When Col stopped, Myuri stared up at him blankly.

"Get changed," he said.

"Huh?"

"We're going to Miss Eve's."

Myuri looked at him, her wolf ears flicking every which way, as though trying to pick out the sounds of prey in the forest.

"Miss Ilenia has been placed in jail."

Myuri's eyes widened, and she crushed the remaining beans in her hand.

There was a crowd of people loitering outside the inn hoping to catch a glimpse of the Twilight Cardinal; Col pushed his way through the crowd so he and Myuri could get in the carriage and hurry to Eve's.

When they got there, there were mountains of goods and a throng of people outside.

But these were not townsfolk here to offer their prayers.

As Myuri stepped down from the carriage, a cloud of melancholy crossed her expression.

"Oh, right. Uncle Luward's leaving already."

The name *Myuri* had once belonged to an ancient wolf.

The Myuri Mercenary Company had passed down that ancient name over generations. They were the ones who had rushed to Col's aid when they were taking care of the pretender Twilight Cardinal, but there was no place for them in a peaceful city.

Once the commotion died down and the officials from the kingdom had arrived, the mercenary band had decided it was time for them to go.

"I guess…they're not coming with us to save Miss Ilenia."

If Myuri had been an innocent, naive girl, then Col might have

said, “I suppose not,” but she was neither innocent nor naive. She knew exactly what Ilenia was.

Ilenia’s characteristic fluffy hair made her look mild-mannered, but she was no ordinary human. She was, in fact, a massive sheep, one who could tow a beached ship with nothing more than a rope tying her to the vessel.

Which meant, if she had been thrown in jail, it was likely more apt to say she had chosen to obediently sit in a jail cell. And upon closer inspection of Vadan’s letter, there was no sense of urgency in the way he wrote.

So really, Myuri’s disappointment that Luward and the other mercenaries could not help them save Ilenia was another way of expressing an entirely different emotion buried in her chest.

“Traveling always comes with good-byes,” Col said, placing his hand on Myuri’s head. Surprisingly, she did not swat him away.

Despite that, once she pushed open the heavy doors to the warehouse, a knightly expression appeared on her face once more, as though she knew she could not show weakness in front of the mercenaries.

“Listen up, everyone! I want to go save Miss Ilenia!” she shouted.

Eve and Luward, both of whom had just so happened to be discussing the departure inside, looked over in surprise.

They sent someone out to go fetch Canaan and Pierre, who were busy working at the cathedral with the kingdom officials.

They also had someone look for Le Roi, who had gone to stock books at one of the city trading companies.

In the meantime, Col told Eve what Vadan’s letter said, and he asked Luward for his opinion.

“There has to be a good reason why Ilenia’s letting them put her in jail.” Eve was Ilenia’s employer.

“But is there a chance that someone *way* stronger arrested her?” Myuri asked.

Ilenia had a decidedly sheepish calm about her, but she was exceptionally stubborn and acted with decisiveness.

Col assumed Myuri had asked her question to consider every possibility, no matter how remote, but what the rambunctious

girl said next was something Col was not expecting.

"Wasn't it the legendary mercenary king who arrested her?"

What?

Col looked at her, confused; Luward folded his arms, contemplative.

"Sounds like this Ilenia girl has power like the rest of you do…I haven't heard any rumors the mercenary king might be the same, though. And the *legend* part actually belongs to his ancestor—haven't heard a lick of the current-day king going out to any wars."

Luward was seriously entertaining Myuri's question. He was especially kind to Myuri, but it did not seem as though he was simply going along with one of her wild fantasies.

"May I ask who this legendary mercenary king is?"

Col could not help but wonder.

"You don't know, Brother?" Myuri replied. "The legendary mercenary king, Iron Arm Duran!"

Why would I know who that is? is what Col was about to coolly reply, but he found himself tripping over that name.

Myuri loved stories, and she spoke a lot about them; he wondered if he had first heard the name from her.

No, he had encountered it quite recently. When that thought crossed his mind, he realized it had been written on the map.

"Prince-Elector Duran."

He was one of the seven prince-electors within the Holy Livorian Empire.

"You said Ilenia was looking for someone when she found herself in Duran's territory and was thrown in jail for kidnapping, right?" Eve asked.

Myuri nodded. "It said she was looking for a fortune-teller."

"An *astronomer*," Col corrected.

Astronomers and astrologers were the same in Myuri's mind.

"She must have been looking for an astronomer in her quest for the new continent, since they research celestial navigation," he continued. "She must have learned that Prince-Elector Duran employed a capable astronomer, so she went to go see them and found out they were missing. Miss Ilenia must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time—it seems they got the wrong idea that she was involved with the astronomer's disappearance…

That's the impression I got from the letter."

The paper the letter was written on was not very big, so there were scant details, and it was likely done with the possibility in mind the pigeon might be caught by a hunter. All the letter asked was that they come to the city Prince-Elector Duran rules, the mountain city of Wobern, and help resolve the problem.

"It's asking you to resolve the issue, implying they're not asking you to save Ilenia."

Eve was somehow amused by this.

Luward added, "But I kind of get why they asked for Little Col—er, the Twilight Cardinal."

Col had first met Luward when he was around Myuri's age, and that was what he used to call him—it almost felt deliberate he had called Col that first before correcting himself.

"Prince-Elector Duran's territory is a harsh mountain range. Land's barren, and they're no strangers to famine. The only real jobs they have out there come from the lumber industry, thanks to their thick forests, or smithing, which consumes a lot of that lumber. Everyone else picks up a spear and makes a living with mercenary work. The Duran family worked their way up from mercenaries to imperial prince-elector originally anyway, so you could say it's tradition."

"They're strong, but not very adaptable," Eve added, bringing a grin to Luward's face.

"They're hardworking when it comes to their jobs and they're faithful. They're mountain people, so they're implacable and narrow-minded. Probably the people who are least compatible with the fancy church folk who live on the plains."

Col sighed when he saw the way Myuri craned her neck forward in excitement; he then turned to Luward and asked, "Do you mean to say it's likely they'll be our allies in our fight against the Church?"

"Pretty likely, I think," Luward replied. "And considering what's coming next, geographically speaking, it's not a bad idea."

"Geographically?" Col asked in return.

When he did, Myuri leaned over the large table and dragged the map toward herself.

"What's that mean, Boss?" she asked.

Luward laughed when she called him that, then pointed at a

spot on the map. “Wobern’s here.”

“Hmm…That’s really far inland. I bet it’s not humid there at all!”

The humid wind blowing in from the bay and the surrounding boglands meant bread could go bad in an instant in the Estatt area unless painstakingly stored.

She was still very unhappy with how her hair frizzed and her tail got so sticky.

“It’s really east…and then south from here. Is it warmer there?”

“Opposite. It’s cold, and it’s more like the north than things here.”

“…Huh?”

It sounded like a riddle, and when Myuri thought about it, her ears and tail popped out.

“Myuri, ears and tail,” Col reminded her.

Myuri gave him a look, as though believing it was fine since Canaan and the others were not around, but she ultimately put them away.

“Wobern’s known as *the* mountain city,” Luward explained.

“…”

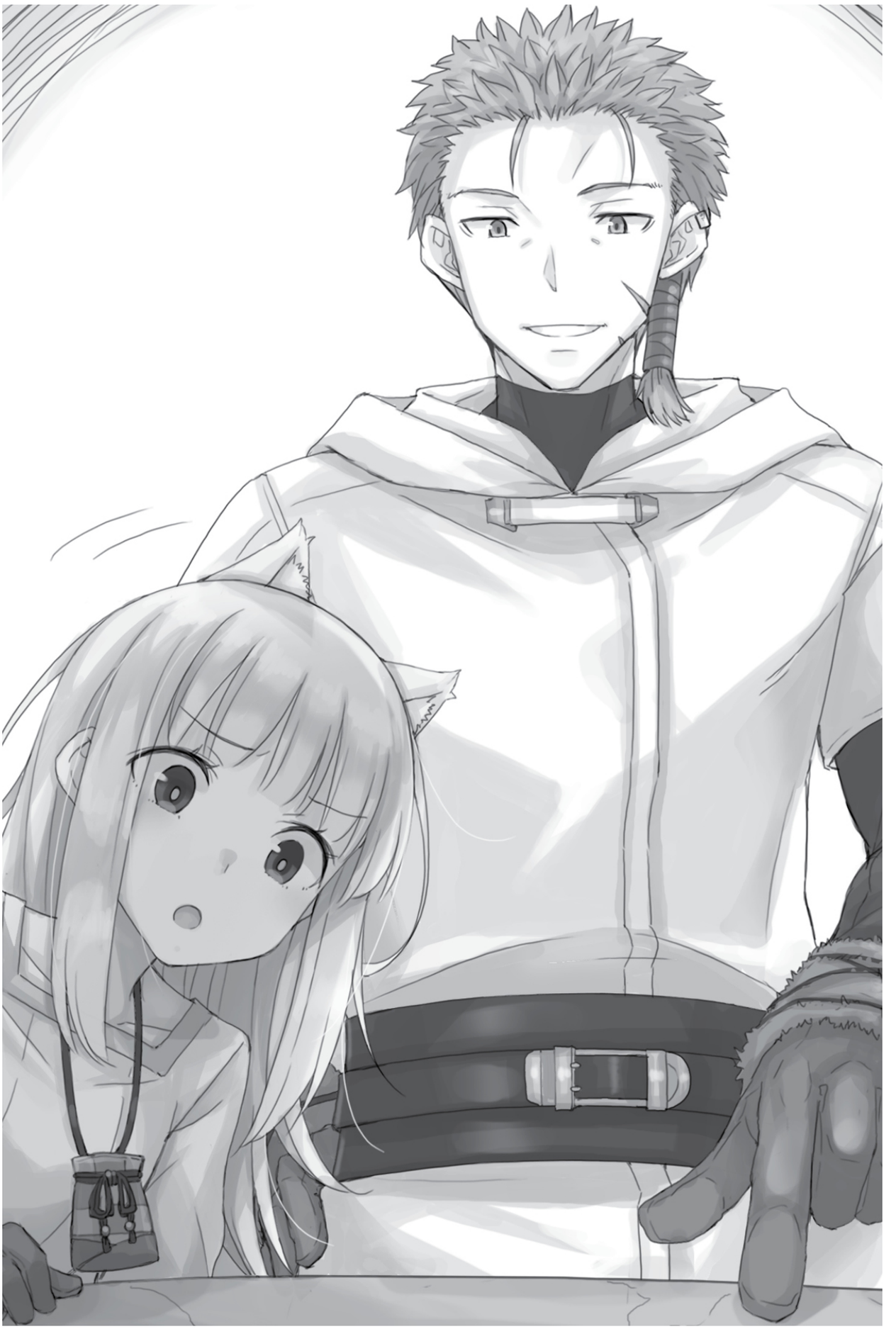
Myuri furrowed her brow, looking like she wanted to emphasize that *her* home was in the mountains, too.

“It’s nothing like Nyohhira. The peaks reach all the way to the sky, and no trees grow on those mountains—even the best knights from the old imperial era had second thoughts about crossing them.”

“You’d be able to go straight from the north to the south without those mountains in the way. That mountain range makes merchants cry,” Eve added.

Myuri’s jaw hung open in surprise as she stared at the map.

“They say that a long time ago, during the time of the ancient empire, the famously dauntless imperial army paved a road through the mountains. But to southerners, that story’s basically a saying that means something’s impossible. And *that’s* why Wobern isn’t considered a southern city. In terms of how people move from place to place, it’s considered the southernmost point of the north.”



Looking at the map, the main seat of the Church, the Holy See, was not all that far from Wobern. The distance between Estatt and Aquent was about the same.

But the reason it was not considered a part of the south was because the interrupting mountain range was so forbidding.

“Basically every road going through it is blocked off. Snow piles up in the winter, and spring is snowmelt season—bridges fall, roads wash out, it’s nothing but trouble. Wobern sits in a basin surrounded by these mountains, making it a natural fortress.”

Nyohhira was also in the mountains, but it sat more in the depths of a far-reaching range of relatively gentle slopes, so it was a different beast entirely.

Myuri was nothing but impressed, and her eyes shone as Luward told her about the city.

“But the mountains to the north of Wobern aren’t as steep. There’s a big river that flows down that way, see, and if you follow it *all* the way through these valleys, you’ll end up at the sea to the west, here.”

“Oh, we stopped at that city when we took the boat from Rausbourne, right?” Myuri asked.

Hyland was currently stationed in Rausbourne—when Col and Myuri left her and came to the mainland, they had come by boat. They had passed several coastal cities along the way, and one of them was a port city called Ahberg.

“But Uncle, if this place is so hard to get to, then why’d you say it was good geographically?”

Luward looked at Myuri and shrugged.

“The mountain range isn’t *actually* impassable. Determined people can get through them. That means it’d be *real* easy to launch a surprise attack on the heart of the damned Church from this mountain city.”

Myuri’s eyes snapped wide open and her ears and tail popped out again, but the way her fur stood on end was a little different than last time.

Col decided not to scold her. Instead he asked Luward, “If we were to gain Prince-Elector Duran’s support, since he rules Wobern, that would put considerable pressure on the Holy See, yes?”

“It would. The Holy See’s on a nice, flat plain. On clear days, you can barely see the mountains on the horizon—even though no one’s ever built a real road through those mountains before, I bet the pope would still be mighty uncomfortable knowing his mortal enemy’s just over that ridge.”

The wolfish grin on his face was perfect for a ferocious mercenary.

“This Ilenia works for you, right, ma’am? She’s probably thought about that, and that might be why she’s called on the Twilight Cardinal,” he remarked.

Regardless of the way he addressed her, Eve gave an irritable sigh.

“Something troubling you?” he asked her.

Eve stared at Luward.

“Two things. One—whether or not you and the other mercenaries are joining us.”

Myuri’s tail stood at attention, like a dog shown a piece of jerky.

Luward noticed this—he shook his head apologetically.

“We won’t be, unfortunately.”

“Why not?!” Myuri asked with such ferocity Col thought she might snap at him.

As Luward gently calmed her, his open palms facing her, he said, “It’s not cheap to take a whole load of people through the mountains. I mean, I bet Miss Eve’s wallet could handle the cost. But the bigger problem is we’d be walking into the mercenary king’s territory.”

Myuri’s ears flicked at those words.

“Plus, considering where the city is, we can’t claim we were just passing by. All roads that lead to Wobern, end in Wobern.” Luward put his hands on his hips and gave a tired smile. “What would you do if a whole pack of other wolves came into your territory, kiddo?”

The silver wolf pup looked a little more grown-up than she normally did.

“I’d want to know what they’re plotting.”

“Exactly. Two strong wolves can’t share the same land. Minus male-female pairs, of course.”

When Luward said that, Myuri, for some reason, glanced

briefly at Col, then exhaled in understanding.

“I can lend you one or two of my best men for protection and guidance. ’Course, I don’t mind if the only payment I get is for their meals,” Luward said, looking at Eve. “So this is where we say good-bye, Little Miss.”

Myuri’s expression suddenly changed from that of the village menace to that of a young girl.

“Am I gonna see you again?”

“Of course you will. Call for me whenever you need me. I’ll be right there.”

Hearing that from such a tough-looking man like Luward would be a fatal blow for most girls.

Myuri was no exception. In a burst of emotion, she leaped at him for a hug.

“So, what’s your other worry, ma’am?” Luward asked Eve as he hugged Myuri back.

Eve was a miser through and through and seemed to relish in acting like it—she was astonished by the sight of Myuri hugging Luward, tail wagging, and replied quietly.

“Hard to do trade in Wobern. The locals have a death grip on the few trade routes into the city. Might as well empty my coin purse now if we go with your plan.”

“Sounds like a big problem for you!” Luward teased.

“It’s not funny. I’m the one supporting you through this, and you people don’t come cheap.”

Once Eve said that, Luward laid out what they needed for their journey to Wobern, and she sent some of her people out on an urgent mission to buy all those things from the grand market.

They initially planned to get to Wobern by going to Ahberg first and then traveling upstream, but they scrapped that idea when they saw how long it would take.

Even though it did not seem Ilenia was in any particular danger, it had been enough for Vadan to send a pigeon their way, so it was likely best to get there as soon as possible.

And so they decided they would travel east from Estatt and then take one of the very few mountain paths from the skirt of the range that led to Wobern.

“Every time I’ve had to say good-bye to someone in my mercenary life, I’ve been the one leaving. It’s kind of strange to be on the other side for once.”

Col had assumed that Luward and the other mercenaries would be leaving Estatt first, but the seasonal winds were making it quite difficult to secure a ship. And so Col and Myuri’s party was leaving first.

With everyone gathered at the front of Eve’s warehouse, Luward seemed to be having fun.

“You *have* to teach me sword stuff next time, okay?” Myuri insisted.

“Of course I will,” Luward replied. “But you’ve gotta bulk up before then. Eat well, sleep well.”

Luward’s advice was fitting, but as her older brother, Col wished it was not something he said to Myuri specifically. She was already eating and sleeping well, after all.

“Are we going, then?”

Myuri was always ready to dash off like a burst of mushroom spores at the start of every new adventure, but this time, the signal for departure was a reluctant question.

Col nodded with a troubled smile.

“We are. Miss Eve, I’m leaving plenty in your hands—including communication with Heir Hyland.”

“I know. I’ll leave some of my people at the cities along the way. Look for them if something comes up.”

Eve was staying behind in Estatt. Beside her, Pierre lifted his cane along with his voice.

“We shall take care of the cathedral!”

“I will be following in your footsteps before long.”

Along with Pierre, Le Roi would also be remaining in Estatt for a short while—he would be heading to Wobern using a different route later. He had to stay in Estatt because he needed to fill the orders of the local nobles who wanted their own copies of the vernacular translation of the scripture.

But there was also another reason why he would be headed for Wobern on a different route.

Ilenia was in jail because a certain astronomer had gone missing. Astronomers were closely related to astrologers, and astrologers were practically heathens.

And while they were unclear about the particulars of Ilenia's predicament, they decided it would be worthwhile looking into the identity of this astronomer at the center of it all. So Le Roi decided he would look at the booksellers' trading records first before heading to Wobern.

If someone needed books in mountainous Wobern, then there was little doubt they would have to rely on the nearest port city, and what sort of books this astronomer was reading would shed some light on whether they were a genuine heretic.

Le Roi had also given a belly-shaking laugh, declaring his wide midriff would not be able to fit on the narrow mountain roads. But since Luward had nodded in response to that statement with a straight face, Col and Canaan exchanged glances.

Were the roads really that difficult?

With those worries in mind, the Wobern entourage ended up being one of Eve's employees, one of Luward's men, Canaan and his bodyguard, Col, and Myuri.

It seemed it was only Col and Canaan who were uncertain if they would be able to traverse the harsh mountain paths.

"Bye, Uncle!"

Myuri, riding the same horse as Col, kept turning around to wave at Luward.

Luward and the other mercenaries still had to prepare for their own departure, so his men were busily running to and fro; Luward, however, waved back every time Myuri did. She paused to look back at the tough-looking mercenary boss with a delighted smile on her face.

At last, they followed the bend in the road. When they could no longer see him past the building blocking their way, Myuri finally turned to face forward and settled into her seat on the horse's back.

"Finished?"

"I wish I could run there and back, and give him another big hug."

She said it with such earnestness that Col could not help the smile that crept onto his face. She sat right between his arms, so he squeezed her with both of his elbows.

"Is this not enough?"

"Your arms are too skinny!" she complained, and then rested

her back on his chest. “I hope Miss Ilenia’s okay.”

“She will be. What I’m more worried about is whether we can make it through the mountain paths in one piece.”

Myuri turned her head to look up at the clear sky, then bent farther back to look up at Col.

“I think you’re the only one worried about that.”

“What? Isn’t Archivist Canaan…the same as me?”

“He said when he came to the kingdom from the Holy See, he took a similar route.”

Indeed, when Col first met Canaan in Rausbourne, Canaan was in tatters, and it seemed like only his eyes were shining. Their traveling expenses were not entirely reliable, and they were unable to secure passage by sea, so Canaan had pushed past his bodyguard’s objections and traveled north through the mountain ranges.

“Plus, Canaan has it more together than you do, Brother. You’re going to trip, stumble over roots, and then fall off a cliff.” She could be so harsh precisely because they were close.

But he knew, of course, that it was a leading statement.

“Yes, you are correct. And that is why I need my knight to protect me.”

Myuri was sad she had to say good-bye to Luward, and so that was exactly what she wanted to hear.

“Heh. Of course I will!” she said, cheerfully readjusting herself in her seat. She stretched, and then snuggled up against Col again.

“I’m gonna nap until it’s my turn to shine, okay? I need to eat well and sleep well, after all.”

“……”

It did not take very long for her to use Luward’s advice as a shield.

Despite his total exasperation, he squeezed her on either side with his skinny arms so she would not fall off the horse while she slumbered.

On the second day after their departure from Estatt, they finally spotted the mountains they planned to conquer on the far horizon.

They appeared suddenly from the flat of the plains, which

made Col wonder what sort of whim led God to create a landscape like this.

Not only that, but what they were seeing was just one part of the whole range—beyond those treacherous peaks was a ring of truly steep mountains, like the crown a king among kings would wear.

On the third day, their road started to slant up and down, and by the fifth day, there was a drastic decrease in the number of people on the roads. They arrived at a relatively large town that evening, which is where many travelers would make final preparations before heading into the mountains proper.

While there were those ready to head into the mountains on one hand, the town was also filled with those who had finally made it through the range, and this was their first lively place in a long while.

That meant the town had a strange aura about it—it was filled with the excitement and unease of those about to make their trip, while also brimming with the relief and freedom of those who had made it through.

There was no chance Myuri could behave herself in such a place.

Worried about her and her high spirits, Col accompanied her as they went around visiting stalls. And the locals seemed to have seen right through them, picking out the unique tension hanging around those about to venture into the mountains. While Myuri was looking at decorations, the stall keeper told her all sorts of terrifying stories about the roads.

Though Col could feel himself shaking, the stall keeper said, “No need to worry. Keeping this protective charm on you will keep you from falling down the steepest of cliffs. This is a fine article, one even the Church themselves have recognized.”

What he held out to them was an iron charm in the shape of a goat.

Col took it as borrowing the strength of a mountain goat, which could traverse practically vertical walls with ease, to make the worst of roads no big deal, but Myuri was terribly upset by this and turned down the offer.

“Why a goat? A wolf makes *way* more sense!” Myuri was still ranting when they left the store, and she sulked. “And I don’t

think we need a mountain guide!" It seemed as though her bad mood was not caused by the charm alone. "I'm more than enough. You don't have to hire a guide."

Myuri was oddly proud of being born and raised in the deep mountain village of Nyohhira.

But according to the information Eve had collected in Estatt, knowing how to traverse mountain roads was simply not enough for this journey.

"It is not *just* that the roads are treacherous," Col explained. "But it sounds as though there is a great deal of erosion due to landslides and snowmelt. We need thorough knowledge of the state of the roads, and what huts we can take refuge in when there are sudden changes in the weather. The act of fishing may be the same at any body of water, but things are vastly different between the river and the sea, no?"

Myuri gave a halfhearted nod when he explained it this way, but she still seemed dissatisfied. Perhaps she had pictured herself leading everyone through the harsh mountain roads.

Especially since this time they were headed to the legendary mercenary king's territory.

Before they left, she had read everything she could about the mercenary king at the cathedral library. Additionally, she had asked Eve to summon a city bard to sing for her every tale about the mercenary king.

Her head was filled with nothing but thoughts of adventure.

Col let her displeasure wash off him and made his way to the town trading hall to hire a guide for their journey the following day.

Myuri was fully cranky, and decided she would be going to sleep in a huff.

As Col grew tired of her upset, he finished arranging for a guide and returned to the inn, where he decided to read through the scripture until they found one for them.

As he did, Myuri's drooping ears and tail tensed, suddenly on edge.

A moment later, there came a knock on their door.

It was not Canaan's knock. Col looked to Myuri, wondering if it was the innkeeper, but she did not put her ears and tail away.

"Hey, I know you're in there. Open up."

Col was surprised. He knew that voice.

Still doubtful, he rose from his chair and opened the door to find one particular young man standing there.

"…Mister Vadan?"

This was a man of the sea who ran his own ship.

No, this was a *mouse* of the sea, and he replied, "Yo."

On stormy nights, there was a ghost ship said to appear off the coast of the Winfiel Kingdom.

The source of those rumors were the mice that crewed a smuggling ship.

And the leader of these mice was a man named Vadan.

"Ilenia told me to come get you. She said you'd be comin' through here. Man, she really works her mice to the bone."

"How is Miss Ilenia?"

Myuri sat cross-legged on the bed; she had called over a small mouse that had come into the room with Vadan and was playing with it in her hands.

"She's good. She's tough."

Myuri laughed, her shoulders shaking as she did so, and the mouse in her palm scrambled as it almost fell off.

"But why's she in jail, though?" she asked.

Col could understand, in a sense, if she had been subject to false charges and gotten caught up in some sort of incident.

But that did not seem to be the case in Vadan's letter, and seeing the man for himself, Col could see he was relaxed.

"You know what this is? It's not specifically about Ilenia herself—lots of people are getting thrown into jail for just about anything. Ilenia decided to act a little suspicious and the same thing happened to her."

It sounded as though the situation was a little more complicated than the paper for the letter allowed.

"She was looking for the astrologer, right?" Myuri asked, only for Col to correct her again.

"Astronomer."

"Same thing. They both look at the stars and decide where to go, right?"

"……"

With no good retort coming to mind immediately, Col fell silent. Vadan chuckled.

“Glad to see nothing’s changed. She’s got you beat, Twilight Cardinal.”

“All she has learned to master are far-fetched arguments. I am not quite sure what to do with her.”

Myuri pointedly ignored him; she placed the mouse on her shoulder and asked Vadan, “Did she ask for Brother so he could find that fortune-teller?”

“Guess so. We first heard about this astronomer from the bird alchemist.”

Diana was both a bird spirit and an alchemist, and she had helped them in the incident involving Vadan and his crew.

“From Miss Diana?”

Despite how very little she was concerned with details in general, Myuri was not the only one who saw alchemists and astrologers, and even astronomers, as one and the same.

The people in those professions seemed to consider one another comrades after all, so it was hardly wrong to consider them connected in various way.

“I don’t know if astronomers are good or bad,” Vadan explained. “But this one in particular seems to have some valuable information. Divine providence, if you get what I mean. Charts for whole boatloads of stars.”

Intrigued, Myuri recrossed her legs.

“’Course,” he continued, “that’s not something you put together in one generation. They inherited that from their master, and their master’s master…Weighty after all that time, golden knowledge trickling down like that. That’s what I heard astronomy’s like, anyway.”

Myuri audibly gulped, perhaps because she had recalled how a particularly high-quality wine was made.

Grapes were placed in a sack outside, which hung from the eaves of a roof, and whatever juice dripped through the bag due to the weight was used for that fine wine.

“We were lookin’ for this astronomer ’cause we wanted a star map which would help us find that continent at the edge of the sea. We finally tracked ’em down, but when we paid them a visit, the house was totally empty, and ’cause of that, everyone who

could *possibly* be involved in the disappearance's been locked up."

"You mean they were kidnapped?"

"That's what the prince-elector thinks, at least."

"What?! Does that mean there are other people looking for the new continent, then?!"

Myuri sat up from the bed, and the little mouse sitting on her shoulder rubbing its face suddenly tumbled down.

"I thought so too, but sounds like things are a little different. Apparently, there's a ton of people out there who want knowledge about the stars. Sounds like it's real handy when it comes to sowing crops and stuff."

"Sowing *crops*?" Myuri tilted her head.

"Sometimes it gets real warm and you start thinkin', is it spring already? But it's not like they've got the seasons written in the sky, you know? So farmers look at where the stars are in the sky and they can see whether it just happens to be a warm winter, or spring's come when they weren't payin' attention. Imagine plantin' your crops, only for the frost to come again. You're in big trouble."

That was the reason why most of the Church's festivals were concentrated in the spring and autumn.

The Church had been around since antiquity—they helped the people determine the seasons by employing their own astronomers, having those astronomers study the movement of the stars across the sky, and established a calendar as a result.

But as those calendars went through revisions over the years, they became far less accurate with time—this was something Col had heard from Myuri's mother, the Wisewolf.

Village festivals grew slightly off as the years went by; festivals that currently took place in the spring once took place in the autumn, and even further back they actually took place in the spring again.

When Col read ancient hagiographies, he noticed the people in the stories wore light clothing despite participating in rites that took place in the winter, which impressed him—how faithful they must have been to withstand the cold like that—but he learned later that at the time, the rites simply took place in warmer seasons.

“Plus, you’ve got this person lookin’ at the stars each night from their tall tower, so of course the Church is gonna think they’re a heretic. And that’s why you’ve got a lot of guys with their eye on astronomers.” Vadan leaned against the wooden window frame and started counting on his fingers. “Lots of potential suspects. Lords from grain-producin’ regions, inquisitors who wanna snatch up heretics, proud nobles who want to employ renowned scholars, and—oh yeah, daredevils who want to discover new continents.”

Myuri stared blankly at Vadan. Perhaps this had showed her once again the world was filled with more unknowns than she was aware of.

“Plus, astronomers apparently cost way more than alchemists. The prince-elector’s paid big bucks to build towers and buy observation equipment, all so this guy can watch the stars. So it’s pretty hard to imagine the astronomer willingly up and left. Not only do they have an obligation to the prince-elector, but it’s almost impossible to find a patron who’d be willing to pay all that.”

“But…the mercenary king still has no idea who kidnapped the fortune-teller, so he’s throwing all sorts of people in jail, right?”

“Pretty much. He probably thinks he’ll get it right eventually.”

Col pictured crowds of innocent civilians crammed in the jail, and he was astonished by how careless the act was.

“But still, why would she want my brother there? He constantly loses track of himself and is always lost. He’s totally useless when it comes to finding people.”

“……”

Col looked at her with a withering gaze; Myuri turned to him and her only response was a sweet smile.

“Two reasons,” Vadan said with a dry smile. “One, he’s always got a wolf with him—you.”

“Me?”

“You can sniff out the stuff we don’t notice.”

Vadan tapped his own nose and then pointed at Myuri’s face.

With her ears and tail out, her tail thumped against the bed in protest.

“I’m not a hunting dog!”

“The other reason is it *does* seem like the prince-elector has

some kind of idea as to who the culprit is. But it feels like there's one specific reason or another why he can't go after them," Vadan said, ignoring Myuri's protest. He turned to look at Col. "*You* might be able to take on this opponent. And so Ilenia made a proposal to the prince-elector—she said if she could get the Twilight Cardinal to come, then we should be given special privileges to look for the astronomer."

"Me…? Then, does that mean the most likely culprit is—"

"Yep—it's the Church. But both Ilenia and I think that doesn't sound right. If this was an inquisitor, then there's no reason for them to kidnap the astronomer in secret. They can just kick down the door and stick their papal writ in everyone's faces, including the prince-elector and his buddies."

Inquisitors were the natural enemies of nonhumans like Myuri.

But the image of them kicking down a door to chase their prey struck some sort of chord with her—the fur on her tail twitched impatiently.

"And it sounds like, from this whole situation, they were taken before the snowmelt, at least two months ago. Despite that, the prince-elector hasn't gotten any word from the Church, which makes it hard to think it was an inquisitor. They always make it real well known when they get their hands on evil people and burn them at the stake."

It was their job to put a check on the spread of heretical thought by doing so.

Thus, it was certainly strange to hear absolutely nothing over the months.

"I could believe the Church wanted a new astronomer because they wanted to watch the stars and went out of their way to kidnap one. But would they really resort to something so drastic?"

"It seems…rather unlikely," Col remarked.

They would at least have held negotiations of some sort first. If those fell apart, then perhaps they would resort to kidnapping… Or would they?

"Plus, the prince-elector is acting weird, too. Anyone who had any kind of relation to the astronomer, anyone who came lookin' for 'em—they all got thrown in jail. Which makes it seem like he's

not really looking for them. He's not even whippin' anyone."

That was the very first thing Col worried about when he heard Ilenia had been put in jail.

"Sometimes it's like he remembers—he'll call up a guy from the cells, ask 'em questions. But the questions are so vague it's almost impossible to tell what he's tryin' to ask."

"Like Brother when he's preaching?"

Col felt a headache coming on when he heard the wild girl call God's teachings *vague*, but Vadan looked serious.

"As far as we can tell, the prince-elector is smart. So we think that, just maybe…he's got a secret he can't tell anyone about, and it's bothering him that he can't ask the crucial questions. You know how your secret could get out if you ask the questions you really wanna ask?"

"…Huh? Is that a thing?" Myuri asked, confused.

Col replied, "Say I hid a jar of honey in the pantry. One day, I went and saw there was less than usual."

That prompted Myuri to peer over at him.

"If I asked the little wolf if she ate some of my honey, that would also reveal I had honey in the first place. I would have to be very careful with my line of questioning."

The rambunctious girl gave an emphatic nod, and then bared her teeth at him.

"'Course, we looked into what kind of secret the prince-elector might be keeping," Vadan continued. "But he's careful. Whatever it is, it's locked up tight in his mind."

Vadan was a mouse spirit, and there were no buildings in the world impervious to drafts.

He and his crew could sneak into any room in any house, and of course, it was easy to believe they had a full grasp on what Prince-Elector Duran was having for every meal and what he was saying in his sleep.

If Vadan had not been able to sniff out his secret, then it truly was a secret.

And it was so tightly kept that Ilenia had to call out the both of them.

"And isn't a priest the perfect person to get someone to spill their secrets?"

There was no way for Col to tell if that was meant to be a joke

or not, but it seemed the mountain paths ahead were not the only trouble waiting for them.

The deep ravines were the result of snowmelt carving away at the mountains for millennia.

People dug out roads that clung to the cliffs, and with incredible effort, had even built bridges over the ravines.

But there was always one big snowfall every few years, which melted into a torrent of water come spring—these torrents damaged the roads and the bridges, and before long, all these things would get washed away. And then they would have to start all over again.

There had to be a good reason why people lived in regions like this, and why travelers braved them.

“We’re walking here on the map now, right?”

Afterward, they met up with Vadan, hired a guide without incident, and set aside some time to rest and prepare. Then they finally headed toward the hazardous mountain roads. Along the way, they stayed at simple inns that simply offered a roof over their heads, or spots in small hamlets where only goat herders lived, as they walked toward their destination beyond the mountain peaks.

On the third day, they stumbled across a sunny outcropping with a good view, and it was here they stopped for lunch.

Myuri and Canaan sat shoulder to shoulder on a rock like close-knit twins, looking at the map as they munched cheese on rye. Trade was poor due to the harsh terrain, so while there were no fancy meals for them, there were plenty of varieties of cheese, and Myuri with all her love for food was quite happy with her meals.

Myuri studied the map with great interest; as she pushed a bit of cheese stuck to the corner of her mouth with her pinky she pointed to the very center of the mountain range, where images of winged horses were flying over the lines.

“Miss Eve cursed a lot about this. She said olives from the south could get to the northlands really fast if it weren’t for these mountains.”

And the ones who would be attempting to deliver these goods

“really fast” were not traveling light like Col and the rest of their party, but encumbered by heavy mounds of cargo.

It would be their legs transporting the cargo, and the only money they could spend would be on the bread that would fill their stomachs.

If they managed to safely cross the mountains, then they could save on time and enormous transport costs.

People traveled even on these roads, and the reason why there were inns and small communities along the way was because this was a shortcut to gold for young, reckless merchants.

“Did you come this way when you went to the kingdom, Canaan?” Myuri asked.

“Oh, no, no, of course not. We took a route that went a bit farther south, so the mountains were not as steep. But it was still quite the journey.”

“Miss Eve told me people usually take boats.”

“We did not have much coin to spare on our travels, and we were in a hurry. We could not afford to wait for westbound ships —the wind is never favorable.”

“Westward sea routes go across the sea then make a huuuge detour, right?”

