



Author:
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka

Butareba

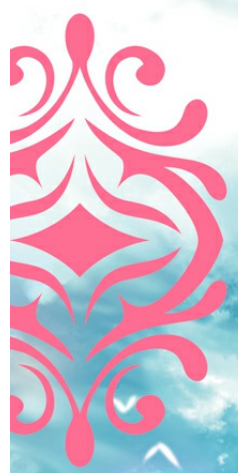
-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-

(1st Bite)



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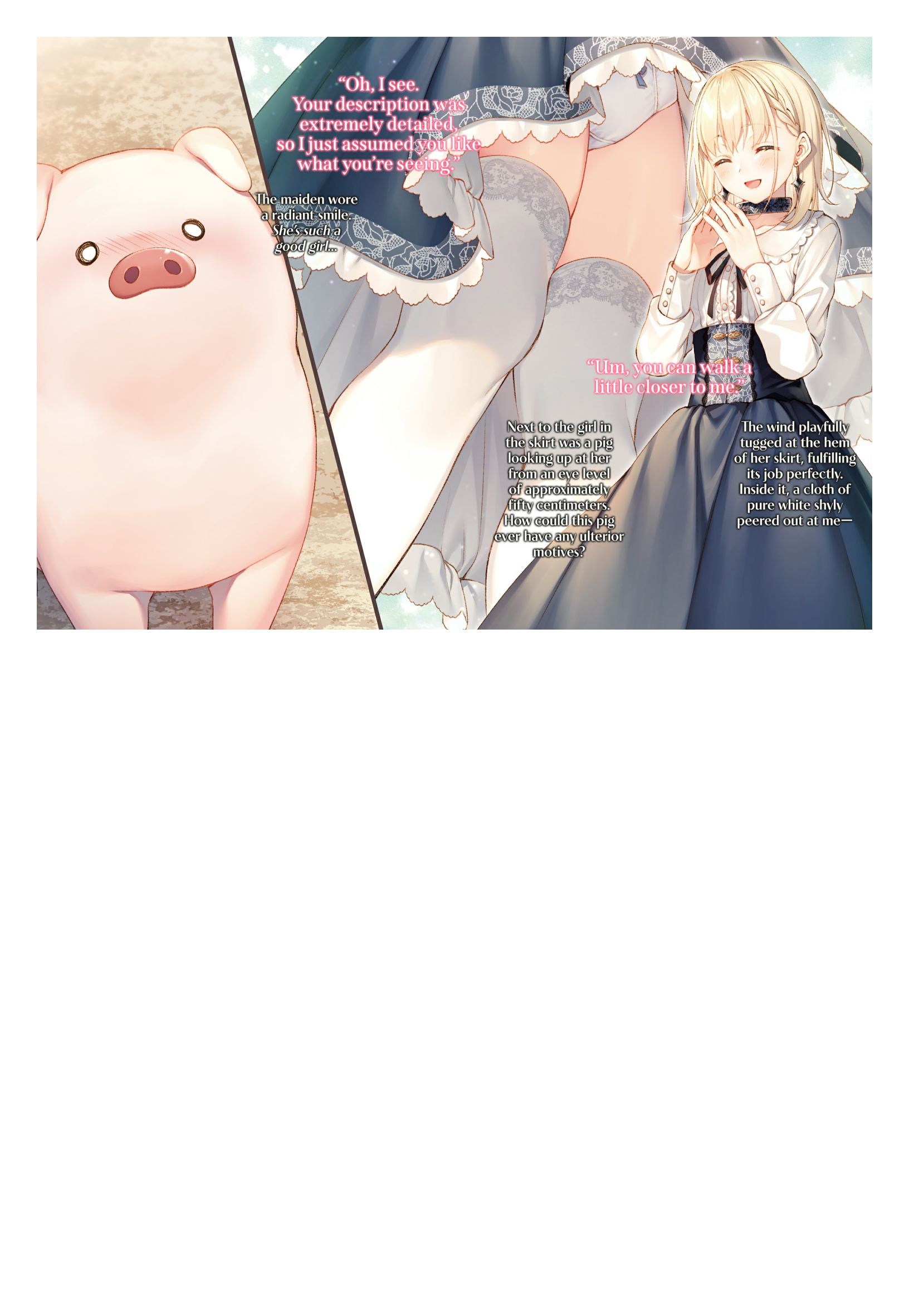
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-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-



*"Oh, I see.
Your description was
extremely detailed,
so I just assumed you like
what you're seeing."*

The maiden wore
a radiant smile.
*She's such a
good girl...*

*"Um, you can walk a
little closer to me."*

Next to the girl in
the skirt was a pig
looking up at her
from an eye level
of approximately
fifty centimeters.
How could this pig
ever have any ulterior
motives?

The wind playfully
tugged at the hem
of her skirt, fulfilling
its job perfectly.
Inside it, a cloth of
pure white shyly
peered out at me—



If a beautiful maiden's
willing to spoil me rotten,
this kind of reincarnation
isn't half bad!

The amount of force Jess used as she
brushed me was also superb. *Listen to this,*
my brethren. Have you ever taken off your
clothes, laid bare before a sixteen-year-old
maiden, and had the luxury of her washing
your body gently?

Profile

A handsome huntsman. He strongly opposes the way society treats Yethma. He also seems to take an interest in Jess... The pig feels extremely anxious about that. Handsome hunks are a crime against humanity.

Quote

“I’ll be your guard. Follow my lead.”



Naut

Profile

A Yethma, a race of people who can read minds. Even when the pig is broadcasting his dirty fantasies, this angelic girl simply smiles and shows compassion. She has a cruel destiny weighing on her shoulders.

Quote

“Sheesh, you have no sense of self-restraint, Mister Pig.”



[NAME]

Jess

Profile

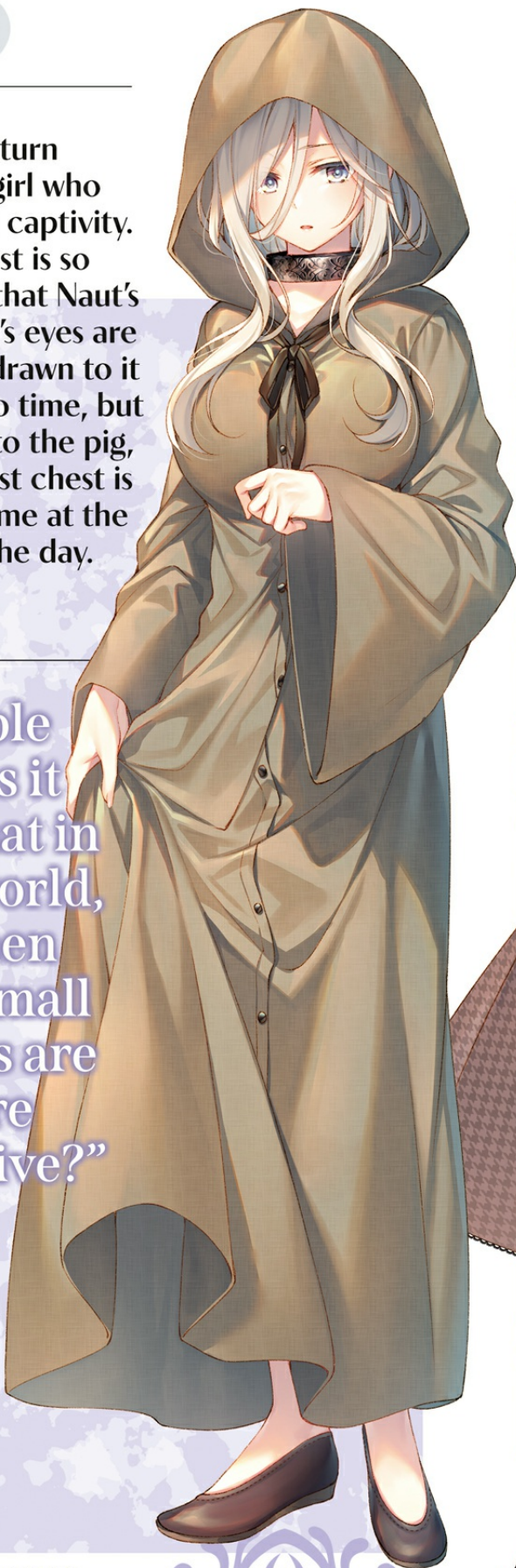
A taciturn Yethma girl who was held in captivity. Her chest is so impressive that Naut's and the pig's eyes are irresistibly drawn to it from time to time, but according to the pig, Jess's modest chest is more sublime at the end of the day.

Quote

"Noble Pig, is it true that in your world, women with small breasts are more attractive?"

[NAME] 

Blaise



Profile

A meek and withdrawn Yethma girl the pig encounters on his journey. After the pig ogles her legs and indulges in his fantasies, she realizes that he's a human on the inside.

Quote

"Um, Miss Jess, is that pig a friend of yours? He's thinking various... *things* as he looks at my legs..."

[NAME] 

Ceres





Quote

“Oink oink!
This is
paradise!”

[NAME]

Pig

Profile

A run-of-the-mill science student otaku who reincarnates in another world as a pig, of all things! With no special powers to be proud of, he’s reduced to mere baggage—that is, until he finds ways out of crises with his knowledge, his quick wits, and his chitterlings!



Profile

Naut’s large companion dog. He’s Naut’s competent and trusty comrade everywhere he goes, even on the battlefield. He looks rather like a wolf, but he’s actually friendly, and he loves sniffing Jess’s bare legs.

[NAME]

Rossi





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Chapter 1: An Otaku Loves It When a Cute Girl Treats Him like a Lowly Pig

There is only one moral I wish to impart on you with this story, my brethren, and it's simple: cook your pig liver first. I'm telling you right now, never even *think* about eating that stuff raw.

Oh? "But I insist," you say? Ugh, you're a stubborn one. Since word of mouth isn't enough to ward you off, my brethren, I suppose show, don't tell, is more appropriate. I'll give you a rundown of my situation.

At the moment, I was covered in mud, lying in a heap on the ground of a dim shed. Why was I muddy, you ask? That was because the ground was slathered with mud. I was surrounded by pigs. It seemed that I was in a pigsty.

If my memories were accurate, I should have been crouching down on the platform of a train station. I remembered a sudden javelin of pain had pierced my abdomen—pain so severe it had made my knees buckle. And I'd had an inkling what was behind this assault.

I had eaten raw pig liver.

A horrible friend had tempted me into the act of dipping raw liver into a fragrant sesame oil sauce and placing it directly into my mouth. I had thought, *Huh, it's smooth, succulent, and surprisingly, not bad at all. It's just like jelly—you know, organ-ic jelly.*

Oh, such ignorance.

Feeling as if I was being devoured alive from the inside, I had desperately prayed in my mind on that platform, swearing, *I will never eat raw pig liver again. O gods above, please forgive meee!*

Everything up until then was fine. But everything from then on *wasn't*.

Normally, in a situation like that, you'd wake up in a hospital, right? But I, instead, found myself in a pigsty. Apparently a stomachache wasn't punishment

enough to earn the gods' forgiveness—they had gone a step further and tossed this pitiful sinner into a pigpen. If you don't want to end up like me, remember well: never *ever* eat raw liver.

My body felt heavy, and my limbs wouldn't budge. The pain in my stomach was no more, but my entire body felt almost alien to me. Rendered completely helpless, I remained in the mud with a sounder of swine.

Even my eyes felt off. The blurriness of my vision could be explained by my lack of glasses, so that much was acceptable. The amount of information they were sending me, however, was notably excessive, and I could perceive almost everything in my environment with one glance—the mud, the pigs, the grass, and even the rundown walls of the pen, where only a sliver of light sneaked in. The dark, blurry world was stingy, unwilling to even yield me a splash of color. My nose brought me suffering as well—the scent of the soil, the dung, the grass, the rust... The intense “aroma” of Eau de Pigsty was attacking the olfactory epithelium in my nasal cavity with fervor.

I'm so sorry. I will definitely heat the pig liver before I eat it, I swear. So please, gods above, please grant me your benevolence. I beseech you, let me out of this hellish place.

The moment I finished my prayer, something happened—in an instant, the pen lit up. The pigs around me squealed like exhilarated otaku as they rose to their trotters. *Stop it, don't trample on me!* They didn't take much interest in me, though, only sniffing me a few times before scurrying towards the light.

There was a voice—a *human* voice, the voice of a woman. A humanlike silhouette emerged near the light.

My prayers have been answered! I cheered.

I then discovered that I had celebrated too soon—the woman didn't even spare as much a glance in my direction. She was feeding the pigs, who attracted much more of her interest than the pitiful male university student collapsed in the mud.

I tried to say something, but my throat was rebellious. *No, actually, something's off... Were my nostrils ever this—*

Moments before my intellect could unearth the fatal and undesirable truth, my train of thought was interrupted by the woman's approach. She crouched down and said something in a questioning tone. The sounds she made were unintelligible.

Help me, I thought, looking at her with imploring eyes. *I understand that this must make no sense to you at all, and I apologize for the abruptness, but I'm stuck—paralyzed inside this pigsty.* I opened my mouth, intent on communicating with more than my gaze.

But that was when the sound from my mouth registered in my ears.

"Burhoo!"

Bur. Hoo. My comrades, I am living my humble life as a dull, science-brained otaku, but I have never spoken in such a language before. I've used the word "boo-hoo" a few times, but only intentionally. Perhaps this is my first glorious step in my evolution towards a too-far-gone otaku who blurts out unpalatable noises subconsciously. My fellows, I sincerely hope you hold a grand celebration, or else I'll cry, boo-hoo.

A voice rang out.

<My, that's terrible! You aren't a pig, I see!>

That's right. I gave a mental nod. *There is no law dictating that all living creatures inside a pigsty are pigs. That was close; you were about to let an invaluable life slip through your fingers due to your error of judgment—*

Wait. I put a stop to my thoughts and strained my ears. *Did this woman really speak?*

<I'll let you out of the pen right away. Please bear with me for a moment.>

I couldn't hear a voice. The information contained in these sentences seemed to be converted into some otherworldly format before it was sent directly to my brain. The only thing I knew for certain was that I could understand what this woman was thinking.

The next thing I knew, the woman had fetched an object that looked like a wooden plank from somewhere. She then rolled me onto the board and started

dragging me away. The device seemed to function like a sled.

This was when I, once again, arrived at a certain fatal and undesirable truth: my body shouldn't be this round. I was a stereotypical, scrawny science student with a slightly above-average height of 174 centimeters and a weight of 53 kilograms. And yet, the feedback from my body when the woman had pushed me onto the vehicle, and the sensations I was experiencing right this moment as I lay on the plank, were telling me otherwise. I felt as if I were wrapped in a gym yoga mat—as if I were a plump *pig*.

As someone who had the makings of a brilliant researcher, I could view everything through an objective lens, even my own body, which meant that I accepted my new reality without a struggle.

I was a pig now.

Ah, I see. I'm a pig. There's nothing to panic about, then, since this is a dream. I'm sure that once I wake up, I'll be lying in a hospital bed. Case closed. Now that I had found my answer, my curiosity started speaking up. *Well, well, what an intriguing experience! Since I'm dreaming, I might as well use this opportunity to test out how brilliant my brain cells can get.*

You see, pigs only had two types of cones—cells that recognize color—in their eyes. Humans typically had three types: one for red, one for green, and one for blue that gave us our trichromatic vision. This meant that pigs were capable of distinguishing fewer colors than we were. If my vision remained the same as usual once I arrived outside, where there would be more light, it would mean that my subconscious had overlooked such details when it constructed this dream's setting.

Hah, I'm the clear winner of this match. Even if my subconscious is outstanding, it could never defeat my aware mind.

The entrance of the pen was just around the corner, and there was a triumphant grin on my pig snout as I stared hard at my approaching glory!

The result was my utter and crushing defeat. The world that welcomed me was disturbingly faded, like an old photo that had seen better days. Above me was a sky painted in a shade of unsettling dull blue, and below it was a pasture of moss green, as if someone had sprayed bleach indiscriminately on the grass.

But hey, there's a silver lining. It seems that my brain managed to subconsciously reproduce the dichromatic vision of a pig. The owner of such intelligence must be quite the genius, if I say so myself!

I was rolled onto the grass like a block of ham, where I lay there, motionless. The woman entered my field of vision and approached my face—she seemed to be looking straight at my snout. *Is that...blonde hair I see?* I stared at the woman's face in my jumbled vision, still fumbling to adapt to the sensory organs of a pig. Her vibrant hair fluttered in the breeze.

Would be nice if she was a cute maiden. I started fantasizing. *Oh, if only a beautiful girl would gently scrub away at my muddy body with a brush... A taste of pure bliss. And if she wore a skirt, that'd be even better. From the angle of a lowly pig on the ground, I can peer up at a certain sacred bit of fabric whenever I want, wherever I want. As for age, hmm... Is she a schoolgirl? Does she belong to the genus of high school girl, revered among us otaku? Hey, my genius mind, it's time for you to get to work. I'm sure you can reproduce a beautiful schoolgirl with golden hair in a miniskirt.*

<Sorry, um...>

My mind automatically converted the otherworldly “speech” into the classic voice of a pure and innocent schoolgirl with jewellike blue eyes. I could “hear” the bewilderment in the woman's simulated voice.

An intense drowsiness suddenly swallowed me like an avalanche, perhaps due to the uncanny feedback from my body that was overloading my mind. Completely oblivious to the trials that lay in wait, I surrendered my consciousness to the darkness.

When I next opened my eyes, I found myself huddled up in a bed. In bits and pieces, I slowly recalled my bizarre dream. I'd turned into a pig and had been rescued from the pigsty by a cute girl of, apparently, European descent. As it turned out, eating raw pig liver meant having a dream of being a real pig live-r.

As my mind slowly dusted away the remnants of sleep, I noticed something odd. *Hm?*

I didn't recognize this bed. When I looked up, I saw a canopy decorated with

lace edging. The cloth was printed with a floral pattern in a subdued color.

I realized that I'd regained my human color vision. *Does that mean I'm back in my human body?* But not all was right with the world, because the room I was in clearly wasn't a hospital ward. I tried getting up, but something was wrong with my shoulders. *Why won't my arms spread out sideways? Did I break a bone or something?*

A meek voice cut into my thoughts. "Oh, are you awake?"

I turned my head towards the source of the voice to see a young girl standing there.

She continued, "Um... How are you feeling?"

Silky golden locks fell low enough to brush her shoulders. A white blouse and navy blue skirt were wrapped around her slender frame. She looked like she was around sixteen or seventeen years old. Her facial features seemed to have the typical characteristics of someone with European descent, but her nose was petite, which added a hint of Japanese as well. One item stood out like a sore thumb, though—the bulky, tarnished silver collar around her neck.

I constructed a sentence in my head. *I don't feel any pain or nausea, but for some reason, my body's struggling to move. Where in the world am I?*

And that was exactly what I intended to say, but instead, the noise that made it out of my throat was the incoherent grunting of an otaku. "Burgooooah!"

"Ah! You don't have to force yourself to speak," she said hurriedly. "I, um, understand."

What's going on? I'm...still a pig? Am I still dreaming?

Seeing my confusion, the girl gave me a troubled smile. "I'm so sorry... I did everything I could, but I was unable to give you back your human form."

None of this makes sense. Before I made any conclusions, I wanted to get up and figure out what was going on. I rolled over, intent on sitting up. But the next moment, I found myself standing on all fours. My feet moved naturally, as if I'd done it all my life, and I nimbly hopped off the side of the bed. There was a silver-framed mirror close by, and I toddled over to it as quickly as I could.

When I reached the mirror, what stared back at me from the glass was a single, surprisingly clean pig. It was roughly the size of a rolled-up Japanese futon mattress—around my former torso height. Its plump body was covered in a thin layer of fur, and moist, black eyes bore into me. With every breath I took, the damp, pink nose twitched. When I lifted my right arm, the pig raised its front foot accordingly. When I tilted my head, the pig cocked its own.

I was engaged in a staring contest with a pig. I *was* the pig.

Huh...? What the heck?

Surprisingly, faced with this mind-blowing situation, instead of panicking, my mind calmed down. Slowly, I turned around to face the girl again. *Why am I a pig? Can you tell me what's happening?*

I didn't speak a word out loud, but she replied, "I...don't know why you turned into a pig either. I'm sorry. You wandered into the grow-out pigpen that's under my care, and that's where I found you."

I see. A question surfaced in my mind. If that's the case, how did this girl realize that someone like me, who looks like a pig from every angle, is a human? Albeit a former human.

I tried to summon my memories of our encounter, but her voice interrupted me. "Ah, did you perhaps overlook this?" Slightly shyly, she brushed up her hair to show her collar.



It was an imposing silver collar patterned with some kind of intricate relief. There was a dark tint over the entire metal, perhaps because she had worn it for a long time. It didn't suit this girl, who seemed so meek and mild.

She cast her eyes down slightly. "So...it really doesn't suit me. I see..."