Myuri dropped her finger farther south from the mountain range they were presently in.

That area was where the ancient imperial capital had once stood, and was where the heart of faith, the Holy See, was in present day. In order to reach the Winfiel Kingdom from there, travelers had to take ships that went around the large peninsula that jutted out from the mainland in the southwest.

And they usually had to contend with westerly winds, which meant they had to make a lot of stops along the way.

That was why it was a much more time-consuming trip than how it appeared on the map.

“There was another route in the time of the ancient empire,” Canaan said. “One was able to pass directly through these mountains. There are records of being able to reach Wobern from the Holy See in about a week.”

“Uncle Luward told me about that. I guess it’s true.”

Myuri looked up from the map and squinted at the mountain peaks. She seemed somewhat spellbound, perhaps because she

was picturing ancient imperial knights crossing over them.

“If you put it another way, it’s the way the land is. There are only so many routes people can take when they travel through here,” Vadan added to their conversation as he scanned the surrounding area. “I don’t think the kidnapped astronomer left behind a crumb trail, like in fairy tales, but I knew there had to be a clue somewhere…Then again, I haven’t found anyone that’s seen any evil-lookin’ guys running off with a person under their arm.”

Myuri smiled at that and tossed a piece of bread into her mouth.

“Usually when the evil king kidnaps the princess, she drops an earring or a ring on the road, and that’s when a knight finds it,” she said.

Vadan shrugged.

“There might not be many roads, but could there be bypaths?” Canaan asked, looking around at the sky-piercing peaks.

Col felt truly small in the presence of such grand sights, but the grander scale led him to believe there were more gaps to slip through.

“’Course I asked the local guide about that, but he almost laughed at me. He said sure, if you’ve got goat legs. Or if you can swim like a fish.”

Vadan pointed at the dark rapids that cut through the pastoral highland scenery.

The cold snowmelt water rushed furiously along the riverbanks, their darkened rockface bare to the world that dotted the mountains. It was because of these raging rivers that communities spread across a valley would be cut off and lose almost all contact with one another.

It did not seem realistic to take unmarked paths in this land that even the locals dared not take.

Even the fledgling merchants, those who wanted to save every piece of copper they could, knew they needed to hire a guide for these paths; not doing so meant death.

Of course, if there was a nonhuman involved in the disappearance of the astronomer, then that assumption no longer applied.

Or, if the astronomer themself was nonhuman.

“But look at these roads,” Myuri said. “Are you sure this is going to be a big town?”

“In terms of what paths connect Wobern and the world below,” Vadan replied. “We’re coming through the back entrance. We came to Wobern from a part of the sea that’s farther north than where you guys were at in Estatt.”

“That Ahberg port city?”

“Yeah. Their main trade route goes up along the river from Ahberg. The roads coming in from the northern part of the mountain range aren’t as bad as this. The southern roads are for adventurers only.”

Myuri beamed when she heard that.

She was covered in dirt and dust after these past few days of mountain climbing.

Before they went to sleep at night, Col told her to at least wipe her face, but she apparently considered the dust and dirt to be proof of her dauntlessness, and so the wild child purposefully kept herself dirty.

“If someone spirited away the scholar, then my bet is they came from the north. My crew’s looking into it, at least.”

“Hmm. I guess scholars like my brother do stand out a lot on roads like this. I thought they might’ve put them in a box and carried it away, but that doesn’t seem easy here.”

Canaan must have pictured the sight of someone carrying a heavy box like that on these narrow, cliffside roads—he shivered.

“But I still can’t believe it.”

“Hmm?”

When Myuri spoke up, Canaan looked at her curiously.

“I still can’t believe there’s a big town nestled deep in these mountains.”

After seeing countless steep, heart-pounding roads, deep ravines, and thick blankets of brush, Col also found it hard to imagine a town stood somewhere up ahead.

“All that talk about cities at the bottom of the ocean were outright lies, but it’s true there’s a city in the middle of the mountains!” Vadan said.

Myuri laughed for a moment, then exhaled, stretched out her legs, and looked to the sky.

“That fortune-teller must be looking at the same sky as me,

somewhere out there."

The sky was a deeper blue here, unlike the plains, and the sun shone brightly.

And if Col squinted, he found he could see the faint white light of the stars, even in the daytime.

After an eventful hike spent looking out for falling rocks and helping a stranded merchant whose cargo had tipped over, their party finally reached the final peak.

At the top of the pass was a cairn made of pebbles left by travelers; it had a stick protruding from it and a tattered piece of cloth affixed to the top, fluttering in the wind. It was a ritual hoping for safe travels ahead, and giving thanks to God for safe passage thus far.

Myuri loved this sort of thing, despite not having a speck of faith in her body, so of course she added a rock to the pile. Everyone else followed suit in commemoration of the trip.

And the sight they saw after that was the perfect show of strength of those who lived in such a harsh environment.

"This is…amazing."

It was not her typical exclamation; instead, Myuri murmured under her breath in open awe.

"It's like the whole city is a fortress…"

They had come upon a vantage point that gave them a commanding view of Wobern.

It was a city of solid stone, built in a basin shaped like a mortar and absolutely earning its reputation as a natural fortress. What gave it this impression the most was the mountains surrounding the city, towering above the basin, reaching so high that no trees grew on the slopes from about halfway up.

Lower down, the land was thick with foliage. The deepest part of the basin was home to a dark and dense forest, perhaps owing to the rich snowmelt.

A wide river cut through the forest like a serpent and flowed northwest from Wobern's northern valley along with a cascade of green. Alongside that river was the main trade route Vadan had mentioned.

"Now I get why they called it an impregnable fortress back in

the day," Myuri murmured in quiet excitement. She had read quite a few stories about Wobern while they were staying in Estatt.

The fall of the ancient empire ushered in an era of constant conflict as successor kingdoms clashed to see who would rule over what was left. No king could successfully capture Wobern, the seat of the mercenary king. As a result, even though the new nation was originally meant to have six prince-electors, they had no choice but to add a seventh.

"Attackers have to come through the valleys to the north, even though incredibly tall highlands sit on either side. And they're filled with stones perfect for throwing! No one could possibly conquer it," Myuri recounted excitedly—she loved war stories—and Canaan listened with rapt attention, deeply impressed. "And even if you decided to attack from the back, the only paths you can take are the same as the ones we took."

Hearing about it was already fairly persuasive, but seeing the city for himself made its invulnerability almost undeniable.

There was no better city to defend than Wobern.

They enjoyed the breathtaking sight for a little while longer before beginning their trek down the side of the mountain.

"It's really smoky. That's not from the hot springs, is it?" Myuri asked when she could finally make out some details of the city in the distance. The sight of Wobern was so grand and majestic that it seemed closer than it actually was.

"It must be coming from all the forges," Col mused. "Miss Eve said smithing was one of the few viable trades here…"

Evidently, this limitation did not mean the scale of trade was necessarily small.

"That deep forest goes on *foreeever*. It might be deeper than Nyohhira's. You can't see them from here, but there are more countries on the other side of those mountains over there, right?"

"I would not call them countries, per se, but a collection of villages and hamlets that dot the mountains. Prince-Elector Duran of Wobern rules this entire mountain region and looks after their interests. Metal ore is brought in from the eastern mountains, lumber is brought in from the western mountains, and both become iron in Wobern before being sent down the river to be traded…Or so I've heard."

“They’re blacksmiths that work for the mercenary king. They must make a lot of swords.”

“Yes, but we won’t be buying any.”

When he preemptively told Myuri no, she stuck out her tongue at him.

As they made their way down the mountain on the winding path, the city of Wobern came into clear view. There was, perhaps, a good chance the city was mostly built from stone due to its abundance as a resource nearby, but it was more likely the smithing industry was just very conscious of the danger of starting fires.

“Is that the castle?”

“It has a tower, so perhaps.”

“So the fortune-teller must’ve been at the very top of it, then.”

From all the prior discussion, Col was under the impression the astronomer had been brazenly kidnapped from a sparsely populated, rural mountain area.

But Wobern was a much bigger city than he had imagined, and kidnapping a single person here would not draw too much attention. It did not seem all that difficult to carry a person in a wicker suitcase down along the northern river path.

Col felt he understood the prince-elector’s desperation a little better now, throwing everyone who might be connected with the incident into jail.

“Either way, it’s the perfect place for an adventure!”

After walking several days on the dusty mountain path, Myuri was covered from head to toe in dirt. But that was a perfect match for the rambunctious girl’s smile.

When they arrived in Wobern, Vadan’s crew came to greet them.

A good number of them could not take human form, so they had slipped into every crack they could find in the city and secured an inn that looked run-down but was surprisingly comfortable inside.

Col wanted to collect information before visiting the prince-elector’s palace. He particularly wanted to get a feel for what sort of person the prince-elector was.

And if he was being honest, he was a bit too tired to speak with

someone so important right after crossing the mountains, so he wanted to get a bit of rest first.

But of course, *rest* was not a word in Myuri's dictionary when she was on an adventure.

"Make sure to come back at sundown!"

He knew she would not listen to him if he asked her to behave simply because he was tired. At the same time, he was not worried she would get lost, even in a new city. And since she now had a member of Vadan's crew on her shoulder—they became fast friends—he knew she should be fine.

"Okaaay!"

Myuri gave her usual acknowledgement (which was truly nothing more than her acknowledging something had been said to her), and once she had finished changing into her errand-boy clothes, she rushed from the room.

"Good grief…"

"She sure has a lot of energy."

In his astonishment, Col saw that Vadan, who sat in mouse form on the table, wore a similar expression.

"Can you make contact with Miss Ilenia?"

"Yeah, we've already told her about you guys. And it sounds like nothing happened while we were gone."

As Vadan spoke, a continual stream of other mice came to him.

If anyone else had seen this, they would be panicking with broom in hand. Col would most certainly faint if he saw something like this in the bathhouse pantry, but now, the sight reminded him of a fairy tale more than anything else. Perhaps it was because all the mice, including Vadan, had such a fine sheen to their coats.

"In other words, there are no clues?" Col asked.

"Do you think it was a spirit that kidnapped them?"

The astronomer had been whisked away from the top of a tower with no witnesses. As the big brother of a wolf girl, Col had naturally considered the possibility a nonhuman was involved.

"A large bird, for example, could sneak in under the cover of darkness and take away the astronomer as they stargaze."

"That bird alchemist could do that."

Diana the alchemist had helped them during the incident with Vadan and his employer, the eccentric noble Nordstone. Diana

was also a nonhuman and was the incarnation of a large bird.

"Maybe Miss Sharon's birds know something."

One of Sharon's bird friends did follow them from Estatt, but turned back once the elevation got too high. Part of it may have been because the air grew too thin, but a bigger part may have been the skies over Wobern were filled with birds of prey, circling overhead with their large wings spread wide.

Myuri had heard they would be taking the long way around the mountain range, and then come back into the city from the north.

"We did ask the city's birds for good measure, but they haven't noticed anything in particular."

In the eyes of a regular human, the powers of nonhumans were practically fairy-tale magic.

"Then…perhaps the astronomer themselves is nonhuman. If they were one of your kin, one could easily slip them into a pocket."

The mouse shrugged, apparently not finding the joke all that funny.

"Well, I guess the little wolf would be able to sniff that out if she makes her way to the tower."

Though it was nowhere near the caliber of her mother, the Wisewolf, Myuri's nose was just as sharp as any wolf's. She would always sniff Col with a dissatisfied look after he spent a long time in meetings with Canaan.

Had there been a struggle in the tower, she would immediately be able to sniff out some sort of clue—and if the astronomer was nonhuman, she should be able to smell that, too.

"But for now, I want to rest. I can stand all day on a boat and not be tired, but…"

Vadan was still the leader of a crew—once he was finished dealing with the reports his underlings came to deliver, he wearily dropped his head onto the table.

Mice were detestable creatures that nibbled on books in libraries and food in pantries, and sometimes even the toes and fingers of those sleeping in inns, but looking at them like this made them seem rather adorable.

"Archivist Canaan wanted to take a walk around the city too, so shall I buy something for you while we're out? I hear Wobern

is known for its good cheeses, like those we had on the road."

Vadan's round ears piqued.

"…I know a good place."

"Then I shall get it for you."

Once Vadan told him where to go, Col left his room to invite Canaan, who sat looking out of the window of his room restlessly, and they left to take a quick look around the city of Wobern.

On the way back to the inn, large cheese wheel in hand, they ended up running into Myuri, and it took a lot of work to soothe her temper.

In the tavern attached to the inn, there was an even bigger cheese wheel that always sat by the fire. Its face was deliberately exposed to the heat and melted, then shaved off with a large knife and poured over meat—a rather decadent specialty.

Though Myuri had thrown a fit over Col and Canaan going out together, this dish immediately cheered her up.

That night, Col had a dream he had been crushed by buckets of that melted cheese poured over him.

The reason he had that dream, of course, was the wolf pup snoring soundly on his chest.

"When are you going to break this bad habit…?"

In the morning, when he tried to push her off him, the clingy little knight whined and resisted.

As he did, he felt something above him—a mouse face was peeking from the crack between the ceiling and the wall.

"So this is the Twilight Cardinal, eh?"

"…Good morning."

Vadan deftly scuttled down the wall. And as he started munching on the raisins they had brought back from the tavern the night previous, Myuri finally woke up.

"Smells like Miss Ilenia…"

"Huh?"

"Thought the wolf might sniff that out. Hope you can track the astronomer with that nose of yours."

Myuri curled up, yawned so loudly and for so long the fur on her tail fluffed out, and then finally did a big stretch.

"*Yawn*…I could chase them across the forests up in the

mountains, but it's not going to be easy here. There's so many smiths. The whole city smells like coal and iron."

She had immediately gone out for a walk when they arrived yesterday, but it seemed she had not done so purely for the fun of it.

"If you go to the room where that scholar was starin' at the stars, you might be able to find us a trail or somethin'. I guess it'd be a scent trail in your case."

"Did Miss Ilenia say anything?"

Myuri got out of bed and reached for a raisin, patting mouse-Vadan on the head with a finger as she did so.

"She said she's comfortable, so no need to worry about her."

Myuri chuckled.

"Does it seem like the prince-elector knows we've arrived?" Col asked as he took a sip of water from the jug.

"There's not a lot of eyes on this part of town, so maybe not. What do you think, wolf?"

"I think we're okay. No one knows my brother is the world-changing Twilight Cardinal in disguise."

"I could say the exact same thing for the Saint of the Sun," Col quipped back. But of course, Myuri acted as though she had not heard him and the frown on his face only made her more delighted.

"So are we taking another walk around the city?" the rambunctious girl asked as she grabbed his arm and grinned.

Canaan and the others went to the church, while Col and Myuri went to the trading companies and artisan houses to gather information. Eve had asked them to check out the market prices for Wobern's metalworks.

Myuri had visited a variety of places the day before, so they wound their way to the artisans' quarter without difficulty.

According to Luward, most of the men of Wobern had battlefield experience. If it came down to it, they could take the weapons they forged with their own hands to battle, and the air about the place suggested that was likely true.

"Everyone here seems much stouter than the average craftsman…"

“All the spears and swords they have leaning against their walls definitely aren’t for decoration. And look!”

Myuri pointed at the canals that flowed between the tightly crammed workshops. The snowmelt water flowing through them was perfectly clear, and they carried boats piled high with swords.

The cargo would have been much too heavy for a person to carry on their backs, yet it easily went from place to place on the water.

And eventually, they would go downriver to the sea and be sold all over the world.

“All right, let’s get asking,” Myuri said, and immediately went into the first workshop.

After a while of asking around, Col and Myuri came to a bridge that crossed one of the canals, and Myuri stared into the water with a frustrated look.

“They stopped calling the lord here the ‘mercenary king’ during the previous lord’s reign.”

Her voice was quiet not because the prince-elector might catch wind of their conversation—she was simply disappointed.

There was no need for them to lower their voices, anyway, considering how even Col began to look around in worry when the merchants and craftworkers spoke so ill of the prince-elector.

“I know the merchants and artisans were saying mean things about him because he threw all their friends in jail, though.”

Vadan had told them the prince-elector was throwing anyone who seemed remotely suspicious into jail in his search for his personal astronomer. And of course, his tyrannical actions was causing a great deal of unrest in Wobern.

The ones treated the most unfairly were the smithies who had built the tools the astronomer needed for observation. They often had contact with the astronomer as they made those specialist parts, and so they were the first to be suspected.

When the many hot-headed smiths saw their colleagues were being mistreated, they became incensed; they banded together and apparently thronged Prince-Elector Duran’s house. These were the same men who would take up the spear and work as

mercenaries if push came to shove, so their strength and skill must have been a sight to behold.

Though they did not end up attacking the jail and breaking everyone out with brute force, it did force Prince-Elector Duran to compromise.

Now, they had come to a strange arrangement where the craftsmen would rotate, so there would be a certain number of them in jail at any given time.

This clearly would not accomplish the prince-elector's true goal of finding the perpetrators. It was nothing more than a compromise with the smiths so the prince-elector could save face.

Additionally, they learned the merchants, who had a lot of connections with the outside world, were also suspected of the kidnapping and were also being thrown in jail, but they had a similar story.

Grain harvests were not especially rich in the mountain region—meaning merchants were crucial for the city to make it through the winter, so the prince-elector, fearing the merchants would pack up and leave Wobern in protest, had not even bothered to conduct house searches on them.

And yet he could not let them off completely, so now, a certain number of merchants were being forced to conduct business inconveniently from jail, using their cells as offices.

It was an awkward, half-baked situation, but there was reason for that.

"People call him the mercenary king who has never gone to war, no?" Col remarked.

The prince-elector was born sickly. On top of that, he had fallen off a horse as a child and used a cane to get around ever since.

Even though it was quite a long time ago now that the Duran family claimed the position of prince-elector as a result of their battle prowess, tradition was a powerful thing.

Every Lord Duran was sought to have authority as a warrior, and so everyone who had sat on that throne had been great men with great muscles.

And it was said his martial might had always been the powerful glue that kept the fiercely independent mountain people together.

“It’d be like if you took Uncle Luward’s spot, Brother.”

“It would be like if you were a priest.”

“I could pull it off, though.”

Col was briefly astonished—*who* did she think she was?—and then returned to the topic at hand.

“From what we’ve heard, Prince-Elector Duran has no authority, and he seems to be aware of that. He’s in a painful position—he cannot simply have his way due to his lack of authority, but he cannot show that weakness as a ruling lord.”

From what the craftworkers and merchants said, they all had a similar opinion—Prince-Elector Duran was at risk of losing his status.

There was a family that branched from the Duran family long ago, and they apparently now lived in a community to the east of Wobern. They supposedly controlled interests to the mines, and the head of the household had always been interested in the seat of prince-elector for himself—there were even rumors he was presently looking for the right time to start an uprising.

“If no one on this mountain is on the prince-elector’s side, then anyone could have kidnapped the astronomer.”

“Out of spite, right?”

“Possibly. Those who want his seat as prince-elector would say he could not keep even one of his own personal scholars safe, so it would be impossible for him to protect the people of this land—it would be the perfect excuse.”

Lords ostensibly collected taxes to protect their territories from threats.

The reason the Kingdom of Winfiel raised the flag of rebellion against the Church was because the Church had continued to collect taxes for a war against the pagans that ended a long time ago.

“Which means, the prince-elector’s suspicion the Church is the culprit…,” Col murmured, and Myuri turned her red eyes to him. “…Might be something he does not actually believe at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe the prince-elector cannot actually name anyone he thinks is the true perpetrator.”

If he were to pin the blame on someone local, then there was a very good chance that would become the spark that would light

everything aflame. The smiths had already threatened to rise up in open rebellion before.

On the other hand, in this day and age, anyone could easily criticize the Church. It was a bit underhanded, but it was a practical decision.

“This isn’t going to turn out like a story,” Myuri remarked.

The rambunctious girl likely held high expectations for the bright and shining mercenary king. Now she looked disappointed, as though she had been woken up from a dream.

“But then why did Miss Ilenia call us here?” Col asked.

Myuri glanced over the bridge and to the water; her expression lightened, as though she had not considered the question before.

“Maybe because if we save this king, then he’ll owe us.”

Ilenia knew, of course, they were looking for powerful allies in their fight against the Church.

Perhaps she thought there were various ways for them to take advantage of Prince-Elector Duran in that regard.

“From what we’ve learned, the prince-elector has questionable martial skill, but he did sound fervently faithful. Which means he would certainly agree with our thoughts and may prove to be a reliable ally in our fight against the Church, but…”

Myuri stood and kicked a pebble at her feet. It landed in the water with a *plop*.

“There’s no real point in helping a king with a rusted crown.”

She did not mince her words, but she was correct.

And judging by the city’s circumstances, even if they did somehow manage to help the prince-elector, he sounded terribly unreliable as an ally when Col would be going up against an organization as great and powerful as the Church.

Of course, the astronomer’s kidnapping was a plot deliberately put together by *someone*, and if the legal prince-elector was at risk of becoming a casualty in a malicious grab for power, then helping him would be the right and just thing to do.

But was that enough for Ilenia to get Col involved?

She could easily carry out justice herself if she put her mind to it.

“We’ll find out when we see him,” Myuri then said, her voice oddly sharp and clear.

Despite how much she loved fairy tales, she was more realistic at her core than anyone else Col knew.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Let's return to the inn. I imagine Archivist Canaan and Captain Vadan have collected all sorts of information."

He began to walk with purpose in his step. But for some reason Myuri did not move.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, turning around.

The wolf girl gave him a flat look. She pointed in the opposite direction and said, "The inn's this way."

Col and Myuri reunited with Canaan at the inn, and they put together all the information they had along with Vadan.

The circumstances in Wobern generally aligned with what Col expected.

The people themselves were rather faithful, but since there was little contact with the outside world, they considered the Church to be outsiders. And since this land was so remote, the Wobern church itself tended to stand apart from the rest of the ecclesiastic organization.

As a result, there was nothing their church could do in particular to fight back once the prince-elector accused them of being kidnappers, and several members of the clergy remained in jail.

Of course, that did not differ much from the way the merchants and artisans were being treated—they were free to come and go from their cells if they had business to take care of—which meant the prince-elector exercised little power here.

"The prince-elector himself sounds like a pleasant person, however."

All the artisans Col and Myuri spoke to unanimously called him a wimp; the merchants praised him for being a hard worker, but all generally agreed he was a pushover and unreliable.

What aligned with all their stories was their livelihoods were at risk due to the prince-elector's lack of strength.

"There's a whole load of dirty, thieving nobles on the river that flows from Wobern because the prince-elector's authority is so weak. They levy all the taxes they want, so prices on imported

goods are wildly high, and profit from exported goods are being shaved away."

As a result, the fledgling merchants would come to the city with their cargo on their backs through the mountains to the south where the terrain was too treacherous to build tollhouses.

"I'm sure the prince-elector is a kind man. I find it terribly ironic the best people do not often make for the best rulers," Canaan said sadly.

This was a lord with a personal astronomer, after all—that meant he was likely a man of learning, one who was more interested in academic questions and poetry than the idea of swinging a sword. Perhaps he could have been a great ruler if his city sat in the pastoral plains. Instead, he was in these mountains, where simply surviving was the priority of the day.

"But as I was talking with the church," Canaan continued. "There was one thing I thought strange. And the other members of the clergy had the same question."

"What might that be?" Col asked.

"That is, why the prince-elector is *so* attached to this astronomer."

Myuri looked back and forth between Canaan and Col and said casually, "It has to do with…face? Right?"

She asked this with the odd intonation of a question, likely because she had never used that word in that sense before, but she was not incorrect.

"You are correct. But the prince-elector was said to have panicked almost excessively once it was clear the scholar was missing. And that was when people started gossiping about him relentlessly."

"How so?"

Canaan dropped his shoulders, tired with how vulgar the world could be.

"The astronomer is reportedly a young woman."

A love affair.

Myuri's eyes glimmered slightly. It was a very easy-to-understand reason why the prince-elector would be so obsessed with what happened to the astronomer.

And yet things made even *less* sense in Col's mind.

According to Vadan, Prince-Elector Duran had some sort of

secret, and his analysis of the situation was that he could not do anything about the kidnapping not only because of his lack of authority, but because of this secret.

Was this typical of a love affair, where the one having the affair himself was the only one who thought it was not obvious?

Which led Col to his biggest question—why did Ilenia call him here?

"Captain Vadan, I'd like to speak with Miss Ilenia directly."

Vadan stood in the corner of the room, leaning up against the wall, his arms folded as he listened.

He stood up, said, "Wait here a sec," and then left the room.

When hearing the word *jail*, Col pictured a damp cellar built at the foot of a bridge along a river.

But the letter he received had such an easygoing tone, and what the artisans and merchants said did not make it sound like a very grim place.

And when they visited the jail for themselves, he saw it was less like a prison and more like a converted storehouse or some other similar building.

The jail was on the grounds of the prince-elector's palatial residence, but the Wobern palace also hosted public functions, acting as the place where the city council had their meetings; the cluster of different buildings meant the whole place was rather big.

Generally, people were free to come and go as they pleased, and it was not out of place to see people walking around during the daytime.

It seemed a very easy place to kidnap a single person.

Vadan guided them through the palace grounds, where they walked out in the open, and no one took a second look at them.

The door to the jail in question was left open, and no guards stood watch—some artisans sat on long, low-back benches nearby, concentrating on their work. What looked to be merchant house errand boys were busily running in and out of the building, carrying bundles of paper in their arms,.

"Where's the jail?" Myuri asked Vadan, her head cocked curiously.

The mouse boss shrugged.

Vadan then stepped inside the building. Not long after, a lone girl stepped outside and squinted, her eyes not yet adjusted to the light of the outside world.

“Miss Ilenia!”

“It’s good to see you, Myuri.”

Myuri leaped at Ilenia for a hug, and Ilenia cheerfully wrapped her arms around her. Even though they knew she was all right before this, both Col and Myuri had been a little worried about her until they saw her in person.

Ilenia seemed very healthy, and there was nothing to suggest she was confined to a cell. It was almost as though she was having an extended stay at a strange inn.



“And you too, Col. Thank you for coming all this way.”

Ilenia seemed impressed with him, but she also did not seem to doubt one bit that Col would be coming, eliciting an awkward smile from him. This sheep girl would truly do anything to get what she wanted.

That meant Eve employed her for good reason, and not just because she had an excellent eye for wool as the incarnation of a sheep.

“Who is this?”

Ilenia looked at Canaan; unusually nervous, he straightened his posture and introduced himself. After Myuri grinned at the way he acted like a naive little boy, she leaned over to Ilenia and whispered something in her ear.

She had likely told her they had yet to tell Canaan about nonhumans.

After brief introductions, Ilenia quickly gave them the rundown of what had happened so far.

She had traveled around with Nordstone on Vadan’s boat, collecting information on the new continent, and that was how she had heard about this astronomer from Diana. By the time she had arrived here to meet her, the astronomer had vanished into thin air.

But when she had heard the prince-elector, the astronomer’s employer, had been throwing into prison anyone and everyone who could have had any possible connection to the scholar, Ilenia put herself in jail and started asking around about her.

That was the gist of it.

“Why do we need that ast—astromon…fortune-teller on our side?”

Unable to pronounce *astronomer* correctly, Myuri switched to the more familiar *fortune-teller* and asked. Ilenia tore off a piece of the pastry Vadan had given to her and handed it to Myuri as she answered.

“We have no choice but to rely on the stars if we are to cross the vast ocean. Miss Diana said she was a very skilled astronomer.”

Myuri nodded and nibbled on the pastry.

“But it turned out the prince-elector really *was* throwing every possible culprit into jail, so no one in there particularly stood out

in that regard."

It seemed as though merchants, artisans, and even priests all stayed in the jailhouse as a bare minimum show of respect for the prince-elector. Which meant Ilenia was likely the most suspect out of all of them.

"Everyone I asked only shook their heads and said love made people crazy."

Myuri did not dislike romance stories, either—she listened to Ilenia with delight.

But Col could not keep the question to himself any longer.

"And yet everything we've learned so far tells me nothing as to why you called me here, Miss Ilenia."

His intention was not to emphasize he was the Twilight Cardinal, but what was true was he did not have all the time in the world. He had plenty of things to do to prepare for his fight against the Church.

And since she had drawn him out here with a letter stating that she was in jail and needed help, then she would certainly forgive him for wanting a more concrete reason for being here.

After all, he could have turned up with Luward and his mercenaries in tow, ready for war.

"Yes, of course. I would need good reason to summon the world-renowned Twilight Cardinal." Ilenia paused to chuckle, and then continued. "Prince-Elector Duran is in an extremely precarious position. His own scholar stolen away from under his very nose, and he has yet to conduct any proper searches. Plus, there's the possibility of a torrid love affair, so perhaps this is not a matter we should be looking into seriously."

Ilenia smiled softly, in a matter that suited her fluffy hair, and stared hard at Col.

The word *sheep* was often used to mean weak, stupid, or prey.

But if one were to ever stand face-to-face with a sheep in a grassy field, another word should come to mind: *persistence*.

"As I was trying to learn what I could about the new continent, I came across a piece of information I could not ignore."

"What was it?" Myuri asked, and Ilenia smiled.

"In a way, the reason we came across this astronomer is because she's been looking into odd tales. Because I heard that as she was looking for her own information, she heard about Miss

Diana somewhere, and went to visit her workshop."

What Ilenia said almost sounded like a riddle.

Because Col did not know why the astronomer would have gone to the alchemist.

All the knowledge one could gain from observing the stars essentially came from every star that sat in the eastern sky at nightfall at the turn of every season—nothing more, nothing less.

Those who crossed the line of that knowledge were generally considered astrologers. Those were the people who forecasted the future from the movement of the stars, and occasionally even attempted to heal the sick.

But twins who were ostensibly born under the same stars generally met different fates, proving astrology was not real—or so argued the great first father of the Church some thousand years ago.

But Ilenia mentioned Diana's name.

Diana was an alchemist—something closer to an astrologer than an astronomer.

But at the time, Col had yet to realize something.

Diana was something else entirely in the presence of an astrologer.

And that was—

"Do you all know what the other name for an astronomer is?" Ilenia asked suddenly.

The well-read Canaan answered, "One who wanders among the stars?"

"Yes." Ilenia smiled. "Our missing astronomer was looking for the Moon-Hunting Bear."

Col was not sure if the one who audibly gasped was himself or Myuri.

Ilenia stared quietly at Col, with the eyes of a sheep looking into the future on a moonlit plain.

CHAPTER TWO



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As rumor had it, every book that ever existed could be found within the Curia's archives. Canaan had spent his whole life in that sea of pages, and even he had scarcely ever heard of the Moon-Hunting Bear.

Its true name was so old that it had been lost long ago; now all that remained was its nickname, and this nickname only appeared in a small handful of very ancient tales.

Yet at the same time, spirit people would never, ever forget the nickname; it stirred dark feelings for Myuri in particular.

"Are you saying the Moon-Hunting Bear is in these mountains?"

She asked this so flatly that it shocked Canaan. He was used to how expressive she was—either constantly crying, laughing, or raging—and he had never seen her like this before.

Ilenia, who looked just a bit older than Myuri, smiled placidly and replied, "That I don't know, unfortunately. But what Miss Diana told me was terribly interesting. She suggested the very moon the Moon-Hunting Bear was hunting might have fallen here once upon a time."

"What…?"

Myuri was dumbfounded. Ilenia kept the mischief in her smile.

The moon the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted?

Col was momentarily taken aback. It sounded like wordplay, but at the same time, it could be plausible. But there was one among them who did not move at all.

"Does this story refer to a star of catastrophe?"

Canaan was likely the most well-read of everyone present—Myuri's gaze snapped to him, immediately latching onto what he said.

He flinched, then continued. "There are a small number of these records within the Church's archives. They state that from ancient times, brighter stars than usual streak across the

heavens. Occasionally, from among them appears a malevolent star, which strays from its path and brings catastrophe to the earth."

Myuri had grown up deep in the mountains—she had seen plenty of shooting stars in her life.

But to hear of them falling was another matter entirely.

"It…falls from the sky?"

Even this girl, who loved getting lost in any sort of unreasonable fairy tale, did not so easily accept this as fact. But it was not entirely out of the realm of things one heard while traveling.

Col, too, had heard tell of such things.

"It does happen sometimes, Myuri. I have seen a star-sword, forged from metal that has fallen from the sky. Strangely enough, it's said to hold the power to draw the enemy's sword from their hands into yours."

Myuri's eyes rounded, her mouth agape.

"Archivist Canaan," Col began. "Do you mean to say the Moon-Hunting Bear caught one of those stars?"

"Yes. I believe…this land may have been formed in that way to begin with."

"What?! Wait, what? What does that mean?" Myuri asked in turn.

"When malevolent stars fall, they're likened to God's iron hammer," Canaan replied.

Col thought that was a good comparison. But Myuri, who held absolutely no interest in his preachings, did not seem to catch on right away.

"Do you remember how we compacted the earth at the bathhouse?" he offered.

"Yeah?"

"We tie a large wooden mallet with rope, pull up the rope to lift it, and then let it drop, so that it can harden the earth."

Myuri's eyes dropped from the sky to the ground, as though watching an imaginary mallet fall before her very eyes.

She had a powerful imagination—she was probably seeing the earth jump from the impact, a cloud of dust filling the air.

They had come all this way from Estatt through the mountain paths and over peaks. The sight of Wobern from that final peak

was so strange and wondrous, it stole their words away. The city was surrounded by natural mountain walls and sat in a perfect bowl-shaped basin.

Myuri held her breath and looked up at the sky.

“Wait, so…do you mean that a huge pit formed here when a star fell from the sky?”

Myuri blanched slightly because she had imagined just how much power was necessary for something like that to happen.

When they flooded Ohlburg, the Town of Hope, she had cut away at the bank of the river in high spirits. In her mind, she had figured her claws were sharp and strong enough to easily change the flow of any river, no matter how big. But when she tried it, she had expended almost all her energy just making a dent in a moderately sized river. Nature was big and vast.

And that meant the impact required to create a place like this was practically unfathomable.

Myuri seemed to understand that in her bones.

If this was the Moon-Hunting Bear’s doing, then there was truly nothing she could do to it, not even in her dreams.

It was then that Ilenia spoke quietly.

“Whether or not what Archivist Canaan said really happened…to be honest, I cannot say for certain. Miss Diana didn’t seem to know, either. But what we do know is there is at least one astronomer looking into this story.”

When she said that Myuri gasped, as though released from her spell, but quickly drew her lips into a thin line. Perhaps she realized there was no way she could win against the Moon-Hunting Bear’s size and skill.

In reality, the nonhumans who had been around in the time of the Moon-Hunting Bear sometimes saw it as a sort of natural disaster. They spoke of it with no resentment. It was simply a part of life.

Col silently wished Myuri would learn to think of it in the same way as he turned to Ilenia and asked, “Then did the prince-elector hire the astronomer because of that legend?”

“That’s not clear,” she replied. “Everyone in prison seemed to have no idea what the prince is thinking. And that might be the reason why they all suggest there’s a love affair. That’s much easier to understand.”

On one hand, this felt like a myth in the making; on the other, it felt like awfully vulgar gossip. The incredible disparity made Col feel dizzy.

“But one thing everyone seemed to agree on is this is not the time for the prince-elector to be doing as something as whimsical as hiring astronomers,” concluded Ilenia.

“I heard his position is being challenged,” Col said.

“It is. This city is home to the original mercenary king. Being a warrior is, above all, proof of his status as their ruler—showing any interest in the stars is something most people consider unsuitable for the role. Either way, it didn’t seem as though there was much else I could do here as a humble wool broker. That’s why I called on you, Twilight Cardinal. I was just talking about how I wanted to saddle the prince-elector with an obligation,” she said brazenly, and smiled.

There was no doubt she knew that Myuri would quickly latch onto the matter if she brought up the Moon-Hunting Bear, and then her older brother would have no choice but to get involved.