By now, I had confirmation. This beautiful maiden was reading my mind.

"Um..." She spoke up nervously. "I'm a Yethma. Sorry for the late introduction—I'm Jess, a Yethma that serves House Kiltyrin."

Okaaay... I don't recognize any of those words, but I'm a pig. Nice to meet you.

She faltered as she asked, confusion thick in her voice, "My apologies, but, um, where are you from, Mister Pig?"

Since I was dealing with a girl with European looks, I replied, *Je viens de Tokyo, Japon. Enchanté de faire votre connaissance, Jess!*

"Tokey-o, Tokey-o..." She trailed off in thought. "I'm sorry, I'm not very knowledgeable, so I know very little about places beyond our borders. But if you don't know about Yethma, it seems that you aren't from Mesteria."

I think so, yes. Actually, what even is Mesteria? Where am I right now? I tottered around with small footsteps, looking for a window. There was one nearby, but being at a pig's eye level meant that I couldn't quite see the scenery outside.

But that was when the girl—Jess—fetched a large chair and placed it next to the window. Gratefully, I climbed on and looked out.

A grassy green field stretched out below us. The landscape beyond was dotted with plaster-clad mansions with red brick roofs. Even farther were rocky mountains dusted with thin, white coats of snow. The world that filled my vision was the peaceful, tranquil scenery of a typical summer retreat in southern Europe.

"You were asking about Mesteria, right? Mesteria refers to this entire piece of continuous land we live on. Our noble king rules over all of it. We're in southern Mesteria, in a suburb of Kiltyrie. And...this mansion belongs to House Kiltyrin,

who governs the Kiltyrie territory.”

I frowned mentally. *I see... So what's a Yethma, then?*

“Ah, well, Yethma are...a race of servants. Our defining characteristic is our silver collar, and...” She seemed to struggle to find the right words. “I’m not sure how to explain it, but we can communicate with other people without using our mouths or ears. I’m a Yethma that serves this household, House Kiltyrin.”

Communicate without mouths or ears, she said? No wonder she's been answering all the questions written in the narration.

The girl was standing next to me as we looked outside together, but she suddenly turned to face me. “Um... You haven’t eaten for a while. Would you like a snack? I can’t promise it will be to your taste, but I have prepared some fruit on the bedside table.”

I glanced over. On the modest wooden table was a display of colorful fruit, but I wasn’t that hungry at the moment. Actually, for seemingly no reason at all, I had an intense craving for a nice head pat.

The girl’s hand reached for my head—my pig head—and started stroking it. On instinct, I wagged my tail. The simple act of wishing was enough to grant my every desire.

I’d finally caught up to the situation. My dream had turned over to a new chapter, and its theme was now a fantasy life in another world. The protagonist was a pig, and the heroine was an esper with telepathy. Thus began the tale of a man reincarnated into an unfamiliar setting—seeking a way to regain his human form, our hero began his legend in a world of swords and magic!

Hold on. My thoughts ground to a halt. Stop right there. I know it's hard, but calm down, my brethren. Before our fluffy romance fantasy story can start, I need to confirm something. This girl, Jess, can read minds, right? That's why she realized I wasn't a pig back in that pigsty. Everything's good so far. But when you dive a little deeper into the ramifications of that...

Say, for example, if I looked at her delicate skin right now and squealed in my mind, “Wowoink! I wanna pin her down! I wanna make her sticky all over with

slimy pig drool!” ...would she know?

Right at that moment, the girl’s hand stopped stroking my head. “Yes, well, that is the case.”

Yikes! That’s bad news! My depraved animalistic desires will be broadcast for her to hear twenty-four seven! I’m no better than a shameful beast!

Jess chewed on her lip apologetically. “Um... You seemed to want a brushing session, so I cleansed your body while you were asleep. I also did what I could with my clothes. I already had something that fit your requirements, so I changed into a skirt that was relatively short. I’m so sorry for probing into your mind without permission... As a foreigner from beyond our borders, it must have been incredibly upsetting. You have my deepest apologies...”

For some reason, she was the one who apologized to me, even though it should have been the other way around. I couldn’t help but think, *This girl is way too nice. She gave me the chair, she gave me food, she gave me nice head pats... She’s so gracious that I have the feeling if I said I wanted to see her undressed, she might take off her clothes for real.*

With a small flush on her cheeks, she placed her hands together in front of her chest. “I’m nothing impressive—in fact, I think I’m rather plain, but if that’s your wish...”

Wha?! In a panic, I got off the chair, distanced myself slightly, and faced the girl. Standing face-to-face with a pig must be a most peculiar scene in her eyes.

“No, not at all.” She shook her head.

There are three things I want to make clear. I directed my thoughts at her. *Listen well, young maiden.*

“Yes, I will,” she said in a soft voice.

Firstly, even from above the covering of your clothes, I can tell that you are the furthest thing from plain. In fact, among us otaku, a good number of us have a great appreciation of someone your size. You can rest assured about that.

“Um, thank you...?”

Secondly... <<Please ignore all my thoughts other than the parts I put in

double angle brackets.>>

She blinked. “Angle...brackets.”

<<Yes. I’ll think inside these brackets whenever I want to tell you something. As for all my other thoughts, even if you end up hearing them, please pretend nothing happened.>>

If I didn’t add such a measure, I’d be no different from a dirty old man who made vulgar comments at every opportunity. That was practically sexual harassment.

“I honestly don’t mind,” she said slowly.

<<That was narration, so you didn’t have to reply.>>

“Ah, that’s right!” She gasped and placed her hand over her mouth before she hurriedly apologized. “I’m so sorry.”

Feeling obliged, in my old dude texting mode, I thought, *no ... I shd be the onesaying sry :’)))*

In the resulting silence, a cute blonde girl and a pig stared at each other wordlessly. It was clear—Spitzbein was going to be the main dish for dinner tonight.

I “spoke up” to clear the air. <<Finally, the third. What I am about to say might sound insolent coming from a lowly pig. Would you mind?>>

“Um... Yes, please say anything.”

<<Everything you have done for me is filled with consideration, and I really appreciate it. I’m elated that you helped me return to a sanitary condition, and your skirt suits you perfectly *and* has a length that’s just right. I won’t point out exactly what I’m talking about, but that dainty, pristine white garment fits your aura well, and it’s sublime.>>

I continued, <<And since the cat is already out of the bag, I’ll confess. The first thing that came into my mind after I realized I was a pig was a desire for a beautiful blonde girl in a miniskirt to pamper me by scrubbing me with a brush. In other words, you have given me the finest hospitality I could ever imagine.>>

After all, the concept of high school girls didn’t seem to exist in this world. But

she'd checked all the other boxes dutifully.

She blinked. "High sch... Please ignore me. I'm honored to hear that."

I bobbed my head up and down in a nod. <<Indeed, you are wonderful. But I do have to make one comment. If you keep granting all the wishes that appear in my mind, it's, oh, how do I put this... It makes everything feel so surreal. You're not a fairy born specially to fulfill my desires, right? No matter what I wish for, there's no reason you should attend to my every whim.>>

"But if it's within my power, I want to do everything I can for you," she said softly.

Ah... I'm not getting through to her. My tail drooped despondently. <<In that case, I guess I'll have to be blunt.>>

The girl placed her left hand on the window frame, clenched her right hand into a small fist, and placed it before her chest nervously. It was hard to voice my true thoughts after seeing such a sight, but I couldn't back down. These were my demands to the dream I was still having, not her.

I'm sure that my astute brethren will understand me. Let's say that you have a kind and devoted anime sister who makes a lunch box for you every day. Then, there's another prickly little sister who usually treats you like a pig beneath her attention—but one day, she makes a lunch box for you and says with an awkward harrumph, "Thanks for helping me with homework yesterday... I'm making this as an exception. Just this once, is that clear?!" Which one do you think tastes better, huh?! I mean, both of them would have the flavor of heaven for sure, but I personally will choose the latter any day! No objections allowed!!!

...And after translating that into coherent lingo in my mind, I mentally typed brackets. The words came flooding out. <<I'm extremely sorry for making you go along with my private hobby, but I don't want to accept one-sided charity. As a pig, I have nearly, or possibly no ability to repay my debt to you. The kinder you are, the bigger my debt would grow. And...that makes me uneasy. If you truly wish to be considerate to me, I would be glad if you only granted requests I make directly to you. Though I may be a pig, I will do everything within my power to return the favor. I don't want you to overly accommodate me. You're not my servant, after all.>>

The girl seemed taken aback by the rapid-fire rambling of an otaku. She looked troubled as she asked, “Is that...enough?”

<<Very. In fact, you’ll make me simp harder if you usually treat me like a lowly pig and only offer a reluctant helping hand when I’m truly in trouble.>>

And, if possible, I wanted her to save her undressed form until a special, impactful moment.

“Oh,” she gasped. “That means you *do* want to see me naked.”

Uh. That’s narration, thanks.

A while later, she asked whether I would like to head out if I wasn’t too tired. I took her up on that offer and went on a stroll with her.

The room I’d been sleeping in was on the third floor. We walked down stone stairs and outside to the backyard from the first floor. I’d noted that the stairs were connected to a kitchen on the second floor and a dark warehouse on the first.

The girl gently spoke to the pig—me—walking next to her. “We are currently in the southernmost corner of the Kiltyrin manor, which is owned by the household I serve. I usually spend my time around this area.” She lifted a finger to point into the distance. “And the farm is over there.”

We walked across the vast pasture, towards an area with several stone huts lined up in a row. Judging by the sun, it must have been a little past noon, and the warm rays of light rained down onto my back from the azure sky. A refreshing breeze brushed against my fur. The wind playfully tugged at the hem of Jess’s skirt, fulfilling its job perfectly. Light gently filtered through the navy blue cloth, intertwining with the warm light bouncing off the emerald grass, casting a glimmering veil in the air. And inside it, fabric of pure white shyly peered out at me—

“Um, you can walk a little closer to me. I don’t mind.”

<<No, I’m fine. That was just plain narration about the scenery. There was no additional meaning or anything.>>

Next to the girl with the navy skirt was a pig looking up at her from an eye level of approximately fifty centimeters, the average height of a chair from the ground. How could such a pig ever be depraved or have any ulterior motives? Never, of course.

“Oh, I see. Your description was extremely detailed, so I just assumed you liked what you’re seeing.” She wore a radiant smile.

She’s such a good girl... <<Hey, there’re a few questions I want to ask you. May I?>>

She looked at me. “Yes. And by the way, my name is Jess. Please call me by my name.”

Hue hue hue, sure, my cutie-pie Jessss! <<Gotcha. Glad to be your acquaintance, Jess.>>

“Same here, Mister Pig.”

Ahhhhh! This is the life! This is paradise! My brethren, have you ever been treated like a mere animal by a beautiful girl? You probably haven’t. You pitiful creatures.

Now I knew that she could overhear all my rampaging internal monologues, I’d actually started feeling nonchalant about the fact that she knew about my true nature. Think about it—a human that turned into a pig was acting all aloof and declaring, “Glad to be your acquaintance, Jess,” but in his mind he was yelling and squealing about her like a simpleminded pig. What an oxymoron! *Jess, you cutie-pie, this is the true nature of us men! Behold!*

I mentally cleared my throat. <<Pretend you never heard any of that,>> I thought weakly.

“I shall. I think I’m starting to master that skill.”

<<Glad to hear that. Let’s get back on track. Can I start asking?>>

“Yes. Ask anything.”

<<Hm, where should I start...? Okay, let’s go with this one. Do humans often turn into pigs in this country?>>

Jess’s face shifted into a slightly stern expression. “I’m afraid I’m not that

knowledgeable, but I believe that such cases are rather rare. I *have* heard historical stories of races that can transform into beast-like forms, or even into complete beasts, but that's all."

<<Are there any cases of a human turning into a pig in your history, then?>>

"No." She shook her head. "Not into pigs, no. But during the Dark Ages, over a century ago, back when mages were still at war with each other, I've heard that they could use their powers to turn humans into animals: sometimes into white-headed vultures that could act as spies for them, or into chubby seals they could punish more easily."

Mages, transformation... In contrast to Jess's serious tone, her words were outlandish. *Oh, I see, I'm really in a fantasy world now.* That fact was finally sinking in. *I have to say, though, the choice of animals is rather eccentric, like vultures or seals. I'm willing to bet that there was at least one mage who, wise beyond their years, transformed themselves into a pig and asked a beautiful girl to step on them. Hee hee.*

<<Do these "mages" no longer exist?>>

"No, they are still around. But their numbers plummeted during the Dark Ages, and everyone says that in Mesteria, our noble king's lineage traces back to the magical bloodline that came out on top during the Dark Ages. They're supposed to be the sole surviving clan of mages."

<<In that case, the only people who can turn me back into a human would be...>>

"My deepest apologies, but I think your only choice is to make a journey to the distant royal capital and ask for an audience with the king."

I was speechless. I mean, it wasn't like I could actually say anything coherent as a pig, so I'd made it a point to keep silent, but I still felt as if words had been ripped away from my throat. That meant I had to have an audience with a reigning monarch and beseech him by saying, "Oink, oink yoink burhoo! (Could you turn the back into a human, please?)"

"Um..." Jess suddenly stopped in her tracks, crouched down, and met my eyes. Between her slightly parted knees was—

“I shall go with you,” she finished, flashing me a brilliant and pure smile.

However... <<Hey, don’t do that. You have your own life to attend to, Jess.>>

She shook her head. “To tell you the truth, I was given some time off from my job for a while, and I was already planning on heading to the capital.”

Huh. Wow, talk about coincidences. Just as I, someone with a condition that only the king could cure, showed up, Jess was making plans to go to the capital. Such a convenient coincidence could only happen in the most clichéd stories. Hey, my dream, could you be a little more original or logical for once?

Jess’s lips curled into a troubled smile. Slowly, she said, “Perhaps...it was fate.”

Aww! Fine, I suppose I’ll let you off once, my subconscious. If you set things up this way so that a pretty girl could say such a line to me, I’ll forgive you. Actually, I should be the one begging you for forgiveness.

<<We don’t know for sure, but that aside, what were your plans in the capital? Is it okay for you to bring a pig with you?>>

“I think so, yes. It’s something like a...” She trailed off, searching for the right word. “An errand, you could say.”

<<An errand in the capital?>>

“Yes. As a servant representing House Kiltyrin, the noble family that governs Kiltyrie, I’m visiting the capital for work.”

<<Would it tarnish House Kiltyrin’s reputation if you brought a pig with you?>>

She shook her head. “Anyway, they say that the king is a great and benevolent man. If he hears about your circumstances, I’m sure he will be willing to help.”

I don’t know how accurate that is. I’m willing to bet that in almost every kingdom, the citizens would say that their ruler was magnanimous, but it’s not like I have a choice. <<If that’s the case, please take me with you!>>

“I shall!” For some reason, a smile of joy bloomed on her face.

The scenery looked as if it'd been taken right out of a painting. What a sight for sore eyes. *Though I do think that, uh, even if it's a pig you're talking to, you should really watch how you crouch down when you're wearing a skirt...*

Jess noticed where my gaze was pointing, and her cheeks turned cherry red. "Oh, I am so sorry for showing you such a dreary sight!"

Hm? If that's what you think, I certainly hope you show me something more intriguing next time.

We soon arrived at the farm where animals were reared. Free-range chickens were sauntering around leisurely, so I pretended to charge at them to give them a fright. They ran around in a panic in reaction to the unprovoked attack of the pig. *Hah, you chickens.*

"Don't be too mean to them," Jess admonished me. "They are a precious source of eggs which will end up on the dinner table of House Kiltyrin."

I reflected upon my actions. I'd gained the heart of an animal and had obeyed it mindlessly. <<Sorry, I couldn't keep my piggy instincts from going hog wild...>> I gave her the first half-hearted excuse that popped into my mind.

Jess smiled at me. "If you do that again, *I'll* be mean to you, Mister Pig."

Wowoink! This girl has mastered all the ways to make an otaku squeal!

We then arrived at the pigsty. Jess opened the door, and my fellows came rushing over, grunting. From a pig's-eye-view, I faced the bona fide pigs. They were staring back at me with what seemed to be curiosity.

"Please wait here for a moment," Jess said. "Ever since I found you, I haven't had much time to take care of the pigsty." She used a key to open a small metallic box attached to the pigsty. Then, she took out something that looked like a yellowish crystal from her bag and placed it into the box.

The next moment, the pen suddenly grew bright. I mingled with the swarm of pigs and entered the pen with them. Tools like pitchforks and brooms were attached to the wall with long chains, and they started moving by themselves. Clean water rushed into a bucket.

I glanced at the ceiling. Several lanterns were arranged in a line, emitting a

warm glow. The light didn't flicker like a flame would—it maintained a constant brightness, like a light bulb.

<<Hey, Jess. These...tools are moving by themselves, and the lanterns are lighting up too. How do these work?>>

Jess, who was carrying a bag filled with some kind of grain, approached me. “This farm manages its animals using ristae. I could never take care of the entire farm by myself.”

That was a new word to me. <<Ristae?>>

“Ah, my apologies. If you're from outside, you wouldn't know about ristae, would you?” Gingerly, she took out a handful of small crystals in an assortment of colors. They were around the size of small pebbles and all had the same shape, which reminded me of a hexagonal prism.

She continued, “These are what we refer to as ristae, or rista in the singular. Our honorable mages produce ristae every day and distribute them for the sake of the citizens in this nation. Magical powers are stored inside them, and we can use them for all kinds of things. Red ristae have heat and fire magic, yellow ristae have motion and light magic, and so on.”

I see, so they're like batteries for magic. Seems like the technology of this place has developed in a very different way compared to where I come from.

<<How many types of colors are there?>>

“You can sometimes come across special ones, but there are five main types: red, yellow, green, blue, and black.”

<<Black? Do you have dark magic or something like that?>> I asked jokingly.

I didn't know why, but Jess lowered her voice into a whisper, as if she felt awkward or embarrassed. “No, black ristae are used for prayer. If you pray with a black rista, you can summon a miracle that only mages should be able to manifest. There are very few people who use them, so they're not all that common...”

<<Why do so few people use them?>>

“Um...” She hesitated. “That's because, unlike all the other types, only

Yethma can use black ristae. In House Kiltyrin, we mostly use them for curing diseases or healing injuries. Their effectiveness depends on the Yethma's prayer ability, so I hear their results are often lacking compared to the miraculous impression normal people have of them."

Oh, really? I suppose it's like a game consumable that's been nerfed or has strict restrictions because it's way too overpowered.

"Mister Pig, my work here will be done soon. So, could you..." She fidgeted. "Fool around for a bit like the pig you are?"

Oink means yes! She's trying to treat me like a pig beneath her attention, but I can tell she's inexperienced. I'm so moved by her hospitality!

Jess went around the pen, unlocking boxes with practiced ease and inserting rista crystals before locking them again. Whenever a rista fell into place, the farm tools inside the pen would move autonomously, cleaning the area or feeding the animals. *Innnnteresting*. I followed Jess around for a while, admiring the automated pen.

"It will take a while before the automatic maintenance is over. If it's not too much to ask, could you accompany me on a shopping trip during the wait?"

<<Of course. I'll help you in any way I can. Feel free to use me as your pack pig.>>

Jess smiled slightly. "Please wait a while, then. I shall retrieve my money." She proceeded to run back to the manor, likely heading back to the room we were in earlier.

I surveyed the pen. *Ristae, hm? How curious.*

Under Jess's guidance, I went into town. People came and went down the cobblestone path, wearing clothing that reminded me of Alpine folk costumes. In the background, there was a lively symphony of horse whinnies, dog barks, and the light clapping of hooves, like castanets.

I'd long stopped worrying about the troubles that bringing a pig companion might give Jess—animals were *everywhere*. Though it was a fantasy world, there were no heinous monsters, and all the animals present were the same as

the ones in my world.

I felt as if I'd wandered into a medieval Europe-themed movie set, and no matter where I looked, there was always something new to admire. So that I wouldn't get lost—and *I pinky swear, that's the only reason*—I stuck close to Jess as I walked right next to her.

Jess was wearing a corset with a large crest embroidered on it. Raising a mental eyebrow, I asked in jest, <<Is that corset a security belt of some sort, protecting you?>>

Surprisingly, with a big smile on her face, Jess nodded. "Yes. As long as I'm wearing the crest of House Kiltyrin, no one would even think of assaulting me."

That made me wonder about the extent of House Kiltyrin's authority. <<Does that mean you have to worry about your safety on the streets?>>

"No, I'm usually safe, but...today's a bit of an exception." She gave no further explanation, leaving my imagination to run wild as she kept walking.

<<What's on your shopping list today?>>

"Weeeell...a few things."

She's kind of dodging the question, huh, I thought. Sensing her silent reluctance, I went quiet and moved my feet dutifully.

Perhaps we had come right at lunchtime—there was a notable number of people dining on patios. The bustling street was filled with noise and chatter.

And one such voice called out to us—to Jess. "Heeey, Jess! Isn't it about time you stock up at our place?"

I looked around, and outside a strikingly large establishment built of stone stood a man with a robust build. His pale blond hair was fully slicked back, and a mustache sat below his nose. He looked like a good-natured man in his forties. Several youngsters with imposing muscles stood at attention around him, and in the window of his shop was an exhibition of ristae.

"Hello there!" Jess greeted him. "I shall come by next time." She promptly resumed walking.

<<Was that a rista shop?>>

“Yes.”

<<They were armed to the teeth,>> I noted.

“Ristae are extremely valuable, after all.”

I see. That makes sense. Even in what should be a frugal facility like a pigsty, there were locks on the boxes for ristae.

We kept walking, and Jess eventually led me into a shady back alley. The dim path was narrow and full of twists and turns, and the two walls on both sides felt like an enclosure locking out the light of day. In contrast to the bright, bustling main street, this back alley had the atmosphere of an illegal market. Men with unpleasant glints in their eyes had set up small street stalls along the path. There was a moldy stench in the air, and it was clear that this place was a breeding ground for crime.

I narrowed my eyes. <<Jess, is this place safe?>>

Instead of speaking out loud, Jess replied with her telepathy.

<As long as I have this corset, we’re safe.>

Jess looked around restlessly, swiveling her head back and forth as she advanced through the dark back alley.

<<Don’t tell me... Are you going to buy something here? Surely not.>>

<It’s complicated... Please, don’t leave me alone here. Stick close to me.>

She balled her right hand into a fist and placed it in front of her chest, as if seeking comfort.

A scraggy man with a scar on his left eye that seemed to have been the work of a sharp blade called out to Jess as we drew near. “Oi, Miss Yethma over there. Are you looking for this, by any chance?”

He lifted his hand to reveal black ristae. And may the anime gods help me— Jess nodded slightly as she looked at the man.

The scarred man curled his lips into an ugly smile, possibly in an attempt to reassure her. “Shopping in secret, are we? If you gimme four hundred golt, you can take three black ristae home.”

Jess's eyes widened. "What? For such a price?"

The men quirked an eyebrow. "Oh? Looks like we have a first timer here. How about it? They're enough to grant your wish. You won't get a better price anywhere else. I sell them cheap."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't have that much money. One is enough, thank you. How much would that be?"

This time, it was the man's turn to widen his eyes in surprise. He narrowed his good eye that wasn't scarred and stared hard at Jess's corset. For a single moment, his face grew tense, and I definitely didn't miss it.

He finally said, "One-fifty gold would be my price, Miss."

"I see... In that case, I should have..." Jess mumbled to herself.

With a twisted smile on his lips that didn't quite reach his eyes, the man stared at Jess in eerie silence.

No. Wait. Something is off about this. Have you, my brethren, noticed too? And no, I'm not talking about how four hundred divided by three should be a hundred and thirty-three point three recurring.

The man had called Jess "Miss Yethma" on sight when he showed her the black ristae. Since he had also mentioned "shopping in secret," this back alley should be a common destination for Yethma who wished to buy black ristae behind closed doors.

And therefore, one question arose.

Jess had explained that ristae were "extremely valuable." So why was this man trying to sell three of them at once? To a girl who came to shop in secret, no less, who shouldn't have too much money. Jess, in fact, had asked for just one, saying that was enough, which meant that buying three should be unnecessary in normal circumstances. Why would someone shopping in secret purchase a set of three valuable items, then? Was the man trying to sell extra to Jess because she served a rich family? No, he hadn't seemed to realize that until he started burning holes in her corset with his eyes. All the signs pointed to one conclusion.

<<Jess, we need to talk. Follow me.>>

<Huh...?>

Snorting with determination, I dashed down the back alley at top speed.

I heard Jess's voice ring out behind me. "I'm sorry, I'll come back later!"

As for me, I persisted in my sprint through the back alley until I arrived at an open pasture. Jess was quick to follow, and she was panting hard as she caught up.

"Um, what in the world happened?" she asked.

I turned to face her solemnly. <<Hey, Jess. It's your first time shopping around there, right?>>

"Yes, it is."

<<You said you wanted black ristae, right? And black ristae, if I remember correctly, are specifically for Yethma's prayers. I want to know one thing: how many ristae do you need for one prayer?>>

Steadying her breathing, Jess answered dutifully, "One is enough. They're filled with an abundance of mana. A wish that can't be granted by one rista means that no number of ristae can make a difference."

I see. <<After granting a wish, is there ever leftover mana?>>

"That would happen most of the time, yes."

I had sufficient clues now, and they were all pointing to one deduction. I declared, <<Jess, you *mustn't* purchase that man's ristae.>>

She blinked, startled. "Huh? Why is that?"

<<You know, after hearing the guy talk, I started thinking—why did he try to sell you a set of three ristae at first? He wanted to sell multiple expensive goods to a young Yethma girl who came to shop in secret. You with me so far?>>

"Yes," she replied, but it was clear that she hadn't arrived at the same conclusion yet.

<<You said that one black rista was enough to grant a wish, right? But you only think that because you've only used genuine and proper articles. And I

have the feeling that's not the case with his wares.>>

Her eyes grew wide. "What?"

<<Remember what that man said? "If you gimme four hundred golt, you can take three black ristae home. They're enough to grant your wish.">>

"Well, that would make sense." She nodded. "With three, you can fulfill multiple wishes."

I shook my head. <<You mustn't be so trusting and optimistic. What he meant was that three *might be* enough to grant *one* wish. All the ristae he had were secondhand—with barely crumbs of mana left.>>

"Huh? Wait, really?" she gasped.

<<Think about it. A Yethma who struggles with money and wants to buy black ristae secretly wouldn't go to esteemed establishments like that shop on a big street, right?>>

"I believe that is the case, yes. In fact, in this town, I believe that only House Kiltyrin is prosperous enough to leave ristae under a Yethma's management."

<<Which means that most Yethma have never seen how much mana there ought to be inside a brand-new black rista. They might assume that three is the minimum needed for their wish.>>

"Oh, you're right..."

<<And because this man always sold sets of three to Yethma who didn't know any better, he tried to sell three to you at first. The evidence is that guy's expression when you said one was enough. He looked surprised, then gazed down at the crest on your corset. When he laid eyes on it, he flinched, as if he'd messed up,>> I reported back about my observations.

"That's right! I could sense him thinking, 'Oh, rats!' back then." She paused. "He managed to compose himself immediately, though."

<<I figured as much. He knew he messed up because he tried to sell his wares to a Yethma who had used genuine black ristae before. He was in a pinch—at that rate, the governor of this land might find out that he was trying to scam people by selling barely usable secondhand goods.>>

“So that’s why he charged such a low price... It makes sense now.”

<<How much would one cost at a normal store?>> I asked.

“In the usual store I go to, one costs six hundred golt.”

Bruh, shouldn’t you have realized something was fishy about him the moment you heard his price?

“I’m sorry.” Her shoulders slumped. “I didn’t want to be suspicious of someone who was kind enough to talk to me. I thought it’d be rude.”

<<Ah, uh, that was my monologue without angle brackets. Ignore me.>>

“Oh, right. I’m so sorry...”

In the silence, a refreshing breeze whisked down the sleepy farm path. I’d known that Jess was a sweet girl, but I hadn’t expected the extent of her compassion. If no one was around to protect her, she’d be exploited and bled dry within seconds. *Or maybe it’s not “if”—she might be getting milked for her worth in the very present. She said that Yethma are a race of servants, but are they actually—*

I shook my head. *No way, right?*

Jess’s voice cut into my thoughts. “Um, Mister Pig, thank you for your help.”

<<It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.>>

“If you weren’t with me, I would have spent my entire fortune on faulty goods,” she insisted.

<<Yeah. Remember this: if anyone comes up to you and says that you won’t get a better price anywhere else, keep your guard up. Their goal isn’t to help you get a discount, but to convince you to fork out money from your wallet.>>

She nodded. “I have learned something new today.” She crouched down and gently stroked my head.

Excellent, my young disciple. But that was when a question, which I should have thought about way earlier, appeared in my mind. And I had a sinking feeling that I had a good hunch about the answer. I felt bile rise into my throat.

I decided to ask her directly. <<By the way...can I ask you something?>>

“Yes, anything.”

<<Why are you trying to buy a black rista to begin with? In secret, no less.>>

Her hand stroking me paused. She looked into my eyes. “Um... Could I keep that a secret, please?”

Even if I wasn’t a Yethma, I could read her mind. <<You know, I’ve been wondering for a while. When I was in the pigsty, I didn’t understand your language, my vision was weird, and I couldn’t even do a basic action like walking. That was all because I failed to adapt to a pig’s body. But look at me now—I can understand your speech just fine, my eyes aren’t fighting with my brain, and I can walk on all fours. It’s almost like a miracle. You said that you did everything you could, and I was thinking, “Huh, I wonder how she managed it.”>>

“My apologies, if my actions caused you distress, I—”

I shook my head. <<Never. I have no right to think that, and I won’t. But tell me one thing, Jess. You embezzled one of House Kiltyrin’s black ristae to cure me without telling anyone, didn’t you?>>

After a long pause, she admitted, “Yes, I did.”

<<That’s why you have to replace it with your own money.>>

“You’re right. I just got a scolding from them because I used the manor’s elevator without permission. After all, elevators burn through ristae incredibly quickly. That’s why I can’t just tell them, ‘Sorry, I used one black rista for my own selfish needs,’ after causing such trouble. But I didn’t have enough money left to buy a rista from an official store, so I didn’t have any other choice...”

Another mystery had been solved. <<The elevator... Just for confirmation, that’s a device that can move up and down inside the house, and you use it to carry things to higher places, right?>>

Jess seemed to have realized that I’d seen right through her, and she hung her head. “I’m so sorry, I...I did so many things without asking you first. I...”

I wasn’t going to hound her about the matter, since I didn’t want to distress her any further. But I’d been curious about how she’d managed to transport me

from the pigsty to the third floor. Someone with her slight frame could never carry a hefty pig up several flights of stairs, but I'd still woken up on that comfy bed.

Now, I knew the answer—she'd used the elevator without permission. And she'd earned a scolding for her actions.

<<Thanks, Jess,>> I said gently.

The eyes looking back at me were glimmering with tears. *She's a kind girl. So very kind*, I thought, *that I've racked up a debt which a pig like me could never hope to repay*. With my stout pig legs, I couldn't even pat her on the head to offer her comfort. I could only stare helplessly at the tears that rolled down this young maiden's cheeks.

Why are you crying? Are you feeling guilty towards me because you did something awful for my sake? Because you caused me to be associated with bad deeds without asking for my consent? Oh, you're so silly.

<<Listen up, Jess,>> I announced. <<I was with you from the moment I woke up in the pigsty until our conversation right now, and I couldn't find a single fault with your actions. You're admirable, compassionate, and earnest. If I *have* to point out one mistake you made, it was associating yourself with a walking personification of trouble, like a man turned into a pig.>>

"You're no trouble at all...!" She stared right into my eyes with determination. Her eyes were an enchanting shade of honey brown.

<<You haven't done anything wrong. I haven't felt offended or uncomfortable in the least. So come on, don't cry, chin up. Please don't look so sad. You'll make me sad too.>>

Hearing that, Jess wiped her tears with her sleeve and flashed a smile at me. *She finally smiled again!* But just as I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, realization suddenly dawned on me. *No. She's only fulfilling my request.*

...She's only smiling because I asked her to. And I felt my heart break just a little.

I couldn't let this go on. I had to repay my debt of gratitude to her no matter what. <<Hey, Jess, you only need one black rista, right?>>

She nodded wordlessly.

<<Are you in a rush?>>

“Yes. I need to get my hands on one before my journey to the capital. Or else...I’ll be chased down as a thief.”

So that’s why she chose today, of all days, to visit the back alley. <<When are you departing for the capital?>>

She hesitated. “Well, I have to leave tomorrow. I’m scheduled to leave tomorrow morning.”

<<Tomorrow?>> *Ugh, talk about unlucky. What horrible timing.* <<I suppose we’ll have to go for an all or nothing gamble, then. We don’t have much of a choice—we *will* have to go to the shop you usually buy ristae from. And there, we’ll do everything we can to procure an authentic rista before the end of the day.>>

“But...I’d need six hundred golt if I were to buy it at that store. I can’t amass a lump sum like that right now.”

<<How much do you have at the moment?>>

“A little over two hundred golt.”

<<Okay, so we’re four hundred short. How much is that, exactly? Could you come up with an example?>>

“Oh, how should I explain this to a foreigner...?” She mulled over the question for a while. “As an example, well, I suppose it’s around the wage a normal worker would earn in twenty days.”

Oh boy. That sounds kinda hopeless. In summary, we need six hundred, but only have two hundred... We have two options, then. We’ll either have to boost our number or lower the number of the seller.

<<The scar dude in the back alley tried to sell a set for four hundred, right? That means other Yethma must’ve been able to gather four hundred golt somehow. Do you have any idea how they managed it?>>

Jess averted my gaze. “Um... We sell our...” Her voice trailed off into an unintelligible murmur.

I didn't catch that. <<Sorry, what do you sell again?>>

She chose to reply with her telepathy.

<Our...sexual organs.>

She must've been too shy to say it directly. *Ah, to be young and innocent. She's adorable.* <<I see, that means you sell your bodies, right?>>

"Yes, you...could put it that way."

I admired the blush on her cheeks while thinking, *I gotta say, the word choice in this nation is pretty blunt.* <<No can do. We're not going that route. I won't let you resort to something like that, Jess.>>

I started trotting around in circles on the turf with my stumpy pig legs, allowing my brain to do its work. <<Hey, did you completely exhaust the rista you used to treat me?>>

"Yes, my apologies... I tested all kinds of methods, and before I knew it, it was gone."

<<Aw, you really don't have to apologize. Let's think about a solution together. Do you own anything valuable?>>

Looking anxious, Jess clenched her right hand into a fist and pressed it against her chest. "I'm sor— Ignore that. I...think the money I have is my only valuable possession. A little over two hundred golt." She hesitated. "The only other thing that counts would be my body."

I see. I guess we'll have to use the last resort. <<Hey, have you ever haggled before?>>

She blinked blankly at me. "Hag...ghoul?"

I wasn't surprised. Haggling was bound to seem a little spooky to an innocent girl like Jess. <<You usually purchase your ristae at the shop, right?>>

"Yes."

<<And you've always bought them at the listed price,>> I confirmed.

"Of course. There is a set price, after all."

<<In other words, you're their regular patron and valued client. They might be

willing to give you a slight discount.>> *If the middle-aged guy I saw is as pleasant as he looks, that is.*

She frowned slightly. “But asking him to lower the price would harm the profits of a store which I frequent and cherish.”

Pretty much, yeah.

“I can’t ask so much from the people who have always been helping me...”

<<I’m sure that the store has earned a tremendous amount of profit because of you, though. Who knows? They might want to be nice to you once in a while.>>

She tilted her head in question. “Is that...how it works?”

<<Totally. Trust me. Let’s head over and see what happens.>>

Her reply was a slow nod. We started making our way towards the main street. While I walked behind the kind girl who placed her faith in me, I started consolidating my plan. I was taking extra care so that she wouldn’t get wind of anything.

I’m sure that you, my brethren, are world-weary enough to know that only the very special few would be willing to give her such a ridiculous discount. Which means we have to negotiate with the one bargaining chip she has other than her money and her body.

We soon arrived at the grand store.

“Hey, Jess!” The burly man called out to her again. “Heading home already?”

“Yes, I’m thinking of heading back soon...” Jess said, acting somewhat nervous as she headed over to the store’s display case. I walked forward until I was next to her and craned my neck to peer into the glass. A myriad of colors entered my eyes—red, blue, yellow, and green were all lined up neatly. At the far end of the display were the black ristae.

<<Jess, I’m right here. Say exactly what I tell you to say. You with me so far?>>

She turned her gaze to me and gave me a furtive nod. I could see the anxiety on her face. Naturally, the shopkeeper couldn’t hear the internal thoughts of a pig, and he quickly lost interest in me after a slight glance.

<<First, tell him that you want to buy a black rista.>>

<Okay.>

“Excuse me,” she said, faltering slightly. “I wish to buy, um, a black rista for myself.”

The shopkeeper’s reaction took me by complete surprise. “This again?” He raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t I just sell one to you a while ago?”

What? She didn’t tell me any of this.

“Well, I ended up needing one more. Could you sell one to me?”

A frown creased the shopkeeper’s forehead. “I don’t mind, but just reminding you, it costs six hundred gold. Do you have enough savings?”

No, this isn’t the time to pick at the details. I need to help her. <<Tell him honestly about how much you have.>>

Chewing on her lip, Jess said, “To tell you the truth, I only have two hundred.”

“Only two hundred? What’re you going to do about the remaining four hundred, then?”

Yeah, that’s the natural response. <<Say that you desperately need one and ask him whether he could lower the price for you.>>

Jess said dutifully, “I need one desperately. Could you lower the price for me?”

The shopkeeper opened his eyes wide, and his jaw fell to the ground. His expression was almost comical. “Uh, that’s a tough one. You’re not buying for House Kiltyrin, are you? Why should I sell something cheap to a Yethma, of all people?”

This time, it was my eyes that opened wide with shock. This was clearly discrimination. Even a seemingly affable chap like him was knee-deep in prejudice against Yethma, and it was something so ingrained in him that I felt sick.

“I...I’m sorry, I...” Jess was shrinking into herself, so overwhelmed that she might burst into tears at any moment.

Frankly, I'd been blindsided by the discrimination, but Jess's current position was still all according to plan. *Sorry for keeping you in the dark, my brethren. If I thought about it in the narration, there was a chance that Jess might catch on. That's why I absentmindedly constructed a certain plan in the back of my mind.*

<<Everything's under control, Jess. Tell them that you'll sell the pig that's with you.>>

<...Huh?>

<<Sell me. Buy a rista with two hundred gold and me.>>

<But I—>

<<I'll be fine. I'm not a normal pig, so trust me. I'll definitely find an opening and escape, no matter what it takes. So say what I told you to. Do it for *me*.>>

And when it came to her, that was the magic sentence.

"Sorry, but I'll...give the piggy over here on top of that two hundred gold," Jess said. "Will you be willing to exchange a black rista for these?"

The shopkeeper raised his eyebrow as he shifted his gaze to me. "But that's the livestock of House Kiltyrin, isn't it? No, I can't do that. I could never trade anything for such noble property."

<<Tell them that I'm a pig that can perform tricks.>>

"Um... This piggy can perform tricks."

The shopkeeper blinked. "Tricks?"

<<You didn't steal me. You secretly took a pig that was supposed to be culled into your care and raised the piglet into the pig next to you. That's why it can perform tricks. You can make it do a demonstration. Say that to him.>>

"I secretly raised a piglet that was supposed to be culled... I didn't steal him. That's why it can perform tricks. Shall I ask him to do a demonstration...?"

The shopkeeper looked at me again. I stared right back at him. He must've thought that I was a lionhearted pig, and something in his gaze shifted.

"Interesting. You said you taught this thing some tricks, hm? Well, go ahead. Show me one."

“Y-Yes, I shall.”

<<I dunno what I should do. Ask the shopkeeper whether he has any requests.>>

“Um, is there anything you’d like to see?” Jess asked.

After a short pause, he replied, “Good question. Get him to dance, then.”

Burhoo, a tall order right from the get-go. Oh well, I’ll dance for you.

<<Pretend you’re giving me a command.>>

“Dance, Mister Pig.”

I dragged out a long exhale.

Ladies and gentlemen, I proudly present Scrawny Four-Eyes, a man who has dwelled within a quiet, gloomy corner of society for his entire nineteen years. The flashy world of dancers couldn’t be further removed from his life, but now, I invite you to spectate his debut performance—a pig round of applause for our star today!

All right, then... Music, please!

I repeatedly bent my four legs, bobbing my body up and down in a regular rhythm. Next was a jump to the beat. I ran in circles, chasing my own tail before bobbing my body once again.

“Pfft!”

I glanced at the source of the noise. Overwhelmed by my majestic dance moves, the shopkeeper could barely contain his laughter. His face grew red. I then looked at Jess, who was also covering her mouth with her hand as her shoulders quivered. They were so awed by my fabulous dance that they’d forgotten how to speak. *Bringing people joy is pretty fun, huh!*

I kept playing anime songs in my mind as I eagerly demonstrated my original hip-hog style dance routine.

“No, that’s enough...” The shopkeeper’s eyes teared up dramatically. “Tell him to stop... I can’t breathe...” It seemed that my dance had moved him so much that he’d been watching with bated breath.

“Mister Pig...” Jess’s shaky voice rang out. “You can s-stop now...”

Pulling off a final jump, I raised my left hind leg and struck a finishing pose.