Her personality seemed as if it matched her hair—soft and gentle—but there was a very good reason why Eve hired and valued her. Col could never let his guard down around her, although it was in a wholly different sense from how he always had to keep an eye on Myuri.

“Prince-Elector Duran may open up if he talks to you, Col.”

It was Vadan who said priests were necessary in getting people to confess their secrets, but Col himself was not sure if this would go as well as they assumed.

He was nervous, but they had already come this far.

And now that Myuri knew the Moon-Hunting Bear might be involved, she was raring to go.

Ilenia had gotten them to do exactly what she wanted, but Col knew winning an obligation from the prince-elector would increase the likelihood he would join their side in the fight against the Church. It was not as though he gained nothing from this.

“Very well,” he replied, and set his mind to the task.

After parting ways with Ilenia, they told Canaan the story they

knew about the Moon-Hunting Bear.

Most adults would roll their eyes at such fantastic tales, but Canaan was more like Myuri, if anything.

He listened with curiosity, and when he heard it vanished beyond the edge of the western sea after causing unspeakable carnage, he gave a light gasp in surprise.

Any kind of dreamer could easily picture the Moon-Hunting Bear heading for the new continent at the edge of the sea from that story alone.

Though Myuri's mood typically went dark whenever the Moon-Hunting Bear came up in conversation, she remained herself this time—that was to say, delighted by Canaan's earnest reactions.

Col would much rather she lose herself in fairy tales instead of letting her eyes darken with hatred.

But afterward, Canaan began telling them strange stories about astronomers and the stars. And even when it grew late, Col had to peel Myuri away from Canaan as she asked to hear more.

In the end, he had to blow out the candles, grab Myuri by the scruff of her neck, and ask Canaan to leave. The wolf pup whined for a little while after that, but she either eventually gave up or decided to think back on the new stories as she curled up under the covers and went quiet.

She was so unruly. But Col reckoned she would be all right if the Moon-Hunting Bear came up in conversation again.

Prince-Elector Duran had hired an astronomer, and that astronomer was following tales of the Moon-Hunting Bear. And following in the astronomer's footsteps was a sheep and the daughter of a wolf.

Col did not know what was waiting for them, and it would be a lie to say that all his anxieties were soothed.

Myuri was a smart girl, so there was a chance she was deliberately putting on a cheerful face. But he did know that God was watching over them, and He would guide them.

That is what Col told himself as he fell asleep.

Col did not like to stand on ceremony.

He thought things would be much simpler if he went to the

prince-elector himself to ask about the astronomer, but Canaan stopped him.

First, Canaan and Eve's employees would act as messengers and go to Prince-Elector Duran's palace as Col's heralds to announce the arrival of the Twilight Cardinal.

Col was clearly uncomfortable with the pomp and circumstance, but in an unusual twist, Canaan sighed at his attitude.

"It is unthinkable that someone with proof of identity from Heir Hyland and a personal letter issued by the Archbishop of Estatt is traveling around without an entourage. He will assume you're an imposter."

Col was also reminded the prince-elector was especially jumpy due to the kidnapping. That was how the Twilight Cardinal earned himself a scolding.

Faith was invisible to the naked eye.

Some rituals were important to assure others all was right and proper. Though Col had decided he was going to play the part of the Twilight Cardinal, there was still much he was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with.

But the wolf pup, who would typically be very pleased with this whole scene and take the time to poke fun at him for it, was oddly quiet.

After Canaan and the rest of the party herded Col and Myuri into their room and made their way to Prince-Elector Duran's palace, Myuri started pacing around, poking at the holes in the walls the mice were using as entrances, then opening and closing the window shutters. Her mind was all over the place.

"Calm down," Col demanded.

Myuri froze for a brief moment, but soon began to fidget again.

The Moon-Hunting Bear may have once been in these mountains. And a star may have fallen from the sky, which might be related.

It seemed Myuri's little head was filled with all sorts of possibilities.

That may have played a part as well—because once Canaan and the rest returned from a productive meeting with Prince-Elector Duran, she and Col argued over whether she should dress

as the Saint of the Sun or as a knight for their audience with the prince-elector.

She was oddly insistent on wearing her sword, so Col asked why. It seemed as though she had even considered the possibility Prince-Elector Duran was actually the Moon-Hunting Bear and he had quietly eliminated the astronomer when she learned of his secret.

The superstitious always said to never respond to people who were sleep-talking, but Col had to wake her up somehow.

“If the prince-elector really is the Moon-Hunting Bear, then Captain Vadan and Miss Ilenia would have found out by now.”

That seemed to calm Myuri for a moment, but she still fidgeted by digging her fingers into the pouch of wheat given to her by the Wisewolf.

Her present mood made Col somewhat uneasy—if they were to truly come across the Moon-Hunting Bear on their travels, what might happen?

He wished Myuri would quickly grow up and calm down. As the thought crossed his mind, the girl in question suddenly froze in place, her ears and tail piqued.

Not long afterward, a mouse crawled from one of the cracks in the wall and rushed to the table.

“Are you ready to meet the prince-elector?” Vadan asked.

As he spoke, Myuri unconsciously reached for her sword, but Col quickly stopped her.

He then grabbed her by both shoulders and guided her, as though she were half-asleep and looking for the toilet, had her dress as the Saint of the Sun, then headed straight to the prince-elector’s palace.

When they arrived at the palace, they reconvened with Canaan and the others, then made their way toward the center of the grounds.

In the tightly packed city of Wobern, the palace grounds were exceptionally spacious. As they cut across the wide-open gardens, Col almost forgot for a brief moment they were in the middle of a treacherous mountain range.

They walked down an old-fashioned colonnade and came to a

stone building more dignified than its neighbors, one that looked much like an abbey. Standing at the entrance was an aging man flanked by soldiers.

Judging from his clothes, he was a steward who served the prince-elector.

His eyes turned to look at them in sharp evaluation—it was his job to preserve the dignity of the head of the household.

Indeed, Col thought—had he wandered in here on his own, the best he could have hoped for was simply being sent away.

Most nobles were not as lenient as Hyland.

Myuri took on a cautious air beneath the steward's condescending gaze, but Col pretended not to notice anything and offered his greetings.

"My name is Tote Col, and I come here under the auspices of Heir Hyland of the Kingdom of Winfiel."

Col dipped his head politely, but the steward did not respond.

After a slow count to four, he raised his head and added, "And if I may be so bold, I am sometimes called the Twilight Cardinal."

And he smiled.

Eve had taught him how to do this, and so he had practiced it. Much like how Hyland had taught Myuri the etiquette she needed to act properly as a saint, Eve had taught him with much delight what he should do when he came across a high-handed noble.

The steward's mustache shuddered under his breath, and he turned on his heel.

He finally glanced over his shoulder and looked at Col.

"His Most Serene Highness will see you. I hope you understand what a great honor this is."

Col gave another brief dip of the head, and the steward went straight into the building.

He glanced behind him to see Myuri with an unsure look in her eyes, unbefitting her role as saint. With a little smile, Col pinched her cheek, and she swatted away his hand in annoyance.

The steward led them inside the palace—it felt less like the prince-elector's lived-in manor house, and more like a real abbey. Furniture was sparse, making the building feel somewhat empty. Nor did they see any sign of maids or manservants busily rushing about to maintain the building.

Of course, it was not as though the building was uncared for,

but the overall mood of the palace made it seem as though they were just about to move out.

The corridor was dim, typical for many older buildings, and they eventually came to another corridor with a red carpet running along the floor. That told Col this was a place where those of high status often came and went.

At the end of the carpet was a door, in front of which stood two lightly armed guards. When they acknowledged the steward's approach, one of them knocked softly on the door.

Col could not hear anything from where he stood, but there was apparently some sort of response; the guards pushed open the door and the steward glanced at Col and the other visitors before he went inside.

That was obviously a signal for them to follow, so Col passed between the guards' pointed stares and into the room beyond.

For a moment, he sensed noise behind him—Canaan's bodyguard and Eve's employees had been stopped at the door.

Col nodded, convincing the armed guards to give up trying to force their way inside and to simply wait outside.

Then, just as he turned his attention to the inside of the large room, he heard a voice he had not heard since yesterday.

"Col."

At the end of the long table sat Ilenia, who had likely been called out from the prison.

The steward who had guided them here proceeded to the far end of the room and stood beside a high-backed chair.

"His Most Serene Highness will be arriving shortly."

At last, the far door swung open, and one man was led in by a guard.

"You're young."

That was the very first thing the prince-elector said as he took his seat.

He was middle-aged, his face framed by thick, light brown hair and a beard. The prince-elector certainly looked like the head of a family whose status was won in battle. Col had heard from the townsfolk the prince was sickly, so he had pictured someone skinnier. This man was rather well built, if anything.

But he also held a cane in his left hand, and he carried it in a way that suggested it was fully a part of his life, and not the consequence of something that had happened recently.

“Your name?” the man asked.

“I am Tote Col,” Col replied as he bowed his head.

“Hmm…You’re quite different from how the rumors paint you. I’d heard you were the sort to walk barefoot through the mountains and preach to birds.”

That image was perhaps more fitting than the real Col was for the revolutionary who was openly challenging the Church’s corruption.

“Either way, I would say I’m just as good at betraying people’s expectations,” the prince-elector said wryly as he stood. He stuck his cane to the ground with much difficulty, perhaps a masochistic way of reminding himself that a daring and resolute mercenary king should not be using one.

“Friegel, entertain our other guests,” he ordered the steward. He then turned to Col and said, “Come with me, Your Eminence.”

The prince-elector jerked his chin toward the dulled glass of the window.

Col was nervous for a brief second, wondering if he wanted to talk about something he did not want anyone else hearing. If he did, Col could not detect any outward signs of that on the man’s face. Col dipped his head in acknowledgement again.

He then glanced over at Myuri, but his little knight did not seem particularly bothered by anything.

Her imagination had been whispering that not only was the prince-elector possibly not human, but that he might be the Moon-Hunting Bear. Judging by her current behavior, it seemed he really was just human, after all.

Of course, what Col really wanted to check was to see if the prince-elector harbored any ill will, but Myuri’s calm suggested they were not in any danger.

Col followed him, proceeding through the door that connected the reception room to the courtyard.

Once the prince-elector stepped outside, he looked up to the sky and squinted.

“I hear the sky in the world below is a different color. What say you?” he asked, prompting Col to look up.

“I believe this sky is much bluer here.”

“We should be much closer to God’s throne here—if anyone can tell, it would be you.”

“…Unfortunately, no.”

Col was unsure what the purpose of the question was, but the truth was that no matter how much he read the scripture, no matter how much he prayed, he had not even seen the hems of God’s robes. That sentiment must have gotten across to the prince-elector—he broke into a fit of laughter, then stepped down onto the hardened earth of the courtyard.

“For a little while after my leg stopped obeying me, I often looked to the sky, thinking I should give a word or two of complaint.”

The prince-elector looked back and smiled.

The bitterness in his smile stood out, perhaps because of all the hardship he had gone through.

“To think He would only show me mercy now, after all this time.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You, of course, Twilight Cardinal.”

The prince-elector faced forward again, slowly walking ahead as he stuck his cane into the ground.

What looked like a fruit-bearing tree grew in the middle of the wide courtyard, bright green leaves growing from its branches.

“The moment that wool broker girl spoke of you, I admit I was doubtful. But then God showed me a sign.”

Col had a feeling, but he wondered if Vadan and his mice crew had acted out a little miracle. It would not be difficult at all to bring over the scripture to the prince-elector’s pillow while he slept.

“And then the great man himself comes to me all the way from Estatt. You brought down an imposter in those lands with a miracle from God, no?”

“It is true we had God’s protection.”

Col was not sure how the story was spreading, so he left it at that.

“Quite a humble thing for the bearer of divine punishment to say.”

“……”

Now Col *really* started to wonder how the story was spreading. He was certain all those bards Myuri loved were making things up as they went along to better fit their songs. But the way the prince-elector spoke suggested he knew that sort of rumor was not to be trusted.

"How much of my circumstances do you know?"

The next thing Col knew, they had reached the center of the courtyard.

It was open, with nothing blocking their sight lines—perhaps this was also used as an equestrian ground.

Four of the prince-elector's guards stood around them, out of earshot but watching vigilantly.

"I know an astronomer Your Most Serene Highness patronized has gone missing," Col replied.

He did not say *kidnapped*.

The prince-elector seemed mildly irritated by that, and it came out as a sigh.

"She was kidnapped. And I believe the Church is behind it."

He said exactly what Col had heard in town.

From what he had gathered, the Church was not the leading culprit. More suspicious was the Duran branch family, which controlled mining interests.

"Do you have proof of that?"

Col knew very well the question he asked was rude, and Prince-Elector Duran turned a sharp eye to him.

But his irritation was not the sort adults showed toward impudent children.

"Of course. I know the local church frequently invites in outsiders. I cannot say how they managed to find out, but they must have realized her worth."

According to Canaan's report, there was no movement to suggest any inquisitors were at play.

But it seemed the prince-elector was rather certain an outsider was snooping around the tower.

"Twilight Cardinal." The prince-elector suddenly turned to Col. "The astronomer's disappearance is a matter of deep regret for me. You may soon learn this if you are to ask around the city, but my authority hangs on by a thread."

His blue eyes seemed heavy and leaden. It was not normal for

a prince-elector, who held as much power as most kings, to admit to a young stranger he had no authority to act.

Prince-Elector Duran was standing on the precipice.

“My father, my father’s father, and the father of all mercenary kings before them validated the name of House Duran by protecting this great city of Wobern and its people. But I have never been able to accomplish my duty due to my leg. The research my astronomer was conducting in secret is part of my final plan to reassert my authority.”

The prince-elector slammed the edge of his cane into the dirt, hard enough to cause it to crack. Contained in that gesture was all his distress and his anger.

But Col did not know where he was going with this.

He said he would be taking back his authority with the astronomer’s research.

But was that possible?

Ilenia said the astronomer was chasing after tales of the Moon-Hunting Bear. That had nothing to do with the throne of Wobern.

Was it possible the prince-elector was possessed by some sort of devil worship? Revering the Moon-Hunting Bear as a god, perhaps? Whatever it was, it was more than enough to draw the attention of Church inquisitors.

“This is not my problem alone, either. This has much to do with you and your fight against the Church. And that is why I accepted the wool broker’s proposal.”

“…It does?”

This caught Col unawares, and he spoke without the formality he had been careful to uphold since the start of their conversation.

But the prince-elector hardly noticed as he gripped the handle of his cane with incredible force.

From what Col had gathered in town, once the prince-elector found out the scholar had gone missing, he panicked and began to throw anyone he saw as vaguely suspicious into prison.

But then according to Vadan, despite all his wanton tyranny, he remained indecisive, asking all those he had captured vague and roundabout questions.

The prince-elector was hiding something.

Something he could not make public.

“Lord Duran, what did you…?”

What did he make the astronomer study?

And did the astronomer find something?

The prince-elector who descended from mercenary kings then said, “The astronomer said she was looking into the fairy tale of the Moon-Hunting Bear. But I knew right away—” He lowered his voice, as though turning his face away from the sun. “—that she was researching an eclipse.”

The reason Col swallowed his words was not because he noticed how sunken the prince-elector’s downcast eyes looked. It was because he was not expecting that word to tumble from his mouth in the slightest.

“Eclipse…? Did you say, eclipse?”

A solar eclipse. Or perhaps, a lunar eclipse. It was a miraculous, heavenly phenomenon where the bodies in the sky would suddenly vanish, and the Church had recorded a number of these events.

In that moment, it all connected with the Moon-Hunting Bear like a flash of lightning.

What was the legend that lingered in these lands?

The Moon-Hunting Bear hunted a star, and it fell.

The Moon-Hunting Bear, and an eclipse that erased the stars from the sky.

As Col struggled to find his words, the prince-elector raised his left hand over his head.

The cane in his hand pointed to the sun above.

“And I believe the astronomer solved God’s providence. Picture her prophesizing the day and time the sun would suddenly disappear from the sky—I would be able to reassert my authority and then some.”

When Col remained silent, the prince-elector pointed his cane at him.

He did so with a sharp, rage-filled gaze.

“What if the Church were to obtain the date? *They* would have no better opportunity to take back the power that *you* trampled on. Because as protectors of the faith bestowed by divine providence, they would be prophesizing the very moment the sun disappears from the sky. The people would fear them, respect them, and bow at their feet.” He struck his cane to the ground

again. “Twilight Cardinal, do you not see that you and I ride the same ship upon these troubled seas?”

The prince-elector had bet everything on the miracle of forecasting the eclipse in order to regain the authority he was so close to losing. And so he had hired an astronomer and spent quite a bit of money to support her and her research.

And that astronomer came very close to becoming the Sun-Hunting Prophet.

It was under those circumstances that she was kidnapped.

“We must take the astronomer back, no matter what it takes. If the date of the eclipse has already been extracted from her skull, then we will need to seize it for ourselves. If we fail…” With a trembling hand, the prince-elector grasped Col’s shoulder. “Then we will be doomed to wither in the shadows for eternity.”

If the prince-elector lost his chance to take back his authority, then what would happen to the Twilight Cardinal?

“The sun will vanish from the sky. It would be easy to paint that as an ill omen. The Church would turn to the panicking masses and say that God hid the sun because an enemy who calls himself the Twilight Cardinal has disrupted the order of the world. And everyone would believe them without question.”

Those who could grasp heavenly bodies essentially held God’s power in their very own hands. The Moon-Hunting Bear became the destroyer of the ancient world with that power.

And if the Church could demonstrate the stars darkened because the Twilight Cardinal had turned his back on God, then his reputation would fall to earth like one of those doomed stars.

The prince-elector raised his cane again and lightly pressed the end into Col’s chest, as though to remind him. The dirt left a mark on his pitch-black habit. The stain seeped through him and into his heart, like a curse.

“I expect much from you, Twilight Cardinal.”

The sinking prince-elector had grabbed onto Col’s ankles.

But even if Col kicked his hand away, there would still be no place for the Twilight Cardinal in a sunless sky.

Myuri stretched toward the sky like a cat reaching for a butterfly it would never catch. Perhaps the first person to utter the

expression, *grasping at clouds*, would be delighted.

"So the sun's going to disappear?"

As Myuri attempted to grasp the sun in the sky, Canaan replied with an earnest expression.

"Not just the sun—the moon disappears at times, too. It is a phenomenon occasionally observed throughout history, so there are plenty of records of it."

Books from history to the present, from all over the world, rested in the Holy See's archives.

But Canaan had only ever read about eclipses in books, so he still seemed rather skeptical.

The nonhuman Ilenia might have seen one in her many years.

While the thought crossed Col's mind, Ilenia had claimed to be just a *little* older than Myuri, so he hesitated to openly ask while Canaan was present.

"But she *was* a fortune-teller in the end," Myuri dropped her gaze from the sky to stare pointedly at Col as she spoke.

"Predicting an eclipse is not the same as telling a…Well, what do you think, Archivist Canaan?"

His own confidence waned, so he turned to Canaan to ask.

Canaan shrunk in on himself. "I am not certain of the strictest definition, either. The great Father Antoni of ancient times said thus about astrology: Twins are born under the same stars, and ultimately their fates should be dictated by the same stars, but there has never been any solid examples of such since antiquity. Therefore, star-telling is either blasphemous black magic, or nothing more than a lie…That said, I've never seen a text that criticizes predicting an eclipse."

This reassured Col there was a difference between astrology and astronomy, but it was Ilenia, who had been looking up at the sky with Myuri, who spoke up.

"Anyone can predict the sun will rise in the east and set in the west, and you can predict what stars will appear in the night sky depending on the season, no? Predicting when the eclipse might happen by looking at the cracks in burnt deer bones would fall under fortune-telling, but when it is the result of studying the movement of the stars and calculating where they will end up, then that is not fortune-telling."

Ilenia spoke with a logical tone, and there was a force to her

words that did not brook any arguments.

The air about her was totally different when compared to Myuri, and Canaan was wholly charmed by it. When Ilenia smiled after her little speech, Canaan nodded, his cheeks flushed.

“But we will have to make sure she was not burning deer bones.”

Vadan and his crew had already looked over the astronomer’s living space, but they were not particularly knowledgeable when it came to things of faith. They would most certainly be able to tell if things like sulfur or charred bits of salamander were left behind, but they would likely not be able to tell if there were heretical writings on her bookshelf.

And so Ilenia had used Myuri as leverage to bring the Twilight Cardinal here.

There was one thing Col put together from her meticulousness.

“Miss Ilenia.”

“Yes?”

“You knew the astronomer was trying to forecast the eclipse from the very beginning, didn’t you?”

When he asked, she gave a smile like any of Eve’s conspirators might.

“I had an inkling at best. Diana suggested the possibility.”

Though she said this with a friendly smile, Col had a feeling she had been all but certain.

If the astronomer was looking to predict the eclipse, then there were very, very few people the prince-elector could look to for help.

Because if the eclipse were predictable, then anyone in power would want to be a prophet. Even if the prince-elector did ask for help, it would not be easy to keep the other person from stealing the initiative.

On top of that, the prince-elector was struggling politically, and he was unable to leave his territory without great hardship due to his bad leg. Anyone could see that if he were to collaborate with someone, his supposed partner could easily steal the credit.

However, there was one person who he could reasonably work with.

That was the Twilight Cardinal, the one challenging the Church’s authority.

Unlike others in power, the Twilight Cardinal would be put in a difficult position if the Church predicted the eclipse first.

Plus, he did not have conflicting interests as a secular leader. That was why Ilenia believed the prince-elector could fight alongside the Twilight Cardinal.

“I can’t believe he asked for a hostage after asking for your help, though,” Myuri complained, after giving up on grasping the sun with her own hands.

The prince-elector had placed his bets on the Twilight Cardinal, but he was not unconditionally trusting him. Far from it. Anyone could become a prophet if they managed to figure out the day of the eclipse. That was why he demanded collateral.

Col understood his feelings and knew there really was no other choice.

However, Ilenia lacked in weight of character, which led the prince-elector to demand someone else, and Myuri was quite cross with the prospect.

“I would gladly take on that role,” Canaan interjected. “Throwing myself in jail is nothing if it is for your sake, Master Col.”

A spirit of service was rooted in the Church’s most fundamental teachings. Canaan placed his hand to his chest and spoke of this proudly.

Myuri looked like she wanted to say something, but she had trouble putting her feelings into words. She moved her lips, irritated, then folded her arms across her chest.

It likely came from a place of gratitude, that Canaan was volunteering to take on the most disadvantageous role, but also a place akin to jealousy because of how proud he was to sacrifice himself for the Twilight Cardinal’s sake.

In all her favorite hero stories, scenes like these were always penned for the most exciting events.

“I can guarantee the prison is comfortable,” Ilenia said, which helped soothe Col’s nerves since she had actually been inside. And Vadan’s crew of mice would be keeping an eye on him, so he could get out if there was any danger.

And yet Col still felt a bit guilty.

“But…are you sure, Archivist Canaan?” he asked.

“Of course I am. I will leave the search for the astronomer to

the rest of you. If anyone must sit in prison, then I would say I am perfectly suited for the role—I lived in those prisonlike archives, after all," Canaan said with a smile.

Col could not let his devotion go to waste.

"Then I thank you, truly. We'll make sure you're not there for very long."

If this were the Col who still lived in Nyohhira, he would have been paralyzed with worry about Canaan's safety. Instead, he accepted this turn of events and firmly grasped Canaan's hand with both of his own.

Col had decided to fight against a problem that could not be won on his own, so it was times like these he *had* to rely on his allies.

As Canaan grasped Col's hands in turn, he began to chuckle sheepishly.

"I imagine people will begin to pen hagiographies of you before long. I believe this would be the scene where I get to shine."

Canaan must have said this to ease Col's worries, but Col got the sense that Canaan was not entirely kidding.

In contrast to his serious exterior, Canaan had a reckless streak, one that led him to travel on foot to the distant Kingdom of Winfiel in order to fight against the Church. And the reason he got on so well with Myuri was because they were both dreamers.

"Brother! We need to find the fortune-teller soon, so Canaan doesn't wind up in any danger!"

Myuri, frustrated the best role had been taken from her, shouted boldly to reassert her presence, and Ilenia laughed. Though he was astonished the wolf girl could be so carefree, he still believed this was the best thing for her.

"Of course we will. We will do everything in our power to find her."

When Col said that, all eyes turned to him. If he was sure of one thing, it was that he had very reliable people on his side.

All Col had done was shake hands with the prince-elector.

It was less proof of trust and more symbolic than anything.

Even though the young man people called the Twilight

Cardinal had a certificate from the Kingdom of Winfiel, and a personal letter from the archbishop of Estatt, he was still an enigmatic individual.

However, the prince-elector had placed his bets on him. Even though he had no one else to rely on and had little choice in the matter, his decisiveness was not normal. Col had a feeling he was, at his core, a fearless and dauntless person.

He was sickly as a child but took up horse riding in his eagerness to make up for that—however, he fell from the horse and hurt his leg. Had luck been on his side, then maybe he could have been a mercenary king greater than anything Myuri would have dreamed of, one who let his name roar through the Wobern lands.

But God did not smile equally on all and was occasionally cruel. Yet people had no choice but to continue to struggle, and Col, at least, wanted justice to prevail.

“Now nothing’s holding us back,” Myuri said once they had dropped off Canaan and his bodyguard at the jail.

She said this so naturally Col’s expression clouded.

With Canaan and his bodyguard in jail, Myuri and the others could use all their might as nonhumans without worrying about the eyes of others. But Canaan was *not* being driven off like a nuisance for that purpose alone.

“Myuri, you need to thank Archivist Canaan for his self-sacrifice.”

“Okay, then *I* could’ve gone in jail, though? I could’ve been like the princess you save at the end of the story. That wouldn’t be so bad!”

Col believed those scenes came about precisely because he would have an admirable princess to save, and he knew this wild child would absolutely get restless on her second day of confinement.

Her attitude was already pointed toward adventure—she was kicking her feet out from the hem of her robes as she walked, completely forgetting to act like a proper young girl.

He could feel his head beginning to hurt as he wondered where to begin scolding her, but there was one thing he knew for certain.

“You are a knight. You will be the one to rescue the trapped

astronomer.”

“……” Myuri’s gaze slinked away, and she shrugged. “I guess that’s fine, too.”

Ilenia chuckled, and Col could feel that headache coming on as he wondered if his little sister understood the importance of things.

Astonished by the lively mood, Vadan interjected, “Sorry to interrupt while you’re having fun, but that’s the tower where the astronomer was.”

Now that Canaan was imprisoned as promised, Col and the rest of them went to investigate the place where the astronomer observed the stars.

There were several public facilities on the prince-elector’s manor grounds, and the tower was apparently once used as a watchtower.

As they cut across the wide lawn of the grounds, the whole thing came into view.

“So the astronomer was taken from here without anyone noticing?” Myuri asked.

The tower stood apart from the other buildings, and there was a clear view of the entrance from all around.

It fell within the sight lines of the guards standing on the nearby castle walls as well, which meant it would take quite a lot of effort to kidnap someone from this building.

“You guys already looked around the tower, right?” Myuri asked Vadan.

“Just a little,” he replied. “All we really found out was that it wasn’t a bloodbath inside.”

A wicked grin crossed Myuri’s face, but Col shivered at the thought.

“Either way, I’ll figure this out,” Myuri said. Along with the key the prince-elector had given them, she fished out the little pouch of wheat from inside her shirt.

While the Wisewolf’s size was certainly exceptional, Myuri was also much bigger than a regular wolf when she transformed. It felt especially noticeable when they were inside the building, and the way she bounded up the spiral steps perfectly matched the

look on her face.

"All I smell are the same things. Metal and oil, which is probably from the craftsmen who've been visiting. And then…the odor of rye bread and onion is really strong in here. She must've liked the stuff."

"Perhaps she was skipping sleep and meals to study," Col remarked.

Myuri swished her large tail dramatically to the left, and then to the right, as though saying that was too bad, because there was nothing more delightful than eating good food.

"It doesn't smell like blood. Or like there's been a fight, either."

According to her, a person's powerful emotions manifested as smells.

"Do you mean the scholar was not taken against her will?"

"Not sure. I read a story at Miss Diana's place about a flower that can put people to sleep."

"……"

If it really were the Church that orchestrated this kidnapping, would they have looked to an alchemist for help? No—was there a chance they could have simply hired someone who specialized in ruffian business?

As those thoughts passed through Col's mind, Ilenia spoke up somewhere behind him. "In any case, if drugs were used, then there would be traces of it."

"You are right," Col replied. "Myuri."

"What?"

"Be sure not to spend too long sniffing things, even if it smells nice. I cannot carry you to bed in that form."

Myuri's present weight was more than double Col's. She paused, and then thwacked Col across the face with her tail.

"Doesn't seem like the scholar was one of us, does it?" Vadan asked, a number of his fellow mice at his feet.

"*No*," Myuri replied, her large, pointy ears turning every which way. *"Doesn't smell like it here. It doesn't smell like goat's blood, either."*

That meant there were no devil-worshipping rituals, at least.

"So…," Col trailed.

That greatly narrowed down the possibilities.

That said, he believed it a bit too early to come to a conclusion,

and the stairs were tough on him; his ragged breaths made it hard to think.

Just about when he thought Myuri might start laughing at him, they finally reached the top of the tower.

“This is both storage and her living space. The room above this one is for observation.”

As Vadan threw open the windows, light flooded the room and revealed the interior—or more precisely, the state of the room.

“This bed is meant for one person,” Col remarked. “I suppose she did not have an assistant.”

He felt a strong affinity for the way the room was simply stuffed with things. The bed was unkempt and dirty, and it easily could have been from cheap lodgings or used as a nap spot for guards on watch duty.

Myuri audibly sniffed it, then sneezed loudly.

“*It smells the same as the one in our room. Like Brother when he borrows a new book*,” Myuri said as she stuck her nose under Col’s arm to sniff.

“It seems our scholar gets just as lost in her studies as you do,” Ilenia said as she looked to the corners of the room. Col looked in the same direction as he dodged Myuri’s requests for attention to see some of Vadan’s fellow mice scurrying around the pile of discarded onion skins.

“Ah, yes. This reminds me of when I would eat raw onions to stave off drowsiness while I read the scripture,” he said.

“Wasn’t that recently, though?”

Myuri’s nose nudged at his back and he stumbled forward.

“How’s it look in the bookshelf? We can’t really tell what’s in there.”

Some books were barely being held closed by clasps—either the quality of the paper was too poor, or the book had been read so much the pages had swollen—while others seemed to be considered a lost cause and lay open on the shelves like blooming flowers.

Col took several from their places to glance at them; since all of them had to do with heavenly bodies, a few were idealistic pieces by theologians and ancient philosophers.

“Many of these are very well-known. I even see names of priests that I know,” Col reported. “What is this?”

There was a booklet that was just a bundle of parchment kept together—no binding at all.

It was written in the language of the desert, so Col could not read it.

“Regarding space. The heaven’s breath and blessings. The goddess of the moon and the tides of the sea,” Vadan said. It sounded like a list of titles.

He was a sailor, of course—he could read a bit of the desert script.

“Our only choice would be to ask Mister Le Roi or Archivist Canaan if those are pagan writings. They do not seem to be at a glance, however.”

“Shall I write them down for now?” Ilenia offered. She reached out to the desk, which seemed like someone had just been working at it moments earlier, to grab an aged quill pen and an inkpot caked with dried ink.

“Myuri, are there any hidden cupboards anywhere?”

Myuri, who had sat to scratch at her neck with her hind paws, piqued her ears. She began to sniff at the floor, and the mice began to chase after her. It was an oddly idyllic sight.

“Mmm…Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Then shall we move upstairs?”

Vadan nodded and began climbing the stairs.

“Goodness…,” Col murmured in spite of himself when he peeked up from the floor at the top of the stairs.

“This is what it’d look like if you built an entire water mill out of metal, isn’t it?” Vadan remarked.

Impressed by the comparison, Col climbed to the top of the stairs.

Fixed in the room was an enormous half-disk, taller than Col. Parts that looked like a titan-size bow and arrow were attached to the disk. Surrounding that was a spherical, complicated-looking, latticework structure.

“Not sure how you’re supposed to use it, but I think that big needle points at where the stars are in the sky, and then you write down the numbers carved onto the disk,” Vadan mused. “We use something similar at sea to see where the stars are. But this one’s way bigger.”

“This must have been quite expensive,” Ilenia said as she

arrived upstairs, finished with writing down the titles of the books downstairs.

“Ugh, it smells a lot like metal and oil down here.”

Myuri poked her nose up from behind Ilenia, then gave another big sneeze.

The device was so big only a few people could fit in the room, so Ilenia and Myuri immediately returned to the lower floor. The space opened up a little bit when Vadan opened the few windows in the room, but it was still tight. And the device was not the only reason it felt so cramped.

“This must be a star map,” Vadan murmured, impressed.

Pictures of the heavens, so minute they could have been drawn by an illuminator, fully covered one wall.

There, heavenly bodies that even a layman like Col knew of—the sun, the moon, the stars visible at dawn and dusk, and stars that closely followed the moon—were depicted, but there were also illustrated movements of stars he had no idea even existed. *How much tenacity would one need to follow the movements of all these stars?*

Even though the visible stars in the sky changed with each season, they often were in very different positions depending on exactly when someone chose to look at the sky, but it was hard to tell if there would be any difference at all if one were to watch them every single day.

But it was an astronomer’s purpose to follow those very slow and gradual movements tirelessly, relentlessly, and with the utmost precision.

Col found himself standing straighter as he considered just how dedicated astronomers had to be in their quest to study the laws that governed God’s creation. It struck him as very similar to what theologians pursued, even if they did so in a completely different manner.

And once he had gotten a glimpse of such a great accomplishment, a question crossed his mind.

“I wonder what the astronomer is doing with her observations?” he wondered aloud. “Hmm?”

He looked around the room with the device, and while he saw tools for repairing and adjusting the mechanism, he did not find the one thing he was looking for. If one were to watch the

movements of the stars every night, then wouldn't they have something to record their observations with?

He wondered if it was still with the things downstairs—as he turned, Myuri's voice came from below.

"Brother!"

Col exchanged a glance with Vadan before venturing down the stairs, where they found Myuri and Ilenia standing before a shelf where the books were particularly in disarray.

"Col." Ilenia pointed to the shelf.

Myuri drew her nose close, then drew it back, all while sniffing.

"What is it?" Col asked.

Myuri twisted her head around to look at him. *"The books look like they've been arranged this way on purpose."*

"What?"

"On careful inspection," Ilenia replied. "The traces of dust are a bit strange."

She lifted a few books and began holding them at various angles, letting the light from the windows hit them in different ways. Col liked his books, and he had visited plenty of large libraries in his travels. Because of that, he knew there were too many books in the world to read all of them.

For dust to collect on a bookshelf was as much of a given as snow falling in winter.

But for there to be dust *beneath* a book was proof the book had been placed there deliberately.

"If we put these back like so…," Ilenia trailed as she busily returned the scattered books to their spots. When she added the books on the worktable, it became obvious. "Some seem to be missing."

Every book was big, and even if only a few volumes were missing, their absence was apparent.

"I think…"

Col felt a terrible affinity for the owner of this room. He knew anyone who owned this many books would want to keep their bookcases full.

"Which means…," he murmured, and Ilenia sighed.

"The scholar may have left of her own free will."

Myuri sat, placed her front paws together neatly, and yawned.

There were no signs of a struggle, there were only so many people who could have come and gone, and the books had been deliberately arranged to hide that some were missing. She must have taken all the books she could carry and had absolutely needed.

Like, for example, the records of the movements of the stars.

"It's not unthinkable an intruder attempted to calculate the eclipse date after the scholar refused to give up any information, but that does not line up with the lack of a struggle. In that case, they may have wanted the astronomer to continue her research in the future."

Col sighed in response to Ilenia's hypothesis.

"The astronomer may have decided to switch sides when she realized how precarious a position Prince-Elector Duran was in. But…"

When his gaze drifted to the ceiling, Ilenia seemed to understand what he meant.