“Proffffft!” The chap burst into laughter with a hideous sound. He guffawed to his heart’s content before finally, between pants, he said, “Your pig’s awesome! That’s the best thing I’ve seen in years! Jess, are you really going to sell such a talented artist to me?”

Oh? Looks like we have a chance. <<Say yes.>>

“...Yes.”

The shopkeeper, in high spirits, turned around to face the young guards. “Did you guys see that?! That pig was squirming around like a wounded heckripon!”

With grins on their faces, the youths indicated their agreement with laughter. *What’re they on about? I dunno that word, but they definitely sounded like they were making fun of me. Hmph.*

He then turned back to face Jess again. “Whew, I’m impressed. Hey, Jess, does this little guy take orders from other people too?”

<<Nod.>>

“Yes. I think...he should, yes.”

Humming in thought, the man glanced at me. “Well then, pig, jump for me.”

I bent my knees before hopping up nimbly. The shopkeeper and his band of merry men all roared with laughter once again.

“Well well, we’ve got a smart one here, aye?” The man raised an eyebrow and grinned.

I straightened my back and lifted my chin proudly. *Hee hee. At your service, my dude.*

The man nodded. “Jess, forget the money. I’ll give you a black rista in exchange for this pig.”

“...Huh?” Jess widened her eyes.

Oho? We’ve got a generous one here, aye?

“It’s a deal,” the man announced. “We’re actually putting on a little something during the festival tonight. I’ve the feeling we’ll reel in money like there’s no tomorrow with this pig.”

Tonight, huh... Looks like I won’t have any openings until late in the evening. The fact that he’s willing to exchange a black rista for a mere pig shows how much expectation he has of me. He’ll likely keep me on a tight leash until the festival, and in the unlikely case I run away, causing his investment to go down the drain, he’d definitely direct his anger at Jess.

“Excuse me, but...I would love to join the festival as well.”

I whipped my head around in shock. Jess had said that. <<Hey, stop right there, if you do that, you’ll—>>

She continued firmly, “He’s a pig I raised, and I want to watch him during his big moment. I can help out for free. Does that sound all right to you?”

Yikes, I didn’t stop her in time. Ugh, if I run away while Jess is around, everyone would be pointing fingers at her! Aaah, she should have discussed it with me first!

...But I suppose it was a pot-meets-kettle situation. I’d also made decisions that would affect us both without her consent. I’d known that someone like Jess would follow whatever I said when pressured, and I’d deliberately set things up so that she’d be on the back foot during negotiations. Because otherwise...she’d never have agreed to use me as a bargaining chip.

“Sure,” the man replied. “Of course I’ll be happy with that, but what about your work at House Kiltyrin? Even a shop of my scale would fold if they found fault with me.”

“It’s all right.” Jess paused. “Um, a new Yethma will come to take my place starting tonight, you see.”

The shopkeeper’s eyes widened, and his breathing hitched. “Oh... It’s already time for that, huh...” There was faint melancholy in his voice. “That’s why you’re selling the pig. All right, I understand. Join us tonight. The festival starts immediately after sunset.”

“Thank you so much!”

Stroking his chin, the man continued, “I’ll give you a job outside so that you’ll get a good view of the stage. Do you know how to serve liquor?”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Sweet. Come to the plaza in front of the church before dusk. See ya there.”

The chap proceeded to reach for a key dangling from his belt and opened the display case.

<I’m so sorry, Mister Pig... I rushed ahead without telling you first.>

<<No, you’re fine. It’s not a problem at all. But remember this, Jess—don’t try to help me when I escape. I’ll run away alone in the dead of night. I’d be in a bind if people try to pin the blame on you.>>

<Are you fine on your own?>

<<Of course. Who do you think you’re talking to?>>

I was a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin. Women fear me, fish fear me, and men turn their eyes away from me.

<Okay, let’s meet up during the festival, then.>

<<Sounds like a plan.>>

That was when the man’s voice cut into our conversation. “Take this. It’s my farewell present.” He handed a black rista to Jess.

“Thank you, you’ve done me a great favor.” She paused. “I have some other business to take care of before I return.” She shot me a final, anxious glance before she walked off in the direction of the manor.

“All right, little piggy.” The man accepted a leather collar from his guards—*Wait, when did those guys grab that?*—and crouched down. “Sorry, but bear with me for a bit.” He fastened it around my neck. It was attached to a chain, and a youthful guard held the other end of the tether.

Weeell, fudge. How’m I supposed to fly the coop now?

After the store closed for the day, the staff led me by my leash as we walked down the cobblestone path. Soon, we arrived at a spacious plaza. In front of a

towering building with a domed roof, numerous simple wooden benches and long tables were arranged in rows. This must be the plaza in front of the church that the shopkeeper had mentioned.

I was guided to one corner where there was a collection of large barrels, and my chain tether was fixed to what looked like a handrail. The chain was wound tightly at a place where my hands—I mean, my trotters couldn't reach. The staff had joined both ends of the chain together into a loop, so no matter how violently I thrashed, it probably wouldn't come apart.

I didn't have anything better to do, so I sank into my thoughts. My intuition was telling me that Jess was hiding something big from me, and the thought of it was gnawing at me.

First, she'd hidden the fact that she'd already bought another black rista recently. I thought back to their conversation.

"I wish to buy, um, a black rista for myself."

"This again? Didn't I just sell one to you a while ago?"

That "a while ago" didn't sound like an errand for House Kiltyrin—based on the flow of the conversation, Jess had bought it for herself. You could argue that I was overthinking it; it wasn't like Jess needed to bring it up or anything. But why hadn't she mentioned her previous purchase, not even in passing, during our lengthy talk about the necessary money for buying a rista?

I recalled Jess's words as well. *"But I didn't have enough money left to buy a rista from an official store, so I didn't have any other choice..."*

Thinking back now, she had alluded to purchasing a rista with her own savings already. *Nnngh... This really bothers me.* Not to mention the conversation she had with the shopkeeper. It'd seemed so unnatural... The shopkeeper had interpreted her statement that a new Yethma was taking her place as something like an eternal farewell. *"It's already time for that, huh... That's why you're selling the pig... It's my farewell present."*

Jess was only going on an errand to the capital, right? She'd been given some time off and was going to take care of some minor work on the way, or at least that was what she had implied. So why did that guy react in such a way?

All my suspicions were eating away at me, and I didn't like it.

My brethren, have you ever had the pleasure of knowing a theory-crafter otaku, especially the nerdy, scrawny, four-eyed type? One moment, they'll be cackling away, doing the evil finger-tenting as they watched a cutesy, fluffy anime. But whenever they encounter something that irks them or isn't logical, they'll suddenly launch into a passionate, hours-long rant, hurling obscure jargon and convoluted theories at you. That's how this subspecies of science-brained otaku is wired, and some of you might be self-aware enough to realize that. In that case, let's shake hands. Hello, my old friend.

Perhaps my reaction might have seemed nonsensical to some. I'd arrived in a whole new world and a beautiful girl was attending to my every whim. Why should I be so worried about the talk about money and the reaction of the shopkeeper? I should just enjoy the sweet life, shouldn't I?

But it was nagging at me. I couldn't control it. That was my nature.

A bell tolled. The sound was coming from a tower on the other side of the church. Before I'd realized it, the sun was inching closer to the horizon, and people were moving about, setting up wooden torches around the plaza.

If I was going to plan an escape, I had to observe my surroundings carefully. The chain rattled as I walked around within my tiny area of freedom.

The large barrels nearby seemed to contain alcohol. As I approached, the musky scent of yeast bombarded my nose. It was likely beer. On each barrel was a metallic tap, so one could directly pour the beverage into a cup. I noticed that the youthful guards of the rista shop were in the vicinity, and they were transporting mugs to this area. It seemed I was at the shopkeeper's stall.

Next, the youths began piling up wooden crates brimming with glass bottles. I witnessed one of the youths licking his lips as he took one bottle out, and inside the glass was some kind of clear, dark brown liquid. It was probably a distilled spirit or something of the like. Wood shavings lined the sides of the crates as cushioning.

There were two barriers I had to deal with if I wanted to slip away successfully. First was a physical barrier—the chain attached to my collar. I couldn't move freely with it still intact. Next were the humans. If I tried to run

for it while an entire crowd was watching, I'd be seized within seconds.

Whenever I moved, the chain would rattle and attract attention, so I did my best to stay quiet as I searched for a way out. Soon, several other areas started lighting fires and arranging plates, just like the alcohol stall. From the looks of it, the scale of the festival was rather impressive.

Just as the sun kissed the horizon, Jess arrived. She wasn't wearing her corset. Instead, she was dressed in a frilly waitress uniform. She looked like she was used to this attire, and it hugged her slender form perfectly. If she ever chose to call someone "master" while wearing that beautiful garment, I was certain that even a man with the most unbreakable will would start squealing and rolling around like a pig.

As I was observing her, I noticed an odd bulge in the fabric near her stomach. The moment she caught sight of me, Jess sprinted to my side and stroked my head.

<I was so worried about you! I was thinking, "What if they make a mistake and turn him into a spit roast?">

<<Hey, don't jinx it. I'm here in one piece, so you can breathe easy.>>

As I "spoke," an appetizing aroma wafted over to my nose. I looked upwind and saw a pig roasting over a big bonfire. *Ah, I see, I see. I'm famished.*

<I thought you might be hungry, so I brought some fruit with me. Please have some, um, M-Master.>

Arooooink! Oh, you really don't have to sneak in fanservice at every opportunity. I feel like everything I mention will turn into foreshadowing at this point... While such thoughts ran through my mind, Jess scanned our surroundings before reaching into her collar and producing two small apples. She placed them gingerly before me. *Wh-Whoa. That's, um, a very unique place to store things.*

<My apologies. I was in a hurry, and I couldn't find a basket. I ended up putting them in my clothes without thinking.>

<<No, it's fine. Thanks.>>

The two small, tender fruits had slipped out of a young maiden's clothes. And right next to them was a pig that extended its filthy tongue, ready to ravish them—

<Erm, um, how does it taste?>

<<Wooow, it's delicious. I owe you one.>>

I'd polished them off in the blink of an eye. I didn't know whether it was because of my new body, but by the time I came to my senses, I'd even eaten the cores. The whole time, Jess was stroking me, and I could tell she was tense.

<<Don't worry. I'm a master escape artist. Actually, I'd like you to keep your distance from this area so that you'll have an alibi.>>

<Are you sure?>

<<Yep. I promise, everything is gonna go smoothly. So let's decide on a meeting place, then go our separate ways.>>

<A...meeting place, hmm...>

<<After the festival, are you going to go back to the Kiltyrin manor, Jess?>>

<Yes. I need to prepare for my journey.>

<<How about we meet at that farm, then?>>

<That's all right, but do you know the way there?>

<<I know the general direction, at least. And I won't get lost—there's only one manor of that size around here, right? It'll be a good landmark.>>

<That's true. There's an enormous tree inside the farm. Shall we meet below it?>

<<Big tree, got it.>>

<When should we meet up?>

<<No clue. It'll probably be midnight or something. If I get unlucky, I might not make it there until the morning. You're leaving tomorrow, right? Get some sleep tonight. My plan is to reach there before sunrise tomorrow morning. If you don't see me even after dawn...>> I paused. <<Come over to that guy's store and check on me. I'll give you my new plan there.>>

<Understood. I know I've already asked this, but...are you *sure* you'll make it out safely?>

<<Of course. Who do you think you're talking to?>>

<Mister Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin, right?>

My thoughts ground to a halt, and I stared at her, speechless. *That...isn't a name, but okay.* <<That's right. Don't look down on me. I'll waltz right out of this place once night falls.>>

<All right. I trust you.>

<<That's the spirit.>> Then, a few questions popped up in my mind. <<I just want to know this for reference, but how long will this festival last?>>

<I'm not sure... It usually lasts well into the night, but sometimes, it'll continue all the way into the morning. As long as there are people present, the festival will go on. We mostly tidy up the next morning.>

Interesting. That's good news for me. <<One more question. It looks like people will be serving alcohol, but do all the participants—>>

My mental speech was interrupted by the voice of the rista store's shopkeeper. "Yo, Jess! It's about time you start getting busy."

I turned around to see the middle-aged man waving his hand merrily at us. He was wearing a white shirt and casual knee-length leather shorts with suspenders. His build was rather large, but his stomach jutted out conspicuously, which meant that he must be a worshipper of beer.

"Ask the young'uns about your job," he continued. "I got some business with the pig over here."

Oh. I didn't get a chance to finish my question.

He unfastened the chain from the railing and started dragging me off somewhere. As for Jess, a youth had detained her and was giving her an explanation about something.

There was a wooden platform, likely the stage, not too far away from the shopkeeper's beer barrels. On the far end, a group of men standing by were carrying instruments that looked like bagpipes and string instruments. As I was

guided onto the stage, the music gradually flowed out. It was a jovial melody.

The man crouched down and released my collar. “Hey, little piggy. Could you rehearse with us?”

I scanned our surroundings, and there were a handful of middle-aged and elderly people around the stage, who seemed to be the shopkeeper’s acquaintances.

The man addressed them. “Take a good look, y’all! I swear, it’s a masterpiece of the century.” He let me roam free and headed towards the rear of the stage. The pace of the music quickened, and the shopkeeper shouted, “C’mon! Dance for us!”

His voice was my cue, and I invested every effort into my dance routine. Before long, the ladies and gentlemen watching me began hyperventilating from laughing so hard.

Everything was good so far. But the problem was that after the dance, just as one would expect, I was once again collared and chained to the handrail near the barrels.

As the day grew dim, the torches were lit, transforming the plaza into a lively festival venue. People settled on the long benches and filled their time with chatter. Gathering around the stage were musicians armed with instruments. And chained here by the beer barrels was me, who could do nothing but watch men in the prime of their life purchase beer while swaying their barrel-like bellies.

Jess was zooming around from table to table, taking orders from customers. The next moment, she came over to my corner, skillfully filling a glass with beer before running off again. She had her hands full, it seemed. As for the youngsters, they weren’t nearly as busy—they were sitting behind the beer barrels, passing time with what looked like a card game. Whenever a customer came all the way to the barrel corner, they’d finally begrudgingly climb to their feet and hand over beer in exchange for money.

I glared at them. *Are you guys clinically blind to the fact that the dining area is short on staff? The sole worker looks like she’s going to collapse under the workload, so work already, wage thieves! These young, fit men are making a*

delicate maiden run around while they leisurely enjoy a card game. What barbarians!

Grievances aside, I hadn't forgotten my mission. Earlier, I'd been interrupted before I could finish asking Jess, but she was swamped with work right now. *I suppose I'll have to patiently observe and find out the answer to my query myself.*

My unasked question was as follows: *Can the youngsters looking after this stall drink boldly as they please?* In other words, were the youngsters allowed to get drunk despite being on duty?

I'd seen the greedy look in their eyes when they gazed at the alcohol. Deducing that these slackers were bibulous, therefore, was elementary. Judging by their appearance, however, they were likely around the same age as Jess. *That begs the question—are the laws, no, virtues of this nation lax enough for them to drink until they're hammered? Until they're so out of it that they'd overlook an escaping pig?*

The sky darkened and the plaza grew livelier. Naturally, Jess had even more pressure on her shoulders as a waitress. Musical performances and other types of performing arts played out on the stage one after another, accompanied by boisterous cheering. Before each group began their performance, they would set up banners on the stage with advertisements like "Lmaoh Hunting Gear" or "Want tourist info? Look no further than Goggle!" At the end of every performance, they would make some kind of sales pitch to the audience. A handful of the crowd would then stand up and tread over to stalls with the same horizontal banner.

So, if the shop puts on a good performance on the stage, the guests supporting them would head over to the group's stall. Is that how it works?

The young men at the beer barrel corner chatted idly away as they continued their card game.

One youngster sighed dramatically. "Still not the pig's turn yet?"

Another responded, "Mister Kilins said we're the big finale."

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” the first young man whined. “That means it’ll be *ages* until we get that heavenly treat we’ve been looking forward to. We have to wait all the way after that dance!”

“Man, I’m starvin’. I wanna get some grub in my belly before that...”

That was when the shopkeeper showed up with a tray in hand. The youngsters stood up and frantically hid their cards—or at least, that was what I assumed would happen. In reality, they continued playing on without a care in the world.

“Evenin’, my fellows!” the shopkeeper’s voice boomed. “Thanks for your hard work taking care of the stall. I bought some meat, so eat up.”

“Mister Kilins!” The youngsters looked at the delightful whole roast chicken on the tray with bright eyes. “Thank you so much!”

The man ruffled one youngster’s hair. “Work hard today! I know that customers are gonna swarm us, so I’ve prepared several times more booze than usual.”

“Several times! You serious?”

“Yep.” The shopkeeper nodded. “Had to rush, ’cause I have high hopes in that Yethma’s pig.”

I had the information I’d been looking for. This man, Kilins, seemed to be a competent and charitable manager. But no matter how “good” he was, the rest of his actions were making me grit my teeth in ire. On one side, he was making Jess slave away without rest. Meanwhile, he was treating these young men—who’d been playing around in the back—to a whole chicken. Despite knowing Jess’s name perfectly well, he referred to her by her race, instead of as an individual. *He sounds like a racist bigot!*

I shook my head to dispel my thoughts. *This isn’t the time for that. It’s not like I’ll be seeing these guys ever again after tonight.*

Kilins sounded like he had high expectations for my dance. If the audience went wild over my magnificent performance, countless people would visit this stall. If that happened, Jess definitely wouldn’t be enough—the youngsters would be forced to work as well. Then, they’d get their “heavenly treat” right

after. Considering that one of the young men had said that he wanted to eat before that, this “treat” wasn’t food. What would it be, then?

The answer was alcohol, of course. As staff, they couldn’t afford to be drunk while serving customers.

I had a plan. *Just wait and see. I’ll make my grand escape tonight and run to Jess’s side. I’ll come home to a dreamlike, stunning maiden, the likes of whom you, my brethren, can only hope to admire from the other side of a screen. Heh.*

Eventually, my turn came around. As I was guided onto the stage, I realized something that had slipped my mind. A brief glance told me that there were at least a thousand people in the audience. I’d *never* been the center of attention of such a large crowd before. I climbed onto a large platform that had been specially arranged for me. Over two thousand eyes drilled into me.

<<Don’t worry, darlings! I’m looking at all of you, even my fans in the back! All eyes on me!>>

Like some Japanese idol, I mentally winked at my audience and acted as if I knew exactly what I was doing. But the fluttering heart in my chest betrayed my true emotions.

Um. This is bad. Really bad.

Gazes of curiosity pierced me from every direction—I must’ve piqued the interest of my audience by being the first pig on the stage.

No. No, I can’t do this. I’m out, boys. Listen, I’m a guy who was so nervous about introducing myself to my classmates that I messed up every word. Now, on my first day in a foreign world, I have to show off a fancy dance in front of a thousand people. Why? I never did anything to deserve this. Why am I even here?

The shopkeeper walked forward until he was next to me and held up what looked like a megaphone with a green rista to his mouth. “Hello, everyone! Next up is Kilins Jewels!” His voice, amplified by twenty or thirty times, resounded in the plaza. “I know that everyone was looking forward to a music performance, since that was what I promised until yesterday, but you’re in for a surprise! Today, we also have a special guest—a pig!”

The reply was confused murmuring and laughter of disbelief.

He continued, “I can promise you that it’s a once-in-a-lifetime show you can’t miss! Eyes on the stage, please!”

It was at this moment when I realized that Jess was in the middle of the plaza. She was looking at me. She clenched her hands into two fists and placed them in front of her chest, staring at me as if to say, “Good luck!” *Simply adorable. Ahhh, when all of this is done and over with, I wanna lay on Jess’s soft thighs! I wanna lick her petite face like a dog and slobber all over her! And I mustn’t forget about her shy and modest—*

<Um, I can hear you, by the way.>

Wait. You can? I took a moment to compose myself. *You could’ve cheered me on with your telepathy from the very beginning, you know,* I huffed internally.

The next thing I knew, the music began. Kilins gave me a big grin and said, “Dance for me, thanks! I’m counting on you.”

I nodded on reflex before I realized I’d messed up. The man widened his eyes in surprise, but he snapped out of it the next moment. He marched off the stage, clapping his rugged hands.

Uh. Hey. I think I’m in trouble. How should I dance? What should I dance?

In my panic, I jumped. A moment of silence.

Then, the entire venue exploded in laughter. *Ugh, whatever. Just let it go! I can’t stand it anymore!* I tottered around and tried to do a full turn, but I tripped and toppled over. Another round of thunderous laughter.

<You can do this, Mister Pig!>

Jess was silently cheering for me, in a way only I could hear. However, this innocent maiden was oblivious to one truth—the moment the awkward race of otaku became aware that a girl was watching them, even their most prized talents would be reduced to bumbling blunders.

I tried to hop from side to side, drawing a zigzag pattern as I went, but I stomped on my own trotter. “Owoink!”

My cry of pain and grief only invited more laughter from the crowd. The

grandpa on the front row was shedding tears of joy as he guffawed.

<I'm not looking at you, so it's all right! Keep up the good work! Hee.>

Hm? Did I catch the coattails of a giggle just now? Oh well. If it's for Jess's smile, I'm never gonna give up or let her down! Watch me, or else you'll miss the historical moment when a pig pulls off a windmill like a pro!

The crowd had loved it. But I had hated it, because the end of the dance was a tragedy. In my frantic dance, I'd ended up at the edge of the stage without realizing, and the next thing I knew, I'd tumbled down from the platform. *Owwwwww!*

Alas, this was the fate of otaku who got carried away and tried to show off some cool moves. I was collared and dragged away, back to the same railing as before. Of course, I was chained down. As I moved, I realized that I'd either twisted my right hind leg or broken a bone. I felt as if I was being pierced by knives with every step.

"Hey, pig, you were awesome out there! Look!" Kilins, who'd chained me up again, gestured at the queue in front of the beer barrels. "They love you!"

The youngsters were finally up and about, busying themselves with selling beer. They also began distributing the bottled spirits—whiskey bottles, judging by their conversation with the customers. Bathed in the humid heat of the festival, the young men sweated profusely as they worked. *Serves you right.*

Enduring the sharp pain in my leg, I waited patiently for an opening.

After around thirty minutes, the queue was gone. Middle-aged people with flushed faces gathered around me and started gawking. *Just like I thought.* In spite of my pain, I jumped around and danced. They clapped and laughed. More and more drunkards, armed with mugs and bottles, assembled around me in a big circle. The youngsters eagerly opened bottles of whiskey, as if they couldn't wait a second longer. They blissfully chugged down the liquor and rubbernecked at me.

All right. Commence operation.

While I danced, I wandered as close as possible to the railing and allowed my

chains to go slack. I waved my limbs around and thrashed my head fiercely, causing the chains to rattle unpleasantly. *Good, get even louder.* Over and over, I headbanged ferociously, as if my head were a whip. The movement caused the chains to smash against the ground.

One of the senior onlookers finally had enough. “Hey, young man! Can ya take off that noisy chain?”

“One whiskey bottle’s ten golt, good sir,” the youngster replied.

“Ah, I getcha. Fine, I’ll grab one.”

After the elderly man handed over the money, one of the youngsters took off my collar. *All according to plan.*

It was time to move on to the second stage of the operation. Slowly but steadily, I moved and steered the crowd towards the stacked-up crates of whiskey. Then, I charged forward, surprising my audience. I was dealing with a bunch of drunkards, and just like I’d predicted, they fled backward without thinking.

A little more to the right, hm? Once again, I pretended to charge at them. This time, one of the drunkards successfully struck the target—the tower of crates.

A deafening crashing sound pierced my ears. The tower fell over, leaving a display of shattered glass bottles on the ground. The sharp-eyed youngsters pretended to clean up the mess, but they were actually snatching up the intact bottles. As for the pignut gallery, they purchased whiskey bottles with guilt on their faces.

Everything is in place. All that’s left is to wait and see. I deliberately performed several peculiar gestures to detain the crowd.

In less than an hour, everyone present was completely wasted. I took that opportunity to flee.

Like lightning, a pig darted across the streets.

...No, he didn’t. Sorry. I just want you to know that my injured leg is hurting like there’s no tomorrow, and I don’t know whether I can make it all the way to

the Kiltyrin residence.

I imagined myself as the Pink Flash of the Leaf. *O pig, unleash your anime ninja run!* I *had* to return before dawn no matter what, because I had to fulfill a promise with a beautiful maiden. *But it hurts so much...*

Since I was a pig, I couldn't touch my hind leg to check the extent of my injury. I'd lain down on the ground and twisted my head as far as I could to look at it, though, and there hadn't been any conspicuous external wounds. My joint was the source of the pain. I prayed that it wasn't a major injury.

I walked on. The streets at night were deserted and gloomy. I could only rely on the silvery sheen of moonlight as a guide. Luckily, there was a full moon tonight, and its glow was so luminous that I could even see shadows on the cobblestones.

The last time I'd been in so much pain was during my second year of high school, when I'd sprained my ankle on sports day. While the popular jocks were showered in earsplitting cheers as they scored one point after another, I'd acted like a burglar on the field and had tripped as a result. In the end, I could only huddle in a corner of the gym in silence as I applied ice to my ankle.

Urk. Bad memory, go away. That aside, I was in a conundrum. If Jess found out that I'd been injured, she might use the black rista she'd just bought. She couldn't sell a runaway pig again, so I had to hide my injury as much as I could. But my opponent was a girl who could read minds—I had to come up with a good countermeasure before I arrived at the farm.

No, gotta remember priorities. Reaching the farm safely is more important. I shook my head to clear my mind. *I was the star of the festival tonight. I need to avoid humans on my way. Maybe I should go through as many backstreets as possible to avoid attention.* I didn't have to worry about getting lost, because I still knew the rough direction of the manor. It was also a large building sitting alone in the middle of an enormous plot of land, so I couldn't miss it. With that in mind, I made a detour into a backstreet.

I walked, dragging one leg behind me, and eventually ended up in a familiar place. It was the fishy back alley where the scarred rista merchant had approached Jess. A repulsive stench hung over the area, reminding me of a

gross public toilet. *If I get past here, I should arrive at green pastures. That guy and the other fellows probably aren't doing business at this ungodly hour of night, so I guess I'll take this path until I'm outside the town.*

But as I advanced down the alley, I heard human voices up ahead. I stilled.

The first voice was a gruff one. "It's your mess, so you gotta clean up after yourself. If you drag me into your problem...you better be prepared to pay the price."

"Sorry. But my hands are tied! I dunno what to do."

"Whaddya mean by that? You could've made it look like an accident. That's easy enough."

"That's not what I mean. I'm not afraid of that corset. Her pig suddenly ran off somewhere, and then she was gone!"

I recognized the voice of the second man. It was definitely the scarred man who'd tried to sell junk to Jess. Quietly, I slipped behind a wooden crate, held my breath, and strained my ears.

The first man continued, "Then find her! You know where the manor is. Follow her and finish her off."

"Wait, *please*. I'm sorry, I really am, so let me off the hook just this once. You're asking the impossible! If someone finds out that I killed House Kiltyrin's Yethma, I'm done for!"

My legs were shaking. *Did I hear that right? What the hell did he just say?*

"It's your problem, you take care of it. If you don't want to do the dirty work, go find the local Yethma hunters or something."

"But I'm asking them to kill an employed Yethma! No one would accept such a job."

"More money always does the trick."

"Do I look like a rich guy to you?"

There was a loud slam. The scarred man crashed into the wall. A huge man, roughly two meters tall, was grabbing him by the collar. Toned muscles

supported the large man's towering frame, and his short blond hair was prickly like a porcupine.

"Listen," the giant hissed, "you only have two choices. Either you kill that Yethma, or you die. If I don't see the Yethma's corpse by tomorrow night, I'll butcher you along with her and take your dead body to the authorities as the murderer. Ya hear me?"

The large man abruptly released his hold on the scarred man. He squared his shoulders and walked in my direction. I hid inside the shadows and held my breath as if my life depended on it. Perhaps thanks to my efforts, the large man left without being any the wiser.

The scarred man, meanwhile, smoothed out his messy attire and sighed as he walked my way. "Guess I gotta pay the piper..."

Wait, what if he sees me? Will I...die? I could only tremble uncontrollably and wait for the man to pass by. He turned a corner and walked in the direction of the Kiltyrin residence.

What...just happened? Huh? Why're they planning on killing Jess out of nowhere? And why won't my legs move, darn it!

Pause, time out. I need time to think. Is that man heading towards Jess? If that's the case, I need to stop him at any cost, right? But what can I do? Look at this lowly livestock who only knows how to quiver inside a garbage heap of a back alley! What the hell can he do?

A series of colorful swear words flashed across my mind. *Curse it all!* I gritted my teeth.

...No. Calm down, pig. Like all great protagonists, you came to a world of swords and sorcery. Are you really going to stay here like a coward and let your heroine die like this? Think about that pure, earnest girl waiting for you. Can you forgive yourself if you let that filthy man kill her?

Move already, Pink Flash of the Leaf, move. If you want to save Jess, you need to move!

I might have been just domesticated livestock, but we pigs were descended from boars. The blood of ferocious beasts ran in my veins. So what if my leg was

injured? It wasn't like I had to kill that man immediately. *That's right. I can just tail him. While I observe him and gain intel, I can come up with a plan.*

I returned to the main street and stared hard at the man's hunched back. One of his legs seemed to be in subpar condition, and he was dragging his foot as he went. This meant he was progressing at a speed I could keep up with. Taking careful note of my surroundings, I shadowed the man. Luckily, I was a pig. A beast's field of vision was vast, since its eyes were on the sides of its head. *Oh, that's right!*

It might sound unbelievable, but the moment I realized that fact, my vision suddenly expanded. I could see almost *everything* around me at once. *I see, I was so used to the human field of vision that I only paid attention to the central area of my sight!* Once I abandoned my literal tunnel vision, I immediately gained access to my new wider field of view.

Another thought sprung to my mind. Pigs were trained to hunt truffles due to their exceptional sense of smell, rivaling that of dogs. With that thought in mind, I inhaled. I was in a headwind. I detected the unique stinky breath that belonged to smokers. The pungent scent of unwashed hair. And one scent that stood out above all else: a mint fragrance.

I couldn't identify scents that I'd never smelled before, but despite the distance between us, I could detect his smell with alarming clarity. Focusing, I tried sniffing the ground. Stone. Dust. And hidden beneath them was the hint of the scarred man's distinct stench.

Pigs have their own unique skills. Attracting attention with a simple dance was only the tip of the iceberg.

Think. Think harder. How can I protect Jess?

The man staggered on with a detached look on his face. *I should observe him.* He slung a leather bag over one shoulder, and the bag was bloated and bumpy, filled with solid objects. *Used ristae, perhaps? With that leg and baggage of his, he can't move nimbly. The problem is that I'm also handicapped. It's too risky for me to pounce on a human who might possess an unknown weapon.*

Not to mention that I'm a former scrawny four-eyed super-virgin. I don't have it in me to kill someone. In that case, perhaps the best course of action is to

make someone else attack him in my stead. But Jess is the only one who can communicate with me. I don't think an angelic girl like her could win in a battle of strength against this man.

I suppose, then, my only option is to go ahead of him, warn Jess, and run away with her. But... I frowned. The large man earlier had mentioned "Yethma hunters." What in the world were those? Even if we managed to run away from this man, would we be able to survive while such a group chased after us?

Think, think even harder. How do I make these guys give up on killing her? What are these scoundrels scared of?

As I squeezed my brain for every drop of wisdom it had, I realized we'd arrived at the outskirts of town. I could see the Kiltyrin manor in the distance. From here on out, it was a straight line to the destination.

The man halted his steps and pulled out something from his waist. A blade gleamed beneath the moonlight. It was a dagger. *If that sharp blade bites into Jess's frail neck... If it pierces her porcelain white skin, digs through her organs, and splatters her blood everywhere... No. Never. I'll never let that happen.* I glared at him with fire in my eyes.

The man put away his dagger and resumed his sluggish walk.

Time was running out. Though I loathed to admit it, I didn't have many options. At this point, I could only go ahead of him to meet up with Jess.

Run, pig. Jess's life is in your hands, and you will save her.

I diverged from the footpath and sprinted across the grassy pasture. The idea of Jess's assassination must have triggered an adrenaline rush—the pain had subsided to a barely tolerable level. I knew I was going to regret running at top speed with an injured leg, but that was beside the point. My top priority was rescuing my savior, Jess.

Our meeting place was a large tree on the farm. However, we'd promised to meet up the next morning. I told her to sleep tonight, so she'd definitely be in her room on the third floor right now.

I soon reached the back door of the manor. It was a wooden door, and the handle was located high above my reach. Even if I could reach it, it was likely

locked. *Great. If I were a human right now, I could force it open or break it, but...*

Though my mind was busy looking for a solution to the locked door, another corner of my mind was distracted. I recalled the conversation between the two men.

“Whaddya mean by that? You could’ve made it look like an accident. That’s easy enough.”

“Then find her! You know where the manor is. Follow her and finish her off.”

“If someone finds out that I killed House Kiltyrin’s Yethma, I’m done for!”

I forced myself to calm down. *I see, I was so panicked that all rational thought went out the window. That man can’t kill Jess when she’s inside the manor. The scarred man knows where the manor is, but the other man told him to “follow her and finish off,” which means that he can’t murder her openly inside the manor. That’s right, these scoundrels are scared of House Kiltyrin. If House Kiltyrin finds out that Jess was murdered, they’d search for the criminal, arrest him, and possibly execute him.*

Jess had mentioned, *“As long as I’m wearing the crest of House Kiltyrin, no one would even think of assaulting me.”* The corset she’d worn must’ve been a sign that Jess belonged to House Kiltyrin and that no one was allowed to harm her unless they wanted to face the family’s wrath.

In that case, the man’s plans were predictable. His first option was to keep watch until Jess came out of the manor and ambush her. The second was to lure her out by, say, pretending to call for help. However, Jess knew the man, and belonged to a race that could read minds to a certain extent. Therefore, it made more sense for him to lie in wait and catch her off guard.

Now then, what was the man going to do after he killed Jess? If he abandoned her corpse there, those who discovered it would deduce that it was murder. However, considering the condition of his bad leg, it’d be difficult for him to carry Jess by himself.

Hold on. I think I’m missing something. Was the man really going to kill Jess with his dagger? If he wanted it to look like an accident, knife wounds would be detrimental. And judging by the exchange between the two men, the scarred

man had sounded like he was low on the food chain. If the search for the murderer began, the scarred man's "coworkers" would want the investigation to stop as soon as possible. To do that, they might betray the scarred man and thrust him before House Kiltyrin as the culprit. In conclusion, it was safer for him to make it look like an accident.

His target was a meek and feeble girl. He'd definitely lead her somewhere else before killing her. The problem was that Jess would recognize him on sight and could read his mind. That was where his dagger came in. He'd ambush her, threaten her with his weapon, and bring her elsewhere. For example, he could take her to a river and push her in.

In that case, if the man ever witnessed Jess leaving the manor, she'd be toast. Unfortunately for me, Jess was likely going to head to the farm before dawn. If the man ambushed her there, even if I was present, I wouldn't be able to make a difference. *Fudge.*

I skirted around to the other side of the manor and stared up at the room on the third floor. There wasn't any light. The room must be pitch black. When she planned on heading out, she would require some kind of light source, which would tip me off as well. *Is there any way I can give her a signal to warn her?*

A sudden realization made my thoughts grind to a halt. There was one more possibility.

Though I was only reaping the seeds I'd sown, regrettably, I'd never arranged a private meeting with a girl before. That was why I wasn't knowledgeable on the topic, but...on such an occasion, how much earlier would a girl arrive before the promised time? *In the case of a girl like Jess, she...might be already waiting for me.*

There was still plenty of time before dawn. I repeatedly turned to check the third-floor windows and the area around the back door as I began walking. I was going to take a look at our meeting place just in case.

Under the cover of night, I sneaked into the farm. I recalled how I'd walked here with Jess in the daylight. It seemed like years ago now, but our conversation was still etched in my memory.

"And by the way, my name is Jess. Please call me by my name."

"Same here, Mister Pig."

"I shall go with you."

Her gentle voice rang out in the back of my mind. I recalled the earnest gaze of her eyes and the angelic smile she'd worn.

I wondered. I wondered where else I'd find such overwhelming kindness in my life. Where else would I find a girl that would offer a helping hand to a muddy guy like me, who'd appeared out of thin air inside her pigsty? Where else would I find a girl so compassionate that she'd use an invaluable rista for a stranger...?

Whoa, stop right there. I shook my head furiously. *Bad otaku brain. Don't do that. A girl, fictional or not, could look at you for one second too long and you'd fall head over heels. This isn't the time for this. You have more important matters to attend to.*

I hurried to the farm. *I'm sure you know the rules, my brethren. No matter what kind of beautiful young maiden you meet or see, falling in love and using that as an excuse to disturb their private life is nonsense. Gently rooting for them at a distance is the job of us otaku.*

Soon, I spotted a large tree standing alone in the middle of a vast meadow. The ground below the tree was slightly elevated, and the tree looked as if it was trying to reach for the skies. Stars were scattered whimsically across the night sky, and below, moonlight flickered as it traced the silhouettes of each individual leaf. The branches swayed with a gentle breeze.

I felt as if my heart was being squeezed like a lemon.

The girl I'd been looking for was there, waiting for me. She was sitting on the ground near the roots and resting her body against the trunk. Her eyes were closed as she slept.

She's here this early? Hang on, it's still the dead of night. But...she's already here.

The ache in my leg flew out of my mind as I sprinted towards Jess. Even after I approached her, she remained fast asleep. She was wearing the same attire as when I'd first met her—a white blouse and a navy skirt. She looked peaceful as

she snoozed on. For a while, the only thing I could do was stare at her in a daze.

...No. Snap out of it. What are you doing, you bacon-blockheaded nerd? This isn't the time to admire the peaceful face of a sleeping beauty. You're supposed to be thinking about ways to stop an assassin from killing this girl. I need to wake her up.

<<Wake up, Jess.>>

No response. *I should've guessed. If she could overhear the thoughts of a simple animal even when she's unconscious, she'd never stay asleep with all the commotion.*

I prodded Jess's shoulder with my snout. She didn't wake up, but she moved slightly. Her doll-like face leaned towards me. Her long golden lashes shimmered under the moonlight. I saw her petite nose, her thin lips... Her neck drew a beautiful curve, like a swan's, until it tucked itself shyly into her silver collar. Beneath the collar, her skin traced the surface of her delicate collarbone before they flowed further down to her modest curves. Her arms were thin and frail. Her fingers looked as if they'd snap if she tried to hold anything remotely heavy. Upon further inspection, there were numerous small cuts and scars on her fingers, which were rough and reddened from work.

No respectable human would dare think of taking the life of a girl like her. Only a monster could imagine it.

Scalding anger bubbled within me. Jess couldn't, and *mustn't*, die for the selfish gains of a brute like that man. *I dare you to point your blade at Jess. Your hand will never, ever, hold another blade in your lifetime.*

I nudged her once again, a little more forcefully this time.

Jess slowly opened her eyes. When she looked at me, her eyes widened, and she looked at me in silence. Her honey brown orbs sucked me in, and I couldn't look away. The next moment, they grew moist, and tears flowed down her cheeks.

"I was so worried about you..." she whispered.

Those were the only words she offered me before she threw her arms around my neck. My mind stuttered and went blank.



It felt as if time itself had stopped to wait for us. But I recalled that we had more pressing concerns to deal with.

<<Jess, I need to tell you something.>>

Jess didn't let me go. She clung tight to an unfamiliar pig she hadn't even known for a full day. However, I had to break this blissful moment.

<<There's a man out for your life.>>

"Out for my... What?" She finally released me before clenching her right hand into a fist in front of her chest.

I tried to explain as quickly as I could. <<The man who wants to kill you is the man with a scar on his face from whom you almost bought a rista today. He's come all the way to the manor for this very purpose, and is still there now.>>

She gasped. "That's horrible. Why would he...?"

<<I don't know the exact reason. However, if my theory is correct, he's trying to silence you permanently. If you expose the fact that he and his colleagues are questionable merchants scamming people with junk ristae, their business would be doomed.>>

"But I'd never tell on them," she said, frowning.

<<I knew you'd say that. But, the thing is, the wicked aren't reasonable people. They'd easily kill others simply because the unfortunate soul knows too much.>> *Why am I explaining such a fundamental thing to her? I'm not her dad.*

"Oh, what do I do? If I die, you... You might never get to turn back into a human again..." She chewed on her lip.

Why are you worried about me when you're the one in danger? You're not my mom. <<I won't let you die. I'm with you. So let's come up with a plan together.>>

She looked at me with puffy eyes. "Then...how about we run away in secret?"

<<That's just running away from the problem, not a real solution. He might chase us all the way to our destination, or he might attack you when you come back to this land.>>

Jess opened her mouth, as if she wanted to say something, but she held her tongue and hung her head.

I continued, <<The best outcome would be making House Kiltyrin arrest that man. There's no need for us to fight, so we won't be exposed to much danger. Above all else, if we get House Kiltyrin on our side and make those shady dealings public knowledge, silencing you would be meaningless. The chances of them targeting you would decrease.>>

"Would the noble Kiltyrins go that far for someone like me, though?" She looked uneasy.

<<You served them for a long time, didn't you?>>

"I did, but...I'm a Yethma."

<<So what?>>

"The difference between someone of my status and the members of House Kiltyrin is like night and day. I'm not in a position to make any requests..."