"That's right. The device upstairs clearly tells us that stargazing equipment is very expensive. I have also heard that stargazing equipment is always deliberately placed at the top of tall buildings so the lights of the city don't blot out the stars. Even if she managed to secure a well-appointed facility, it would not be easy to find a new patron. If she betrayed the prince-elector, it would have to be with incredibly favorable conditions."

Alchemists had several options when it came to securing research funding—there were always some nobles who wanted to buy dubious products, or they could pretend to be doctors, or appraise ore for merchant companies, among other things.

Astronomers were different. They could only produce results after a dizzyingly long time of observation, and from what Col had heard, it was still extremely rare for an astronomer to make significant findings in their lifetime.

Even though the fields of agriculture and seafaring valued their research, it was hard to think they believed these kinds of scholars were worth the money.

And so those that offered support for astronomers were either those who were willing to bet everything, like Prince-Elector Duran, or wealthy and eccentric nobles.

Otherwise…

“The prince-elector may have considered the Church suspicious to begin with.”

There were very few people who could put together equipment and funds on this scale. Even if there was a member of the branch family who was after the prince-elector seat and wanted to poach the astronomer, they would be found out rather quickly.

But there was exactly one organization where an extra astronomer could appear, and no one would notice.

That was the Church. All Col had to do was think back on how resplendent the cathedral at Estatt was—churches always came with tall towers, and the best place to hide a tree was in the forest. Or rather, the best place to hide an astronomer was in a forest of towers.

“What should we do?” Ilenia asked, and Vadan and Myuri turned to look at Col.

If the astronomer had been forced from her tower, then there were still ways they could search for her.

If the culprits used force, as in a kidnapping, then it would have been very difficult to carry out the plan with small numbers and keep everything quiet.

Outsiders stood out terribly, especially in a land like this, surrounded by mountains with few paths leading outside. No ruffians could carry out a crime without the help of a local.

But if the scholar left of her own will, then the situation changed dramatically.

She would have enough time and energy to erase evidence, and she could even come up with a plan that would not leave any evidence in the first place. She only needed the smallest number of people to help her carry out her plan. And upon leaving the tower and Wobern, she could hide in places no one would think to look, and then have others quietly carry her out.

On top of that, even if the Church were the ones to lead her away, she would then not be lacking in places to go.

If that was the case, their lead was as good as gone.

Myuri’s front legs pawed at the ground, and Ilenia’s eyes were settled on the floor, her hand at her chin.

Col, however, did not panic.

He felt strangely at home in this room. It was filled with the

unique air of someone who would get so engrossed in whatever they were doing, they often forgot to eat and sleep.

And Ilenia and Myuri had noticed the bookshelf.

He felt a sort of bitterness at the carelessness the astronomer exhibited by forgetting about the dust, and at the same time, sympathy welled up inside him.

She was supposed to be vanishing into thin air, yet she could not help but bring her books with her.

So he placed himself in the shoes of an astronomer packing her things, ready to run away, and when he looked around the observation room, he felt like he could almost see the look on her face.

And that meant there were still leads they could follow.

Col turned his attention to the piece of paper on which Ilenia had written the titles of the books on the bookshelves.

"We still have a clue. Captain Vadan."

"Hmm?"

"Please take what Miss Ilenia has written down to Archivist Canaan. Ask him if there are any particular titles here that a scholar might want."

"Oh, uh…Sure…"

"Myuri."

"Huh?"

Myuri, who had been playing with the mice, lifted her head.

"Check to see if Miss Sharon's birds have arrived in the city," Col said. "And…if they have, then while I understand they must be tired, we must ask them to fly again."

Along with Hyland's letter had come a complaint from Sharon they had been working her birds too hard.

But now was the time for them to demonstrate their true value.

"Sure, but fly where?"

Col recalled their meeting just before leaving Estatt. There had been an extraordinary bookseller who loved his books.

"To Mister Le Roi."

If the astronomer had been kidnapped, then traces of the event would have remained in the room.

But if she quietly left of her own will, then she could erase that evidence.

Was this where they were to give up? Not at all.

Because there would be traces of her leaving of her own accord, too.

Col felt like he knew the owner of the room just by looking at the state it was in. He was fairly certain he knew what she had been thinking.

“Brother?”

Three days had passed since they searched the tower. It was just after noon.

They had received permission from the prince-elector to take some books about heavenly bodies from the tower, and Col was reading them in their room at the inn when Myuri called to him.

“It’s here.”

Sitting on the windowsill was a lone pigeon, flapping its wings with uncertain eyes, and beside it was Myuri, holding a letter in her hands.

The pigeon’s normally expressionless eyes seemed to emit an even colder, quiet fury than usual.

Myuri had tied a bit of fur from her tail to the pigeon to protect it from the rampant birds of prey in the mountain skies, but it was still a dangerous journey.

Col felt bad as he unfolded the letter.

“What does Mister Le Roi say?” Myuri asked.

They were using Canaan’s knowledge and Le Roi’s connections as a bookseller. There was also the fact very few people read books in the world, which was something Myuri always enjoyed pointing out to poke fun at Col’s bookishness. Given everything they knew, it was possible to narrow down the otherwise infinite paths the scholar might have taken.

“It appears I was right,” Col replied.

Myuri’s ears piqued and she leaned in closer to look at the letter, doubtful.

“Get ready to travel,” he continued. “Call for Miss Ilenia. We’ll be asking permission from the prince-elector to travel.”

“……”

Myuri snatched the letter from his hands and stared at the writing on the page.

All that was written there was the word *Ahberg*.

After leaving Estatt, Le Roi would not be taking the shortest route to Wobern. Instead, he would be taking one that stretched a bit longer, along the sea. While part of the reason was because of his uncertainty about braving the mountain roads, there was another reason.

One could clearly tell from the map the river flowing from Wobern eventually flowed to the port city of Ahberg, which sat at the mouth of the river.

According to the continental merchants Eve spoke to, the remote Wobern relied heavily on the city at the mouth of the river for their trade. Wobern's primary products were heavy and bulky—lumber and metalwork—so they had no choice but to rely on water routes, not land routes.

And so Le Roi chose to travel via Ahberg.

If an astronomer stationed in the remote Wobern wanted rare goods such as books, she absolutely had to go through the port town.

In short, if a special book had been sold in Ahberg, then there was very little doubt it was the astronomer who purchased it, and they would be able to tell whether the one at the top of the tower was an astrologer or an astronomer based on the type of book.

And they could apply that knowledge to other uses, too.

If the astronomer in question had been respectfully transported from Wobern for her knowledge and services (and not by force), then it was very likely she would make a certain request once she arrived at the bustling city markets.

"It seemed some books had been sold in Ahberg after the astronomer's disappearance."

Myuri looked at him doubtfully.

"If the scholar was staying in the lively port city, then she would undoubtedly want to purchase some books. I doubt she was able to bring all the books she liked with her, you see." Her eyes widened in surprise, and Col continued. "If you were to run away from home, I think the first place I would look would be either the butchers' or an apothecary in a big city."

Honey and sugar were valuable sweeteners sold by apothecaries. A wolf pup off the leash of her nagging older

brother would, without a doubt, go there.

Myuri puffed out her cheeks and shoved the letter in her hand onto Col's chest.

"Just get ready to go!" she said, and then muttered under her breath, "I have to be careful…"

But Col pretended not to hear.

They met with Prince-Elector Duran, and once Col explained they had deduced the astronomer's movements based on the book trade in Ahberg, the prince-elector hummed and fell silent.

But it was not a sound of regret having not thought of it himself; it almost seemed as though he was attempting to mask his delight in that his bet on the Twilight Cardinal was paying off.

He gladly approved their request to momentarily leave Wobern to continue their search.

"Let me give you this as your travel allowance. This should be of help for whatever you need."

He handed them a bag stuffed with silver coins and a document that stated House Duran guaranteed their free passage.

Local landowning nobles set up checkpoints along the river flowing from Wobern, acting increasingly despotic as Prince-Elector Duran's authority waned. Even so, the documents should serve as a reliable way to stay out of trouble.

Col was grateful for the consideration, but that the prince-elector believed such a thing would be necessary at all only highlighted how precarious his position was.

And regular merchants, who were not granted the same privileges, were taxed every time they passed through a checkpoint, which harmed their business and subsequently drove prices up throughout Wobern, making life all the more difficult for the townsfolk.

As anger and resentment grew, it was all directed at Prince-Elector Duran, who was unable to rein in the thieving nobles who preyed on anyone traveling along the river. This continued to erode his already dwindling authority and gave those nobles even more opportunity to make even greater demands…

The prince-elector was caught in a vicious spiral.

"I feel bad for him," Myuri said as they clambered onto one of

the boats in the city canal, clad once again in traveling clothes.

"The people themselves could be perfectly capable, but land dwellers are way too caught up in mainland affairs and stuff. The sea's way more comfortable and freeing. Mountains are nothin' to write home about," Vadan grumbled.

Mice were chased by cats and dogs and hated by humans in the cities, so traveling the vast seas on their castle of a ship meant they could enjoy the air of freedom to their heart's content.

Vadan seemed fully fed up with life in the mountains and seemed eager to return to his old haunts on the sea.

"But a ship's basically the same thing," Myuri said. "The wind blows you around, and you get chased onto rocks, and big waves just flip the thing over. Did you forget you got beached and you couldn't get yourself out?"

Myuri was not defending Prince-Elector Duran. She was simply barking back as a girl born in the mountains.

Vadan's mouth folded in a pout, but the mice who had become friends with Myuri sat on her lap, amused their boss had been argued into a corner.

"Also, Brother, how long is it gonna take to get to Ahberg?"

"I've heard we'll have to walk partway down the river due to unfavorable conditions, so…with that in mind, I believe it should take us about three days."

"That's not far. I wish we could have a little more of an adventure instead," Myuri mused absently.

Vadan and Ilenia, who had traveled to Wobern from Ahberg along the river, smiled as though they knew something she did not.

Myuri stared at them blankly at first, but it would not be long before she learned why.

"Aaa-*choo*!"

Places where roads crossed rivers eventually gave birth to little post towns—ferries came and went, inns popped up targeting stranded travelers.

Sitting at the fire in one such inn, Col gave a loud sneeze.

He felt as though he had been sneezing nonstop since leaving Estatt.

“The river’s not gonna be like that tomorrow, is it?”

Myuri was in a state of partial undress to dry her clothes, and despite how disheveled the fur on her tail was, she had a bright smile on her face. They had descended the river on its furious rapids, everyone had gotten soaked, and Myuri had almost fallen off, yet she still cackled and used an idiom she had just learned —“So this is what they mean by looking like a drowned rat!”— much to Vadan and the other mice’s displeasure.

Col was very much the opposite—their wild journey did not make him feel alive. The snowmelt was freezing cold, and he could have easily lost his life if he had fallen from the boat. They had chosen speed over safety, and now he understood why the boatmen had grinned so boldly when they asked to go as fast as possible.

Since they had an allowance from the prince-elector, they splurged on the inn and secured a room with a large fireplace. Once the fire had grown, Ilenia, who had been wringing out her hair outside, returned to the room.

Even the sheep girl, who rarely flinched in the face of anything, seemed rather annoyed.

“I came here on foot, and when I did, I had gotten the impression going downstream would be rough, but I did not think it would be *that* rough…”

“It was fun, though!”

When Myuri offered her a carefree smile, Ilenia returned it with a tired one of her own.

“I guess a stormy sea’s way worse. The water was…kinda cold.”

Vadan tried not to show how much it had affected him as he held his hands over the fire, and Myuri snorted.

“Brother and I jumped into a sea that actually had ice on it before. Remember?”

“Yes…I genuinely thought I was going to die then.”

To be more precise, Myuri had jumped into the sea after Col had fallen from a ship.

No matter how selfish she acted or how much she teased him, of all the reasons he could not heartlessly toss her tail aside, that was the one at the top of the list.

“Man, you guys’ve been on a crazy trip,” Vadan remarked.

“Eh, not really,” Myuri replied.

The mice lined up in front of the fire like dried fish. Some even looked terrified.

"Either way, the river's gonna be a lot calmer tomorrow," Vadan said. "You're gonna be battling boredom, wolf girl."

"Ugh…That's what I hate about boats."

If they were walking, she could run ahead, find herself a stick and swing it around, or pick some tree nuts and munch on them. But on a river boat she had no choice but to sit still, and tomorrow they would be spending their entire day on one.

"You boasted about how you would be fine in prison, so I'm sure you'll be all right," Col said.

He had been terrified while Myuri had been fully enjoying herself on the downstream rapids, and that light jab was simply payback. Then her still-damp tail thwacked him.

"I can nap, so I don't mind!"

And where do you think you'll be sleeping? Is what he wanted to ask, but he already knew the answer. Just as he thought, Myuri dozed off in his arms the next day, and he had to sit very still in a small boat for an entire day.

Since they did not have anything that looked particularly like cargo, they did not run into any trouble at the checkpoints Col had been so worried about, and before long, they arrived safely at Ahberg.

The first thing they did was head for the Ahberg harbor and meet up with the rest of Vadan's crew, who had been waiting on their ship.

They were the ones who had gotten their letter from Wobern and found Le Roi for them.

They shared the details of the situation with one another, and then Col and the rest of their party made for Le Roi's inn.

Just moments after their happy reunion, Myuri insisted they barge right into a company that dealt in books, but Le Roi only lightly laughed.

"Unfortunately, I can't say I've actually asked the city merchants about the trade of books here."

Col calmed the excited girl and listened to what he had to say.

"The companies here understand book transaction records

stand out. And so they will not give up that information easily, even if you knock on their doors and ask nicely. If anything, the moment we ask, they will immediately get the sense we're following somebody."

Le Roi called himself a bookseller, but the air about him was a bit different from a regular merchant. Considering he often dealt in books that could not be spoken about in public, his qualities and demeanor made him seem more like an inquisitor or a hunter.

"And so I found several visiting booksellers who had come to the city to sell their books and asked them."

Merchants had a powerful command over the world, sometimes only second to God.

Their network reached every corner of the world.

"They said the trade of books came to a sudden halt in the city sometime last month," he said, and patted the books stacked in his inn room. It was as though he was comforting books that were sulking because no one was reading them.

Like Eve, Le Roi would start trading whenever he had a moment, so his inn room was already filled with books and bundles of paper.

"Does that mean the fortune-teller's not here anymore?" Myuri asked.

She scanned the pile of books, then picked one that was full of illustrations and placed it on her lap.

"That's likely. She may have stayed here for a little while, then traveled to another city. It's unfortunate, because it sounded as though she was ordering books with quite the substance. She could have been an excellent customer."

"Mm."

Myuri opened the book, and inside were many colorful pictures of bizarre animals. It seemed to be a collection of fables from faraway places a long-distance merchant had heard on their travels.

"But that's not the end of the trail, is it?" Vadan spoke up. "Can't we come up with a different reason to search the companies here? We got a special document from Prince-Elector Duran, so we could probably do it if we negotiate with the city council and tell them that, I dunno, Wobern suspects them of

illegal trade or somethin'."

Vadan's idea was a bit violent, typical of a sailor.

And what was unsaid but still implied was he would have his mice take a look around, too.

But Le Roi shook his head.

"Unfortunately, the prince-elector has no authority here."

Myuri, who had been staring curiously at a picture of a strange animal that looked like it had noses for feet, looked up when he said that.

"What do you mean?"

"This is the end of the river that flows deep from the mountains of Wobern. The lumber and metalwork that comes downstream is then sent out all over the world from these ports. But in exchange, Wobern buys its wheat and wine from this city."

Le Roi spoke as though he were reciting a riddle.

"I guess the one who provides food is going to be more powerful," Myuri said.

What she said was an obvious truth.

No one could eat lumber or metal. They would have to procure what they lacked from elsewhere.

"And what you've told me," Le Roi continued, "is that we are dealing with a conflict surrounding the prediction of an eclipse. That's when it came to me—the company in charge of trade in Ahberg is the Ruvik Alliance."

"What?!" Col exclaimed in surprise, and Myuri stared at him with wide eyes. "The Ruvik Alliance was the one sending money to my imposter," he explained.

"So it seems," said Le Roi. "And I heard you made quite the fools of the alliance during that commotion in the northern islands. And on top of everything else, the Twilight Cardinal is hurting their luxury goods business. They must be doing whatever they can, wherever they can, to bring about the downfall of the Twilight Cardinal. What is happening now may be part of that plot."

While Le Roi seemed like he was enjoying himself, the dots seemed to finally connect for Myuri.

"…So we *do* know exactly who took the fortune-teller away, then."

Her eyes told Col she wanted to crack down on them

immediately.

“But,” Le Roi said. “The Ruvik Alliance is like an octopus.”

“An octopus?”

Myuri was born in the mountains, and did not know what that creature was. Le Roi smiled and flipped through the pages of the book on her lap before landing on a page with a picture of a monster emerging from the sea, its tentacles reaching out to a ship to drag it underwater.

“The Ruvik Alliance is an elusive entity,” he continued. “It is generally considered a league of cities, but their connections are much looser than that name may imply. In essence, a city itself may be hostile to the alliance, but the large companies in the city may be members of the alliance. Not only that, but they are less like a group with proper command, and…more like a gang of stray hounds that leap at food the moment they see it.”

They were not *allies*, but a group of individuals who often shared the same interests. Myuri, however, being a wolf, did not seem pleased with the metaphor.

“In any case, determining *which* company of the Ruvik Alliance kidnapped the astronomer would be very difficult.”

There was a picture of an octopus strangling a ship with its many tentacles in the book Myuri had in her hands.

They did not know which arm had taken the astronomer, and if they were to attack the wrong arm, then the entire octopus would vanish into the sea. That was what Le Roi was trying to say.

“But we know that whatever company was buying the books has to be the culprit, right?”

Myuri spoke with a defiant tone not because she was being stubborn, but because she knew she could find out—no, *sniff* out—which company was at fault.

They also had Vadan and his crew of mice, who were most adept at sneaking into buildings.

But Le Roi did not know any of this, so this must have been extra frustrating for Myuri.

And the seasoned bookseller denied Myuri’s line of thought from a completely different angle.

“In trade, it is not unusual to make purchases through a proxy. Especially so if one is concerned about others following their

trail. Even if we know which company made the order, that will not tell us who the true client is."

Myuri literally gritted her teeth and fidgeted impatiently.

"Urgh, then we should just do the same thing in another city!" she argued, and all the adults blinked. "It sounds like she left the city a long time ago, so if we look at the trade of books in another city, and then another city, then we'll eventually stumble into her while she's paying for a book!"

Logically, it did make sense, but…with their doubts, everyone turned to look at Le Roi.

He was the only one who had connections with booksellers all over the world.

"That's quite a difficult request."

He looked like an adult who had just been asked a profound question by a toddler.

"If you don't have enough people to search, then I know a way."

Myuri glanced at Vadan; Col began to sweat, wondering if she was about to blurt out the existence of nonhumans in her excitement. But instead—

"There are a lot of bored nobles in the Kingdom of Winfiel. We could get them to help if we told them it was their punishment for kidnapping my brother."

There was a prince who was in line for the throne, but had very low chances of ever inheriting it, and his lackeys.

He had his own fervent reasons for building a sinister force within the kingdom, but one thing led to another, and eventually he made up with Hyland. At this point, they could be counted among their allies.

It was a realistic proposal in Myuri's eyes, but after a moment of thought, Le Roi gave a word of warning.

"The book trade is a bit different from the trade of wheat and cured meats."

"…How?"

"It is, in general, a secretive trade. No one wants to make their transactions public."

"……"

Myuri furrowed her brow and looked to Col.

"Erm," Col began. "Copies of the scripture, for example, are not

a problem, but books on alchemy might attract the attention of the Church."

"Precisely," Le Roi said. "Many books are also very expensive. And there are many people who want to get their hands on curios before anyone else can, so there are plenty of reasons why booksellers are quiet and discreet."

"But you found the books the fortune-teller bought right away, right?" she asked.

Le Roi shrugged his broad shoulders. "Information on who bought what kind of book is considered tradable goods among booksellers. So I offered my own information as compensation, and collected information like that from outside booksellers."

"Oh…"

Nothing was free between merchants. It seemed at first that Le Roi had simply gone around asking questions, but he was indeed paying for the information with something of equal value.

Myuri had been talking as though they should be trying whatever came to mind, and it seemed she finally understood her own ignorance on the matter.

Le Roi smiled, his eyes gentle, like a master studying an excited apprentice.

"It is true there are many people who want to create an obligation of gratitude from me, since I am very well acquainted with the Twilight Cardinal's movements. And so, Lady Myuri, I ask you to keep begging Master Col to thoroughly criticize the Church and write a book that will cause plenty of controversy."

Le Roi had asked Col many a time to write a book criticizing the Church, since he knew it would sell faster than hotcakes. Information on when such a book would be published would be very valuable merchandise indeed.

After learning Le Roi had worked hard in his own way to track the astronomer, Myuri turned to glare at Col, as though completely taking Le Roi's side.

"Knowing she was definitely here but not knowing *where* she went is definitely annoying," Vadan said, folding his arms over his chest.

"Then shall we trust in God's guidance and search through every nearby harbor city one after another?" Col suggested.

Even if they were not willing to give up, what they could do

now was limited.

“If the astronomer happens to be in town, then those townsfolk may have noticed. That counts for the book trade, and she may be observing the heavens again somewhere.”

“You are correct,” Ilenia agreed. “What towns have tall towers…narrows it down, and if we look for towers whose tops are occasionally lit, then that narrows it down further.”

Myuri continued. “And if she’s wandering around like Brother does, then she’d definitely stand out!”

Col could picture it, too.

“And books are super heavy, so if she’s like my brother, then they’d really weigh her down, right? So we could ask the guys who load ships or load carts at the harbor, and we might find her right away. It’s probably not every day someone’s loading a whole bunch of books.”

Col pictured a certain kind of scholar in his mind: clad in threadbare robes, face unhealthily damp with sweat, cradling books that were more valuable than her life.

“Well? You know a lot about ports, right?” Myuri’s attention was on Vadan the sailor.

“I wanna agree, but it’s not like this astronomer escaped the prince-elector on her own, right?” he said. “She clearly has some kind of backing that’s payin’ for her stuff and takin’ her somewhere. So even if she can hold all her books herself, she definitely brought more than her precious star records, right? She could just pretend the rest is regular cargo. And tryin’ to find what you’re lookin’ for out of regular cargo, well…*You* know how tough that is.”

Vadan was looking at Ilenia, the wool broker.

Ilenia’s shoulders slumped in defeat, and she offered Myuri an apologetic smile.

“An unbelievable number of items are traded every day in the city. And occasionally, things said to be bags of wool may contain something more.”

When she said that, Vadan stuck out his lower lip, and Le Roi gave a knowing smile.

Vexed, Myuri folded her arms and said, “Contraband.”

Though her voice was somewhat emphatic, she stumbled a little over the word. She had probably only learned it recently.

Either way, the only one who could know everything that was hidden in unexpected places was an omniscient god.

“So…we can’t track her down anymore?”

Myuri let her arms drop. The captain of the smuggling ship aside, neither of the other two adults in the room replied with a favorable answer. They had likely hidden their own fair share of goods, and they knew firsthand how difficult it was to expose things that had been hidden.

While Col did think her nose was capable, it would still be impossible to find out anything useful from the astronomical number of ships and carts at any port. Even if they were to attempt this, they would need many more people.

And in some cases, what they were looking for might be cleverly hidden, so they would need to consider all the possible smuggling tricks.

Sending capable individuals out to every harbor and town to find everything the astronomer might be looking to purchase was simply too tall a task.

It simply was not possible. Those who had the necessary skills were often placed in very valuable roles—and that was where Col’s thoughts came to a sudden halt.

“Oh.”

He did not mean to speak aloud.

They *did* know someone like that.

Every person in the world had their natural enemies.

And in this case, what they were dealing with was a little different than typical smuggling.

And that meant they still had ways of tracking an astronomer who left this town with most of its books toward new ground.

“Even if she had hidden her things in order to cover her trail, that may be something she has only done upon leaving the city,” he murmured, as though speaking to himself, and the other four turned to look at him. “And anyone who wants to hide contraband would have to be very careful, unless they want it to be found right away.”

This time, everyone looked at Vadan, and he replied with a scowl.

“So what? You saying there might be some kinda special clue in smugglin’ books? But then shouldn’t you ask the bookkeep

over there and not me?”

Vadan jerked his thumb toward Le Roi.

“No, that isn’t what I mean,” Col rearranged his thoughts and tried again. “I believe she hides the trade of her books to shake anyone who might be following her from Wobern. And that means we can assume she isn’t doing it to make money, meaning she only keeps it a secret when she’s leaving this port town. No?”

Vadan looked dubiously at Col, unable to see where he was going.

“If the smuggled books are exposed when the astronomer arrives at a new town, then that would draw undue attention to herself. I doubt she would want to expose herself to that kind of risk while trying to avoid attention,” Col continued.

“Yeah…That would be a hassle for her. A lord could put her to trial, depending on the value. But so what?”

“That means we *do* have a way to find out what city she brought her books to.”

It was not just Vadan who looked at him with a grim expression—Myuri did, too.

They still had the problem of numbers—they would somehow have to search all the towns, numbers of which rivaled the stars in the sky.

Even if they got Heir Klevend and all of his followers to help, it would take an unbelievably long time. But so long as the astronomer and her group were not genuinely attempting to smuggle books, there was a way to overcome that problem.

“Books are generally expensive, and every town or port is more than eager to levy taxes on them, to the point that Prince-Elector Duran prepared special documents for us when we left Wobern. Which means—”

“Oh! I know!” Myuri exclaimed, her eyebrows shooting up a moment later. “Brother, do you mean—”

He nodded emphatically when he saw the exaggerated frown on her face.

An astronomical number of people and things moved through harbor towns, and it was almost impossible to find one specific person or thing once they managed to blend in. And so there were times people would deliberately hide other people or things just because of that.

But it was possible for someone to hide their head and still leave the rest of themself exposed—some might even say they were leaving their rumps out for a wolf to bite into.

Even if goods were not thoroughly checked upon leaving town, things brought into town were meticulously inspected. And that meant there were those who could expose even hidden items.

Especially if they were things with value, like books.

“Customs. Tax collectors.”

When Col said that, both Vadan and Ilenia’s mouths hung open.

“Books are expensive, so if she is properly paying tariffs, then that will remain in town records, or perhaps in the shared memories of tax collectors.”

Tax collectors were genuinely sharp-eyed. That was not because of work ethic, but simply because their livelihoods depended on whether or not they could levy taxes. That, and there was a very good chance the astronomer brought quite a lot of books with her.

Those trying to avoid attention would likely be more wary of the commotion that might arise from secretly moving expensive books rather than simply moving them out in the open.

Anyone doing that would simply pay their tariffs.

“But would those awful tax collectors ever talk offhand about the things they’ve accomplished? They know everyone in the world hates them, and their guild is more closed off than any other guild,” Vadan said. He was always on the receiving end of his smuggling being cracked down on.

Ilenia smiled. “Well, we *do* happen to know a person who used to be a very skilled tax collector. Don’t we?”

Myuri drew up her shoulders in discontent because that tax collector was the one she was constantly bickering with.

“You know someone like—oh.”

At last, Vadan seemed to recall the less than pleasant memories.

The very reason Vadan’s ship was called a ghost ship was because he and his whole crew would take on mouse form whenever their smuggling was about to be exposed, and that was how they avoided detection.

But their luck eventually ran out, and their ship became

stranded on a sand bar due to a sudden storm, exposing a hidden room on the ship and getting them all arrested. And the one who found the hidden room was none other than the person who once acted as head of all Rausbourne's tax collectors.

"Miss Sharon once told me that sharing information with one another is an important part of a tax collector's job. News on suspicious ships is passed between ports, and they check to see what was loaded where, and if they find a discrepancy, they instantly descend on the ship," Col said. "Isn't that right?"

"Huh." As the captain of a smuggling ship, Vadan had likely had his fair share of confrontations with tax collectors. "Never thought the day would come where I'd be relyin' on their vindictiveness."

A thin thread now bound them to the missing astronomer.

Before the sun set that day, a single seabird set flight across the sea. The letter tied to the bird's leg asked for assistance, and a request for the birds to be handsomely rewarded for their trouble.

Folded inside the paper was a tuft of fur from a wolf's tail, almost like it was a threat intended for one person in particular.

CHAPTER THREE



Chapter Three

Though they had to wait for contact from Sharon to arrive, they were not wasting their time in Ahberg. That was because determining possible towns the astronomer went to through taxed book records alone was nothing more than splitting hairs.

It was not simply the question of whether or not those records truly existed—when Col thought about putting the plan into action, they would still be faced with the big problem that there were *too* many possible towns.

Even if they were to limit it to towns with towers that could be used for astronomy, it still left them with quite a number.

If they did not narrow down the number first, then it would still take a long time, even with Sharon's help.

They would have to cut down drastically on the possibilities.

"Everyone stops here," said Myuri.

Sitting at her feet were stray dogs, tails wagging happily.

They looked at the sea, looked at Myuri, then panted heavily, their tongues lolling out of their mouths.

Myuri offered them pieces of jerky, and they devoured them with delight.

"I think that pretty much confirms the fortune-teller left the town by sea."

The first thing Myuri did after sending Sharon a letter was make her way to the town's large companies.

She did not barge in in wolf form and steal hidden ledgers or anything—she found the strays that lingered near the back entrances and had them sniff a cloth she brought from the tower in Wobern.

There were all kinds of bold sorts who targeted company goods—mice, birds, thieves—and the stray dogs would gladly take food scraps in exchange for howling at these uninvited guests.

And so Myuri's hypothesis was if the astronomer had stayed the night at one of these companies, then the strays would remember her scent.

Most dogs showed no interest in the fabric she brought from the tower, but a few of them hanging around the back of one company house did react and trotted off to lead the way.

The dogs would eventually break off and take the wrong routes, but so long as they followed one, they eventually came together again at the same place: the dizzyingly busy Ahberg port.

“They won’t know what ship she took, will they?” Col asked.

“I don’t know, I can’t understand them like Mother can,” Myuri replied. “But even if I did, I don’t think the dogs would be able to tell any of the ships apart.”

That was true.

“But we know what company she stayed with, so the mice could probably ransack their records tonight. We might be able to find out where she went easier than we expected.”

Things would be easy if that really were the case, but Col reckoned it was not very likely they left any evidence in writing.

And there was one other problem.

As he and Myuri were following the strays, he was once again amazed by how convenient a nonhuman’s power could be, but on the other hand, he knew there were some things he had to think about with regard to it.

Myuri’s power found out what company had been sheltering the astronomer, and there was a chance they could find a big clue if Vadan and his crew snuck in under the cover of darkness. If they really were to find a clue then, how was Col supposed to explain that to Le Roi?

They had been faced with similar problems thus far, but he felt like it was at last time to consider the question in earnest.

It was not like he did not trust Canaan and Le Roi.

There would be more and more situations in which the Twilight Cardinal would be standing center stage in the future, and he could easily picture situations in which he would be faced with difficult problems. And among those would, without doubt, be circumstances that Myuri’s power could solve in an instant.

Even if revealing Myuri’s true identity to Canaan, Le Roi, or Hyland was the correct choice, if they kept encountering situations where they had to tell someone, their secret would one day get totally exposed.

Then again, sometimes when a nonhuman's power was almost *too* convenient. There were times when he felt like he had no choice but to rely on it.

That was why, when he looked at Myuri as she patted the strays' heads, he gave a heavy sigh.

The reason he admonished Myuri for wanting to wear her sword all the time was similar. It was not simply because he thought a girl should not carry one—it was because weapons often demanded to be used.

The same went for a nonhuman's power. Not even Col could guarantee that, when he stood at a decisive turning point in his travels to come, he would choose never to use their power in exchange for revealing their existence to the world.

Could Myuri, who was innocently playing with stray dogs, choose to never exercise her power? Could they forever keep people like her a secret?

Of course, Col also felt a sense of guilt for keeping secrets from Canaan, Le Roi, and Hyland, people who were giving their all to support the Twilight Cardinal.

Col had made the conscious decision to step out into the world as the Twilight Cardinal, but there were many tails lying across this path he should not be stepping on. As he thought about what was to come, he wondered if, perhaps, he should make the decision to never rely on their abilities again.

His head already ached from trying to decide how to convey this to Le Roi.

He hummed deeply as the thoughts rolled through his mind, and Myuri stood, finished with the dogs.

"Brother," she said, brushing the dirt off her hands. "Since we're already out, can we take a look around town?"

All the dogs around her turned to look at Col suspiciously.

It was as though they were asking him what he planned on doing with their princess—it was uncomfortable.

But Myuri paid it no mind; she sidled up to him and slipped her arm around his like this was a date. The dogs grew even more jealous, but when he noticed she was casually wiping dog drool off her hands and onto his clothes, all he could do was sigh.

"Are you hungry?"

"No! There's something I wanna look into!" Myuri objected.

Col shook her off and thought about what she said.

“Very well. Miss Eve told us to look at how much ironware costs here, anyway.”

Most goods exported from Wobern went through Ahberg before being sent out into the wider world, so if they were to inform her of the prices in the city, that would repay her a bit for all the things she had done for them thus far.

And that would also give Col time to think of a good pretext for Le Roi.

“But we will not be walking and eating.”

He nipped that possibility in the bud. Myuri, who had started walking already, turned to look at him over her shoulder and growled.

With light, puppy-like steps, Myuri peeked into every stall and workshop they came across, and then asked the stall keepers and artisans about whatever caught her interest.

Some things were ironware, like swords and scissors, while some other things were cheese wheels large enough for Myuri to curl up and sleep on, and a good portion of the goods were things from the Wobern mountains.

Though Col had forbidden them from walking and eating, she eventually secured herself a small piece of cheese and a buckskin belt with trinket pouches after sufficient wheedling. As he started to wonder if she thought the allowance the prince-elector gave them was gift money, they came across a canal that spanned the city.

The way the neatly banked canal ran straight through the city was a genuinely magnificent sight—the city council must have been more dependable than he thought.

The canal looked like it was for the townsfolks’ everyday use—ships stocked with fresh fish and others stocked with chickens came and went. One that passed right in front of them at that moment looked to be carrying the wine that would be sating the thirst of the townspeople that night.

As they walked along the canal, Myuri found a boatmaster who was waiting for his cargo to be unloaded and went up to talk to him.

People who were in the middle of work—and this went for the craftspeople, too—were often the type to yell when interrupted by conversation, but strangely enough, they did no such thing when Myuri spoke to them.

That was probably because she was very good at catching them off guard.

Before they knew it, she was in their personal space, her red eyes peering up at them with curiosity. When the sturdier artisans and boat workers faltered and the younger apprentices went red in the face, Myuri pounced with her questions.

Then every single one would offer an answer without thinking, and ultimately found themselves being honest with her. It was like watching a wolf effortlessly kill foxes.

The daughter of the Wisewolf and a merchant of exceptional talent had quite the worrying talent.

“Brother?”

The girl eventually found her way back to him and tugged at his sleeve.

“I’m hungry.”

It seemed she had finished her little piece of cheese long ago.

Myuri was pointing to a large tavern that sat at the edge of the plaza where several of the canals came together; it was open during the day. It was better than eating and walking, and it was just about the time of day when lunch was a reasonable excuse.

Col nodded reluctantly, and Myuri quickly settled at one of the tables just outside the tavern.

They soon placed their orders, and then Myuri asked him a question, in the same tone and cadence as if she was asking about tomorrow’s weather.

“So, Brother, once we get the date of the prophecy, are we actually going to give it to the mercenary king?”

For a brief moment, he did not know what she was talking about.

“Uh…I’m sorry?”

They had come to Ahberg to search for the missing astronomer, and they were doing so because the scholar supposedly had predicted the date of the eclipse. Once he had the prediction in hand, Prince-Elector Duran would attempt to regain the authority he was so dangerously close to losing.

Col, Myuri, and the rest of their party were helping to restore the prince-elector's authority to create an obligation, and if they managed to prevent the Church from taking advantage of the prophecy, then all the better.

But what Myuri had said as she was studying her new buckskin belt ignored everything Col had taken as a given. And the way she spoke insinuated betraying Prince-Elector Duran.

Col's mouth reflexively opened to scold her for suggesting something so selfish, but he had a feeling they had gone through similar things several times throughout their journey together, so he stopped himself.

Myuri was a wolf who constantly watched their surroundings, and she was always looking at things he could not see beyond the trees.

Once he calmed down a little, Col asked, "…Could you explain that a little more, please?"

Myuri's eyes narrowed slightly. It was the face of a wild child testing him, suspicious as to why he did not get angry.

"You're the one fighting the Church," she said. "You should be the one to make the prophecy. You should use the prophecy first, so the Twilight Cardinal becomes more popular, instead of helping an unreliable ruler get his power back."

Myuri spoke so smoothly and matter-of-factly, that at a glance it made logical sense.

"You know that would be stealing from him, and that is not something I can do. The prince-elector took Archivist Canaan as hostage so that we wouldn't do such a thing."

Col made sure to speak firmly, but Myuri only shrugged.

"Even though Miss Eve would lick her lips if she learned what was going on in this city?"

Col furrowed his brow—at first, he was not sure how this was related.

Myuri remained facing the canals, but she looked at Col out of the corner of her eye.

"I asked around a lot. And everyone said all the goods shipped here triple in price when they go up the mountain and get sold in Wobern."

They were served their bread and soup. After a pause of a breath, Myuri said quietly, "That's a lot of unfair profits."

It was not easy taking a boat upstream on that torrential river, so most cargo apparently ended up being carried on the backs of donkeys or people. But even if the trip was a difficult one, three times the normal prince was, indeed, far too much. The road from Ahberg to Wobern was nowhere near as harsh as the road from Estatt to Wobern, after all.

"And everything that goes the opposite way, down the mountain, is sold for super cheap. They're practically bartered away. Like, a whole mountain of metal traded for one sack of wheat. It's like they don't even bother to calculate the ratio."

That was what she had meant by Eve licking her lips.

But Col was still not sure how that justified betrayal.

He gave her a questioning look, and after she bit into her bread, she continued.

"The sea dwellers are treating the mountain folk like crap!"

The one reason Col could not shout at her for foul language was because he understood precisely what she meant.

"The previous mercenary king and the one before that were all rough and violent, and there's a reason why the mountain people want a lord like that."

This girl once acted as the rascal boss of all the children in Nyohhira, and constantly fought with the other boys in the village. Now her red eyes bore straight into her older brother, who had essentially never fought in his life.

"The reason all the old kings were people who fit the title *mercenary king* wasn't because of tradition, but because the people genuinely wanted them to be like that. I think they needed someone who would threaten to come down the mountain and make everyone kneel if the people living by the sea got too greedy."

The relationships between towns made for quarrels that were on a vastly different level than disputes between neighbors. It was more like a territorial dispute between animals of the forest, and force of arms ultimately had the final say.

"And so I wondered." The wolf girl understood the rules of the forest, and so she continued talking. "Let's say you find the fortune-teller and get the prophecy date. Even if you were to just give the mercenary king the date, would he still end up a reliable ally?"

She dipped her bread in her soup and bit into it, as though warming up her mouth, cooled from suggesting something so cold.

She had so much fun ordering the strays around, letting her curiosity lead her throughout the city and asking many people many questions, yet this had been running through her mind the whole time.

Col, who had been bemoaning nonhuman power, was not the only one putting his brain to work.

“Also, you probably couldn’t tell,” she said. “But most of the wheat being shipped to the mountain is bad quality. I thought maybe there wasn’t any good wheat around this area, but when I got a closer look at the cargo at the port, there was plenty that looked just fine. They ship bad quality stuff to Wobern on purpose.”

In the eyes of the Ruvik Alliance, the ones who managed trade in Ahberg, the entire mountain region, including Wobern, was a cow worth milking dry.

It was the martial might of the lords past, ones who lived up to the name of mercenary king, that carved away that natural disadvantage. But no one could expect much from the present prince-elector in terms of battle due to his bad leg. And since he was much more brains than brawn, the thieving river nobles did whatever they pleased.

The reason the people of Wobern did not respect the prince-elector was because of very real problems.

The prince-elector had very few options remaining to him—he bet his course of action on an astronomer, and he left his fate in the hands of a young man who called himself the Twilight Cardinal.

“The worst possible outcome of all this is that you give the date of prophecy to the mercenary king, and then he gets kicked off his throne. Did you think about that?”

“……”

Myuri’s tendency to dream was just one part of her personality.

It was these parts of her that gave her a sharpness that lived up to her wolf heritage.

“Do you think one measly miracle is enough for the old man to

flip all the disadvantages against him?" she mused, then looked up at Col with wide eyes.

He could see the Wisewolf in her red eyes.

"But if *you* made the prophecy, it would be *amazing*—I know it. That would become your power, and your freedom. Right?"

All Col had to do was think back on the false Twilight Cardinal who had appeared in Estatt.

All the imposter had to do was speak of ideals, and that drove the people into a fervor so powerful they built an entire town on a muddy wasteland.

What would happen if he predicted the moment the heavenly bodies vanished from the sky?

Grabbing the hearts of the people was the same as grabbing a weapon—at least in the context of the fight against the Church.

"Stand on a hill, raise a staff, then tell everyone about the change in the sky. Do you know how many stories they'd write about your miracle?"

The corner of Myuri's mouth lifted, and Col got a peek of the canine underneath. And even though she sounded like she was partially joking, her eyes were serious.

Even Col knew how much of a commotion that would cause.

He had taken on the role of the Twilight Cardinal in Estatt and had vowed to prevail in his fight against the Church. He was keenly aware he needed a firm grip on the reins so the immense power his title carried was not used for evil.

With that in mind, Myuri's suggestion might have been the optimal solution.

The eclipse prophecy would push the power of the Twilight Cardinal to even greater heights. And that would be a huge step forward on their journey.

"But…"

Col thought back on Prince-Elector Duran as he told him of his secret in the courtyard of his palace. His palace was empty. It stood in the center of a city packed with buildings and people living nearby; however, it still seemed like he lived alone.

That he employed an astronomer, too, had to have been a last resort; a grasping at straws; his only option left after a long and hard struggle. And then, just when it seemed like a miracle might occur, it was taken from him.

Could Col take that possibility away from him yet again? That was not something the Twilight Cardinal would do.

There was yet another thing that hurt his heart. It was the way Myuri so casually brought it up. He did not believe that growing up and becoming an adult meant gaining a cold, heartless point of view.

Logically speaking, Myuri was probably correct.

But it was hard for him to accept, and it saddened him this might be how Myuri was growing up.

Col realized he had crushed the piece of bread in his hand. It was when he lifted his gaze to advocate for faith, the nonreligious sort.

“And then, when you become such an *awesome* prophet that you make Canaan go red in the face, you’ll be able to save the mercenary king for real,” Myuri said, leaning over the table.

“Ah…What?”

“If he becomes a king my great brother recognizes, then everyone would bow to him.”

There were marinaded sardines in Myuri’s hands. Evidently, she had ordered without him realizing. The sardines were rather round and fat for the season, and they were covered in what looked to be finely chopped herbs.

After spending so much time at Hyland’s manor and in Eve’s presence, a woman for whom money was no object, Myuri had come to develop a discriminating palate.

She pinched the tail of the sardine, lifted it above her head, then opened her mouth wide and ate it in one bite.

Col had no choice but to watch the act with a dumbfounded look, like a sheep that came across a wolf in the forest and could not bring itself to run away.

“Are you listening to me, Brother?”

She did not look angry. If anything, she seemed delighted. When he saw that, he understood; she knew he would be thrown off balance by her idea from the very start.

They would be taking away the date of the prophecy from Prince-Elector Duran, who held on to it as his last hope. What sort of reaction would her foolish brother make when she made such an unethical suggestion, even if it was perfectly sensible?

Her simple brother would of course show aversion, but then

find distress as he reasoned through it, and yet choose to take a heavy step forward on a path of his own choosing.

That was because sheep tended to stare at their own feet as they walked.

But wolves walked paths where there were none, saw far beyond the canopies of the trees, and laid in wait for their prey.

"You know, I would *neeever* actually suggest something I know you'd hate," Myuri said happily, and swallowed another marinaded sardine.

A bitter look crossed Col's face, because for a moment, he felt an awful lot like the sardine.

She knew her timid brother would hate waving a staff around and pretending to be a prophet, *especially* if that meant stealing Prince-Elector Duran's thunder.

But Myuri had taken the exact same things to make a completely different dish from it.

Prophesizing an eclipse could turn a beggar into a wise man.

And so she was saying a Twilight Cardinal who had successfully made an accurate prediction could save the unfortunate prince-elector with certainty.

"Oh, obviously, when the Twilight Cardinal stands on the hill waving his staff around, the Saint of the Sun is going to be there with him! It's going to be so awesome when it happens, and people are gonna act it out on street corners everywhere!"

As the sheep tread earnestly through the treacherous forest, the wolf trotted along beside him, wagging her tail.

The wolf cared not that the sheep stumbled over the bad roads—she was still playing with him.

As the image played out in his mind, Col sighed.

Myuri was pleased, having toyed with her brother.

Col tore off a piece of his squished bread and tiredly tossed it into his mouth.

The Twilight Cardinal would prophesize the coming of the eclipse, and then wield his overwhelming authority to save the prince-elector. It was an option Col had not even considered, but it was certainly worth considering.

That said, when he wrote it down it felt terribly arrogant, and

he had a feeling the prince-elector would find it hard to stomach on an emotional level. Just picturing himself telling the prince-elector that it would go much better if the Twilight Cardinal were to make the prediction made him squirm from the sheer insolence.

Regardless of the way he held his head in his hands as he sat at the desk, the very wolf who had showed him the alternate path lay sprawled out over the bed, reading a book Le Roi had lent her about the legend of a saint who had something to do with the constellations.

When Col traveled with Myuri's parents as a child, he often saw the merchant sitting at the desk with his head in his hands while the Wisewolf relaxed on the bed.

As he thought back on Myuri's father's troubles, he thought hard to put together several ways they could deal with the prophecy, then put it in a letter to Hyland asking for her thoughts.

After a few days, they received contact from Vadan and his crew, who had been sneaking around the company where the astronomer had been temporarily staying.

The results were not great.

They had apparently done a thorough search across two entire nights, but there was no written record of where she had gone. It was perhaps a plan only a small number of people within the company knew of.

This was a plot that involved kidnapping a scholar from the employ of a waning, yet still respectable, prince-elector. Of course they would be careful.

And that meant the only way they could trace her steps was to look through the customs records of an impossibly large number of towns.

They had no clues that could help them narrow that number down—all they had was the certainty she likely left the city by boat.

But Myuri did not have a worry in the world. She would randomly come up with ideas, such as, "There are huge flocks of passage birds, right? I heard those get big enough to cover the entire sky, so we could have the birds search for us!"

Col anxiously wondered if that was ultimately possible, and if they used that method, would they ultimately be forced to reveal

the existence of nonhumans, until the night of the third day.

Vadan in his mouse form came to their room at the inn.

"Sorry we couldn't really find anything at the company house. You got a reply to your letter, though."

"Already?"

A bird bearing the reply letter from Rausbourne was apparently waiting on Vadan's ship. Col was shocked by the speed; it must have been hard for the bird to fly through the drizzle, which had lasted all day.

Knowing whatever it was had to be big news, Myuri slung her hooded robe over her shoulders, but—

"Wh—hey! Walk on your own!"

"One or two can't hurt."

As she changed, all the mice, including Vadan himself, scuttled up her shoulders and into her hood.

"C'mon, you're taking us there. I'll tell you where to go."

Myuri sighed as she pulled on her hood, now bustling with mice. The way it squirmed made it seem like she had her wolf ears out.

"Don't pull too hard on my hair, okay?"

With a pout, Myuri shoved her hand into the hood to shift the mice around.

Though she could not be too harsh with the mice she had become friends with, Col still suppressed the intrusive urge to say, *How does it feel to be toyed with for once?* When they exited out into the corridor, they found Ilenia, who had mice on her own shoulder, ready and waiting for them.

"I'm glad to see you having fun as always, Myuri."

Holding back the stream of mice that threatened to pour from the gaps in her robe, Myuri sighed deeply.

The harbors in any town typically stayed lively late into the night, but naturally, with the rain, it was quiet.

The city felt unusually silent on this still night; they rushed through it while being careful of the wet, slippery flagstones. Once they arrived at the harbor, light spilled from a few boats. It seemed feasts took place below deck on rainy nights.

They gingerly crossed one of the planks to board one such

ship.

From the outside, it looked like all the other ships. But once Col stood on deck, he recalled when they came to investigate this very ship when it had run aground on a sand bar. He then remembered it had been physically pulled from the sandbar with rope, and he looked at Ilenia.

“Hmm?”

Ilenia noticed his gaze and smiled at him, but he quickly looked away.

In that moment, Vadan and the other mice leaped from within Myuri’s hood and vanished.

There must have been a mice-only entrance somewhere.

One baby mouse was not quick enough to leap down with the rest; Myuri started teasing and playing with it in her hands, and the door to the hold opened shortly afterward.

“Come on in.”

Vadan, back in his human form, welcomed them in, and they all started down the stairs. As they moved down, relying on the faint light of the candle, Col noticed the frown on Myuri’s face growing deeper and deeper.

“What is the matter?” he asked, and Myuri looked away in a huff.

“That’s not how you say hello,” came a voice.

Sitting in the dim of the candlelight was the bird spirit who once led all the tax collectors in Rausbourne.

“Chicken!”

“What do you want, puppy?”

They addressed each other sharply, but Ilenia was chuckling; it was their usual way of greeting each other.

Myuri brought the baby mouse close to her face and scared it with fake threats. “That evil bird’s gonna eat you if you let your guard down.”

“I did not think you would be here yourself, Miss Sharon, and this late at night,” Col said.

On closer inspection, he saw her hair was damp; sitting on the crate beside her was a piece of bread and a bowl of soup, still steaming hot.

“I told the others I was going to Rausbourne when I left the monastery. Didn’t have time, so I had to fly overnight.”

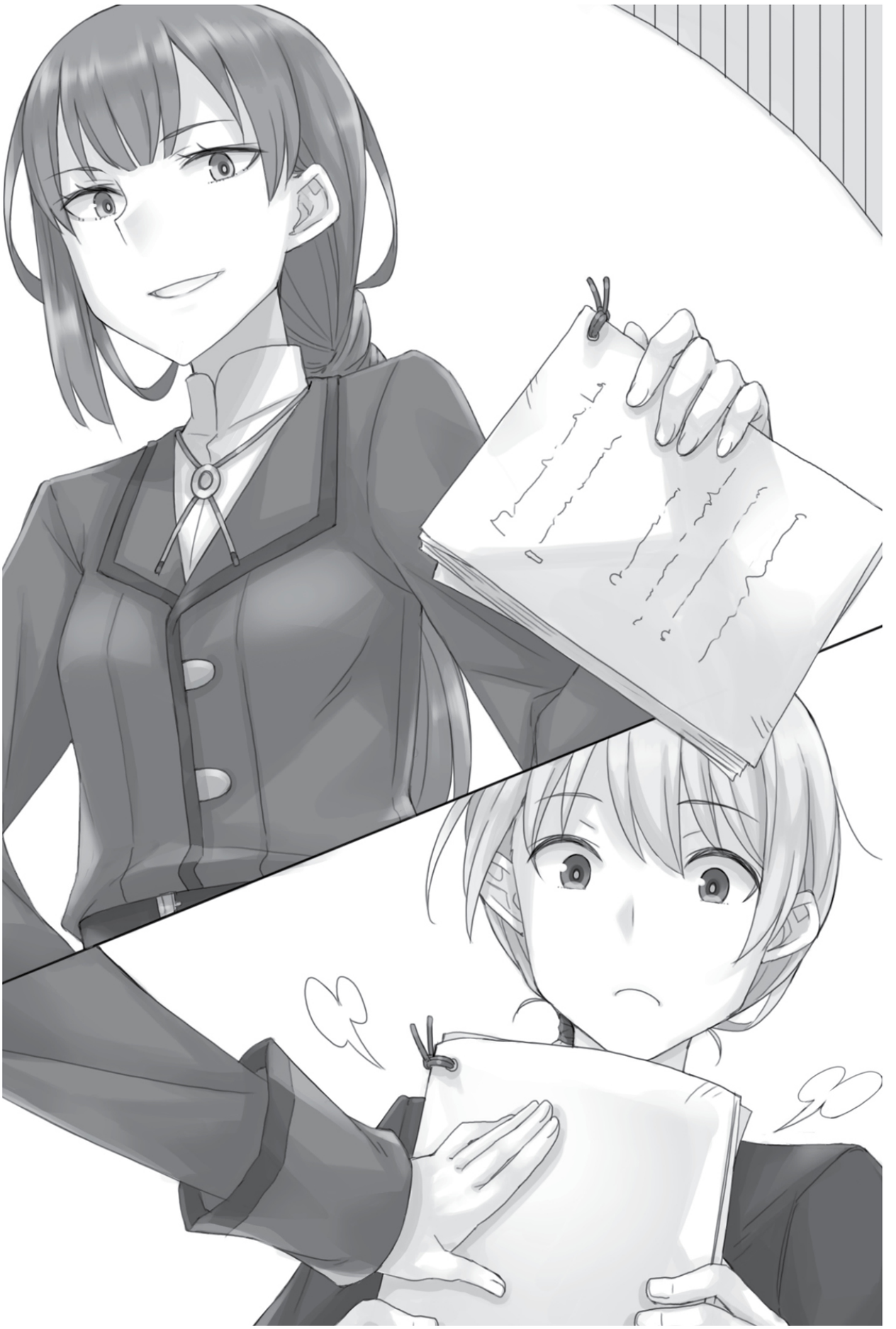
Sharon was the incarnation of a bird, and when she retired from tax collecting, she started running an orphanage in Rausbourne. She was presently working with a fledgling priest named Clark to build an orphanage attached to a monastery under Hyland’s auspices.

And of course, she was a powerful ally while they were traveling on the mainland because of her influence over birds.

Yet Sharon kept her true identity hidden from Clark, so there was quite a lot of awkward things she had to work around.

So Col found it hard to ask for her help too much…yet when that thought crossed his mind, she reached into the darkness behind her and pulled something out, which she then shoved into Col’s chest.

He hurriedly took it in hand and saw it was a sheaf of paper.



“It’s just the beginning, but I brought it with me ’cause Clark was excited to show it to you.”

The corner of the page was slightly damp.

“Is this the scripture?” he asked.

“Printing’s incredible, huh?”

Illuminated by the candlelight was a stanza of the scripture, neat letters arranged in tidy rows.

Myuri peered at the page with great interest.

“The place is packed to the ceiling with this stuff right now.”

Normally, the only way to make copies of a book was to get a scribe to labor endlessly with pen in hand.

But one group of artisans came up with a way to print letters onto the page, in the same manner as one might stamp a wax seal. This technology allowed them to copy an incredible number of words at once, and what might have taken months to copy by hand could be done in just a few days, and produce multiple copies.

Anyone would think it a convenient technology, but the Church was wary of how easy it would be to spread falsehoods and heresies, and they sealed it away. It was only recently that Col and his allies took into their care an artisan who had escaped this persecution and built a workshop to make books.

And it was in that workshop they had begun printing copies of the vernacular translation of the scripture.

“The workshop itself isn’t finished yet, so we won’t be drowning booksellers in copies of the scripture just yet. But you can already see it happening at some point, yeah?”

Sharon typically had a stern look on her face, but Col caught glimpses of pride and confidence when she turned her gaze to the sheaf of paper.

They had craftspeople carving the metallic molds of the letters they would be using for printing, casters who made the letter blocks from the molds, papermakers producing all the necessary paper, artisans brewing huge quantities of ink, and of course, merchants to collect everything.

It was certainly not an easy job to command all those people while simultaneously building the workshop itself.

Myuri seemed somewhat displeased by the look on Sharon’s face.

“Can you make more adventure stories?” she asked.

“Logically, yes. But the technology’s meant for making more copies of one thing. It’s way too much trouble to just make one copy of one book for one little puppy. Quicker to get it transcribed.”

Myuri pouted, and not because Sharon was calling her a puppy.

But the rambunctious girl had not only inherited the blood of the Wisewolf, but also the blood of an exceptional merchant.

“But if you make more copies of a book everyone wants, then I could trade it with books about all kinds of stories.” Myuri looked up to the ceiling, plotting, then slowly dropped her gaze to Col. “Right, *Brooother*?”

The way she spoke to him at the end was not her asking for his agreement, but like a cat purring, or rather, a wolf whining because she wanted something.

Perhaps she was going to ask him to request the artisans make copies of a popular adventure novel.

“When do you think the scripture will be finished?” he asked Sharon, completely ignoring Myuri.

“The scripture’s got a lot of pages. I’m thinking past autumn.”

“Autumn, hmm…”

It was not as quick as he had initially hoped, but if they did manage to print all the pages, then the number of copies of the scripture would explode.

They would have them done in time for their fight against the Church, it seemed.

“Also, printing aside, Hyland’s getting churches and abbeys all over the kingdom to transcribe the vernacular version of the scripture, and she’s getting so many inquiries from all over. I bet the world’s gonna be a little more cohesive once everyone can read the scripture.”

Not only was Sharon not human, but she was one who had suffered at the hands of society’s and the Church’s distorted ways. Though she spoke in a light tone, her words carried a unique weight.

Col ignored Myuri as she tugged at his sleeve, whining about wanting more adventure stories, and nodded.

“Then we will have to do our best as well.”

He had to find allies on the mainland, arm himself with the vernacular translation of the scripture, and head into battle against the Church with as many advantages as he could manage. Because he knew now was the only chance they had to clean up the injustices all over the world that had built up over a thousand years.

“Clark’s been thinking about you, too. When he heard about the imposter, he went red in the face. I’d never seen him so angry.”

“He was?”

Canaan was surprisingly a lot like Myuri, but Col found Clark truly felt like a quiet and honest priest. Col could not picture him angry, but he was still delighted to know Clark had been angry for him.

“Anyway, that’s partly why I rushed out here,” Sharon said, tired, as she put her hand on her hip. She seemed genuinely exhausted. She had flown from Rausbourne all day and all night with a test print of the scripture in her talons.

Col thanked her again, and she gave a loud and heavy sigh. “You know there’s another reason I flew out here, right?”

“What?” Col asked.

“What the hell are you thinking?” she asked. “Do you have any idea how crazy that plan of yours is?” Apparently Sharon had rushed out here to complain about their foolish plan right to their faces.

Myuri, who had been busy clinging to Col to ask for more adventure stories she could trade for other stories from around the world, suddenly turned to Sharon to ask her a question.

“But you could get it done right away if you ask your flock of birds. Right, Chicken?”

“Okay, listen,” Sharon began as she pressed a hand to her forehead. It was like she was unsure of what she should be angry about first when it came to Myuri’s thoughtless request.

Col also pushed away the clingy girl’s head, and informed Sharon of their situation.

“We attempted to narrow down the trail ourselves, but all we managed to learn was that she likely took a sea route.”

“Wow. Do you know many ports there are in the world? Your thoughtlessness gives me a migraine.”

The astronomer had left Ahberg by boat and then arrived at some port, somewhere else. The books among her things would most certainly have been subject to tariffs, so if they could find those records, then they would know she had alighted there.

It was a lot like the pure and proper lifestyle detailed in the scripture—much easier written than done.

“First, it’s gonna be real hard to find what port she went to after this, and that’s not all. If the council of that city is the one that manages the tax collectors, then you’re free to look through their tariff records. But if the tax collectors are levying taxes at their own discretion, then they’re only really gonna talk about what kind of taxes they levied to collectors who work at the same port, over drinks, just to brag. They *might* talk about it with colleagues if someone manages to bag a pretty penny because they found a bunch of books…”

In short, that meant even if they did manage to send a letter to the city where the tax collectors who levied taxes on the astronomer’s books worked, there was no guarantee they would receive an appropriate response.

“But this is an astronomer, right? Clark told me they like high places. Maybe it’s more realistic to check out all the really tall towers in the world.”

“I-if you think s—” Col began, but fell silent when she turned a sharp eye on him.

“I’m being sarcastic. Doesn’t matter if you want my kin to do that survey for you, because there’s a problem. Ask your puppy what that is.”

Sharon jerked her chin at Myuri, and Col looked at the girl beside him.

Myuri stared back at him, then drew up her shoulders as she got into a vexed huff.

“There’s a difference between what errands I can send you on and what errands I can send Miss Ilenia on, right?”

“Pfft.” Sharon snorted at her wording.

Ilenia was smiling at the way she had been used as a point of reference, but all Col could manage was a sigh.

“I think I understand,” he said. When he saw how Myuri grinned, Col heaved another sigh.

It was Ilenia who spoke to Sharon instead.

“You mean to say it would be difficult for the birds to determine if the astronomer was in any particular tower, right?”

“Yeah. All I can really ask ’em to do is send letters.”

Myuri often had the strays in a city help her with things, but she could not ask them to do anything complicated.

“Even if I did ask them, birds of passage are all migrating at this time of year, and if any of ’em linger behind, then it’ll be difficult for them to keep their territory once the rest of their flock’s left.”

That was also a problem.

Much like how humans led their own lives, so did birds. Sharon was warning them they were asking too much from her birds.

“Well, the idea itself isn’t so bad,” Sharon said. “Why don’t you just set that puppy on the city merchants?”

That was the method she eventually settled on.

“I wish I could take the merchants and throw them into the sea, too.”

Myuri was not opposed to resorting to violence, of course—that was often the first thing she thought of. The reason she never brought it up was because she knew her straitlaced big brother would not agree.

But what Le Roi had mentioned earlier was more relevant than Col’s reluctance to put nonhumans in situations that might reveal their existence.

“What would cause us the most trouble this time around is the moment we ask after the astronomer, it will become all too clear she is being pursued.”

And that was why Col would only set Myuri on the Ruvik Alliance as an absolute last resort when they truly had no time left.

As Sharon crossed her arms and sighed, a voice came from the hallway.

“Why not drag those merchants onto our ship? We could get ’em to spill their guts and then strand ’em on some island for a little while. The Twilight Cardinal’ll allow it so long as we don’t kill ’em, right?”

The voice from the hallway belonged to Vadan, who approached in his human form.

There was a wooden bowl in his hands, and behind him, his crew brought over ale and a large pot.

The self-concerned wolf girl, carried by her whims, let her tail out and began wagging it, and quickly leaped at the sinful nighttime meal.

“That would be a quick solution and ultimately safe, I think. You have a mouse that can unlock doors, and you have a wolf that can bite into ’em,” Sharon said and resumed her dinner.

Myuri tore the piece of bread she received into small bits to share with the little mouse that had been scampering over her shoulder.

Those with truly superhuman abilities could push through problems in the human world by force. While it was reassuring, the question of *how* Col would explain everything to Le Roi and Canaan loomed before him.

Regardless of how he thought or felt, Myuri was surprisingly approving of Sharon’s suggestion, while Vadan gave the outline of his plan and Ilenia adjusted the details. The plan sounded savage on its face, but they could likely pull it off with the same casual attitude they could do their shopping for dinner, and with little risk.

Those speaking below deck on this ship, illuminated by candlelight, were not human. And as the only person in this room who *was*, Col felt an obligation to say something.

“If I may…”

When he murmured this, animal eyes and ears turned toward him.

“Even if we find a solution with your miraculous powers, there are still people with whom we cannot share the truth.”

Myuri munched on her bread, swallowed, and said, “Is that old man Le Roi and Canaan?”

“Yes.”

Myuri turned to look at Ilenia, Vadan, Sharon, and then shrugged.

“I think we could tell them.”

“Of course, I think we can trust them. And I believe we can do the same with Heir Hyland. However…”

Col was the only human here. He paused to think about his words. He wanted them to hear what he had thought of during

his walk with Myuri around town directly from himself.

“Let’s say everyone we know learns about nonhumans. If that were to happen, then naturally, they would readily come to you for help due to your powers.”

There had been many times during his journey where he had relied on nonhuman power to solve a problem. If there were no restrictions on using those powers, Col would have a much easier time.

“Yeah. That would make things simple. Right?!”

Myuri had her ears and tail out as she looked to her peers for agreement. Ilenia smiled, Sharon shrugged, and Vadan’s expression suggested his answer would depend on the reward.

“But yeah, what about it?” she continued. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“In terms of problem-solving, yes. But the moment it becomes easier for others to rely on your powers, then our own actions will change drastically.”

“They will…?” Myuri canted her head to the side.

Sharon, who was the best adjusted to the human world out of everyone present, scratched her head as she spoke.

“Yeah, guess they would. People would just look to us for help any time there’s a problem.”

Despite that, Myuri still did not seem to understand what she meant. If something was convenient, then why not use it? That was precisely what Col and Myuri had been doing. Now that she could entrust a letter to a bird whenever she wanted to contact someone, it had quickly become natural to Myuri.

Col cleared his throat, and the wolf girl turned to look at him.

“Miss Sharon may have experienced this a few times as a former tax collector…”

Sharon, who had been listening with her arms crossed, snorted, possibly recalling an unpleasant memory.

Col was a fool, and he was nowhere near as sharp as Myuri the wolf. But not even the sharp-eyed Myuri could see everything in the world.

“We must think carefully about the moment we lose all hesitation with regard to using this miraculous power, simply because it is convenient. We will, quite literally, be creating miracles. Like carrying out the prediction of the eclipse, for

example.”

Col turned to look at Myuri because she was the one who had said it would be more effective if the Twilight Cardinal were to make the prediction, rather than the unreliable mercenary king.

“A great deal of people will marvel at our miraculous problem-solving abilities, and even more will see us as saviors in this chaotic world. Many will acknowledge us and lend an ear to all we have to say. Once that happens, they may even prove to be a big help in your search for the new continent. However…” Col paused before continuing, his voice tired. “Hagiographies describe saints who create miracles to help people, but those stories are always short. They typically end right when the people begin to venerate the saint. Do you know why that is?”

Myuri shrugged, perplexed by the question. Her wolf ears lay flat, as when she was being scolded.

“Because it’s not long afterward that the saints are no longer able to live up to the people’s expectations.”

Those who could create miracles were naturally expected to make miracles all the time. But they were only people, not an omnipotent god.

People wanted miracles—what would they think if the saint was no longer able to solve their problems one day? Would they see it as a well that had run dry? Or would they see a person being stingy with their power?

People could be unspeakably cruel.

“Recall the people’s fervor from the Town of Hope, Ohlburg. That zeal became disappointment, and then transformed into anger that rebounded right back at them.”

When Col said that, Myuri fell silent and went stiff. Despite her love for the wilder side of festivals, she had never been fond of fanaticism.

“People expect great things from the Twilight Cardinal,” he continued. “If I cannot continue to meet their expectations, then we cannot win against the Church. But doing so will come with a price.”

“And that is if the expectations are too high, then it becomes more difficult to keep pace, yes?” Ilenia confirmed with a sigh. “I spent most of my time working alone, and I generally thought it would be fine so long as no one found out. I see now—you truly

are different from the rest of us, Col."

Col was the only human here.

If he were to borrow the miracles nonhumans could bring about, then he would eventually have to pay the price.

Unlike the sheep who pulled a beached ship free, or the eagle who could call upon countless birds, or the mouse who could sneak into the most impregnable fortresses, Col was just a regular human being.

Beyond the familiar visage of their faces was an entirely different world; the depths of the forest writhed with entities unfathomable to him.

Of course, he did not think this meant they could never reach an understanding. It was because Myuri's father shared the belief he had taken the wolf spirit's hand.

But Col could not forget these two things were qualitatively different.

They may be familiar in form, but on a deeper level—

"My brother isn't different!"

Myuri leaped toward him, flinging both her soup bowl and spoon in the process. Col somehow managed to stay upright, despite tipping dangerously. He caught her in his arms, and she squeezed her arms around his neck, like she was strangling her prey.

"We're *not*!"

Humans and nonhumans.

They were intrinsically incompatible, all the more so than heretics and the faithful. This girl was more sensitive to that division than anyone else, and she had leaped over it to hold on to him tight.

She rubbed away her sudden flood of tears into his chest, and Col, somewhat reflexively, patted her on the back.

As he did, the one to speak up was, surprisingly, Vadan.

"Well, if that's the deal here, then it's fine, isn't it?"

The captain of the mice spoke with indifference. One of his crewmembers had acrobatically caught the soup bowl Myuri threw, so Vadan took it from him and, for some reason, handed it to Col.

With one hand around Myuri's back, Col took the bowl with the other, and Vadan spoke breezily.

“We mice are usually ostracized anyway. We know there’s danger in standing out. Well, I guess we’ve gotten a little braver since we welcomed Miss Sheep on board.” Vadan shrugged in slight self-deprecation.

Ilenia’s brows and shoulders fell as she spoke up as well.

“I suppose I’m the same. That reminds me of when the master…I mean, Lady Eve scolded me a little while ago. A merchant stole one of her shipments, so I went and turned his company building upside down to get it back.”

Even Sharon stared wide-eyed at that confession.

Sheep tended to get fixated on one thing, and Ilenia’s attachment and adoration for Eve were perfect examples of that.

Col pictured the look on Eve’s face as she held her breath, watching Ilenia uproot and overturn an entire building, foundation and all, to get her shipment back with a smile. It was entirely possible his own wolf would pull a similar stunt someday, so it was not something he could brush aside.

Then he heard Sharon sigh as she looked at Myuri.

“When people from the same town run into one another in a distant port town, they tend to cut loose at a tavern together. This is my first time getting together with people like me, too.”

Sharon sounded vexed. The hint of self-caution in her words pointed at the real reason why. Her life was deeply intertwined with the systems of human society. And it seemed she had experienced the pain of using the power of the bird that she had inherited, only to pay the price.

“Well, it’s also kinda your fault.”

Her flat gaze rested on Myuri as she clung to Col, and the way his arm wound around her protectively.

“You two always make me uneasy. I feel like I gotta help you, y’know?”

Col made no reaction, but Myuri began growling in his arms.

“But you’re right, we should be a little more conservative. You’ve been using my birds too much anyway.”

Col was well aware of that, so his only real option was to nod.

“So I get we’re not supposed to stand out too much, but then what are we *actually* supposed to do?” Vadan asked, cracking his neck. “Even if the point is that it doesn’t look like a miracle and we act all careful-like, you’re not gonna find where the

astronomer went without our power."

Reality and ideals were always separated by an unbridgeable gap.

"This eclipse business, too. Might be in six months, and it might be tomorrow. Not sure if we can go about this casually."

That was also a problem. With every day that passed, they drew nearer to the moment someone would raise their staff and point to the heavens.

"It would be nice if we had a way to narrow down the places she could have gone," Col remarked.

Especially if she had not been forcibly dragged away but treated well enough that someone was buying books for her. That meant it was very likely she was continuing her observation of the stars. These facts together *should* serve as big leads.

Unfortunately, they had not made very good progress.

That was when Sharon spoke up.

"When I heard about your plan, I knew you wouldn't be able to do anything about it if you didn't narrow things down. That's why I flew straight here to save you some thinking time," Sharon said. "Of course," she added with a vexed sigh, "if you *really* need to use the birds' power on a grand scale, I'm not going to keep stubbornly turning you down. We have power, and you have a goal. And I, at the very least, am placing my bets on your success."

Sharon had ties to the human world, and she had a whole gaggle of orphans she wanted to protect. And whether or not she could keep the orphanage running depended on Hyland's aid.

A large, dark shadow would fall over all of that if they lost their fight against the Church. And so in Sharon's view, it was better she held nothing back if they could achieve their goal.