<<But if you die, Jess, House Kiltyrin would be inconvenienced, wouldn't they? You're far from retirement age.>>

"Um, I..." She looked tense. She placed her hand against her chest.

My intuition was telling me that she was hiding something. <<Go on, tell me. I promise I won't get mad.>>

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you the whole story." She bowed deeply. "To tell you the truth, I won't return to the manor after my departure."

I figured. My intuition had been right—the shopkeeper *had* been alluding to a permanent farewell with his words. <<Got it. I hope you'll tell me the reason on another day. For now, let's focus on the present.>>

Since we couldn't petition House Kiltyrin to take care of the scoundrel, the next best thing was, naturally, setting up an appropriate scenario to force their hand. *What to do, what to do...* <<Hey, Jess, are there any facilities in this farm that can be locked and are big enough to imprison a human?>>

"Give me a moment... We have a warehouse built of stone. You can't unlock it from the inside, and there is no way out if someone locks you in."

<<Do you have access to the key?>>

“Yes.” She nodded. “If you go into the manor from the back entrance, you will find it hanging right next to the door.”

That means there’s a chance the scarred man would spot her when she retrieves it. <<One more question. I know that you’re only a servant, but you can at least leave a note in a place where the members of House Kiltyrin will see, right?>>

“I...believe so, yes.”

<<All right, I have a plan. Follow my instructions closely.>>

Jess had been opposed to my plan, but I hadn’t backed down. My stubbornness won in the end. I promptly began taking action.

Alone, I scouted the circumference of the manor. The wind carried the pungent smell of mint to my nose. I could tell that upwind, the scarred man was sitting down behind a shrub as he stealthily watched the back door. My deduction had been on the mark. He was going to ambush Jess when she came out, threaten her with his dagger, and lead her elsewhere.

I returned to Jess’s hiding spot and told her, <<Follow me. Remember this: his aim isn’t me, but you. No matter what happens, don’t come to save me. That guy has a lame leg, so if worst comes to worst, run away by yourself.>>

She swayed her head ambiguously. *Oh well. As long as I don’t mess up, she won’t have to face that choice.*

I guided Jess to a hiding spot close to the manor. Then, working up my resolve, I pretended to wander aimlessly in the vicinity until I was right in front of the back entrance. Of course, the scarred man should see me.

“Oinkek!” *Oh, oops. Was trying to make a noise to attract his attention, but I ended up laughing like a gamer at the end of it.*

On the bright side, it was super effective. The man noticed me and changed his posture.

“Burofl!” I grunted again before I tottered in the direction of the farm. In the

farm was a burning pile of dried grass, and the bright flame flickered.

I could see the man pursuing me in my wide pig's peripheral vision. His attention was drawn to the fire on the farm, and I caught him staring at it for prolonged periods of time. It was an open-air fire on a farm which was likely under the management of his target Yethma. The Yethma had brought a companion pig with her during the day. And now, a particular pig was heading towards the fire.

When presented with all this information, anyone in his shoes would naturally conclude, *The Yethma I have to kill might be near that campfire.* And that was what I was counting on.

As I approached the farm, I quickened my strides and took cover inside the pigsty. The man should have lost sight of me, but he'd likely carefully investigate the area around the campfire for any sign of Jess. He would make rounds at the harmless bonfire that was a fair distance away from the warehouse.

I waited for a while before I left the pigsty to look for the man. I spotted him immediately—he was near the campfire, turning his head restlessly, observing his surroundings. *Good, keep looking at the fire. Look at the nice and bright fire. Your pupils will shrink, and you'll greedily consume the photopigments in your rod cells. Light adaptation, as they call it. Human eyes adapt to a bright environment rapidly, but dark adaptation takes time. With those eyes of his, he should overlook Jess, who's taking this opportunity to retrieve the key from the back entrance before heading to the warehouse under the cover of night.*

Abruptly, the environment grew brighter. Somewhere else had lit up—the warehouse. *All right, let's go.*

Once again, I approached the man, snorting as loud as I could. "Oinkek!" I might've overdone it, but it didn't arouse any suspicion in the man. He only stared intently at me as I headed to the warehouse. The minute he saw the brightly lit warehouse, he stopped loitering around the campfire and followed me. All according to plan so far. The rest depended on my next performance.

I entered the warehouse unhurriedly, so that the man could see me. The lanterns hanging from the ceiling were lit. I took a quick scan of my

surroundings, and saw there was only animal feed and fertilizer in here. There didn't seem to be any tools he could use to escape. The haystacks were positioned just right to create a blind spot. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I moved to an area out of sight from the entrance and started snorting and making a fuss. I could feel my heart race. It was a normal reaction, because the next step of the plan required a man armed with a blade to enter the warehouse. I recalled Jess gently stroking my head and composed myself.

<<Ready, Jess?>>

<Yes. I'm hiding on the opposite side of the warehouse.>

Nice. Unlike the festival performance, this time, Jess's gaze wasn't on me. It's a known fact that introverted recluses can only shine like a star when they're away from prying eyes. A girl is trembling in fear nearby, and I'll take on the world for her sake!

As expected, the man's stench drew nearer. Tobacco. Unwashed hair. Mint.

The man entered the warehouse. Acting as if I was only minding my own business, I walked by the man's side and left the warehouse. I saw him glance at me.

Now!

I stamped my aching hind foot hard on the ground. In my mind, I retrieved the memory of Jess's face when she'd cheered for me onstage. *I will protect her.* Gritting my teeth, I charged at the back of the man's knees. I crashed right into him like a boulder.

The cranium of a pig was hard. The impact of the collision didn't falter me in the least. On the other hand, the man's knees buckled, and he fell forward, face down.

"You swine!" he hollered.

I backed off. Then, as the man tried to pick himself up, I charged once again at the man's flank!

But this was when the Scrawny Four-Eyes debuff activated. The man was much nimbler than I'd expected, and he swung down his leather bag at me. I

couldn't dodge, and I took a direct hit to the side of my torso. The bulky stones inside jolted my innards. *Ugh!*

Jess's smile flashed across my mind. A man who might tarnish it was right in front of me. I twisted my body skillfully so that I wouldn't lose my momentum, and slammed my snout right into his torso. It was effective. The bag slipped out of the man's hand. Without a moment's delay, I took a step back, opened my mouth wide, and bit down on the man's Achilles tendon with all my might. I felt my teeth puncturing flesh.

The man howled. The next moment, an acute pain pierced my back. For a split second, I stiffened. *What was that? I have a bad feeling about this.* With jumbled thoughts, I withdrew from the warehouse.

<<Now, Jess! Shut the door!>> I yelled in my mind.

Jess rushed over immediately and slammed the bulky warehouse door with a speed that looked out of place on a young maiden. She locked it. I could hear the man's pained groans echoing out from within.

I breathed a sigh of relief. *It's a success.*

<<Good job, Jess! You're safe now!>>

I urged my feet to walk over to her, but my hind leg was being rebellious. Suddenly, I toppled over and fell on my side. On instinct, I arched my back. *What happened?*

When I looked at Jess, I saw her standing still as a statue, staring at me with eyes wide. I soon realized the reason for my sudden ache.

Something hot and warm was oozing out. A dagger had wedged itself deep into my back.

It was on my deathbed that I was finally convinced this world wasn't a dream. *Ironic, right?*

Such realistic, vivid pain should be enough to wake anyone from a dream. I'd had a dream where I'd been stabbed in the back before, but back then, I'd woken up with a start, arching my back like a bridge. But this time, I must have truly reincarnated in a brand-new world.

...Oh. This isn't a dream. As I lay on my side, my legs twitched uncontrollably. I looked up at a young maiden's face, which was tilted at an angle of ninety degrees. It hurts. It's so cold. Am I...going to die?

<Don't leave me, Mister Pig... Don't die!>

The girl was communicating directly with my mind as she touched my neck with shaking hands. *That tickles.*

<I'm sorry. Um, what should... What do I...>

There's nothing you can do. Unless you're in a world of magic, there's no way of escaping the grim reaper in my state.

Jess whipped her head up, her eyes wide. I knew what she was thinking. She was probably going to embezzle another black rista of House Kiltyrin. <<Stop, Jess. Don't put yourself in any more trouble because of someone like me.>>

<But you're going to die!>

<<Yeah. I've only known you for a day, but it's been fun.>>

<How can you die like this?! Weren't you going to the capital with me?!>

<<Sorry, but forget about that. You can head over alone and finish your own business. Don't worry about me.>>

<No, that's not it... I... That's not what I...>

What does she mean by that?

<Um... I haven't even undressed in front of you. You told me to save it until a special impactful moment, but now...>

<<That was the silly rambling of a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin. Forgive me.>>

My eyes grew heavy. The blood loss was probably causing oxygen deficiency in my brain. As my consciousness drifted away, a beautiful girl would accompany me until I breathed my last. I was a lucky man.

<Please, I'm begging you... Don't leave me all alone...>

A white fog slowly draped over all sound and light. However, Jess's heartbreaking wish was painfully vivid in my mind. But soon, even her wish

unraveled like silk threads.

As my consciousness slipped away, I recalled how the man had struck me with his bag. The bag had been filled with hard rocks, and...

No. There was no point crying over spilled milk.

Wanting to catch a glimpse of Jess during my last moments, I closed my eyes and focused hard on my eyeballs. This was a much more pleasant way to die than a mundane, appalling case of food poisoning. *You're in the company of a beautiful maiden. I could never ask for anything more.*

I opened my eyes to sear one last image of her into my mind...

But the only thing that filled my vision was a dark, desolate pasture.

Chapter 2: Nine out of Ten Handsome Hunks Are Scumbags

I opened my eyes.

Sunlight cut through the gaps between the tall trees, illuminating the dark forest with a faint glow. Judging by the angle of the rays, it was likely still early morning. I'd woken up in an area sectioned off by dense shrubs—a perfect place for a secret hideout.

I felt a weight on my stomach. A girl with silky golden hair was using me as a pillow.

Sluggishly, I stood up on my four trotters. Jess's head slipped off and struck a wooden board with an audible thud. She was in a new outfit, a light blue dress that was more casual and offered better mobility than her previous attire. This change was likely made in preparation for her long journey ahead.

"Gnauph..." Jess made an unintelligible noise and held her head with her hand.

<<Oh, sorry about that...>>

As I spoke, my mind churned as I tried to recall how we'd gotten here. I'd turned into a pig, shown off some moves at a festival, reunited with Jess on a breathtaking moonlit night, then locked that man up in a warehouse. And then...

Jess looked at me and stroked my head. "Ah, I'm so glad you woke up, Mister Pig." A bright smile softened her features. But in contrast to her angelic smile, her complexion was alarmingly pale. Her hair was disheveled, and a few long, golden strands were stuck to her face, which was slick with sweat.

What happened to you? You okay there? My gaze trailed down to her body. She wasn't wearing her corset. Her dress was wrinkled. Her hands were red from friction or work. I glanced down at the "bed" I was lying on. It was a large wooden board, and attached to it were primitive "wheels" made by wrapping

metal around wood. A long, tough rope was hanging off the makeshift vehicle. And judging by the fact that we were in a forest, she must've dragged me all the way here.

<<Jess, are you okay...?>> I asked slowly.

"Yes, I am. After all, you're here with me."

You don't look like you're doing fine at all, I thought worriedly. Then, a memory hit me. *That's right, I was stabbed.* <<Did you use a black rista on me?>>

"Yes. I found the fallen bag outside the warehouse. Like you thought, there was very little mana residue in each, but after combining several of them, they worked."

That was a complete coincidence. We were extremely fortunate that the man had used his bag to bash me. <<I can't thank you enough. Thanks to you, I'm still alive.>>

"No, you don't have to thank me." With a smile, she stroked my head. "It's what I wanted to do."

I felt a rush of shyness building up, and to cool my head, I looked at the ground and asked, <<Did you leave a note behind about how we captured that man?>>

"Yes. Since it might be good evidence, I also left all the remaining secondhand rista inside the manor."

She's way too honest... She could have snatched up a few for herself. They sound like they'd come in handy. But, well, I guess her earnest nature is one of her charms.

"Oh, not at all, I'm not really..." Jess mumbled as she looked away.

It's narration, remember? Please note that.

"Ah, sorry."

<<I don't mind. But could you be more careful next time?>>

She nodded. "I will."

Jess was *such* a sincere and good girl. I'd have trouble finding another woman who suited the titles "angel" and "goddess" more than her. "Self-centered" was a word I'd almost never associate with her, for example. She was always kind and strove to be genuine with everyone she met. Her inner beauty was radiant, overflowing from her adorable face and her delicate fingertips like a halo.

I glanced over at Jess, and she was looking down with a flush on her cheeks. She was likely doing her very best to ignore my narration. *Okay, I think I should stop teasing her.* <<That aside, I can't stress how much you helped me. Thanks to your prayer, my leg was cured as well.>>

I tried to walk around just a tad, and indeed, I had fully recovered from the injury during my tumble and bumble at the festival. *Urk. Bad memories, go away.*

Though her cheeks were still a rosy red, Jess covered her mouth with one hand and tried to stifle her laughter.

I narrowed my eyes at her. <<What? Got a problem with that? I danced with everything I had. Laughing at me is pure rudeness.>>

"I'm sorry, but..." She stifled a giggle. "It was just so funny."

A grin was a better look on her face than weariness. *I was happier looking at it too. I suppose I'll let her off the hook just this once.* <<That aside, where are we?>>

"We're in a forest."

<<Uh, yeah, I can tell from looking around.>>

Jess laughed, her eyes shimmering with amusement. "Sorry about that. We're located near a path that goes through the Dark Woodland, which is northeast of Kiltyrie. If we follow this path and leave the forest, we should see a few small villages, I think."

<<You don't sound like you're very confident about that... And I assume we're heading in the direction of the capital, right?>>

"Yes. If we keep heading north, we should eventually see the capital. It should be recognizable on sight, since I've heard it's built on a tall, conspicuous

mountain.”

<<Hold on... Does that mean you’ve never been there before?>>

“It’s all right. I’m sure we’ll reach there somehow!”

The way she’s putting it makes it sound like there’s a chance we might not make it... <<I see. Well, I’m growing peckish, so I think it’s about time we set off. Have you gotten enough rest?>>

“Yes!” Jess clenched her hands into fists and pumped them with determination. Though she tried to hide it, the fatigue on her face was seeping through.

<<Just for reference, how long will it take before we arrive at the nearest village? How far are we currently from Kiltyrie?>>

She hummed in thought. “I think we’ll arrive in another two or three horae. We’re already over halfway there, after all.”

<<How much is one “horae,” by the way?>>

“Oh, right. We call it ‘hora’ when singular, and one hora is... If you divide one day into twenty-four parts, one part is one hora.”

In other words, it was the same as the hour unit I knew. *That aside, I’m glad I managed to fish out the answer I hoped to get.* A simple calculation would clue me in on one truth—Jess must have walked for over three hours, dragging the cart I’d been lying on the whole time. No, she was literally dragged down by heavy baggage, so it might’ve taken her even longer. From what I could see, it was only roughly one hour after dawn. I’d been stabbed in the middle of the night. In other words, Jess had trudged on without rest since then. She’d barely gotten any sleep.

I focused my attention on my stature. My eye level was roughly even with Jess’s thighs. My back, therefore, should be a little higher than that. <<Hey, Jess, do you want to hitch a ride on my back?>>

Startled, she blinked. “Huh?”

She was a kind girl, so if I made that request in a straightforward way, she’d insist on walking with her own feet. Unfortunately for her, I’d already learned

how to manage this overly gentle soul. <<Tell you the truth, it's been a dream of mine since I was a child. I've always wanted a cute girl to straddle me like a horse with her bare legs pressing against me.>>

A little while later, I asked, <<We just follow this path all the way, right?>>

"Yes... Um, I think... That should be right..."

It'd only been three minutes since she'd climbed onto my back. But as she spoke, her voice was broken up by subdued panting, as if she was in pain.

Worriedly, I asked, <<What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?>>

"No, um... It's my first time riding on a pig, and... It's, um... Rubbing against me, and I'm ticklish..."

What exactly is the cause of the frict— Realization dawned on me. I panicked. <<You— For the love of the anime gods, what in the world are you doing?! Merlin's beard, don't sit like that!>>

I frantically sat down and lowered her onto the ground.

She blinked. "Am I...sitting in the wrong way?"

<<Yeah! Ack... Sorry, that was my bad. I should've been more thoughtful.>>

Jess and I sat face-to-face. The innocent maiden was placing her hand on the area between her thighs as she tried to steady her breathing. *Ugh, I feel horrible. I should've done everything I could to prevent this scenario... When a woman, especially a woman wearing a skirt, is straddling me—I mean, I don't think it should ever happen, but if she does—utmost care is necessary! How could I forget that?!*

"No, it's...all right. It's not to an unbearable extent." She shook her head. "It just...feels a little strange..."

Stop! Please, I'm begging you, no more! I wailed internally. *Don't sully the blissful moment between me and a beautiful maiden with a line that belongs in a porno doujin!*

<<Okay, let's see what we can do. When you're riding on me, try putting more of your weight on your hands, not your hips. Pigs are famous as good diggers,

so as you can see, my spine is extremely robust. Go ahead and put all your weight on your hands. I'll be fine.>>

After Jess climbed onto me again, I tried walking. <<Is it any better?>>

“Um... Your backbone is still... Mn...!”



I hurriedly stopped. No, the coarse backbone of a pig shouldn't be the one to guide this innocent maiden through her precious first time. There was a legend that cherry boys turned into wizards after the age of thirty, and if that rule remained true for the mages of this world, they wouldn't turn me into a human—I'd end up as gamja-tang.

<<If that's the case, try sitting a little farther back, right before my ham. Sandwich me tightly with your legs.>>

Jess shuffled backward and did exactly what I told her to. I started walking.

"Ah, you're right. I think I'm fine now."

I'd averted disaster by the skin of my teeth. *With this, we can finally—* My thoughts stopped abruptly, along with my feet.

I heard Jess's voice from above me. "Is something wrong?"

<<What...*is* that thing?>>

A little ahead of us to the right, there was an eerie animal at least two meters tall standing inside a grove. Its main body was covered with fuzzy black fur, and four disturbingly thin, long limbs stretched out from it. On top of its long neck—which was bald like an Andean condor's—sat a head that looked disproportionately small compared to the rest of its body. A pair of large black eyes were fixed on me. Its ears were like a bat's, and its snout was like a pig's. The uncanniest thing about the animal was how it swayed its body exaggeratedly from left to right at a constant rhythm, but its head remained still, as if it were fixed in place. It kept staring at us.

The mysterious beast swayed its body continuously like a pendulum of a broken clock. Seized by fear, I couldn't move, not even an inch.

"Ah, this is your first time encountering one of them, I see."

<<Of course! The hell is that thing? Is it going to attack us?>>

She must've sensed the tension in my muscles, because she gently stroked my back to sooth me. "It's all right. That's an animal we call a heckripon."

I swear I've heard that somewhere before... Oh. Didn't Kilins from the rista shop make the comment that my dance was like "a wounded heckripon"?

“You can just walk past it. It’s not going to do anything.”

Uh, you sure about that? But then again, it wouldn’t make sense for Jess to lie to me in this situation. I did exactly as I was told and walked on, ignoring it. The heckripon kept its gaze trained on us the entire time, but it didn’t make any moves. In fact, it didn’t even move one step from its spot.

After marching on single-mindedly for a while, I finally decided to comment, <<I’ve never seen an animal like that in the place where I’m from.>>

“Oh, I see. In Mesteria, they’re everywhere.”

<<*That thing is commonplace?*>> Most of the vegetation and animals I’d encountered in this world had seemed familiar to me so far, so I’d been under the impression that our ecosystem was identical. It seemed that I had to make amendments to that assumption.

“Heckripons are supposed to have suddenly started appearing right around the end of the Dark Ages. They eat plants and carrion, but will never attack animals. They are docile creatures. I mean, I can’t deny that there are countless peculiar rumors about them due to their odd habit of swaying their bodies, but I have never met anyone who has witnessed heckripons attacking other animals.”

<<Huh. Could you elaborate on the peculiar rumors?>>

Jess happily indulged me. “There are many different legends passed down in each region. Some say that heckripons are envoys of peace, while others say that they’re signs of a bad harvest. In one area, they see heckripons as auspicious symbols while in another, they are bearers of misfortune. Since there are so many conflicting rumors everywhere, it must mean that at the end of the day, the heckripons actually don’t do anything.”

<<You seem to be in high spirits when you talk about them.>>

“I am. I love history and folktales!”

<<I’ve got to admit that I’m a bit surprised.>>

“As a servant, it would be rude for us to be uncivilized when we’re attending to guests. That’s why I borrowed a bulky book about Mesteria’s history from

the Kiltyrin head. The more I read, the more hooked I was.”

<<That’s a good thing.>>

“Really? I’ve never told anyone else, but...” She paused. “Hearing you compliment my pastime kind of makes me happy.”