"My objective is in the new continent, but our interests greatly overlap, Col. I am always happy to lend you my power," Ilenia said, and Col nodded. "But it's getting late. Shall we call it for today?"

Her gaze rested on Myuri in Col's arms as she said that. No one opposed the suggestion, and so they dispersed.

Myuri was still upset. The baby mice were worried about her and

gave her little pieces of bread, which she accepted with slight embarrassment.

There were times back in Nyohhira, too, when the great Wisewolf would give her a terrible scolding, but she would quickly regain her energy once she got some food, almost like she was reinflating. That was one of the good things about her.

Once Sharon finished her cooled soup, Vadan directed her to where she would be sleeping on the ship, and Ilenia went to study a map detailing all the seaside port towns in the navigation room with the rest of Vadan's crew.

The lively room quickly emptied.

Wolves much preferred the dark forests to the wide-open plains, but the dim and lonely interior of a ship seemed to be an exception; Myuri asked they go out on the deck.

The sprinkle of rain that had come with their arrival had lifted. Now a comfortable, damp, but cool breeze gently caressed Col's cheek.

Myuri seemed to have calmed down for the most part, but she still did not say much. Perhaps she had been shocked by the unexpected encounter with the boundary between humans and nonhumans.

Nonhumans had great power, but the more regular humans borrowed that power, the further they, too, drifted from the human world.

Col had heard of a fairy tale where a sheep in wolf's clothing beat back a bear. But it ends in tragedy, where the sheep begins to genuinely think of itself as a bear. If humans were to continually borrow the power of the spirits, then they would soon forget they are human.

Myuri had been born straddling that line to begin with, and so it seemed she enjoyed freely crossing from one side to the other, but perhaps she was simply pretending the line did not exist.

And that was perhaps why she had been so shocked by its sudden appearance, and why she panicked.

The friendly wolf pup did not yet have a coat thick enough to withstand the cold of isolation.

"Shall we go back to the inn?" Col asked her.

Only one of her wolf ears turned to him.

"If Miss Ilenia…," she trailed.

“Hmm?”

“If Miss Ilenia really finds the new continent, are you going to stay with me, Brother?”

Col needed a few moments to properly grasp what she meant by that.

The idea that she would undoubtedly go to the new continent once it was discovered was due to either her love for adventure, or because of the nonhuman blood in her veins. If Ilenia’s plan of a country for nonhumans genuinely came to fruition, then it would be a place where she would be surrounded by people like her, where there was no need to hide her ears and tail.

But the reason he pictured her looking lost as she stepped onto this new land from the ship was because he was not there with her.

Humans and nonhumans.

Perhaps Myuri had grown anxious after being forced to confront the distance between herself and Col once again.

“If I were a priest, I would tell you God will always be with you,” he said as a slight joke while patting her head.

Her typically valiantly piqued ears now lay flat and listless.

“But I am not God.”

Myuri held her breath and looked up at him.

“And I am sure one day I will no longer be able to keep up with your reckless adventures. I am certain there will come a day where I will sit in a quiet chapel, praying for the safety of your journey.”

She was not the type to listen if he told her to behave, and he would not lie and say he did not wish she would calm down sooner than later, but he had no intentions of tying her down, either. Because ultimately, he was happier when she was joyfully dashing about the world and not glumly cooped up in her room.

Col felt like he had been the first to give in, but Myuri seemed saddened by this, as if she had been cast aside.

“However…,” he continued, and gently pinched her cheek. “My door will always be open. That is more than enough, no?”

Col did not know if that door would be in Nyohhira, or if it would be somewhere else.

But after the wolf had gone on her grand adventure, sick of the cramped world she lived in, there would come a day that

exhaustion would catch up to her, and she should always be welcome to visit. When she was disappointed in the ugliness of the world, or when she had lost her way, she could surely find her footing again there.

“Even if we do end up apart, I will always be your older brother.”

Nothing was certain in the storm called life, but that was the one constant, shining light. That was what he had in mind when he said that, but Myuri sniffed quietly and suddenly went sour.

“…I don’t always want to be your little sister.”

Her stubbornness was proof she was well.

Col smiled faintly and replied, “Even though you cannot call me anything besides ‘Brother’?”

He egged her on. The wolf pup easily took the bait and leaped at him.

As she clung to him, he patted her head and chuckled quietly.

Though it was never nearly as bad as her father, Col would get very anxious whenever he thought about sending Myuri off to get married back in Nyohhira. When he thought about how the lively girl would one day be gone and leave the bathhouse quiet, he would indulge in his sentimentality.

But it would never be a permanent farewell. The whole world was connected.

If she kept walking, she would always find a new home.

“So long as you stay the Saint of the Sun, then I know I will always be one of many who will look up at your brilliance and watch you venture from east to west.”

She was fervent, restless, yet reliable in that she would always reappear, even if she did sometimes vanish from view—and that made the moniker of the sun perfect for Myuri.

“But I will always keep a faint light burning for you when you find yourself trapped by darkness.”

Much in the way dawn showed the way.

“Because I am the Twilight Cardinal.”

Col ruffled Myuri’s hair once again, then patted her.

“Come now, it’s getting cold.”

He wanted to say they should be returning to the inn, but Myuri, in all her cunning, deliberately misunderstood what he meant. She clung tighter to him and attempted to shove her

entire self under his arm. It was a silent indication this is what he had to do if he was getting cold.

“Hey, stop that.”

Col almost fell over but managed to steady himself; he saw her tail happily begin to wag. He was relieved her mood was improving, but he did not want her to be this clingy forever. He tried to peel her off, but she refused to budge.

“That’s enough, Myuri.”

“Heh-heh, no it’s not!”

Col was sure Sharon and Vadan would give him a *look* if they were watching him now. And the mice who had been worried about how crestfallen Myuri seemed earlier were now staring up at them wide-eyed.

He thought the line about being a faint flame in the dark to guide the lost was nice, something that could have come straight from the scripture.

The day he would be a silent, guiding light, one that never bent to the elements, much like the lighthouse in the distance, seemed a distant one. He had almost fallen over when the wolf pup ran into him, after all.

“Ah-ha-ha…ha…Hmm?”

Myuri had been twisting around, laughing to herself, when she suddenly noticed that Col’s attention was elsewhere and stopped.

Though he was not looking at her, he could tell she was looking to see what he was looking at.

“……”

Who did the silence belong to?

Regardless, Myuri was the one who moved first. She stirred, then pressed close to him, as though wiping her face.

“I’m gonna guess what you just thought of!”

Col wrapped his hands around her head and gave her hair a firm and aggressive ruffle—the pup never learned her lesson, after all.

“There is one place we need to check before we wander blindly into the mountain of port cities.”

Though she rarely minded the lie of her fur on her tail, Myuri took very good care of her hair. She whined when he messed it up.

But Col’s gaze remained fixed on one thing, no matter how

much she shook and smacked him.

It was a place that sat apart from where people typically lived, and it was not strange for people to come and go during the night. Plus, it rose into the heavens, supporting the starry skies both night and day.

“The lighthouse!”

Myuri spoke the answer aloud.

There was no particularly strong evidence, but Col was oddly confident about his conjecture.

Though he had tried so hard to peel her off without any luck, it was Myuri who suddenly leaped backward away from him to rush below deck like the wind.

Ilenia was just coming up at the same time and quickly stepped out of the way; she followed Myuri with her eyes, then turned to Col, and promptly decided to go after the wolf.

The baby mice, too, used their special entrance to follow.

Col stared up at the sky and squinted.

The clouds were thinning, but it was not clear enough for him to see the stars.

But it was simply that he could not see them—they were still there.

He clenched his fists, as though wrapping his hands around what he felt was a firm lead to the astronomer, and then followed after Myuri.

Chapter Four



Chapter Four

Le Roi was also invited to the ship, bringing a large map to the rooms below deck.

Like the captain he was, Vadan stood before it and spoke.

“This astronomer’s been taken away from her place in Wobern, but we can assume she’s being treated decently considering how someone’s buying books for her. That means this isn’t a kidnapping, but an escape. If we’re right about that, then it’s likely she’ll be somewhere she can keep an eye on the stars. And that means she’s either in a big city where nobles keep tryin’ to one-up one another with taller and taller towers in their mansions, or in a big church or abbey.”

Once he laid out the premise, he took a knight chess piece and placed it on the map.

“But there’s another option. A place no one will mind if outsiders come and go, one that could be lit up at night and won’t attract the attention of the inquisitors.”

The wooden knight piece did not rest on any particular noble’s territory.

It stood on the open sea.

“A remote island? I see.”

“There are a good handful under the Ruvik Alliance’s control, but more importantly, there’s one that’s particularly convenient to them.”

Vadan was an active sailor—when Col informed him of his realization when he saw the lighthouse at the port, Vadan had named the island right away.

“Northwest of here, between the mainland and the Kingdom of Winfiel, is Cobb Island.”

“Is it well known?”

“To sailors like us, yeah,” Vadan said with a shrug. “The island prospered a long time ago, back when the Winfiel Kingdom still had holdings on the mainland. Used to be their foothold in the south back in the day. ’Cause of that, the port was big, and the city

was real grand despite how small the island was. But as the kingdom started losin' its grip on the mainland, who exactly had ownership over the island became kinda ambiguous. It's pretty far from the kingdom and the mainland, so it's not easy to put one over the other. Y'know what that means?"

"Aha," Le Roi replied. "Any crack in governing powers serves as a haven for the lawless—that is the way of the world."

Myuri was excited because she loved stories of knights who rode gallantly over open fields, and that meant she loved tales of pirates who sailed the open seas even more.

"The kingdom used to maintain the port, so it's got a good, solid lighthouse. But when ownership got a little hazy after the kingdom withdrew, the light went out. It takes a lot of money to keep it goin', see? When you've only got the likes of pirates sticking around on the island, no one wants to shell out the money for it."

"Which means," Col continued, "if the astronomer started to live there and occasionally had the light on while observing the stars every night, no one would suspect her—in fact, they would be glad, no?"

"Yeah. Plus, there are no tax collectors at the port there. She could bring in all the expensive books she wants, and no one would notice."

Col and the others had quickly come up with the idea of tracing the astronomer's steps by tracking transactions in the book trade, so the astronomer herself must have been wary of the same thing. It would not have been surprising if she had carefully planned her movements to leave no obvious tax records.

And that meant nothing was more perfect than this island for those who were wary of pursuers and wanted to erase their trail.

"I doubt anyone will complain if we check this place first," Vadan said.

Le Roi stroked his chin and hummed. "From what you tell us, I see nothing wrong with it. It makes perfect sense."

If they got too ahead of themselves, there was a chance even white could start to look black. That was why the ever practical Le Roi's agreement was such a vote of confidence.

"That settles it, then," Vadan declared.

They would go to the island and begin searching for the astronomer.

Myuri, who was leaning close to the map to squint at it, seemed like she might let her ears and tail pop out at any moment.

There was no doubt the girl's head was already filled with dizzying images of a grand adventure, where they had to fight through a flotilla of pirates to get to the island, then beat back hordes of ruffians as they took back the astronomer from the top of the tower.

While Col did prefer it when she was playing hero rather than moping, he had to remind himself a real sword was hanging from her belt.

If he suggested to her they leave the investigation to Vadan and his crew, she would surely bare her fangs and claws at him, which were much more terrifying than her sword.

"Brother, when are we going?"

She turned her burning eyes toward him. It did not seem he had much room to negotiate at all.

"…Captain Vadan, let's get going," he said.

Vadan looked between the two of them and gave a slight laugh.

Le Roi remained in Ahberg, and Sharon left the ship, too. Despite how Myuri always snapped at Sharon, calling her Chicken and all that, she was a bit sad when she learned Sharon would not be coming with them to Cobb Island.

"I need that bookseller to sell the vernacular scripture for us, y'know. I gotta talk to him."

Sharon had said that with a tired smile when she saw the way Myuri's tail so obviously deflated.

Sharon would show the printed sample to Le Roi, ask how many prospective customers they might have and how much they might be able to charge for it, and then decide how many copies they needed to start. Though Hyland and Eve were covering the costs of the workshop and the workers, their pockets were not bottomless. They had to start making money as soon as possible.

"But this is supposed to be an adventure…," Myuri said,

disappointed. Her tone made it seem like Sharon was the foolish one for letting something so fun slip through her fingers.

Sharon, instead, grinned. “It’s fine. I’m not the one who’s supposed to be going on adventures anymore. My job’s to calm down kids with stories of them.”

Sharon came across as crabby, but in reality she enjoyed taking care of others. The orphans she looked after loved her dearly. Col could easily picture her reading to the children, but Myuri, on the other hand, realized she was being treated like one of her children and glared at her.

Regardless, they got along well. The day after that conversation, their traveling party weighed anchor and set sail to Cobb Island on Vadan’s ship.

“It’ll take two days to get there, right?” Myuri asked.

“Yeah, if the wind doesn’t change on us,” Vadan replied.

Myuri had waved until she could no longer see Le Roi, who had come to see them off. She gazed at the city of Ahberg with a touch of melancholy.

The reason Sharon did not see them off was because they were pretending she had yet to arrive in the city. That was why she was not present at the strategy meeting for their departure to Cobb Island, either.

If she reached the city too early, then Le Roi would begin to wonder how she managed to arrive so quickly.

If they were to continue to rely on the powers of nonhumans, then they would have to resolve these inconsistencies one day.

As Col was wishing his fight with the Church would end quickly so the world would be at peace, there came a cheerful laugh from beside him.

“Heh-heh, pirate island…”

Myuri let go of the railing on the ship and suddenly crouched, bending and stretching as though drawing up energy from a well.

She wasted no time in letting her ears and tail out, either. Her coat was smooth and full of enthusiasm.

“Remember, only draw your sword as a last resort.”

It was much less likely the astronomer was locked away against her will and more likely she was being treated as a guest.

Which meant there would be little in the way of guards watching her, and Col believed they would have plenty of

opportunities to avoid bloodshed.

But Myuri ignored his warning and abruptly stood up straight from her stretching.

“Oh, right! I need an eyepatch! I have to ask Captain Vadan!” she exclaimed and rushed off.

“But that would make *you* a pirate…”

The rambunctious girl was going to give him a headache. The little mice nearby simply stared at him with wide eyes.

Cobb Island was not very big. Its forests had been cut down a long, long time ago, and it was a dilapidated little island.

The waters off the shore were mostly reefs, so the only proper place for ships to dock was in the south harbor.

The island was an expanse of grassland and rocky outcroppings, and only shepherds managed a meager living out there; most of its residents were concentrated in and around the harbor.

Outside of the harbor itself, the lighthouse in question sat on the eastern edge of the island.

“There’s a little beach north of the lighthouse. A small boat could go ashore there,” Vadan said.

It was the first night after their departure from Ahberg. They anchored in a small bay to shelter from the wind, and Vadan had a map open in front of them, explaining all sorts of things to them as they ate their dinner.

“So we could take a small boat on the beach at night, go to the lighthouse, take out the guards, then save the fortune-teller, right?”

Myuri’s eyes shone eagerly. The baby mice played with her tail.

“We could, but there’s one thing I need to check with you first,” Vadan said. He looked around at the candlelit faces present before finally settling on Col. “If we do find the astronomer there, what are you gonna do if she refuses to go back with you?”

There had been no trace of her being forcibly removed from the tower in Wobern. Most likely, she was not here against her will.

“I do not expect there will be any need to force her to return with us. The prince-elector, too, will likely think it fine so long as

we get the date."

"So you're not gonna try and stop her if she doesn't want to go back to Wobern, but wants to take our ship, yeah?"

Myuri watched dubiously, but Col thought it perfectly plausible.

Col and Ilenia, and those working with Ilenia, had different goals when it came to the astronomer. Ilenia's priority was finding someone who had knowledge of the stars so they could find the new continent.

It was perfectly possible the astronomer would say she did not want to go back to Wobern, but find the idea of looking for a new continent more exciting than staying and observing the heavens under the Ruvik Alliance's watchful eye.

If the Twilight Cardinal prioritized indebting Prince-Elector Duran, they would naturally have conflicting interests. As captain of the ship, Vadan had asked the obvious question to settle on one course of action, but Myuri did not seem to approve. She had assumed they were already acting as one.

"I will not. I want to prioritize the astronomer's wishes."

She would have needed a good reason and a good deal of resolve to leave Wobern voluntarily.

"Is it okay to assume the same answer, even if she doesn't give up the date of the eclipse?"

In response, Myuri's ears stood up while Col smiled bitterly.

It was Ilenia who spoke.

"Don't be rude, Vadan."

The mouse captain looked at the sheep girl and shrugged.

"I've got a wolf on board. I need her word before she decides to turn those fangs on us."

If the astronomer did not reveal the wanted date of the eclipse and refused to return to Wobern, then it was possible Col and Myuri would have to interrogate her.

However, Vadan and Ilenia sought out the astronomer's cooperation for other reasons, so they wanted to avoid forceful means if at all possible.

"I don't bite people *that* much!" Myuri took offense. But as she turned away in a huff, she added, "But I guess I do make threats."

Ilenia gave a troubled smile and stepped between Myuri and Vadan.

“We still don’t know under what circumstances the astronomer left Wobern. The Ruvik Alliance may have simply won her over, and she left her tower without any further thought. I’d say the same is true for many alchemists and the like—there are a surprising number of them who have absolutely no interest in everyday matters.”

Myuri still looked displeased, but when she turned to look at Col, ears twitching, she sighed and gave him a nod. Col decided not to ask what the sigh meant.

“And if the astronomer won’t talk, then that may mean there are other people who already know the date of the eclipse. If you are going to bite anyone, then please bite whoever that might be instead.”

Ilenia smiled, and the fur on Myuri’s tail stood on end.

What was implied, but not said, was that she was free to bite anyone who was not the astronomer.

“We’ll see how things shake out once we meet the person in question,” Vadan said, and again pored over the large, open map.

The sun rose and set, ushering in the night again.

The stars twinkled in the sky, and the wind was calm. The waters offshore were a bit choppy, but they evened out as they neared the island—the perfect weather for making secret passage.

Vadan’s ship passed over the northern tip of the island, changed direction, then glided toward the spot off the shore they were using to disembark.

“We won’t have excuse for the patrol ships if we drop anchor. We’re gonna sail away from the island for a bit.”

Cobb Island’s political situation was uncertain, but that did not mean it was completely lawless.

It cost money to maintain the port, and that money was collected from mooring ships. They would not be able to keep the harbor running if scoundrels anchored their boats outside of the port, did all the trade they wanted, and never paid the fee.

“Update us with the lighthouse light. You remember the signal, yeah?” Vadan asked.

As she stepped onto the smaller boat, Myuri nodded deeply.

She had a dark cloth wrapped around her head—she was fully ready to play the part of pirate.

“Fortune be with you,” Vadan said with a dead-serious look on his face as they pushed away from the larger ship. It seemed the mouse captain liked adventure in his own way.

Ilenia looked like she was enjoying herself, and Myuri wore an expression of such earnestness Col had never seen before as she sat at the bow of the boat, staring straight ahead.

The person rowing their boat was one of Vadan’s crew who could take on a human form, and several mice sat on his shoulders and at his feet.

Quietly dancing in the sky far above them was a seabird Sharon sent with them for communication.

The only sounds were the creaking of the oars and water lapping against the sides of the boat.

As Col watched Myuri stare straight ahead at the beach, he felt a bit of relief.

It seemed as though the distance between humans and nonhumans, and the inevitable parting the both of them would one day have to face, was no longer at the forefront of her mind.

As he thought about how glad he was to see her having fun, her tail suddenly lifted lightly. Her gaze turned to the left, and he followed suit. There, he saw a hazy shadow in the darkness. It was the outline of the cape and the lighthouse.

“It’s smaller than I thought it would be,” Col remarked.

Though he could not see clearly, it seemed to be only about five stories high.

Back when kingdom ships frequented this place, the lighthouse would have been lit every night, guiding ships that missed their mark back to the port.

“I hope we’re right, though,” he whispered.

It was unlit, and it seemed empty.

Myuri inhaled deeply, and then exhaled just as deeply and audibly. Perhaps it was from nerves, or perhaps she was trying to smell other people.

As she stared ahead, the last thing she said was, “It smells like fish.”

The boat slid onto the beach, and they started getting out.

While Col took his time, the mice leaped onto the island and dashed off with incredible vigor. They were apparently going to scout their surroundings.

Ilenia helped him onto the beach. Myuri, her mind now full of pirates, beckoned them to follow and began walking along the water's edge.

Once his eyes adjusted to the nighttime sea, Col was surprised by how far he could see, and he was surprised by how loud his footsteps were. He then began to wonder if the reason Myuri had cloth wrapped around her head was not because she was playing pirate, but because her silver hair stood out so much.

If that was the case, he thought she should put her tail away, too, but for some strange reason, her tail seemed to blend in with the sand.

They stepped over the crabs taking their nighttime beach strolls and occasionally ran into the mice who had gone off scouting. They would scurry a few paces ahead of Myuri, then rush off again.

After a short bit of walking, they reached a hilly path that led to the cape, and they stepped from the beach onto grass.

That was enough to make the waves sound distant.

As they trudged through grass soaked in night dew, Myuri came to a stop, crouched down, and reached for the ground. A mouse appeared from the curtain of grass, scampered up her arm, then whispered something to her.

"Really?" she asked back, then turned around to look at Col

"Someone's in there."

The lighthouse had fallen out of use and was supposed to be empty. Perhaps it was a shepherd. Or a scoundrel looking to save money on an inn.

But of course, Myuri thought it was the astronomer.

"Let's go!"

Myuri set off with such energy Col thought she was going to finish that line with *scallywags*!

The lighthouse was sturdy and made of stone, its entrance firmly barred with a metal gate.

Ilenia could have opened it with a head-butt, but Myuri found little gaps in the stone meant to let in fresh air, and whispered to one of the mice, “Can you go inside and open the door?”

The mouse leaped into the wall and slipped through the cracks. Apparently, he was one of the mice who could turn into a human, and before long there came the dull sound of the gate bar lifting.

Myuri pulled the door open and the mouse, faintly illuminated by the moonlight, greeted them; had he been in his human form, he would have been completely naked.

Col was thankful for his consideration as the older brother of a girl coming of age, but the wild girl in question likely had not even considered the possibility, given how she took the lead and made her way up the spiral staircase.

The lighthouse was filled with the scent of stone, and strangely enough, Col did not sense the sea from here. He could scarcely hear the waves, and the sound of his own heartbeat quickly filled his ears.

There did not seem to be any armed guards. Even if there were, he had Myuri, who was more reliable than any knight, and Ilenia, who could mow down a whole band of soldiers.

Despite this, Col was terribly nervous, perhaps due to his timid nature.

Or perhaps he was excited at the prospect of meeting an astronomer so skilled that she could predict the movement of the heavens.

Prayer was not the only way one could brush up against the hems of God’s robes, and from what he saw in her observation room at the top of the tower, Col wondered if astronomers prayed more than anyone else night after night.

As those thoughts rolled through his mind, they steadily made their way to the top.

They could not use candlelight, so he relied on Myuri’s silver tail as they went up until they reached an open space. It felt airy in here, perhaps because the floor above was where the lighthouse lamp would typically be lit.

Myuri opened the wooden shutters of the window, letting in the light and illuminating the room. It almost looked like the inside of a remote abbey, or lodgings meant for traveling monks.

The walls were bleak, and it was barely furnished, but there were piles and piles of books.

No grand portraits of saviors or depictions of angels adorned the walls.

Instead, there was one enormous star chart.

“There she is,” Myuri murmured.

She gazed at a girl cradling a large book as she slumbered.

The girl’s long black hair lay beneath her messily, like a pool of blood, but what made it seem not as unsettling as it could have been was that she slept so soundly.

Ilenia had mentioned the possibility the Ruvik Alliance may have convinced her to leave Wobern without much of a plan, and Col had a feeling that might have been the case.

He again felt an affinity for her given the state of the room. His nerves were also eased considerably by the way the astronomer showed absolutely no sign of waking up even when mice scampered around her pillow and Myuri stuck her face in close to sniff her.

“I’m waking her up,” Myuri said as she turned to look at Col, and he gave his tired assent.

“Wake up, fortune-teller!”

Myuri shook her shoulders, and she comically jolted up.

Her drowsy eyes rested on Col, and she stared blankly at him.

“Huh, wha…?”

“Are you the fortune-teller?” Myuri asked.

The girl blinked.

“We have been looking for you under orders of Prince-Elector Duran.”

The moment Col said that, her childlike face tensed up.

“Your dagger is here,” Myuri said. “You can yell, but the only people who’ll hear you are the fishes.”

The mice had already pilfered her dagger from beneath her pillow, and Myuri held it in her hand. The astronomer had been discretely reaching beneath the pillow, but realizing the futility, she held her breath and curled in on herself.

“Make no mistake,” Col continued. “We are not here to forcibly take you back.”

The girl turned to look at Col, then at Myuri, and finally at Ilenia. She looked perplexed, perhaps because the pursuers of the prince-elector she had wronged were acting rather oddly.

"…O-okay, then, wh—*Cough, cough*!" As she spoke haltingly, she began to cough, either from nerves or confusion. After her fit subsided, she tried again. "Wait…How…did you find this place?"

The way she spoke told Col she had escaped voluntarily. He could also tell from her bewilderment she had not worried about being found at all.

"Easy. We've traveled all over the world," Myuri said proudly.

Col lightly jabbed her in the head and gave the astronomer a brief explanation.

"The next time you decide to run, I suggest you refrain from buying any books."

The girl stared at him, then glanced at the large book she had fallen asleep holding, then let her shoulders slump in disappointment.

"It was books, huh…"

"And you need the right tools and location in order to observe the stars. That narrowed down the possibilities," Ilenia added. She had climbed up the ladder that led to the floor above and was poking around up there.

It seemed that was where the astronomer's observation tools were installed.

"Ohhh…But those guys told me no one would ever be able to find me here…"

From appearances alone, the girl looked to be about a decade older than Myuri and Ilenia, but the way she spoke and acted was strangely childlike. Boyish, even.

It truly seemed as though she had lived her whole life pursuing only things that struck her fancy.

"By any chance, are you talking about people from the Ruvik Alliance?" Col asked.

The girl turned her black eyes to Col, pouted, and turned away in a huff.

Col instantly felt the tension drain from his body because her reactions were *just like* Myuri's. That sense of familiarity was incredibly relieving.

"Why don't we talk for a bit?" he offered.

The girl ignored him for a short while. But just as Myuri was about to lose her patience, the girl glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and nodded with a sigh.

They got a fire going and started boiling some water. Myuri then used the same fire on the upper floor to give Vadan the signal.

Col also decided to take a quick peek at the room above. Though it was much smaller than the one in the tower at Wobern, it also held a half-circle metal plate and the large, bow-like apparatus with the needle for observing the stars.

“Amaretto,” the girl muttered sulkily.

A few moments later, Col realized she was introducing herself.

“My name is Tote Col. This is Miss Ilenia, and this tomboy is Myuri.”

The girl sipped her hot water and shrugged.

“And? Why’d you come all this way from those backwoods mountains?”

The way she spoke so brusquely was exactly the way Myuri acted when she got defiant after a one of her pranks had been found out.

“Prince-Elector Duran is in a bit of a tough position,” Col began. “As his last resort to regain his authority, he requested you give him the date for an upcoming eclipse, but then you escaped and took the information with you. Is that correct?”

Amaretto took another sip, and then exhaled in irritation.

“Is that what he’s telling people?”

“……”

Col did not respond. He only stared at Amaretto in return. The childlike astronomer stubbornly glared back, then snapped her gaze away in a huff.

“So you came after me because you took everything he said at face value?”

Col knew from watching Eve at work that sometimes, the shrewdest merchants would purposefully rile up the other party for an advantage in negotiations. But what Amaretto said sounded like pure grumbling.

The reason Myuri stared so coolly at her was probably because she could tell how similar they were and she did not like it.

“I told him I couldn’t predict the eclipse.”

Col looked at Ilenia, who gave him a dry smile. It did not seem she was lying.

“Predicting eclipses is like a secret art that astronomers talk about. It’s the stuff of legends more than anything. Do you even know why the stars on the ecliptic are called planets?”

“What?”

“Because even the ancient wise men concluded their orbits are like lines drawn by a drunkard!”

Col had heard once before that *planet* was derived from the old word for *wander*.

As he rolled the word in his mouth, pondering the significance of it all, a smack on his shoulder brought him back to the present.

The culprit was Myuri—she had no interest in complicated matters.

“So then why did you escape from the mountains? And,” Myuri said as she leaned forward, coming close enough to Amaretto that she could bite her, “why were you researching the Moon-Hunting Bear?”

The surprise that sprang onto Amaretto’s face was different from when she had been roused from her slumber, or when she learned they were pursuers sent by the prince-elector.

Because what remained after her surprise passed was not fear.

It was curiosity.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I’m the one asking questions here!” Myuri threatened.

But Amaretto did not recoil; instead, she leaned forward.

“Are you looking into the Moon-Hunting Bear, too? Where did you hear about it? What did you hear?”

“Wh—huh?”

“Wait, I have a map. Tell me where you heard about it. Was it in the northern mountain region? Or the southern plains? What other stories have you heard? Do you think the Moon-Hunting Bear really existed?!”

Myuri was supposed to be the one pressing for answers, but she suddenly found herself on the back foot instead. As she sat on her bed, Amaretto roughly ran her hand through her hair then reached up into the cabinet above her and immediately pulled out a folded map.

Myuri was also the type to forget about everything around her when her interests came up in conversation, but it seemed Amaretto had more experience in this area as well.

“Miss Amaretto,” Col called.

She had hurriedly unfolded the map and glued her face to the page to stare at it, and her head snapped up when she heard her name.

“We may have quite a lot of information that you want.”

Similar to how Le Roi traded with other booksellers, information could be used as a currency.

If Amaretto never intended to predict an eclipse in the first place, then what was she doing in Wobern? Why did the Ruvik Alliance want to get her away from Wobern?

The value of all they had heard about the Moon-Hunting Bear thus far on their journey had to be enough to pay for the answers to those questions.

“What were you researching in Wobern to begin with?” Col asked.

Amaretto looked at him.

She stared at him like a child might with her large black eyes. Her earnest expression made her seem like a child telling an adult about the ghost they saw the night before.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

However, her simple objection made it clear she was no innocent child. She must have been painfully aware of what most laypersons thought about staring at the stars every night.

And so Col said—

“We once encountered a ghost ship carrying human bones.”

It was less to win Amaretto’s trust, and more to ease her worries. Because this girl was just like Myuri when she became obsessed with enchanting stories.

“What…? What on earth? A ghost ship?”

“The truth was it was a smuggling ship. If you’d like to know more, you will have to help us out a little.”

It was not so much the curious Amaretto could not ignore the bait—it was more that she realized that Col and the others were people who could understand her.

“Fine, fine. Stories of the Moon-Hunting Bear still live on in that mountain region. I went there to do research. I don’t really

want to tell you why I'm looking into the Moon-Hunting Bear, but my mother was an astrologer, and fate connected her to it."

Myuri held her breath at the word *fate*.

Astronomers and astrologers were two sides of the same coin. What if Amaretto's mother was not human, or part of a nonhuman bloodline?

Col exchanged glances with Myuri and Amaretto and then asked, "Have you ever seen the Moon-Hunting Bear?"

He chose his words carefully, and Amaretto responded with a shrug.

"In a sense."

"What?!"

"You've probably seen shooting stars before, right?"

Col did not understand how this was connected.

His confusion must have been obvious. Amaretto made the sort of face experts often made when talking to the ignorant masses. Or perhaps the real reason she seemed that way was because she did not think anyone else would care about such a story.

"The Moon-Hunting Bear is a fairy tale. It's a metaphor for shooting stars."

"……"

The Moon-Hunting Bear. The bear that hunted the moon.

It reached up into the night sky and lashed out at the moon.

And when struck, the moon…slid across the night sky?

Then this massive heavenly body fell to the earth, putting an end to the era of spirits?

Col was enticed by the suggestion, but when Amaretto looked at him, she wore a dubious expression.

"You're kidding, right? Did you honestly think the Moon-Hunting Bear *actually* existed?"

How Col wished he could say, *You do realize you have an enormous sheep spirit and a girl who inherited a wolf's blood standing before you, right?* but he resisted temptation.

And the golden sheep of the Winfiel Kingdom had indeed told them stories of when he had escaped the Moon-Hunting Bear.

The Moon-Hunting Bear had existed at one point in time.

"So you're saying a star fell in those mountains, and that's where they built the city?"

Myuri's words were like careful steps on a snowy mountain path.

Canaan had also told them that Wobern sat on a perfectly flat basin—it could very well have been the scar from a blow that originated in the heavens.

Amaretto then grinned defiantly, seemingly glad they were quick on the uptake.

"That's what you'd assume at first when looking at the geography, right? But I don't think that's the case. Because there are absolutely *no* stories of anything resembling that passed down in Wobern tradition."

"……"

Myuri's face scrunched up into a frown, and that reaction seemed to delight Amaretto. It was unlikely she had many people who would take what she said seriously to begin with.

"So I was wrong, in a sense, but when the king of Wobern asked why I came to research the land and proceeded to ask for my help, I said yes almost immediately."

But as Amaretto spoke, the energy quickly sapped from her face.

All that was left in its place was a small, tired smile.

"Eccentric nobles aren't uncommon, so that's all I thought he was. But it didn't take long for me to realize what this really was." Amaretto folded her legs under her as she sat on her bed and shrugged her shoulders. She wore the face of one who was inexperienced in the world, as though a merchant at a market had put a counterfeit item in her hands. "I guess the king just assumed I was researching the eclipse. Probably because it's called the *Moon-Hunting* Bear."

She lifted her hand in the air, pretending she was hunting the stars.

If those stars were to glide across the sky, then they would be called shooting stars; if they were to suddenly vanish from the sky, then that phenomenon came with a different name.

Eclipse.

"He even commissioned really nice observation instruments for me, but by the time I realized what he was thinking as I was doing my research, it was too late. That room can only be locked from the outside, you see."

To keep her from running away.

She was the prince-elector's last hope.

Amaretto had been asked to do the impossible and then locked away.

"So it was a lifesaver when the Ruvik Alliance proposed sneaking you out, was it?" Ilenia asked.

"Obviously," Amaretto shrugged. "There's no way I could've gotten out of those mountains on my own. I said I'd do anything so long as they got me out of there, and so I left."

The Ruvik Alliance did not see Wobern as a place where they could line their pockets, so they likely wanted to avoid Prince-Elector Duran regaining any sort of authority.

And it was just a guess, but there were likely conspirators in the court keeping an eye on the prince-elector's movements.

Did that then mean the alliance did not have the Church's backing, and there was no grand plot for the Church to restore their lost power?

Amaretto did not seem to be lying when she told them how she managed to escape from Wobern. Col believed this was the case since neither Ilenia nor Myuri seemed suspicious of her.

"But you found me instead," Amaretto said blankly. "Would you consider…letting me go?"

Her obsequious smile may have been a front she was mustering with all she had.

Normally, running from a ruler's request, even if it *was* a nigh-impossible ask, would only lead one down a path of harsh punishment. Col, of course, had no intention of watching that happen to Amaretto.

But there were many things he had to consider.

As he and Ilenia, who was also considering her options as he was, exchanged glances, Amaretto seemed to finally believe they were not loyal hounds of the prince-elector.

With a look of relief, she said, "I'm not really interested in watching the moment my fate's decided for me, so would you mind if I watched the stars until then? You know, it's been so cloudy for these past few days, but I think it's supposed to clear up tonight."

She pointed upstairs. Col sympathized with her, so he nodded.

"Not at all. While the prince-elector has asked us to take on

this job, we are not your enemy. You have nothing to worry about."

She offered an almost tearful smile and said, "Thank you."

As Col watched her climb the ladder, Ilenia gave a slow exhale.

"What shall we do?" she asked.

If they were to believe Amaretto, then that meant there was nothing at all they could bring back to the prince-elector. She had not been researching any eclipse to begin with.

Yet if he wanted to obtain an obligation from the prince-elector, he should bring Amaretto back. However, he did not believe that was the just decision.

Even if Prince-Elector Duran did not punish Amaretto, Col doubted he would let her go. She would likely be locked away in that tower again, and he would continue to expect a prediction for the eclipse.

But Amaretto herself made it very clear that was not something she could do to begin with.

"If she can't predict the eclipse, then we have no reason to force her to go back," Col said. "Rather, I believe we should *not* take her back, considering her safety."

He had heard enough stories to know that not being able to live up to a powerful individual's expectations typically meant a trip to the guillotine.

"I suppose all that's left is deciding what you want to do, Miss Ilenia."

Ilenia rubbed her chin.

"I want her help, since she has knowledge of the stars. And it seems like she's been enthusiastic in her research of the Moon-Hunting Bear, so that would be a big help for us as well."

They had been told the Moon-Hunting Bear ventured beyond the edge of the western sea, and its footprints remained at the bottom of the ocean.

The new continent, which was also said to exist beyond the edge of the western sea, seemed to be closely related to the Moon-Hunting Bear, but the bear was still shrouded in mystery, so there was good reason to keep looking into the myth.

"The problem is," Ilenia continued, "what to do with Amaretto once we do take her from here. The alliance will doubtlessly think the prince-elector has recaptured her. And then let's say the

alliance makes their way to Wobern to get her back. As a result, the prince-elector would naturally learn that we found her."

"…This will get sticky very fast, I see."

The world would view this as the Twilight Cardinal betraying Prince-Elector Duran.

And once word of this reached the other prince-electors and those in power, that would tell them the Twilight Cardinal was not to be trusted.

A dark shadow would be cast over his plan to find allies in his fight against the Church.

"Which means taking Miss Amaretto back presupposes we would be trying to sway the prince-elector…right?"

"Yes, but I believe you would be able to persuade him, Col. If what she told us was true, then he must truly be grasping at straws in the water—or grasping at stars in the sky. If you told him the Twilight Cardinal would support him in his fight to defend his crown, then he may give up on clinging to nonsense."

Ilenia seemed proud of herself for saying *grasping at stars*, perhaps as her way of attempting to lighten the mood. And the reason Prince-Elector Duran wanted the prediction of the eclipse was because his authority was like torchlight in a storm.

And Myuri had already essentially said the same thing, but from a different direction.

The Twilight Cardinal should be the one to prophesize the eclipse, and then support the prince-elector once he does.

So even if there was no eclipse prediction, Prince-Elector Duran may allow Amaretto to accompany them without question if the Twilight Cardinal promised to support him politically.

"But," Ilenia began. "It takes quite a lot of work to pull a sinking ship back to the surface."

Her eyes were not that of the kind sheep, but that of a coldhearted merchant.

Ilenia had made deals that spanned vast swathes of land as a wool broker, so she had seen the rise and fall of many of those in power. And with that in mind, she was of the opinion that restoring a prince-elector's power would be terribly difficult.

And so it was from her overall aura that Col understood what option she truly wanted to take.

She wanted to take Amaretto out of here, and then disappear

completely.

This lord was fated to fall from his throne anyway—if they carelessly reached out a helping hand, they would only get dragged down with him.

Any merchant Eve had taken a liking to would naturally assume that without the backing of both the eclipse prediction and the Twilight Cardinal, that poor lord will face his downfall sooner than later.

Once he did, the reality that the Twilight Cardinal had betrayed him by absconding with Amaretto would all vanish like mist.

“I understand the logic, but…”

Prince-Elector Duran was at the end of his rope, and he had placed his final hope in this young man.

Col did not think cutting him off on what was beneficial to him alone was the right thing to do.

“Ultimately, I think I—”

He stopped in his tracks as he began to speak. Myuri, who had been quiet until this point, suddenly looked up to the ceiling.

“Hey, do you hear something?” she asked.

“What?”

It happened right afterward.

There came a terribly heavy *thud* from above.

For a brief moment, he wondered if one of Amaretto’s observation instruments had fallen over. But that was not it—the hatch leading to the upper floor had fallen closed.

As Col stood there, bewildered, he heard something drag over the floor, and then another *thud*.

With short breaths Myuri leaped up the ladder and scrambled up it like a squirrel.

But the hatch refused to budge.

“Hey! What are you doing?! Open up!”

She pounded on the hatch, but no answer was forthcoming.

Just as he wondered if she was holing herself up, Ilenia moved.

“Col,” she murmured, poking her head out of the window to look outside. “She got us.”

Myuri leaped down from the ladder to stand beside Ilenia and confirm what was happening.

Her ears and tail had appeared when he was not looking, and

all her fur stood on end.

“Brother.”

Myuri pulled the pouch of wheat from under her shirt, her wolf ears alert.

Col understood immediately what was going on.

What was the first thing Myuri did when she came into this room? She used the light in the lighthouse to send a message to Vadan and his crew while they were still out at sea.

They should have been more on guard. A talented astronomer would not be as foolish as a child might be. They had sealed their fate the moment they let her go upstairs simply because she claimed to be scared.

While they talked, Amaretto used the light just like Myuri did to send a message to her comrades in town.

“The speed tells me those are horses,” Ilenia reported. “I see five…six torches. It won’t take long for them to reach the top of the hill.”

Amaretto had pretended to give in by telling them all sorts of things, waiting for her chance to call for help. In her eyes, Col and his party were essentially officials armed with a warrant to arrest her.

What he *should have* trusted was the solid proof she had already allied herself with the Ruvik Alliance.

“What should we do, Brother?”

Despite the question, Col did not act right away.

It was not because his heart was hurting from Amaretto’s betrayal or any other emotional reason.

He was simply weighing the scales.

If Amaretto had an eclipse prediction, then they had to secure her person somehow, even if it meant inviting all sorts of danger. If the Church got the date through the Ruvik Alliance, it would put Col and his comrades at a terrible disadvantage in their fight against the Church.

But if she did not, then he did not have the confidence it was worthwhile to bring Amaretto along with them, especially if that meant risking all-out conflict with the Ruvik Alliance.

If the alliance had been holding her against her will, then they could have considered forcefully taking her with them.

But Amaretto had deceived them and called for help from the

alliance.

Which meant letting the astronomer go here would ultimately result in less chaos and would be the safest thing for her.

Even if they dragged Amaretto back, despite her insistence there was no eclipse prediction, the prince-elector may very well continue to cling to the possibility, no matter how remote. Nor could Col ignore the possibility the prince-elector would not listen to him and force Amaretto to name the date of an eclipse she had no way of predicting.

There were a number of possibilities, and some would doubtlessly bring on consequences that were as dark as a bottomless swamp.

He had no presumptions he would be able to choose the perfect answer—only God could do such a thing.

But he should absolutely do everything he could.

"We should—"

Give up on Amaretto and run.

That was what he was going to say when a terrifying thought crossed his mind. Amaretto tricked him to contact her allies. Did that mean everything she had told them was also a lie?

"What if…the eclipse…"

It was a bit circular at this point, but if this gamble backfired on them, then things would unfold in a way they would not be able to fix. Prophesizing a heavenly body vanishing from the sky was enough to turn a beggar into a sage.

Though the Church's authority was unstable at the moment, they could instantly gain the people's trust and make it known to the masses who exactly represented God's providence on this earth.

How easily they could kick aside the young and inexperienced Twilight Cardinal.

Were the scales not meant to tip in this direction?

Here he saw a new answer. But—

"Col."

Ilenia placed a hand on his shoulder.

"There is one absolute rule among merchants: finding good products is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Buy it first, then think of the consequences later."

Eve had hired this broker herself.

Now, of all times, Ilenia wore a confident but kind smile.

It was also the smile of a gambler, who had placed a great shipment of wool onboard a boat only for it to get caught in a storm. Though she called herself only a “little” older than Myuri, he could tell by her steely nerves that was an absolute lie.

That, and Col had learned an important lesson at Ohlburg. He would get nothing done if he was preoccupied with not getting dirty. The right thing alone could not remain so, so long as it existed in this world.

There were moments where he would have to forcefully draw righteousness to him.

And what he lacked was force.

“And that means, this gamble—”

Col swallowed his words and his breath, and then spoke again as though in prayer.

“Myuri, can I ask you to take care of the men downstairs?”

The restless wolf girl rounded her eyes and bared her fangs.

“’Course you can!”

She immediately began stripping off her clothes.

“Miss Ilenia, the ceiling?”

“Of course. I would ask you to retreat down the stairs. It may collapse.”

As she rolled up her sleeves, she still looked nothing more than a lithe maiden, but rough ram horns had, at some point, appeared from her fluffy hair, and her eyes had become much sharper.

Her true form was that of a sheep massive enough to overturn the office building of a villainous company.

“C’mon, Brother!”

He turned around to see Myuri in her wolf form, tugging at the hem of his clothes with her teeth.

Perhaps she was in a bad mood because he had spent a little too long looking at Ilenia.

He collected Myuri’s scattered clothes and headed down the stairs as she urged him along.

When he turned around, one last time, Ilenia had grabbed the ladder with both hands and was about to ram the ceiling with it.

Just as Col and Myuri went down about one story on the spiral staircase, there came a low rumble from above that resonated in

the pit of his stomach.

Myuri had already made her way down to the first floor like the wind. From below came the sounds of horses whinnying, men yelling, and people reaching the metal door.

There was nothing Col could do now but pray to God that none would be injured.

Brazen yelling became shouts of surprise, then screams of fear—they arose and faded one after another, like a play on a street corner, and then things fell silent.

Col felt a presence above him and lifted his head to see Ilenia, something wrapped in bed linens slung over her shoulder.

"Mmmh! Mmmh!"

The wails came from the wrapped bundle like she had just remembered she could scream—they clearly belonged to Amaretto.

Regardless of being a sheep spirit, Ilenia likely was used to heavy lifting, considering she was always dealing with heavy wool and occasionally had to hold back wild sheep.

The delighted smile on her face was truly reassuring, but also a bit terrifying.

"It seems they're finished downstairs. I've contacted the ship. They should be coming to pick us up at the beach, so let's get going."

As they came downstairs, they found Myuri sitting at the door, proud of herself, and happy the mice were praising her. Her ears alone turned to him and Ilenia; she scratched at her neck with a hind paw before standing up and shoving her face at Col, begging to be praised.

She doubtlessly acted as she normally would have, but she was the size of a bear in her wolf form. Even if she was just playing, that was more than enough to knock him over. He used all his strength to push her back, but that only caused her to wag her tail, expecting him to do it again.

In the meantime, the mice held rope in their mouths and scurried over the men's bodies, deftly binding them.

They had clearly done this before, as a sailor might do.

"Mmmh!"

As Amaretto wailed, they left the lighthouse.

Vadan himself was on the little boat waiting for them on the beach. He was briefly surprised when he saw the bundle on Ilenia's shoulder, but he only shrugged and sighed.

"Things got noisy out by the harbor. I figured that's what happened."

"I wish we had managed to sort this out peaceably," Col lamented.

Vadan snorted at him, probably because he thought Col sounded disingenuous.

Amaretto, still bundled up, was laid on the bottom of the boat and did not move at all once they launched from the beach.

Either she was frozen in fear or she was consciously trying to keep her breathing quiet out of worry for her own life.

The truth turned out to be neither. This only became obvious when they moved from the boat to the main ship and undid the binding over her face.

"Are you gonna throw me at the feet of the king?"

Her defiant gaze was sharp enough to be a threat—she was going to bite if they were not careful and got too close.

If Col had been in this situation before he began this journey, he would have been at a loss in his fear.

Instead, he knelt before Amaretto and faced her gaze head-on, something he could do because he had experience behind him.

"We had no choice but to capture you because you called for reinforcements from the Ruvik Alliance."

"……"

Amaretto looked away, doubtful.

Of course, he knew, from her point of view, that had been the logical choice.

"We do not want to betray Prince-Elector Duran," Col continued. "But we do not see it as a necessity to bring you back to him."

"Hah!" she snorted. "And what can a measly errand boy like you do?"

Despite how she seemed like an unreliable bookworm who preferred to stay cooped up in the library when she sat on her bed, Amaretto was now showing quite a lot of backbone. The trade of an astronomer was not an easy one without the backing of a church or noble blood.

Amaretto had her hackles up, like a stray dog. Myuri, now back in her human form, opened her mouth to say something, but Col held up his hand to stop her.

“My name is Tote Col.”

“Okay? And what does that have to do wi—”

Amaretto stopped; the expression on her face made it seem as though she had seen something odd out of the corner of her eye.

“I have another name. The Twilight Cardinal.”

“……”

Amaretto held her breath, her mouth agape.

Myuri, beside her, folded her arms and puffed out her chest, smug. Col pretended not to see her.

But the scowl soon returned to Amaretto’s face.

“You—you think you can trick me with such an obvious lie?”

Col thought the development here was a bit ironic, considering how blindly the people in the Town of Hope, Ohlburg, believed the imposter to be real, but this was how reality was.

“Your doubt is perfectly understandable. I, myself, am still not used to the title yet.”

Either the way he let his shoulders fall was wildly convincing, or his claim was too brazen to be a lie—whatever the reason, the doubt quickly vanished from Amaretto’s expression.

“But I do believe the fact I am the Twilight Cardinal is a very good thing for you in your current situation.”

Amaretto, still bound, flinched, as though he had poked her in a sore spot.

“Because if I were a nobody, I would not be able to report to Prince-Elector Duran. I would quietly hand you over, and then not care what happens afterward. I would simply get my reward and head for the tavern. And not long after, you would be taken to the guillotine.”

“Your head would fly off your shoulders like a shooting star!” Myuri threatened.

Col sighed and glanced over to Ilenia, who was watching from a short distance away. Ilenia understood what he wanted and she led Myuri away with a smile.

“Well?” Col asked.

Amaretto dropped her gaze.

“Miss Amaretto, this whole situation has grown complicated

due to the possibility you *might* be able to truly predict the eclipse. So…" He paused and sunk to both knees; he stared straight at her, as though he were encouraging a criminal to confess. "Can you predict the eclipse? Or can you not?"

Of course, he was not so naive to believe she would answer honestly.

His belief, instead, rested on her smarts and her strength.

If she had an appropriate understanding of the situation, she would know how she should act. She should be able to tell who she needed to trust here.

Amaretto's gaze dropped, and she fell into thought.

Then she said slowly, "No one believes what I say."

It did not sound like a sharp ending remark made in desperation. In her words he sensed weighty emotions that had built up over a long, long time.

This girl was an astronomer chasing after a bizarre fairy tale.

Col remembered what they spoke about in the lighthouse.

"Is this related to your mother?"

Amaretto said her mother was an astrologer.

Astrologers and astronomers were two sides of the same coin.

But the space in between the two faces of that coin was enough to divide them between proper believers and heretics.

"What, are you gonna burn me at the inquisitor's stake, too?"

Behind Amaretto's aggressive smile was a clear view of her past. And at the same time, Col caught a glimpse of why she was so attached to the story of the Moon-Hunting Bear.

"Your mother must have caught the eye of an inquisitor by telling fortunes with shooting stars or something like that, yes?"

Some nights, over some village, one could see stars streaking through the sky. Some regions saw this as good luck, and others saw it as bad—but the ones generally making that decision were the clergy.

But in the most remote places, a church may only have drunkard, uneducated priests who did not know what the stars meant.

And in times like those, they turned to the village fortune-tellers.

Households without men to work occasionally made a living through occult practices using fortunes and herbs.

Such places were a hotbed for heresy and paganism, but it was still necessary work even now in places where the Church's teachings could not reach.

"Hah! And what if she did? You want me to praise you for how smart you are?"

"I want to help you just as much as I want to help Prince-Elector Duran. But I cannot do that if I don't know what the truth is."

The most difficult thing was that Amaretto had already lied to them, acted falsely, and tricked everyone, not only him.

The Twilight Cardinal imposter at Ohlburg, the Town of Hope, was clearly a fake.

But lies that came from a person's heart were not so easily discerned.

Especially if those lies were meant to protect oneself, or to protect other things from a painful past—that only made it even more difficult to tell if a person could be trusted or not.

"Miss Amaretto."

When Col said her name that time, it was the first time she looked frightened.

That was likely not because she knew her fate hung in the balance in this moment. It was because she realized she was not sure what words might come out, even if she were to ask for help.

"The Moon-Hunting Bear."

There came an odd interjection.

It was not Amaretto who said it.

It was Myuri, whom Ilenia was meant to have taken away.

"You really were going after the Moon-Hunting Bear, right?"

Amaretto was more shocked than Col was. She stared back at Myuri.

"You weren't lying about going deep into the mountains and going around searching for something, right? Anyone can tell the mercenary king doesn't live up to anyone's expectations as a king. You had no reason to go out of your way to curry favor with him using something as awe-inspiring as an eclipse forecast as bait. Which means…" Myuri let her arms drop. "You were really going after the Moon-Hunting Bear. Right?"

Back at the lighthouse, Myuri had intended to corner Amaretto only for that to be turned on its head, and she had been caught

off guard instead. Now she was speaking in a high-handed manner, as though airing out her resentment.

"I noticed something else that was kind of weird. Just because you were so passionate about the Moon-Hunting Bear, would that mercenary king still be taken in by your story and think, *Huh, maybe I'll lock her in my tower*?"

That drew Ilenia's attention.

"He's not like my *brother*, whose first thought is always locking girls away."

Myuri turned a cold eye to Col. When their gazes met, she smiled. It seemed she still held a grudge against him for tying her to a chair to force her to read and write.

"And you said the people in those mountains didn't have any stories about the Moon-Hunting Bear anymore. I thought that was weird. Because then where *are* you looking for those stories?"

Exactly. That was it.

"And what kind of stories were they? Were they enough to confuse the mercenary king and cause him to reach for stars that don't even exist?"

Myuri leaned in close to ask her questions, but Amaretto said nothing in return.

But she did not flinch or lean back; she let Myuri stare at her.

Myuri was the most spirited of all the children in Nyohhira, and of course, she was great at staring contests.

The moment Col thought they would stare at each other, unblinking, forevermore, the ship shuddered violently.

They had started encountering big waves offshore.

If they remained on the deck, Vadan and his crew would not be able to work in earnest with Amaretto watching, and they would only get in the crew's way.

As Col tried to encourage everyone to go below deck, Amaretto spoke up.

"I can't predict an eclipse, and I'm not interested in doing so."

Col and Myuri looked to her in surprise, but Amaretto still did not look up.

She continued, her speech faltering.

"My goal…is to find the star that belonged—no, that the Moon-Hunting Bear chased after."

Col had once heard the best scammers were the ones who genuinely believed their own lies. Perhaps it was in that regard the imposter in Ohlburg, the Town of Hope, was second-rate.

When Amaretto lifted her head, she looked straight at Myuri.

There was a fortitude in Amaretto's eyes. When Myuri saw it, she looked like a hound that had been shown a nice tree branch.

"What does that mean?!"

Just as it seemed her ears and tail might pop out, the ship shuddered again.

"Damn it, we're being followed!" Vadan shouted from the rudder.

Myuri's eyes went wide. "Even though they were tied up so tight?!"

"They were likely not the only ones standing by," Col said. "They must be others who guessed that anyone who might come to take Miss Amaretto away would make landfall somewhere besides the port."

This was an alliance of cunning merchants. It was impossible to outrun them forever.

"Their boat is small and full of rowers! They're gonna catch up to us!"

Vadan's words told them to take Amaretto below deck.

Not all of his crew could take human form, and he needed all mice on deck in order to sail at full speed. Naturally, this was not something they could let Amaretto see.

Ilenia moved straight away, hoisting the bound girl over her shoulder.

Despite her position, Amaretto looked at Myuri and said one more thing.

"I went looking for the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted. The Moon-Hunting Bear isn't just a story made up by the pagans. I'm going to…I'm going to prove my mother wasn't a liar!"

She twisted, but not to escape Ilenia's grasp. She was shaking off the dark past that clung to her being.

Amaretto's mother had been asked about the meaning of shooting stars and told some sort of fortune. Either the villagers took it badly or it landed in the lap of an intolerant member of the clergy, after which her fate took a dark turn.

Amaretto must have yelled in the same way she did now when

her mother was being taken away.

But could Col trust that this, too, was not an act? All of them had been fooled by her innocent act at the lighthouse.

But—

“Tell us.”

Col and Myuri stood side by side before Amaretto, as she rested over Ilenia’s shoulder.

Because if he were to doubt Amaretto here, then he had no business aspiring to be a priest.

“Why did you come to Wobern?”

Amaretto’s face twisted, and at last, she burst into tears. The way she cried made her look much younger than she seemed at first glance—they were, perhaps, tears she should have shed a long, long time ago.

These were the tears for when her mother was taken away by an inquisitor for the crime of providing for them both by divining fortunes from the stars.

“I—I…”

She could no longer change the past, but she could draw her own future closer.

But in order to do that, she first had to overcome the present.

“Col, Myuri, take Amaretto for me,” Ilenia said, Amaretto still on her shoulder. She saw Vadan was giving his crew new orders.

She let down the sobbing girl and said calmly, “The enemy ship is catching up to us. Our boat may sway quite a bit, so please be careful.”

Col did not ask what she meant by that. If Ilenia put her mind to it, she could reduce the approaching ship to splinters and bits of debris in the dark of night.

Myuri used the sword at her hip to cut the bindings. She and Col helped Amaretto below deck. And just in case, he closed the hatch behind them.



Darkness quickly enveloped them, but Myuri pushed open a door in the corridor to reveal the room they used before departure to finalize their plan. The map was still open on the table. Myuri opened the shutters on the window, which brightened the room quite a bit. They set Amaretto down on one of the many crates stacked in the room.

There might have been a battle going on above deck, but all they could hear down here was the sound of the waves.

It was the perfect place to tell strange fairy tales.

“And?” Myuri asked Amaretto.

As she sobbed like a baby, Amaretto looked up at her with wet, pleading eyes.

“Don’t let them get a hold of us! Cut off every grappling iron they throw at us!”

Vadan’s voice came through the small, open window in the room. Outside, Col could see the hull of the slim enemy ship getting closer.

It was apparently a standard tactic in naval battles to pull up alongside an opposing ship once caught up, use grappling hooks to pull it closer and keep it in place, then gain control by boarding with daggers in mouth. Col assumed the “daggers in mouth” part was an embellishment that only existed in Myuri’s imagination, but it seemed everything else was more or less accurate.

But since the enemy ship was a small one built for speed, it also seemed to be at the mercy of the offshore waves.

They may be able to escape anyway, without needing Ilenia to act.

“So? Continue where you left off,” Myuri said once her gaze dropped back down from the ceiling.

Amaretto did not look up. And yet she continued to speak, faltering, but without losing her composure.

“I…found a story on the Moon-Hunting Bear in a place far to the south of Wobern. It was at an old abbey, in the diary of a chiliarch from the ancient imperial army. It remained in an incomplete state, but as I looked into it, I learned the chiliarch was making his way toward the north, and that he was trying to pass through the land that is now Wobern, before it was called

Wobern."

It was clear looking at the map—if one drew a line straight north from the city that served as the center of the ancient empire, it would cross right over Wobern. Canaan had even said, in ancient times, a road had indeed been built along that line.

"According to the diary, their march had been suddenly interrupted, and their operation ended in failure."

"And the Moon-Hunting Bear caused it?"

Amaretto did not even nod—she simply closed her eyes.

"The diary said their path had been blocked because of the star the Moon-Hunting Bear dropped. And that so many of his soldiers had gotten caught up in it. Rocks and stones of all sizes flooded the valleys like a torrent, and everything was swallowed up in the landslides. And then, he swore on the god of war, Bamas, that it was true."

She must have read it so many times she memorized it.

Amaretto spoke clearly and without hesitation.

It had come from a military log from an ancient imperial chiliarch.

It was well known that people in antiquity were superstitious, but there was no proof that Amaretto was not the same.

"And you're saying you can find that fallen star?"

"I can."

"How?"

Myuri's questions were like teeth in flesh.

It sounded less like she doubted Amaretto, and more that she was impatient to hear the answer.

"There were detailed star charts and hours in the log. The chiliarch wanted to know exactly which star fell, so he had his accompanying scholar chart the stars. You'd usually laugh. It's so stupid. But—"

"Were the charts accurate?" Col asked.

For the first time, Amaretto nodded.

Most old writings were, at best, either used as fuel for fires, their contents mostly illegible to the common person, or used as control for the thickness of newer books if they were lucky.

But miracles did occasionally happen, and a small number were found by astronomers.

And some could see the truth hidden in fairy tales.

“There are people all over the world who’ve recorded the stars over long periods of times with unbelievable patience and tenacity. If you look at the fruits of the labor of all the people who’ve told the stars’ stories from ancient times through to the present, you can tell exactly where those charts were drawn. By looking at the stars, you can see who did what where, like an astrologer.” Amaretto bit her lip. “My mom was one of those people. Her divining the shooting stars wasn’t anything worth attacking her over, but, but…”

Tears welled in her eyes again, but she firmly wiped them away.

“I observed the stars visible from present-day Wobern from that tower in the city. And when I compare them to the stars in the diary, I can generally pin down the location, or at least the direction in which they were drawn. I should be able to prove the Moon-Hunting Bear existed.”

Amaretto’s eyes were clearly different from how they were in the lighthouse.

Words like *desperate* or *urgent* could not describe them—it was something else, something that could swallow a person whole.

After suddenly appearing at the palace, Amaretto must have declared her intent to research the myth of the Moon-Hunting Bear, and desperately sold her tale. And Prince-Elector Duran was more of a resourceful general, one who was more suited to wielding the pen than the sword. Unluckily for Amaretto, his knowledge made him believe the myth of the Moon-Hunting Bear was connected to forecasting an eclipse.

There were plenty of common legends that told of soldiers agitated by a sudden solar eclipse, leading them to suffer terrible losses in battles they were almost guaranteed to win. Prince-Elector Duran only believed the fairy tale of the Moon-Hunting Bear was one of those stories because it suited his purposes.

“But…” Amaretto’s lips suddenly twisted weakly into a self-deprecating smile. “That’s why, even if you took me back to Wobern, all I’ll find are big boulders.”

If they were to truly find a large boulder, they could likely prove the old stories were correct, or that the fairy tale was real.

But the only type who would be happy about that were the

eccentrics who loved fairy tales, and it would not lead to a resolution to this mess, which began with an eclipse forecast.

People would continue to fight, searching for a prophesized date that did not exist.

But this told Col what the origin of this entire debacle was. He thought Amaretto's story was adequately believable. In which case, that would make it a good enough weapon in a chat with Prince-Elector Duran, at least.

"Your story is convincing. I believe, with the help of our allies, we will be able to undo the presumptions Prince-Elector Duran has filled his head with."

The prince-elector had convinced himself of the eclipse forecast all because he had no other choice to begin with. And so if the Twilight Cardinal were to declare his all-out political support, then the prince-elector would no longer have to grasp at stars.

If faith was not enough to resolve the whole thing, then they could get Eve's help to alleviate the trade problems wrought by the alliance. And once the townsfolk's lives were elevated, the prince-elector would have respect again.

"But there is a problem."

And just as he said that, Myuri shot to her feet.

Beyond the little window, the enemy ship was approaching rapidly.

"Grab on!"

There came a loud impact, one that drowned out Myuri's shouting.

The cargo stacked in the room shuddered, crates collapsed, things fell from the shelves on the wall.

But the enemy ship quickly retreated once again. It seemed as though they had not been purposefully aiming to ram them, but were at the mercy of the waves.

Yet Col could tell they were not giving up by the way the oars continued to strike the water.

They were trying to get Amaretto back, no matter what. Sending a small ship like this built for speed out to sea on a night like this was a terribly dangerous gamble.

And Amaretto, too, was another who had made a dangerous gamble.

“Miss Amaretto, did you promise the Ruvik Alliance that you could predict the eclipse?”

“……”

Amaretto nodded wordlessly.

She had no choice but to get the alliance’s help in order to escape Prince-Elector Duran once his assumptions got the better of him.

The girl before Col no longer had that carefree air around her that she did in the lighthouse, or that defiant will.

All that was left was a girl whose pursed lips quivered; she was lost and out of options.

No—that was perhaps the face of a powerless girl from a remote village unable to help her astrologer mother when she was strung up as a heretic. Perhaps the reason Amaretto was so adept at deceiving others was because she had long been deceiving herself, so now she never had to look at her past.

With the rocking of the boat, she tumbled from the crate on which she sat and crumpled to the floor. How terribly weak she looked in that moment—it reminded Col of how Myuri said it was a knight’s role to save the princess trapped in a tower.

The Twilight Cardinal was no knight, but the reason he wished to be a priest in the first place was to help lost lambs with nowhere to go.

And before him was a girl who had truly lost her way in her search for the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted.

“Please…” Amaretto looked up to Col and said, “Help me.”

Col reached out to Amaretto and slowly pulled her into an embrace.

To show her, without words, she had allies.

This girl had been unable to help her mother yet had been tracing the fairy tale of the Moon-Hunting Bear in her memory. She likely never had time to sit and complain—she needed the strength to tell whatever lie she needed to tell in order to survive.

Col took a deep breath.

The meaning behind his title, which was much too big for his shoulders, was the dawn that brought light to the people.

“Of course.”

He patted her back, perhaps a bit too roughly, and hugged her tight, like rope binding cargo together.

But the reason he soon grasped her shoulders and pulled back was because reality came at him fast.

“I am confident I can persuade the prince-elector. However, convincing the Ruvik Alliance there is no predicted eclipse will be different.”

And it was not only because Amaretto promised them there was.

If the Ruvik Alliance did have an accomplice in Prince-Elector Duran’s court, then it would not take them very long to realize it was the Twilight Cardinal who took Amaretto from the island.

That fact would only tell them Amaretto did indeed hold that much value, and it would bring about an even bigger problem.

“It was my fault the Ruvik Alliance’s luxury goods trade was completely spoiled, and they are furious with me. They even paid con artists in a town called Ohlburg in order to drag down my name.”

Amaretto stared at him in surprise, but quickly turned her attention out the window—she could sense the wrath of the Ruvik Alliance from the way their boat doggedly gave chase, crashing through the tall waves.

“So if the Twilight Cardinal takes you back,” Col began, “they would not believe me if I were to tell them there is no need to fight since there was never an eclipse prediction to begin with. What we need to persuade the alliance will be completely different from what we need for the prince-elector.”

The boat rolled down, then lifted again.

“If we fail to persuade them, then they will likely take an army to Wobern, even if we manage to shake them on these seas. “I need to prevent that from happening,” Col said firmly.

Amaretto drew her lips into a thin line and dipped her head in pain.

This girl had nothing to her name, not even a real date for a real eclipse she had promised. She did not even have trust in the words she spoke.

All she had was knowledge of the stars.

“But why can’t we just let them fight anyway?”

It was Myuri who spoke, indifferent.

“Those mountains are the best place for defense, after all.”

It cannot be that simple, is what Col wanted to say. But for a

moment, he questioned himself—*Is it?*

No, it was not.

"Do you think the prince-elector can put together an army?" Col asked.

"Probably not, if this were about anything else. But the mountain people should be fed up with the sea dwellers by now," Myuri guessed. "I think they'd be happy to take up the sword against the merchants in Ahberg."

Col could easily picture this.

In that case, was it instead better to cast things in strict black and white during a war?

He thought about it for a second, but then quickly picked out a problem.

"That would make it a siege battle. You like war stories, don't you? You should know how difficult siege battles can be."

Being always by Myuri's side and her love for war epics and adventure tales had earned him a bit of knowledge on the matter.

Myuri made a face as though a secret of hers had gotten out, and glared at Col.

"So then what are we supposed to do?"

The way she pouted at him told him she had spoken with a nonchalance to ease his conscience.

In reality, perhaps that was the case.

Even if they were to take Amaretto to Wobern, there were doubtlessly workers for the alliance in the city, and the situation would quickly make its way to the alliance.

They might start a war in their anger, and even if they did not, they could deny trade to Wobern, which would essentially stop all distribution of goods to the area.

Their one saving grace was it was not winter yet. Even so, the city would quickly run out of food and famine would spread.

Would the people still come together and choose to fight the Ahberg branch of the Ruvik Alliance when it meant enduring such hardship? They would still have to prepare themselves for the tragedy that naturally accompanied siege warfare, even if they were up against an opponent who they bore many grudges against.

If anything, it was a lot more likely they would tear Prince-Elector Duran from the throne, who was the source of all of their

problems, and hand over everyone involved, Amaretto included, to the Ruvik Alliance.

Because none of this mess would have ever come about if the prince-elector had never become obsessed with the idea of an eclipse prophecy.

“This might be kind of sad for you, Brother,” Myuri said coolly as Col desperately searched for the start of a solution. “But if you could really persuade everyone with words alone, then you’d be able to stop that ship right now.”

Myuri’s legs were spread in a wide stance to withstand the violent rolling and dipping of the room.

It was as though she was showing him *her* feet were firmly on the ground.

“I…”

He could voice all the correct arguments and his apprehensions in the world, but that would still not change anything.

Prince-Elector Duran began dreaming after listening to Amaretto, and Amaretto had put the Ruvik Alliance into a nightmare in order to protect herself.

In order to resolve this, Col needed to wake everyone.

For that, he had to find a large horn he could sound.

“But I guess we’ll worry about that after we get through this alive!” Myuri said.

The enemy ship managed to find purchase in the waves and closed in quickly, then rammed into their ship.

What was different from last time was once the hull made contact, the ship did not drift away.

The terrible sound of creaking wood rattled through the walls. It was almost like insects biting into the wood and tearing holes into it.

It was likely the grappling hooks tearing into Vadan’s ship.

“Brother.”

Myuri’s tone was cold, and that told Col they had no time left to spare.

Even with Ilenia on their side, they would have to fight back once the enemy boarded them. The mice crew alone would not be enough, and there was no telling if the ship itself would be able to survive if Ilenia exercised her full strength in her sheep form.

The way Myuri was looking at him was her way of asking permission to fight as a wolf.

What vexed Col the most was his own shame, that in the end he had to rely on nonhuman power, and because he wished he could swear at a god that would not come to help them, even if he prayed.

But they were running out of options, and they were running out of time.

If they wanted to put out the fire, they needed to do so before it spread.

They could answer the question of how they would handle Wobern and the alliance once they managed to get through this moment.

“Do not be too reckless,” he said.

Myuri took a deep breath and huffed it out.

Amaretto stared blankly at them, not quite absorbing the situation, as Myuri turned to leave the room. But she suddenly stopped in her tracks.”

“Oh, right, ‘reckless’ reminds me.”

“What is it?”

“If that fortune-teller finds the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted, would that basically mean we’ve won this war?”

Her ideas and questions were sudden, as they always were—everything about this rambunctious girl was.

And what gave Col the terrible feeling in his gut was the delight on her face.

“All we have to do is pull out that star and roll it down the valleys. It doesn’t matter what kind of army they send, then, because it’ll flatten them all!”

When they stood at the peak of the mountains after crossing the harsh mountain paths from Estatt, the sight before them had seemed almost artificial.

The perfectly bowl-shaped basin, surrounded by mountains, made one believe there was no other piece of geography in the world as easy to understand as this—and between the mountains ran the valleys, like paths.

The geography had likely been carved over many moons and many years by the snowmelt, and it certainly seemed that way, depending on the perspective.

It was perfect for rolling a large boulder down into the sea.

“You never change, do you…?”

Myuri took that as a compliment and cheerfully exited the room.

He was sure she had said something silly to ease his nerves. It was not long afterward they heard the sound of clashing blades.

The sound frightened Amaretto and she curled into herself, wrapping her arms over her head. Perhaps she recalled the villagers who had attacked her astrologer mother.

Humans were powerless, and that was a solemn fact. Not even kings were invincible, and they, too, could be possessed by groundless fantasies like Prince-Elector Duran. The Twilight Cardinal was no different. Even if the name itself had power, it was still nothing but an illusion that was held up by a great number of people.