She’s a strange one, I remarked in my mind. I’d only commented that she had a good hobby, but I could hear the genuine joy in her voice.

“Do you have any hobbies too, Mister Pig?”

Watching slice-of-life anime and squealing at pretty girls like a pig. But I could never say that. <<Reading, I guess. Oh, and my newest obsession is tasting and comparing weeds.>>

“Does that mean you like stories where beautiful girls make an appearance?”

Uh, I think I’ve said many times to please ignore the narration. <<Do you know the mystery genre? I like stories that involve solving a mystery. You know, where seemingly insignificant pieces of evidence scattered throughout the story lead the reader to an unexpected truth. I like those.>>

“I never knew that such reading material existed! I want to read some too!”

<<I can’t guarantee that this genre exists in Mesteria, though. Well, we have a long journey ahead of us. I’ll tell you a few stories on the way.>>

“Oh, you would?! I can’t wait!”

When I had a conversation like this with her, it was clear that Jess was just an ordinary girl. Though she served a distinguished family, had a demanding job, could read minds, and was strikingly kind... If we took all of those out of the equation, she wasn’t that different from the average high school girl in my knowledge.

...No, sorry, I lied. My deepest apologies, my brethren. I was in an all boys’ school during middle and high school, and I’ve never had anything to do with the race known as high school girls. Allow me to amend my mistake.

“I’m just wondering, but you are very sharp, Mister Pig. Is it because you read these mystery books that you notice so many things?”

<<Maybe. And, well, I suppose I also have to thank my bad habit of picking at minor details.>> My nerdy persona in my mind pushed up the rim of his scary, shiny glasses. Hooray for theory-crafters.

“In that case...” Jess’s voice took on a lower tone. “I can’t hide anything from you, huh?”

<<Nah, that’s not the case. If you have your secrets, feel free to keep them. Just as you’re turning a blind eye to my monologue that doesn’t have angle brackets, I won’t probe into matters that you don’t want me to know. Everyone has a right to privacy, and we should respect it.>>

For example, she’d avoided mentioning to me that she’d purchased a black rista a little while before she’d met me. Though she would never return to House Kiltyrin after her departure, she’d claimed that it was only “an errand.” There were a lot of other unanswered questions I had, but they were likely things that I didn’t need to know.

“Um... I can answer that.”

<<What question do you mean?>>

I felt Jess’s hands, pressed against my back, shuffle slightly. “I can tell you the reason this journey is a one-way trip.”

<<You mean...the reason why you won’t return to House Kiltyrin once you arrive at the capital?>>

“Well, I suppose you can say that, yes.”

<<Are you going to serve another household?>>

“No, not quite.”

What’s going on, then?

The silence stretched on for a while. Jess seemed to be collecting her thoughts, and while waiting for her, I pondered about the matter. Now that I’d received confirmation that the “errand” was a lie, I had to question everything she’d said. For example, was the capital truly her destination? She knew that I couldn’t turn back into a human unless I went to the capital, and there was a chance she’d lied so that I wouldn’t feel guilty about making her come along.

This was Jess we were talking about. I wouldn't be surprised. Back then, she'd concluded that it might be fate and had left it at that, but could such a convenient coincidence really exist? If it wasn't, then... *Hmm... No, I know way too little about this world.* I couldn't deduce the goal of Jess's journey with only the materials I had at the moment.

"I *am* going to the capital. I wasn't lying."

She seemed to be doing her best to select what she would say and what she wouldn't. I should place my faith in her.

If she wasn't lying about her trip to the capital at such a convenient time, it would mean that our encounter was indeed a fateful one. *Yeah, I can accept that. I mean, I'm not complaining. In fact, it's exactly what I want. Burhue hue hue.*

In that case, what was her goal? She wasn't going to serve another household. Why was she going to the capital, then?

That was when I recalled one fact that had seemed unnatural. *Some of you might have thought it was strange too, my brethren.* After healing me last night, Jess had left the farm without waiting for me to wake up. She'd then likely walked for over three hours inside a forest. She was in such a rush that she'd moved me, an unconscious, heavy pig, onto a cart and dragged me after her.

Was her business urgent, then? No, that wouldn't make sense. Jess had said that she was scheduled to leave in the morning. Why would she rush out in the middle of the night? Was she...running away from something? If she was, what exactly was chasing her? Was it the scarred man we'd locked up in the warehouse? No, the chances of that were low.

Okay. So far, we know that she has to go to the capital, isn't serving another household, and is running away from something. Running away... I was reminded of a certain term I'd heard in the back alley: Yethma hunters.

"But I'm asking them to kill an employed Yethma! No one would accept such a job."

The keyword was "employed." In other words, they would kill Yethma that weren't employed.

Wait. Hang on. My mind churned frantically. Jess isn't employed right now, is she? She's in a forest that might hide danger at every corner, but she isn't wearing a corset with the Kiltyrin crest.

My thoughts were scrambled, but my mind continued its analysis. I fell silent.

No. Stop. Jess didn't want to tell me, and she must have a good reason. Snooping into her business is bad. Bloodcurdling possibilities are popping up in my brain, but even the thought of putting them into words is terrifying. Let's stop here.

I felt Jess's fingers grip tightly onto my back. "Mister Pig, um... Can you promise me something? Can you promise that you'll still go to the capital with me even after my explanation?"

<<Of course. If I don't go, I'll be a pig for the rest of my life.>>

"Ah... Right." She inhaled deeply. "Okay, I think I'm ready. I have the resolve to tell you the truth."

<<I see. I've also braced myself for whatever you're about to say. No matter what I hear, I won't be scared or have second thoughts. Don't worry.>>

Jess breathed in and out slowly several times. Finally, she said, "I'm heading to the capital to present my very being as an offering to the royal court. If I don't manage it, I will die on the way there."

...What?

Jess's voice had lost its soft and gentle quality. "That is the destiny of Yethma. In Mesteria, after their sixteenth birthday, Yethma will leave the household they serve and journey to the capital by themselves. That is the rule. Most Yethma lose their lives during the journey. The Yethma who manage to reach the capital will never return to their original workplace for the rest of their lives."

...What?

I sucked in a deep breath. *Calm down. Calm. Down.* <<What's...in store for you when you reach the capital?>>

"No one knows. The capital is completely isolated from the rest of the world,

and no one has any knowledge of its interior. But..." She hesitated. "There are all kinds of rumors, and they all have one thing in common—the Yethma who overcome their trial will be treated with respect and hospitality. I personally think the theory that Yethma will serve the capital until the day they die is the most plausible."

I was speechless.

"You found it strange that I left the manor as if someone were chasing me, didn't you? I can answer that now. You see, the silver collar I'm wearing, it's...it's infused with an incredible amount of mana and can fetch a handsome price. This collar is protected by magic, and unless someone cuts off my head, they can't remove it from me."

I took a sidelong glance at Jess, who was riding on my back. I stared at the bulky collar of tarnished silver that gleamed with a dull light around her neck. There weren't any joints or openings. Unless someone deformed it by force, they couldn't take it off. At least, that was how it looked.

"And...parts of a Yethma's body fetch a fair price as well, like our bones. From the moment the capital pays House Kiltyrin compensation money, I am no longer the servant of House Kiltyrin. And...the moment I lose my status, I will be a target of Yethma hunters, who make a living off killing us."

I was at a loss for words. I could only stare at her as she sucked in a deep breath.

"Of course, everyone in House Kiltyrin is compassionate and kind, so they would never think of selling me and turning me into money. But I ended up telling Mister Kilins that today is my departure day. Mister Kilins is also a wonderful man, and I'm certain that he wouldn't do that either, but sometimes information spreads in the most unexpected ways. That's why I distanced myself from the manor as much as possible and took cover in the forest."

What the hell is wrong with this world?

Jess's voice was shaking. "I... Do you regret making that promise, Mister Pig? Are you going to say you're not going with me after all?" Her hands were shaking too.

You're a man, darn it. Get a grip. <<How could I ever go back on my word?>>

Her trembling stopped.

I continued, <<How can anyone abandon such a girl in need? Do I look like someone who's heartless enough to sit back and watch as this twisted world harms a kind, gentle girl like you, Jess? Let's go to the capital together. I'm nothing more than a mere pig—I can't wield a sword or sorcery, but I'll squeeze my wisdom dry and protect you with everything I have. You're not getting rid of me, we're together until the bitter end. Until the moment you step foot inside the capital, I'll be right here, joined at the hip with you and stuck to your thighs. Just like this.>>

I waited for Jess's reply. I'd tried to sound smooth, but I might have blown it.

"Please detach from me when I'm going to the bathroom, though," Jess finally said. Then, I heard a small chuckle.

She's such a strong girl. Stronger than I ever imagined, I thought. When she was with me yesterday, she'd smiled as if nothing was wrong, even though her cruel, heartless fate was looming over her like a guillotine. She'd feigned indifference, hiding her secret from me all this time, thinking that I might get scared and run away. Thinking that I might be intimidated by her destiny and abandon her—

No. That's not it.

<<I think...I've figured out the reason I appeared in your pigsty yesterday.>>

"You...have?" There was a hint of unease in her voice.

<<Yeah. It's not just your destiny, Jess; it was mine too. My mission is to head to the capital with you and to turn back into a human with the help of the mages there. That's probably why I ended up in your pigsty on the day before your departure—it was all a part of fate's plan for us.>>

Tension eased out of Jess's hands. "Yes."

<<We're tied together by one destiny, Jess. Until the capital, at least, we'll always be here for each other.>>

"Yes!" Jess said in a nasal voice. I heard her sniffing.

I hardened my resolve and made an oath to myself. Until we arrived in the capital, I would be Jess's reliable partner no matter what was in store.

And quietly, in another corner of my mind, I told myself that I must never let her on about...a certain something.

From what I learned from Jess, it was unlikely for Yethma hunters to enter this forest, so I told her to lay on my back and get some sleep. Like a duvet hanging out to dry, her cheeks and chest were pressed right against my back. Meanwhile, I followed the straight path like she'd told me to.

Jess seemed exhausted—even when I couldn't keep my back as steady as I wanted to, she was sound asleep. And while she was unconscious, I could let my thoughts run free. It was my opportunity to indulge in dirty daydreams, but I wasn't in the mood for that at all. I had to come up with a strategy in preparation for our inevitable encounter with Yethma hunters.

It was obvious from their title that they were professionals who hunted down sixteen-year-old Yethma during their journey to the capital. Therefore, their "hunting grounds" were likely the area around the capital. Yethma would depart from all over the nation, but they all shared a common destination, so waiting for their prey near the capital would save a lot of unnecessary effort. That was why Jess had assumed that this forest, which was a long way off, was relatively safe. The latter half of our journey would be more perilous than the first—as we got closer to our goal, the danger level would spike exponentially.

Yethma hunters would definitely patrol areas that Yethma were likely to pass by on their journey. Therefore, we could just pick a route that was most unusual for a Yethma. Our second-biggest problem was her silver collar that displayed her status. It was protected by some kind of spell, and she'd said that we couldn't remove it unless we severed her head. She had to hide it somehow, and fast.

The problem, however, was that any Yethma with a bit of critical thinking would come up with such simple measures, which meant that Yethma hunters likely anticipated them as well. I had the feeling we were at the crossroads of fate, and the strategies we came up with while keeping that in mind would

decide our outcome.

Jess's weapons were her extensive knowledge of history and a thinking pig's wits. And likely, we could add marginally respectable funds to the list. That was probably all. We had to use them in the most effective ways to rebel against her cruel destiny. Then, once we safely arrived in the capital, I was going to grill the so-called great king for at least an hour until I was satisfied. Why was he imposing such a harsh trial on the Yethma—on Jess? Why wouldn't he let them live in peace? Didn't his guilty conscience haunt him after establishing such a society?

My blood was boiling with a sense of duty. I'd never been so passionate before in my entire life. Likely, my liver was heating up from raw to smoking, and I was ready to fry someone's bacon. For the sake of the innocent girl sleeping on my back, I would do everything within my power and beyond.

Think, pig. There's still time.

After about two hours of walking, we arrived in a small village. Well, it was more like a row of snug log houses lining the sides of a narrow path, but there were a few shops and a handful of people walking around. It looked like they'd carved out an area inside the forest to make the village, and tall coniferous trees stood right behind the houses like a wall. Perhaps due to its location, a gloomy atmosphere hung over the village. Though it was noon, it was a cloudy day, and the area was dim.

I woke Jess before entering the village with her.

<<Jess, do you have something like a scarf by any chance?>>

In response to my question, Jess began rummaging through her leather bag. "Hmm, no, I don't. Why do you ask?"

<<The silver collar you're wearing is, well, a defining trait of Yethma, right? If we hide it, you can hide your identity, and we might be able to deceive some pursuers.>>

"Oh!" She gasped. "You're right."

Uh. I think I need to keep a close eye on her, huh... <<You have money, right?

You didn't buy the rista, so you should have around two hundred gold on hand.>>

"Yes, thanks to you."

<<A scarf isn't that expensive, right?>>

She nodded. "At most, it would be three or four gold, I think."

<<Well then, how about we buy one?>>

"Let's!" For some reason, Jess looked delighted as she replied. She began turning her head back and forth, surveying the area. "Ah, found one! There's a clothing store here. Let's take a look." She promptly began walking.

I followed her until we were right in front of the shop, but that was when I halted my steps. <<Hey, is it okay for me to walk in?>>

"It's all right. Look." She gestured at the entrance, where some muddy men were walking through. They brought a large white dog with them. "Come on, let's head in."

Why does she look like she's a little excited? I thought in the back of my mind as I entered with her.

Brightly colored wood lined the interior of the shop, and warm lantern light enhanced its cozy atmosphere. Though the clothing wasn't in every color of the rainbow like in modern Japan, there was a rich variety of garments in natural hues on display.

<I found the scarf section!>

Jess pointed at a shelf by the window. Rough-hewn wooden bust sculptures lined the shelf, and fabric coiled around their neck areas. Even someone like me, who was completely out of my depth in the fashion world, could tell that it was the scarf department.

<Which one will look good on me? What do you think?>

She looked at the merchandise with eyes so bright that they were almost sparkling. At this moment, she seemed no different from an ordinary sixteen-year-old girl.

<<If someone can tell that you've got something around your neck from a distance, it might actually make you stand out even more as a Yethma that's possibly trying to hide your collar. It's probably best if you choose something close to skin color.>>

<Oh... You're right, I'm sorry...>

Jess widened her eyes, as if she'd been startled awake from a dream. She started comparing her skin and the fabric available.

I stared at her in silence.

Ugh! I'm so useless! Don't let your otaku social debuff drag you down like this! You just went and poured cold water on her precious excitement, ruining the mood beyond repair! If you were in my shoes, my brethren, what would you do...?

<<No, wait,>> I said immediately. Then, I started coming up with an argument. <<Actually, if you choose a scarf that's close to skin color, you'd seem even more suspicious up close. I take back my statement. Let's pick the one that looks the best on you, Jess.>>

<Really? In that case, please choose one for me, Mister Pig!>

Whew. Looks like it's finally my time to shine, aye? A big round of applause to contestant Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin, everybody! He's been single since he was in his mother's womb, but now, it's time for him to demonstrate his true abilities—using his abundant knowledge of chino pants and check shirts, he will select the perfect scarf for a beautiful sixteen-year-old maiden with golden hair!

A moment of silence, will you please, while our connoisseur makes his selection.

Silence.

<...>

No matter which one I imagined Jess wearing, she looked gorgeous in my mind. Right now, she was wearing a light blue dress. A scarf in the blue category would blend in very well if someone looked at her from afar. However, picking the exact same color was clearly a tasteless choice. In that case...

<<What do you think about the light green one over there? It's a bit bluish.>>

<Do you mean this one in the color of a crystal clear and slightly shallow lake?
>

I could probably never hope to come up with such profound descriptions in my entire life. <<Yeah.>>

Jess held up the scarf to her neck.

<How does that look? Does it suit me?>

Well, well. Not a bad choice at all! <<Yep, I think it looks good on you.>>

<Yay! Thank you! I'll go ahead and purchase it.>

With a spring in her step, Jess headed to the other side of the store. She finished buying the scarf without incident, came back to my side, and guided me outside. As I walked, a young man with blond hair caught my attention. He had a dog with him, and he seemed to be looking at us.

Outside the shop, Jess promptly put on the scarf. *Okay, one thing down, that's good.* But now, another problem arose—both Jess and I were famished. Therefore, we decided to stop by the local inn despite it being the middle of the day. It was apparently the only inn in this village. The building was a sight to behold, built with dark timber and coated with white plaster. It also served as a pub.

Jess called out, "Excuse me, is anyone there?"

In response, a chubby woman who looked to be in her fifties came out from the back of the inn. Her ginger locks were curly, and there was a healthy shade of red on her puffy cheeks. She seemed like the jovial type.

"Why hello there, young miss," the woman greeted. "You look like you're drained after a rough journey. You must be starving!"

"Yes, I'm hungry," Jess said sheepishly.

"Ceres!" The woman called out. "Fetch a steamed towel and a simple meal for our guest!"

"Yes, madam! Right away, madam!" a shrill voice replied.

A moment later, a slim blonde girl—who looked around twelve or thirteen—came out from the back of the establishment. The silver collar around her neck told me that she was a Yethma. Her hair was trimmed to a short length. She had large eyes, and the color of her lips was a light pastel shade. She seemed even more ethereal and delicate than Jess.

Jess smiled sweetly and bowed at Ceres. Ceres returned a deep bow of her own before she swiftly disappeared into the back of the establishment.

“Young miss,” the woman turned around and addressed Jess, “if you want to get anywhere from here, whether it be crossing the valley or heading to Kiltyrie on the other side of the forest, it’ll be night by the time you arrive. How does staying here for the night sound? A meal here is three golt, and if you want a room, it’ll be ten golt on top of that. As for feed for your pig over there, two golt will be enough.”

Jess nodded. “I will be in your care. Fifteen golt, right?” She rummaged through her bag and paid the woman.

While that was going on, Ceres came back with a light brown piece of cloth. Steam was rising out of it. She offered it to Jess and said, “Here. Please use this.”

“Go on, wipe your face, young miss.” The woman nodded encouragingly. “Having all that mud on your beautiful face is such a waste.”

“My...! Thank you for your kindness.” Jess accepted the cloth and wiped her face. The woman stared at Jess intently.

Something doesn’t seem right. Slightly alarmed, I observed the movement of the woman’s eyes. But my realization came too late.

As Jess moved to wipe her neck, her silver collar peeked out from the covering of her scarf. The woman looked exasperated as she raised an eyebrow. “Did you come from Kiltyrie, Miss Yethma?”

I whipped my head up. <<Jess, don’t—>>

But before I could warn her, Jess nodded without a shred of caution and said, “Yes.”

The woman curled her lips into a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I see, I see. Heading to the capital, are we?"

"Yes, I am."

How can she be so careless? The next moment, however, it hit me. *Right, Jess can read minds. If that lady had any malicious plans for us, I'm sure that Jess would act more panicked. That being said, I mustn't blindly trust Jess's abilities.* Jess was an unbelievably soft person, so there was a chance that she hadn't managed to see through the woman's true colors. For example, even though a depraved otaku had squealed and grunted "cutie-pie Jess" at point-blank range, she'd let it pass with a smile.

I kept my guard up and scrutinized our surroundings. The exits I could see were the front door we'd just entered from and the door that led to the annexed pub. If anything happened, we could probably escape from either of them. Judging by the woman's physique, she wouldn't chase us. Then, I scanned the area for anything we could repurpose as weapons or obstacles—and that was when I spotted an object that made alarm bells ring in my head.

A Yethma collar was on display. Two swords adorned the wall, overlapping to form an "X" shape. A silver collar sat at the intersection, almost like a rubber band tying the two together. It was impossible to remove the silver collar unless someone cut off the head of its Yethma owner. Which meant that...

<<Jess, we gotta get out of here. There's a pair of swords decorating the wall, and there's a Yethma collar on them.>>

That caught Jess's attention. She looked at me, then followed my line of sight. Soon, the swords and collar entered her vision. Color drained from her face, and she immediately started running—or at least, that was what I thought would happen. However...

<Don't worry.>

That was all she said to me before she turned back to the woman. With a solemn expression on her face, she asked, "I see a collar over there. Who did it belong to?"

Sorrow filled the woman's eyes. "There was a Yethma named Eise, and she

used to wear it. She was Ceres's—ah, that's the girl you saw just now—predecessor, and she used to work here."

Huh? What in the world is going on?

"Oh... I'm so sorry for your loss. Where did Miss Eise pass away?"

The woman beckoned Jess with her hand and guided the girl to a table in the pub. I was completely lost, but I trotted after them. Jess took a seat, and the woman sat down with a thud on the seat across her.

The woman looked right into Jess's eyes as she began her tale. "To tell you the truth, Eise didn't leave for the capital at all. It happened five years ago. You see, we used to give shelter to Yethma who turned sixteen and help them take refuge inside our convent."