But if there was one thing Col had learned on his journey thus far, it was that nothing would get better if all he did was lament his powerlessness. That even if the mud at his feet was terribly deep and the dawn was a distant dream, he could not stop walking.

Because the only way to reach his goal was to keep moving forward.

“Miss Amaretto.”

Col placed his hand on Amaretto’s shoulder. From her position, curled up as if she was taking a penance, she glanced up at him, perplexed.

“How long do you think it will take to find the Moon-Hunting Bear’s star?”

It was better to talk of things she might be able to accomplish instead of simply allowing oneself to be overwhelmed with powerlessness.

“……”

Amaretto squinted at him, as though looking at something bright; she then wiped her face with her sleeve and replied, “The journal said…they marched…after winter ended, around this time. And…I’ve mostly finished observing the stars over modern Wobern.”

Amaretto slowly sat up straighter, like more and more water slowly pushing a waterwheel into motion.

“I know the general direction it’s in. All I had to do was comb the area.”

In the human world, very few knew the tale of the Moon-Hunting Bear anymore.

The nonhumans who were alive during the time kept quiet *because* they knew of the calamity it brought.

A fairy tale in a class all on its own, buried beneath the layers of history, was about to be lit once again under the light of the stars.

“Do you think…we’d be able to do what Myuri suggested?” Col asked.

Amaretto’s eyes went wide, and she then gave a tired smile.

“The philosophers of the past debated constantly over how big the moon was. If one were to hang up a round shield and then keep stepping back, it would grow smaller and smaller—so then how high did the sky go? That sort of thing.”

The sun, the moon, and all the stars hung in the sky.

“The log described it as a massive, towering stone. They were chased away by a terrible tremble of the earth that knocked them off their feet, and a never-ending flow of boulders and pebbles. I think that whole area’s been inhospitable to people since then. So…if there was a star, then it would be realistic to kick it south.”

As she spoke, Col started to think this fantastic tale was starting to sound rather realistic—Amaretto must have thought the same.

It was thanks to Myuri’s silly suggestion that a small smile finally returned to the hurt girl.

The Saint of the Sun was said to bring smiles to the people—Col could see the saint’s smug smile in his mind’s eye.

“Aren’t you—isn’t the Twilight Cardinal fighting against the Church? You can just roll the Moon-Hunting Bear’s star to the south. Like she said, once you get the rock rolling, it’ll go back up the road and reach the Holy See in no time.”

The city that once served as the center of the ancient empire was still the present-day location of the Holy See.

The old roads no longer existed, of course, and the Holy See was far away.

But picturing the sight alone was fun indeed. Even back in Nyohhira, the children would make large snowballs, push them

down the hills, and cackle with delight.

Ilenia could do it, he thought.

Her physical strength was enough to pull out any boulder from any depths, was it not? And then he could see a hole opening up in the mountains, like a clogged canal being cleaned up.

"If we were to remove the stone, then we would be able to open up the ancient road leading south. Even if the Ruvik Alliance were to attack from the west and block off the roads, we could still leave from the southern road. And if we did that—"

He knew it was not just his own imagination, because Amaretto was looking at him with the exact same expression.

"Then…we could get through to the south?"

Her murmur caused the images in his memory to flash through his mind.

Wobern. Ahberg.

The steep paths from Estatt.

The conversation they had with Eve before departing.

"Wait—wait a moment."

If all these *if*s slotted together nicely, then what sat before him was an unbelievable possibility.

He looked around the room and found the map they had used in their strategy meeting. The rocking of the boat had pushed the desk into a corner of the room; he pulled it back out and unfurled the rolled map.

The scope of the maps sailors used was rather vast. It would take him weeks if he were to travel from one end of the map to the other. And those roads were not flat—at times, he would have to take detours around mountains, and he would have to take long detours around certain parts of land even if he were on a ship, too.

But that was exactly why fledgling merchants crowded those roads from Estatt to Wobern.

Was this star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted, in a way, its own star of hope?

Col dropped a finger to the map and followed the path.

It was a wild dream, one he could only make with his feet off the ground, one that assumed a fairy tale was real.

But was he not a priest-hopeful who spoke nothing of his ideas, just in the way Myuri often teased him for?

And so of course…

“Let us speak of ideals so we may lead the people.”

The Twilight Cardinal’s slender arms could scarcely move a small stone.

But if he were to take quill in hand, so many people would want to read what he had written.

If a significant number of people were dreaming because of the eclipse forecast, then simply waking them up from their dream was not the way to solve this.

Because he would not mind showing them a new dream.

“Miss Amaretto.”

“Hmm…?”

She looked at him curiously.

“Please draw on the map where the star may have fallen. And then, would you happen to know of any specialty products from the south?”

“What?”

Amaretto’s eyes, widened in surprise, were like beautifully full moons.

“Hey, they’re coming from over there! Cut their lines! Do *not* let them on board!”

The deck had become a battlefield. Someone must have been shooting flaming arrows, because small blazes burned in scattered spots across the deck.

Men clung to the port side of the ship. Vadan’s crew cut down the grappling hooks with their swords and forced back the enemy with long sticks as they boldly tried to board the ship.

Vadan was barking commands even as he swung his sword around. The mice were also out in full force, bringing over extra tools and buckets full of water.

Ilenia and Myuri remained in their human forms because they were helping put out the fires, it seemed.

They were soaked from head to toe, putting out one fire that had found its way onto the mooring rope.

“Myuri!”

“Hmm? Wh—Brother?!”

Myuri, after handing over an empty bucket back to a mouse,

looked at Col and gawked. The mice, after taking the bucket from her, got information and held the bucket on their backs and deftly carried it away. If someone who did not know their true identities saw this, they would likely think the bucket was sliding across the floor on its own.

“Brother, it’s too dangerous. Go back below—wait, what do you have there?”

“I want to go on their ship. Do you think it’s possible with you escorting me?”

Col ignored her question and asked his own.

Myuri’s eyes flicked up and down, like a cat watching a toy—that was because his lack of strength meant he could scarcely keep a hold on the oddly heavy piece of wood; he had adjusted it to rest on his shoulder.

“Oof, there we go…Well? Can I ask you to escort me?” he asked again.

It was only after a long pause, long enough for a droplet of water to drip from her wet bangs, that Myuri finally snapped out of her daze.

“O-of course, sure! But…” She looked at him doubtfully; she had no idea what he wanted. “But, Brother…What are planning on doing with that?”

What do *you plan on accomplishing with that?*

He heard his own voice with hers because he had cautioned her plenty of times with that exact same phrase countless times when she was up to no good. Every time he did so, the rambunctious girl reacted in all sorts of ways—she would try to act innocent, try to get her way with tears, or for some reason get angry with him instead.

Col reacted by offering her a proud smile.

“You’re not…,” Myuri began.

“But I am,” he replied. “Did you not tell me to stop that ship with words, if everything could truly be solved by talking?”

Myuri was surprised, bewildered, and at last, tears welled in her eyes—what he held over his shoulders was the crest of the Church, cobbled together with whatever wood was available.

“Brother, that’s—”

She must have thought it was done out of spite. Or out of desperation.

Or that he was panicking because he was finally out of options. But of course, it was none of those things.

“Should I ask Miss Ilenia to escort me instead?”

The fur of Myuri’s ears and tail stood on end in surprise.

“I-I’ll do it! But—”

“I appreciate it. Think of this as a white flag. Either way, I would like them to lay down their arms.”

The crest over his shoulders swayed, and in turn, Myuri’s gaze flicked up and down.

“Come now, hurry up and be a wolf.”

“O-okay…”

He saw how she was still perplexed and wondered if his current attitude was making him unlike the brother she was used to being around, because he was typically much too lenient and soft.

If he were to keep his dignity both as a brother and as the Twilight Cardinal, then perhaps he should always act this bullish.

While he waited for Myuri to hurriedly get ready as those thoughts idly rolled through his mind, his eyes met Ilenia’s—she had thrown one of the buckets over portside, into the sea, then planted her foot on the side of the ship as she gallantly pulled the pail of water back up.

Ilenia, who was listening without really intending to, smiled at him as she doused a cloth meant for smothering fires in water.

“Brother.”

Col turned around to see Myuri in her wolf form.

She was two times larger than a regular wolf, and she could easily knock him over if she were to play with him.

But when her ears drooped in such obvious sadness, she looked oddly cute.

Col gave her a rough pat on the head and turned to look at the enemy ship.

“Clear the area and make space for me to jump aboard. I’ve asked Miss Amaretto to take care of a little job for me below deck, so she will not be coming up for a while. Be decisive in your actions.”

Myuri looked in the direction he pointed and then shuddered, as though drying her damp fur.

It seemed she was finally getting some enthusiasm back now

that she was being asked to do what she loved—playing rough.

"Just don't fall in the water when you jump over, okay?"

Her little spiteful remark was her way of biting back at the fact he took initiative from her.

"I know you would save me if that were to happen, so I have nothing to worry about."

"……"

Myuri turned a dour look to him, then rubbed her face on him with enough force to snap him in half.

"*Brother, you dummy!*" howled the wolf, and she became a gust of wind.

"A—a wolf…?"

When wolf-Myuri gracefully landed onto the deck of the enemy ship, those on the other side predictably looked at her in confusion, like they were dreaming.

Why is there a wolf at sea? No, is that really a wolf?

Once everyone froze in shock, Myuri head-butted a poor man who just happened to be nearby.

Her teeth then clamped down onto the scruff of his neck and she tossed him into the crowd. Once she did, all hell broke loose.

Some fought back gallantly in a manner that earned them the right to be called brave sailors. But Myuri easily snapped spears with her paws, and her thick fur caused arrows to harmlessly bounce off her body.

The enemy sailors were quickly seized by fear—some escaped below deck, some scurried up the yard like squirrels, and some overturned the boxes full of arrows to hide under.

But there were not many places to run on a ship, and there were even fewer places to hide. No one, of course, took the option of jumping into the sea.

The only one who would dare jump into the open seas at night was a reckless young girl.

Ultimately, most of them huddled together like sheep, their weapons still in hand, slowly inching backward, covering one another as they did. Whenever Myuri stepped forward with a growl, they all matched her movements with a step back, toward the sea.

As this happened, Myuri's tail swished to and fro.

Once he received the signal, Col stood at the edge of Vadan's ship, makeshift Church crest still on his shoulder.

"There's no need to worry—that wolf will not attack unprovoked," he said, then leaped over the side of the ship and landed on the deck of the enemy's.

The ship rocked over the waves, and he staggered a bit, but he did not drop the crest on his shoulder. So he gave himself a middling passing mark.

"My name is Tote Col."

He looked around him with a faint scowl and continued.

"Some call me the Twilight Cardinal."

The crowd stirred, and the flames of hostility burst to life in their eyes. That was likely because this situation was much more believable for them as opposed to a wolf that appeared from the blue.

But when Myuri lowered her head and growled again, they all shrunk like pups.

"In the name of God, I request a cessation of hostilities."

He then lifted the makeshift crest from his shoulders and held it high in the air.

He could sense doubt from Myuri's tail—she was not sure such a thing would have much effect. But they were at sea, the one place that made sure people were painfully aware of how powerless they were.

The reason sailors were so superstitious was because it was a terrible truth they had to learn in the face of the merciless waves.

"Where is your captain?"

Col's voice was surprisingly loud and clear among the silent sailors.

Every single one of them looked like cats who had been doused with water as they fought.



“Here.”

At last, from beyond the crowd of people, appeared a man with a beard like seaweed.

The fur on Myuri’s tail stood on end, likely because he also wore an eyepatch.

“Meyer Donnel. You the Twilight Cardinal?”

“Greetings, Captain Donnel. Yes, that is what I am called.”

Donnel seemed somewhat quirky—he looked Col up and down with an aggravated expression, looked to Myuri, then recoiled backward.

No matter how gallant of a man of the sea he might be, a wolf was a hunter of the mountains, something he would normally never run into.

“I need to speak to you with regards to the astronomer, Amaretto.”

When Donnel heard that, he quirked his lips, giving a smile that looked like a scowl.

“We rushed out of port as fast as we could when we heard someone snatched up our guest from our territory. And wouldya look at that? The Twilight Cardinal himself’s got a hand in kidnappin’!”

Donnel’s gravelly voice revived a bit of his crew’s spirit.

They were a stout crew of sailors.

“No. This would not fall under such criticism. She was in Wobern to begin with. It is under the request of Prince-Elector Duran that I am to save this poor girl, on God’s behalf, from the plot in which she has found herself mixed up.”

Donnel fell silent, but Col knew that was not because he was satisfied with his excuse.

And yet the reason he did not immediately command his men to attack was because he was waiting to see how this situation would unfold.

They were likely nothing more than sailors who just happened to be a part of the Ruvik Alliance, and were not the primary players in this plot. Or perhaps, more realistically, he may have been calculating how many of his men might survive if he were to command them to attack, bearing in mind Myuri’s fangs and claws.

Either way, Col loudly and deliberately cleared his throat, and

continued.

“Amaretto the astronomer confessed to me that when she was trapped in her suffering, she had no choice but to lie. And this lie had to do with the forecast of the eclipse, which I believe you are presently pursuing. She confessed that no such thing existed to begin with.”

“…Hah! And you want me to believe you?”

His response was as Col expected, so he nodded generously.

“Of course, if we believed anyone who asked us to believe them, then this world would not need the clergy. One copy of the scripture would be sufficient, and someone like me would not need to examine the injustices of the Church.”

The Ruvik Alliance had reportedly gotten rich by trading in the luxury goods that supported the clergy’s lavish lifestyle.

Donnel’s seaweed-like beard flared as he glared at Col in response to his sarcasm, and Myuri’s tail swished back and forth three whole times.

“But together, we serve in the name of God. We should be able to understand one another and work together.”

The bearded captain attempted to laugh it off, but he could not.

That was partially because what Col said sounded like nothing more than lip service, but at the same time, he produced a large map from his pocket once he was finished talking.

He knew from dealing with Myuri the first one to show fear was the loser. He boldly continued speaking, undaunted.

“Captain, do you have anyone on your ship who is well-versed in trade?”

“…What?”

“Do you?” he asked again.

The armed men exchanged glances and began murmuring among one another.

Eventually, a tall, lanky man stepped forward through the crowd.

First, he jumped in place at the sight of Myuri, then looked to Col, and drew up his shoulders.

“Er, um…”

“This is our chief navigator. Former merchant.”

Col nodded in satisfaction before unfolding the map over the

long table, which had probably been used as a platform in the battle.

Donnel encouraged the chief navigator to join him, and he peered at the map.

“Miss Amaretto was not researching a prediction for an eclipse in Wobern. She was looking into a particular legend.”

“A legend?”

“A story of a star that fell from the heavens. Prince-Elector Duran simply assumed she was researching an eclipse.”

“……”

Donnel and the chief navigator exchanged glances, indescribable expressions on their faces.

Perhaps they both thought it was a little too unbelievable that Col would try to confuse them with tall tales.

“Look at this map.”

Those who had lost their way would always find themselves looking to a path when shown the way.

Col pointed to a spot on the map, and both Donnel and the chief navigator looked at where he pointed.

“In the era of the ancient empire, the fastest way to reach the north by land was by going through here.”

He slid his finger from where sat the Holy See straight north.

“There is no road like this now, of course—it’s cut off by a steep mountain range. Typically, one can only go north by hugging the mountain range westward and clinging to what meager manmade paths have been built there. I believe everyone knows of the sea route—there is no other choice but to go around the mainland to the southwest.”

The two knew of the sea route, of course. They looked at Col, as though expecting new information.

“However, how would you feel if we were to revive the ancient road here?”

“What? What’s the point to any of—?”

Donnel began, anger in his tone, but Myuri growled and bore her fangs.

The chief navigator took a half step back with a little yelp, and Donnel, too, fell silent.

“There is a point. I have heard that you trade in a lot of luxury goods in the south. If a road were to open here, then you could

transport all your goods to the north very quickly."

"Hah?!"

Once again Donnel was at a loss for words. He stared at the map in shock, then leaned in closer to look more intently. When he lifted his head, he looked at Col.

"That's foolish talk—wait…Hmm…"

He fell silent again and looked back at the map.

This is what it was like to have common sense overturned.

"What do you think? Ahberg serves as the endpoint for the river that flows from Wobern, and at the same time it is the ideal port for heading north. The Kingdom of Winfiel is not that far away, and of course, Cobb Island is in a very convenient spot. Think about it—you could transport your goods from south to north a month faster than your competitors. Doesn't that sound attractive?"

Travel cost money. Goods lost their quality as more time passed, and so grew the possibility those products would be lost, stolen, or put on the black market by the very ones tasked with transporting them.

Captain Donnel clutched onto his wild, mane-like beard and hummed, as though trying to see if this was a dream or not.

"The Twilight Cardinal's tryin' to work *with* us?"

"I do not want to start a war. All I want to do is examine the Church's long history of injustice."

"……"

Donnel looked straight at him, yet he was also the first to look away. He rubbed his thumb over his mustache and gritted his teeth like Myuri did.

He was unsure and thinking.

"But the prince-elector's here on the map."

Donnel's thick finger rested on Wobern. The relationship between the people of the sea and the mountains dwellers had never been particularly good.

Ahberg, especially, had been treating Wobern terribly with regards to distribution of goods.

"If we were to open this road, then profit would come to every person in this entire area. Especially to Wobern, the keystone of this region. I believe persuading Prince-Elector Duran to cooperate is possible."

“……”

Donnel looked at Col, then dropped his eyes back down to the map again, as though hiding his interest in the idea.

“And?”

“The prince-elector does not have a personality suited for war. This area has held martial prowess in high regard for a very long time, so he is not well-respected. Plus, these people are being forced into a disadvantageous position due to the flow of goods, so they see the prince-elector as unreliable and are turning their dissatisfaction toward them.”

Donnel, a member of the very alliance who was forcing Wobern into that disadvantageous position, did his best to put up an aggressive visage before looking at Col again.

“The hell do you want us to do, then?”

“If you are to conduct legitimate trade and stop squeezing the people of Wobern for all they’re worth, then it can be framed as a victory Prince-Elector Duran obtained, and then the prince-elector will be able to avoid political peril.”

Col then pointed to a spot on the map.

It was a part of the mountain range where Amaretto said the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted had fallen.

“In exchange for letting Prince-Elector Duran take the credit, I will arrange for special trading privileges for you once the road to the south opens. How does that sound?”

The south was a rich land, and the temperate climate meant the region was full of all sorts of foodstuffs. And since the south was then connected both by land and by sea to the desert regions, curious items Col had never seen before often traveled those roads.

And what would happen if those things could be brought to Ahberg with overwhelming speed?

“Of course, products from the north could be carried south, too. Captain, I’m sure you know the Kingdom of Winfiel is my backer.”

Col leaned into the captain’s face, in the way Myuri often did to him.

Among the rest of Donnel’s features, reddened from the salt and the sun, his eyes were strangely beady, and they rested hard on Col.

“The kingdom produces an incredible amount of wool,” Col explained.

It was fast to transport things by ship, yes, but some seasonal conditions caused shipments to fall behind schedule due to adverse winds. But if a proper land route were opened, then trade could carry on throughout the year.

Of course, this was all a supposition, and there was no telling if it would truly go so well.

But that was what faith was to begin with. People prayed to God because they believed the days to come would be good.

“Could you return to Ahberg and speak about this with the rest of the Rivek Alliance?”

Of course, Donnel alone would not be making the final decision.

However, those who engaged in trade would easily see the benefits of this proposal.

If nothing else, the winner of this battle at sea had practically been decided.

Vadan and his crew had completely reorganized themselves for battle and were ready to counterattack at any moment. And it was clear from looking at Myuri that if Donnel or any of his men were to make any sudden movements, this standoff would devolve into a bloodbath in an instant.

And that meant it was better to return unharmed with a small handful of souvenirs instead of needlessly fighting back and suffering terrible casualties…

This captain had to have gone through the decision of whether to keep pushing forward or to pull back, over and over again, now that he had gotten caught in this seaborn storm.

Donnel closed his eyes and spoke through his teeth.

“My word ain’t gonna be enough to convince the others.”

Col immediately nodded.

“Of course, I will also go to persuade them. It seems Miss Amaretto wants to apologize for lying to everyone as well.”

Donnel’s clenched jaw loosened, and his shoulders seemed to relax.

But his one eye still rested on the open map.

Perhaps he could not stop imagining what trade would be like once items could freely travel when the north and south were

connected. There was a one catchphrase shared among merchants: When a merchant falls down, they do not get up for free.

Those who dreamed of joining the clergy thought similarly: there was joy in falling down, because that is a trial given by God.

The two were more similar than either thought—there were ways they could understand each other.

“Heh,” Donnel snorted, and twisted around.

Myuri’s ears piqued and she nearly leaped at him—it almost looked like he was drawing his sword.

“Can’t wait to see the surprise on the bigwigs’ faces,” Donnel said. After wiping his hand on his clothes, he stuck it out to Col.

When Col grasped it in return, Donnel snorted again and ordered his crew to retreat.

EPILOGUE



EPILOGUE

Col wrote a great many letters.

He had to add constant apologies and excuses right in the greeting portion of the letters, and he knew that once he saw all these people in person, he would have to say more than what was written.

This was the only way to resolve everything neatly.

They would be using the myth of the Moon-Hunting Bear to revive the great north-south corridor.

“Like brother, like puppy, huh?”

Once they returned to Ahberg and told Sharon about taking Amaretto back, Sharon was flabbergasted.

“But I guess if you take out the…the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted? I think it’d go pretty well. What do you think?”

It was as though the problem that landed in Sharon’s lap was a bit too much for her to handle, so she handed it over to Le Roi.

“Master Col must write a book. He needs to write a tale of adventure instead of a book of sermons.”

Le Roi then gave a belly-shaking laugh.

“The companies that claim membership in the Ruvik Alliance would fall over themselves for new trade opportunities. There is no good or bad when it comes to coin—gold is gold. It’s not a terrible idea. And we simply need not tell the Church.”

Le Roi’s shoulders shook as he laughed with genuine delight, and while Col was not sure if he should join in, they at least had a guarantee for the plan for now.

“Then we can report the plan to Hyland,” Sharon said. “All we need to do is bring in someone to negotiate on the kingdom’s behalf, yeah?”

The reason they needed Hyland’s help was because they needed to prepare wool that would match the value of the goods that would be coming from the south.

Goods were traded all over the world and reached their destinations after long journeys.

It was not good for one side of the deal to send their cargo over without any compensation or collateral.

"Yes," Col replied. "But I do realize this is an unreasonable idea. Please let her know I am more than ready to be scolded."

The letter he had written for Hyland, at least, was a very, very long one.

"That so? I assume she's gonna say yes without a second thought," Sharon said, then waved the bundle of letters in the air.

Afterward Sharon joined Le Roi, who wanted to visit the printing workshop to check on the vernacular translation of the scripture and left for the Kingdom of Winfiel.

Neither Col nor Myuri could afford to watch them off—Col sent a letter to Eve in Estatt. He wanted advice on trade negotiations, which would serve as the keystone to the plan.

But it was mostly a front—he knew that if he did not involve her in such a massive deal, she would yell at him for days. While he was worried her entrance onto the scene would only make things more chaotic, Ilenia apparently wanted to see her in person, so at the end of the letter explaining the situation, he asked her to come to Ahberg.

The final obstacle was Prince-Elector Duran. Col could not contain the entire report in a simple letter, so he had no choice but to go directly to him.

The prince-elector's cooperation was required for this plan to have any hope of succeeding, so Col had to persuade him to agree, no matter what. He would have to take Amaretto, the eye of this storm, back to Wobern and explain everything, starting with the myth of the Moon-Hunting Bear.

He knew it was going to be difficult, but he also knew it was something he had to do, so he paradoxically found calm once he realized he had no choice but to steel himself and do it.

What weighed on him the most was the last big job he had waiting for him.

And that was everything involved in dealing with the Ruvik Alliance.

He had proposed the plan to the alliance through Donnel and suggested there had to be a way everyone could claim credit for their hard work in the end, but from the alliance's point of view, they had their own reasons for not immediately agreeing to his

idea.

In truth, there was no way to check if Amaretto was indeed looking into predicting the eclipse or not. So the alliance could not completely abandon the possibility the horrid Twilight Cardinal was lying to them and was planning to make a leisurely but triumphant return with the astronomer, holding on to the secret to the eclipse forecast all the while.

After the battle at sea, Col returned to Ahberg with Captain Donnel and went straight to one of the alliance companies in a show of good faith.

As the alliance realized their plot with Amaretto had failed, they found themselves in chaos at the sudden arrival of their old enemy, the Twilight Cardinal, but when he and Donnel told them about this unbelievable plan, they quickly fell silent.

Col had a feeling they were more bewildered and confused by what was going on than anything else, but they also seemed to be busily weighing the scales to see what their profits might be if this harebrained scheme turned out to have legs.

That said, they were still merchants—they would draw up a contract even when negotiating with God.

They could not ignore the possibility the Twilight Cardinal might be tricking them—they wanted suitable assurance for when the Twilight Cardinal and Amaretto made their way to Wobern to persuade the prince-elector.

Myuri was irritated by their open doubt, but it was an understandable worry when Col placed himself in their shoes.

In fact, it was practically a miracle they agreed to his plan.

They were likely doing so only because they were left feeling like they had no other choice, and just like Le Roi said, the Ruvik Alliance was only a collection of merchants with varying opinions.

The alliance members of Ahberg ended up reordering their interests and placing their profits on the scales. But they would be crossing a very dangerous bridge, so they wanted some insurance before moving forward.

And that was then Col came up with a plan.

“It pains me to ask you of this, but could you stay in Ahberg?”

“……”

Myuri sat on the bed in their room at the inn, and Col knelt

before her.

“So you’re going to leave me here, take a little stroll through the mountains alone with the fortune-teller, hand in hand?”

The fur on her tail stood more on end than it usually did, and it thumped the bed with obvious displeasure.

The cherry on top was Myuri had been in a sour mood ever since the boat chase.

The reason for that was apparently the conversation Col had with Amaretto on the ship.

Myuri understood it had been necessary to earn Amaretto’s trust. As she continued playing the part of the Saint of the Sun, she began to somewhat understand the role of the clergy.

But it seemed she had been simmering in discontent that Col embraced the overwhelmed Amaretto.

On top of that, she had apparently failed to reach the level of excitement she had been expecting from her big job, which was leaping onto the enemy ship to cut a path through enemy lines, which was yet another source of disappointment. She had apparently pictured truly wild combat, a naval battle that would have left its mark in the annals.

And so ever since they returned to Ahberg, the cranky wolf was glued to her desk, day and night, rewriting the entire battle.

Despite all that was upsetting her, Col had to ask her to remain in Ahberg while he went with Amaretto to Wobern.

One could even say it would be his most difficult trial yet.

“We must persuade the prince-elector to give up on the eclipse and agree to our plan. A letter alone cannot accomplish that, and considering the alliance’s apprehensions, a person of considerable importance must remain here in Ahberg. Once we manage to persuade the prince-elector on either of those issues, I will come right back.”

At most, it would take about two weeks there and back.

That was a brief amount of time for an adult like Col, but thinking back on when he was a child, two weeks felt like forever.

“And?”

All Myuri offered was one chilly word.

Col managed to maintain his advantage with Donnel, and that attitude was something Myuri herself had cultivated in him.

And now his master was cross with him.

However—

“Myuri.”

He said her name with a particular nuance: *That’s enough.*

Myuri’s tail flicked upward, and her eyes darted away in surprise.

“I understand, to a degree, there is plenty you are unhappy with right now. And of course, you have my thanks for a job well done on the ship. None of this would have been possible without you, and it was your words that led me to this idea. And that is why I have been answering every one of your demands and whims ever since we came back. Do you understand?”

Myuri’s hair was beautifully braided, as though she was about to dance on stage. And before Col had braided it for her, she ordered him to comb it very carefully.

During their meals she had him debone her fish, asked for portions of his meat, and opened her mouth wide and demanded he feed her.

He had obliged more than enough of her whims, but Myuri was greedy. She was planning on picking every piece of pulp from the fruit peel, if she could help it.

This request to stay behind was perfect for the last big bite.

But the wolf pup had measured incorrectly.

Col stood up with a sigh, which signaled to Myuri this was the end of that act.

As she looked up at him, he could see the sadness on her face as well as the frustration that she had made the wrong choice.

“I do apologize, but you will have to serve as a hostage for now.”

“……”

This was the bargaining point that would satisfy the alliance while Col and Amaretto were off to speak with the prince-elector. Myuri was more than valuable enough to be a hostage. And Col could rest assured, knowing if it came down to it, she could easily manage on her own.

Vadan and his crew were already very carefully investigating whether or not there were any nonhumans who could pose a threat to her in the Ruvik Alliance.

She would also have some of the mice around her at all times while she was staying at the company, so she would not be

completely alone.

“We’ll be on separate adventures for a short while,” he said with light jest, but her face made it plenty clear she did not find it funny at all.

Col sighed. The way she pouted and turned away from him in a huff showed just how childish she was.

“When it comes to the point where we search for the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted, you’ll be able to do quite a lot more.”

By comparing the star charts of the present day to ancient star charts, Amaretto could generally narrow down where the ancient imperial army came across the fallen star.

But that was nothing more than theoretical, so it was possible the star had gotten buried beneath shifting land over the long months and years. It would be quite the challenge to search for it with human hands alone, so they would be borrowing the strength of Myuri and the others.

They had even written a letter to Diana the alchemist asking for further advice on the Moon-Hunting Bear.

“You can be patient, can’t you?”

In her huff, Myuri did not move a muscle on her face.

Col’s lengthy experience with her told him this was a test of patience.

And if he were to look back on everything up until this point, he would start to wonder if he had spoiled her a little too much. And that meant he should stare back at her, on his dignity as her older brother…except in the end, he was the first to drop his shoulders.

Myuri’s wolf ears immediately piqued out of pride in her victory, but that did not mean Col had lost.

He knew exactly how to take down this formidable wolf.

“My dream is to become a priest. I want to lead people in faith and fight using the power of those words.”

Myuri glanced at him, not sure why he was suddenly bringing this up. But she must have thought it was a strategy to get her to peek out from her burrow, so she quickly looked away again.

Col gave a faint smile as she did so, and this time, he did not kneel before her, but crouched instead, as though calming a toddler.

He took Myuri’s hands, balled into tight fists on her lap, and

looked up at her.

“Picture this.”

“…What?” asked the rambunctious girl, annoyed.

Col could not divine the stars, nor could he predict an eclipse.

But he could predict a different sort of thing.

“You are going to be held captive in the enemy base soon. While you are, I am going to work hard to complete my own mission. It is not going to be an easy path, and there is no telling if my attempts to persuade the prince-elector will go well. Despite that, I am going to give it my all, overcome all the obstacles, and return to this city.”

Col pictured a traveler whose clothes were tattered and cheeks were gaunt, yet whose eyes shone with a powerful light. Heroes were typically depicted in that way in the fantasy adventure stories Myuri wrote.

“And in the end, I will pry open the door to where you are held captive with my own two hands.”

Myuri said she had wished to be the one thrown into jail when Canaan did so in Wobern.

Because—

“It’s the role of the knight to save the princess, after all.”

Myuri was a wild child, one who loved swinging her sword around, yet she had one cheekily feminine interest.

Even though she wore a sword at her hip and clad herself in the heraldry of a knight to protect her brother, she, of course, wished to be saved, too.

“Will you believe in me and wait?”

As he said that, he looked up to her with the greatest sincerity he could muster.

The fur on her tail shuddered and her wolf ears stood perfectly straight, yet the tips of her human ears were bright red.

“O-okay…”

Myuri nodded slightly, as though swallowing something down, and then looked at him with wide, pleading eyes.

“…Then…will you hug me when you do?”

He suppressed the urge to ask her if that was something he had not always done, but instead he answered, “Of course.”

Immediately afterward, Myuri leaped at him.

“Hey, sto—*Myuri*!”

She knocked him over and clung to him. He attempted to peel her off, but her tail whipped back and forth happily, and she refused to budge.

He struggled for a little while, and when she still refused to move, he spoke coolly to her.

“You hugging me now means you don’t need the princess-knight act, is that correct?”

Myuri snapped her head up from his chest and glared daggers at him.

“Yes, I do! This is different!”

She then clung to him again in delight.

“Good grief…”

He let his head drop to the floor with a *thunk*.

Soon he would have to take Amaretto into very difficult negotiations.

Then they would have to ask high ranking people—not just Prince-Elector Duran, but also people like Hyland—to gather either here in Ahberg or in Wobern and explain to them this grand plan, which would create big changes on the world map.

And then the world of trade would change again once they found the star the Moon-Hunting Bear hunted, but that was not all. They may learn something new about the calamity that befell the mysterious age of spirits.

More importantly, if Prince-Elector Duran were to join him as an ally *and* he were to work together with a part of the Ruvik Alliance, it would be a lot easier to plot out a brighter path toward the ecumenical council with the Church.

In short, whether justice could manifest in the world rested on how well the Twilight Cardinal did his job.

“But I doubt anyone could imagine how that all looks right now…”

Col had given up on trying to peel Myuri off him and instead wrapped his arms around her, patting her back like he was trying to put a baby to sleep. He suddenly felt a presence, and his eyes darted to the right—there he saw a baby mouse peeking out from a gap in the wall.

Not long afterward, something in the wall pulled the mouse back into the darkness, and it vanished—Col knew he had a lot to explain to them afterward.

“Brother?”

“What is it?”

“I think you should make me your wi—”

“No.”

He said it again to make sure the mice heard as well, but Myuri clamped her hand over his mouth.

“Geez! I had the fortune-teller tell our fortune and she said our stars are super compatible!”

“You *what*?”

What on earth had she asked Amaretto to do?

Col would not say if their stars were a good match or anything like that, but he certainly felt like she kept him spinning in her orbit, twisted around her little finger.

As that thought roamed his head, he pictured two shooting stars chasing each other in the sky.

But they were up against the Saint of the Sun.

A wry smile crossed his lips. That was going to be a tough match for a little star.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for checking in again. This is Hasekura.

I blink, and all of a sudden, this series has reached its tenth volume. This all came about because I wanted to do something in conjunction with the conclusion of the *Spice and Wolf* manga, etc., but now I realize that of all of my series, this is the second longest. I had no idea it would go on for so long.

I would be more than happy if you, my readers, stick with me for just a little while longer.

I thought that would be enough to fill the afterword page, but I see it only takes up six lines when I write it out. I'm writing this afterword right now in a panic because I sent my proofread manuscript to editorial and forgot they wanted me to send in the afterword along with it, and I just saw the email asking for it.

The only silver lining to this is that I saw this right before I was about to go to my scheduled foot massage.

But I cannot deny that I really don't have many topics for a serious afterword—the first thing I thought of was to announce that my stiff shoulders are getting a bit better, and then I wondered what my afterwords might look like in the future if I were to start talking about health now, so I hesitated, but I ended up talking about it anyway.

Writing these afterwords serve as the few chances I get to reflect on my life, but every time I do I am surprised by the surprising lack of changes in my day-to-day. I believe the previous sentence will earn me some comments from the proofreader, but I'm padding my word count, so I need it.

In a normal year, I try to do something appropriately seasonal at least once a season, so I would file my final income tax return for the year at a snowy *onsen* resort, but winter was so warm this year that I felt absolutely no urge to go. But then suddenly, it got so cold in March…

It doesn’t seem there’s much pollen to activate my dreaded allergies, so that’s my one saving grace. I was terrified when I saw data that showed about half of all Tokyoites get allergies and hay fever.

Oh, yes—I believe the new *Spice and Wolf* anime should be airing by the time this book is published. I believe all the readers who have been following this series would have thrown up their hands in excitement at the very first scene in the first episode, because I definitely did.

For those who have yet to watch at all, please do—at least the first scene.

And now I have finally filled the page! I will see you again in the next volume!

Isuna Hasekura

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