"Are you referring to Baptsaze's convent, perhaps?" Jess asked.

Eyes widening, the woman said, "Oh, you've heard of us? That's right, Baptsaze is this village's name."

"I never realized..." Jess hesitated. "I used to serve House Kiltyrin, you see. I remember hearing about the incident in a settlement not too far away, and though I was young, I still remember my shock after hearing about it."

"My, my! So you were House Kiltyrin's Yethma. My goodness..."

This was when Ceres walked in with a plate with brown bread, vegetables, and cheese in one hand and a bowl of various mixed vegetables in the other. She placed the plate in front of Jess, then crouched down to set the bowl of vegetables down in front of me. With a radiant smile, Jess voiced her thanks. In response, Ceres returned a stiff smile and bowed.

The woman addressed Ceres. "Did you hear that, Ceres? She was House Kiltyrin's Yethma, apparently. Hey, take a seat and join us."

Hearing that, Ceres sat down on a chair right next to me. As a result, the slender, aesthetic, snow-white legs of a young maiden were presented before me. Beautiful curves extended from her delicate Achilles tendon to her tender calves. The crease on the back of her knee had a hint of pink, almost like a flower petal. *Wowoink! Spigtacular!*

And then I saw Ceres looking at me with a shocked expression. *Yikes*. I immediately began meditating. The power to read minds wasn't unique to Jess—it was a characteristic of the Yethma race.

I'm a pig. I'm a pig. I'm a pig.

Out of courtesy, Jess took a nibble of her bread before she asked the woman, "If this village is Baptsaze, then... Did Miss Eise pass away in the fire?"

"Nope, she was seized and taken away by Yethma hunters. They must have done unspeakable things to her until the moment they decided to finish her off..." The woman sighed.

Jess sounded surprised. "How did the collar end up here, then?"

"One of our huntsmen snatched it back from those Yethma hunters. Our village takes pride in it. That's why we've transformed it into a silver crest on display."

"I see..."

Their conversation kept flowing, and I was still struggling to keep up. One thing was clear, however—the collar exhibit wasn't malicious. It actually seemed to be evidence that reassured Jess that this woman was trustworthy.

And now, I had too much spare time and too little to do. Since there didn't seem to be any better options, I munched on my vegetables and waited for time to pass. I could detect the scent of dirt and mud, but it wasn't unpalatable. Perhaps my sense of taste had also become more similar to that of a pig.

In the corner of my eye, I noticed Ceres staring at me with a bewildered look in her eyes. I began my meditation once again. *Grass yummy. Grass yummy. Grass yummy.*

The conversation went on for a while. At one point, Jess expressed interest in visiting the convent. Since she was in the vicinity, she wanted to see it for herself, or so she claimed. The woman mentioned that there was a clean spring near the convent and suggested that Jess wash her pig while she was there. Not only that, but she even offered to assign Ceres as our guide since there wasn't much work during the day.

After Jess polished off her meal, we departed from the inn. We would travel to the convent on foot.

The convent was apparently slightly uphill on the outskirts of the village. A most peculiar ragtag group consisting of Jess, Ceres, and a pig weaved a line across the terraced fields as we headed towards the mountain.

Ceres, who was in the lead, turned around and looked at Jess quizzically. “Um, Miss Jess, is that pig a friend of yours?”

“Yes.” Jess nodded. “It might sound unbelievable, but he’s actually a nineteen-year-old man.”

Hi, I’m a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin. Nice ta meetcha.

Ceres looked startled. “Huh? He’s...a human?”

“He is. We don’t know how he transformed into a pig either... We were hoping to ask a noble mage to turn him back when we arrive at the capital.”

“I see...” Ceres trailed off. “I *did* think he was an odd pig, because he thought various...*things* when he looked at my legs. It all makes sense now.”

Hearing that, Jess puffed out her cheeks slightly and looked at me. “So everyone is the same to you, Mister Pig.”

I’m deeply ashamed of my behavior, I thought contritely. From now on, I’ll survive solely by admiring Jess’s legs.

Jess giggled. In her hand was a bouquet of wildflowers she’d picked along the way.

In the middle of our journey through the fields, Jess had told me about the convent in Baptsaze. One night, the convent, which had secretly been a shelter for sixteen-year-old Yethma, had suddenly gone up in roaring flames. To this day, the cause was unknown. The fire had been so abrupt, so fierce, that many Yethma had been burned alive. The few who had managed to escape weren’t spared a cruel fate either. Yethma hunters had appeared without warning, assaulting the survivors, who disappeared along with them. This was a summary of an incident that had happened five years ago.

When knowledge of the incident had spread among the public, the citizens of

this nation started a rumor that divine punishment had befallen the Yethma that had tried to escape their duty. Meanwhile, the villagers that had given refuge to the Yethma had been spared from all blame and criticism. The reason behind that, apparently, was that it was natural for a human with a heart to show compassion towards Yethma who were facing such a harsh trial, even though the latter were mere servants... I'd been speechless when I had heard that.

Jess had explained that she wanted to see the site of the disastrous incident with her own eyes, and to leave flowers as offerings.

We soon arrived at the beginning of a woodland path. Though I couldn't see it yet, if we went a little farther up the path, we would arrive at the ruins of the convent, according to Ceres.

But this was when we were interrupted by a clinking noise behind us. I turned around.

There stood a tall youth with short blond hair. He seemed like he was the same age as me, or perhaps a tad younger. Elegant double eyelids hooded his eyes, and his chiseled nose had an attractive high bridge. He was a striking, handsome hunk who would make people turn heads in the streets.

My gaze flowed down to his clothing. High leather boots. Beige trousers with thin fabric. A white shirt left unbuttoned, revealing his collarbones and part of his chest. Around it was a celadon green vest. A thick belt was wrapped around his waist, and two shortswords hung down from it.

"Where are you going, Ceres?" he asked in a somewhat brusque voice. "Two girls, alone in a place like this? That's dangerous."

I immediately realized he was the man who had looked at us near the clothes shop.

Ceres bowed slightly in greeting. "Hello, Mister Naut."

The surly, handsome guy, Naut, jabbed his finger in Jess's direction. "Oi, Ceres, this girl's a Yethma on her way to the capital, isn't she? What, are you going to take her sightseeing at the convent or something?"

"Um, that's not it..." Jess spoke up meekly. "I was thinking about leaving some

flowers there.”

Handsome shifted his gaze to the bouquet in Jess’s hand. His eyes trailed up to Jess’s face and stopped there. His long eyes, framed by long lashes, widened a fraction. Redness crept onto his cheeks.

You’ve got to be kidding me, is this guy still going through puberty or something? I know Jess is adorable, adorable, and even more adorable, but falling head over heels at first sight is so pathetic! You’re with me on this, aren’t you, my brethren? I understand attraction, but falling madly in love with a girl you’ve only known for seconds is something only hormonal teens would do!

“So you want to make a pilgrimage to a memorial site and leave your prayers there, I see. I can accept that. But that scarf is out of the question.” Handsome, who was grating on my nerves, narrowed his eyes. “You’re practically telling everyone that you’re hiding your collar. Take it off.”

“Oh, um...” Jess looked hesitant. “I’m not sure what else I can do, though.”

Handsome marched up to Jess and took out a cream-colored piece of cloth. “Wrap this around your collar. It’ll look like skin from afar.”

“But...wouldn’t it be conspicuous up close? They’d realize I have a collar with one look.”

“The most important thing is to throw people off your trail while they’re still at a distance. I’m not saying this for your sake—Ceres might get dragged into danger as well. Listen to me and wear this instead.”

I wanted to hiss at him, “Who do you think you are, ordering her around like that?” But I was a mere pig. I could only watch as Jess took off her scarf. The Naut guy had the *nerve* to wrap his piece of cloth around Jess’s collar like a bandage with his own hands!

I have to say, he was pretty lucky he had a piece of cloth in the right size and color on hand. Wait, hold that thought... A certain possibility occurred to me. Yeah, it’s way too convenient. Why would anyone in their right mind carry an item like that around without good reason? Why did he come all the way here to begin with? Did he see Jess purchase the scarf in the shop, then stalk us ever since then?

<Oh, what do I do, Mister Pig?>

Jess had read my thoughts and spoke directly to my mind. She seemed nervous.

<<He's armed. We won't stand a chance if we fight him head-on. In that case...>> I turned to Ceres.

The young girl in question seemed to have caught on to my wariness, and she jumped slightly in surprise.

<Um, Mister Naut isn't a bad man!> Ceres chimed in through telepathy. <He's a wonderful person, so please trust him.>

<I see! Okay, I will!> Jess replied.

<<Time out. Jess, it's too early to place your faith in him.>> As I spoke, I stole a glance at this Naut guy, who was going out of his way to help Jess wear the cloth. I had no clue what his intentions were, and his cheeky attitude was a thorn digging into my side, but he didn't seem to have too much malice towards Jess.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. <<Then again, innocent until proven guilty, as the saying goes. How about this? We'll keep my identity secret from him. I'll observe this guy and inform you immediately if he ever seems like he'll put you in danger, Jess.>>

<That's a great idea,> Jess replied. <Let's go with that.>

<<Can I count on your assistance, cutie-pie Ceres?>>

<Cutie...pie...> Ceres repeated slowly.

<<The moment he proves himself trustworthy, we'll reveal my identity right away,>> I promised. <<So could you treat me as a mere pig too, Ceres?>>

<In that case... Yes, sir!> Ceres replied.

Ceres turned to face Naut. Seeing him lean forward and approach Jess's neck, Ceres averted her gaze awkwardly. Jess, on the other hand, widened her eyes slightly at the younger girl. *Hmm.*

Naut finally leaned away, nodding to himself. "That should be better. You're

heading to the convent, right? I'll be your guard. Follow my lead." Without another word, Naut walked ahead of us, his shortswords clattering with his movement.

"Let's hurry along," Ceres said, before doing exactly that.

Jess and I followed immediately, with me in the rear. I stared at Jess's legs as I climbed the mountain trail. Unlike cutie-pie Ceres, dirt and dust clung to her legs, but it did little to hide the beauty of her skin. Perhaps because Jess was undergoing puberty, where she developed her secondary sexual characteristics, the contour of her legs was a little softer and fuller compared to cutie-pie Ceres. Both were gifts from heaven itself, but if I had to choose, Jess's form was more to my liking. With every step she took, her calf muscles would shift and flex. Her tender skin relaxed and contracted in accordance with her muscles. *Good, belly good.* That being said, through a new lens of dynamic and functional elegance, cutie-pie Ceres's legs were a worthwhile exhibit to admire. The movement of her muscles might be easier to distinguish than Jess's legs.

This is when Jess's thoughts cut into my mind.

<Um, Mister Pig, I have to remind you that Miss Ceres can pick up every single word of those thoughts...>

I reflected upon my actions and felt remorse. When there were two narration patrollers in the vicinity, the mood was kind of awkward, as if I were a deranged pervert everyone had to skirt carefully around. *Living in another world is unexpectedly tough, huh?*

Not long after, we arrived at the convent. Halfway up the mountainside was a flat clearing on a ledge, and the building seemed to have been built here with its back to a steep cliff that was almost perpendicular to the ground. I wrote "seemed" because the building was utterly ruined—only the floor and a part of the walls were left as rubble. It seemed to have been a stone building. *Can normal fire do this much destruction to a stone structure?*

"We're here," Naut said curtly. "You over there—that reminds me, I don't know your name yet."

Jess responded to his rudeness with a bow. "My name is Jess. Pleased to

make your acquaintance.”

“I see. You’ve arrived. What now?”

“Well...” Jess hesitated. “I would like to take a look at the building first. May I enter the establishment?”

Naut shrugged. “As you can see, there’s barely anything left, not even leftover walls. There isn’t much to see, but do what you want.”

“Thank you very much.”

I followed Jess into the convent’s remains. It’d completely slipped my attention because I’d only had eyes for her legs, but Jess had coiled the scarf she’d removed around her left wrist. It didn’t look very practical, but I supposed it made for a nice fashion accessory. *That aside, the cream-colored fabric bandage thing on her collar looks so...tacky and awkward.* It seemed that Handsome had no sense of fashion whatsoever. But then again, I was the pot calling the kettle black here. Furthermore, if we didn’t take his personality into account, the guy had the kind of good-looking face that would make any clothes look stylish on him, so I supposed he didn’t really need any. *Grrr.*

Jess pressed her left hand against the crumbling stone wall while placing her right hand, holding the bouquet, against her chest. In silence, she slowly walked around the ruins.

The convent ceiling hadn’t survived at all. On the walls—damaged to the point that they didn’t retain any of the original shape—were black marks and signs of spalling, as if they’d been burned by an intense inferno. That seemed odd to me—the convent had been made of stone. Did it really have enough flammable material to fuel such a fire? At the same time, the thought that Jess’s kin had been burned to death here only five years ago made my heart seize up. For a moment, I didn’t know how to breathe.

Eventually, Jess left the bouquet gingerly on one corner of the wall. She remained crouching down as she closed her eyes and prayed.

When we left the ruin site, we found Ceres and Naut waiting for us.

Naut asked, “Are you done?”

Hearing that, Jess started surveying our surroundings. “Um, I heard that there was a spring nearby.”

“Huh. Do you want a bath or something?”

I fixed my death glare on the man. *Eager, are we? Looking forward to something spicy, hm? Are you a lowlife pig?*

Jess shook her head. “No, I was thinking about washing Mister Pig.”

“I see. It’s right there. Let’s go.” Naut took a step forward.

But then, without warning, he halted his footsteps. He reached into a small pocket on his vest and retrieved two tiny red rista. Jess and Ceres also froze. Naut inserted a rista into the hilt of each shortsword, unfastened the weapons, then took one into each hand.

What is he planning? Is he going to kill Jess with his blades? I thought, alarmed. *No, if he were, he’d lead us away from his acquaintance first. But just in case...* I swiftly wedged myself between Jess and Naut.

Naut opened his mouth to speak. “Ceres, make sure Jess and the pig stay still.”

A blink of an eye, and his swords were drawn from their scabbards. The shortsword in his left hand was thrust forcefully into the ground while he swiftly swung the right sword above his head. Two loud whooshing sounds echoed out, and somewhere a little in the distance, fire and a cloud of dust flared into existence on the ground.

I looked at the fire site and saw a lone heckripon, which made an agile leap back to evade the fire. Not a second after it landed, Naut launched a crescent-shaped flame from his right shortsword, sending it flying towards the heckripon at a speed that rivaled an arrow. *He must have predicted where it’d jump.*

The heckripon soared like a camel cricket and nimbly dodged the fire projectile. As it moved, Naut pulled out his shortsword from the ground with his left hand and charged forward like a rampant bull. He whipped his left arm up in the direction of the cliff and closed the distance between himself and the heckripon.

The moment the heckripon's feet touched ground, it was welcomed by a hail of rocks and pebbles—a fire projectile from Naut's left shortsword had smashed a good chunk out of the cliff. Naut ran under the cover of sand and dust, and in the next moment, he was face-to-face with the beast.

The last thing I saw before the veil of dust draped over the scene was two bright, crimson trails left by his blades.

When the dust finally cleared away, I saw the heckripon collapsed on the ground next to Naut. Its bald, bat-like head had been lopped off, and a large, gaping gash split open its black body.

And it had only been roughly ten seconds since Naut had started moving.

Naut allowed his hands, still armed with his shortswords, to dangle casually on both sides of his body as he approached us unhurriedly. The blades shone brightly like a flickering fire, and the copious, dripping scarlet blood was transformed into smoke instantaneously. Once the light subsided, the shortswords regained their metallic luster. Naut then proceeded to sheathe his weapons.

Jess placed a hand on her mouth. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Naut.



“Sorry, I must’ve given you a shock just now,” Naut said, then aimed a dark smile at Jess. “It’s a policy of mine to kill every heckripon I see.”

This guy’s nuts! According to Jess, though heckripons were creepy, they were completely harmless to humans. But this man had slaughtered one without hesitation, as if he were venting his anger on it, and he’d been so proficient that he might as well be a professional heckripon hunter.

I had a friend who held a grudge the size of Mount Everest against mosquitoes, and that guy had made it a point to kill every single one on sight. *That reminds me, I remember him saying something like, “Whenever I see a flying mosquito, I chop at the air to weaken it with the resulting change in air pressure—wind, basically—before stamping it on my feet with all my might. That way, I can end it for sure. Only an amateur would think they’d have any luck crushing those pests by clapping their hands aimlessly in the air.”*

My friend was a veteran—he would detect a mosquito biting him instantly, and the next moment, it’d be reduced to a flattened smear on his skin. If I remembered right, he had a constitution that was particularly attractive to mosquitoes. Hatred made people stronger. Did Naut have some kind of vendetta against the harmless heckripon, perhaps?

Wearing an aloof face, Naut led us to the spring as if nothing had happened. The spring was about the size of a large, shared bath at a traditional Japanese inn. Crystal clear water gushed forth from the bottom, rippling the surface incessantly.

Jess retrieved a small brush with hard bristles from her bag, removed all coverings from her feet, and walked into the spring. Using clean water, she started brushing and cleaning my skin. At the moment, the climate here was similar to the summers I’d experienced in Japan. This cool water was just the right temperature. It felt pleasant against my skin.

The amount of force Jess used as she brushed me was also superb. *Listen to this, my brethren. Have you ever taken off your clothes, laid bare before a sixteen-year-old maiden, and had the luxury of her washing your body gently? Heh, probably not. You poor souls. Ultimately, you guys have it worse than a mere pig.*

This was when Jess spoke into my mind.

<I owe you a big thank-you, Mister Pig. You walked all the way while I was sleeping.>

She stroked my head.

<<I'm only returning the favor.>>

<No. In my case, I needed to leave as quickly as I could, and my only choice was to carry you along. It's different for you. You didn't have to, but you wanted me to get some sleep, so—>

I interrupted her. <<You've got the wrong idea.>>

<Really?>

<<I only wanted to be sandwiched between your soft thighs, cutie-pie Jess.>>

She chuckled. <Okay, if you say so.>

I felt someone's gaze on me, and I looked over at Naut. There he was, leaning against a tree and staring absentmindedly at Jess. *Boo! You're sooo obvious.* On a whim, I glanced at Ceres as well. She was standing alone at a slight distance from Naut, and she fixed her gaze on his visage. There was a conflicted look in her eyes. She noticed me looking and immediately cast her eyes down to the ground.

Hmm. I hope this doesn't turn out to be trouble.

It was evening by the time we returned to the inn. In the end, Naut hadn't done anything that seemed like a red flag other than the slaughter of the heckripon. When we arrived, Ceres hurried into the kitchen to attend to her work.

Outside the inn, Naut seized the opportunity to make an offer and make it sound natural. "Hey, Jess, how does dinner together sound? I assume you don't have much money on your hands. I'll foot the bill."

"Oh... That would be very kind of you, yes. But wouldn't Miss Ceres be upset with you?"

Naut knit his eyebrows together, as if he was struggling to comprehend what she was saying. “Why would Ceres be upset at me just because we had a meal together? Come on, let’s head in.” He pushed open the door to the side building—the pub—and walked in. Jess bowed slightly before trailing after him.

Haaah... If only I could smoothly invite a girl to a meal like him. Unfortunately, from what I’d seen so far, I wouldn’t stand a chance against this handsome guy. A part of me wanted to interfere and sabotage their meal, but I had no right. I decided I’d be on my best behavior and accompany their meal as a pork tag-a-loin-g.

We entered the pub, made our way to a table in the back, and the two sat across from each other in a semiprivate area. I lay down next to Jess’s seat, but my ears were pricked and alert.

The innkeeper woman came over. “Well well, look who we have here!”

“Hey, auntie,” Naut greeted. “It’s been a while.”

“How was the hunt? Any luck?”

“Pretty good, if I say so myself. I can guarantee you that I’ll bring along some bear meat as a trophy tomorrow.”

The woman’s voice grew jovial. “I see, I see! That’s our wonderful Naut for you. I suppose I’ll make some stew and give you a nice treat!”

“I can’t wait. Ah, in that case, could you share some with Jess as well, auntie?”

At my eye level, I could see the woman’s feet part slightly, as if displeased. She continued, “I’m sure you know the rules. We can’t let a Yethma heading to the capital stay for a long time. It’s a shame, but I’ll have to ask her to leave tomorrow morning.” She paused. “That was your plan, right? Is that all right?”

Jess’s voice flowed out. “Yes. I intend on departing for the capital tomorrow morning.”

“Huh,” Naut muttered noncommittally. “Well, if you say so.”

“Naut, if you want to hunt something, hunt beasts, and nothing else.” The woman’s voice took on a warning tone. “I can see through you as clear as day.”

“Oh?” Naut responded.

“After all, they’re somewhat similar, aren’t they? I thought the same thing when I first met her.”

“...Quit nagging and leave me alone. Fetch some beer. I need some beer right now.”

“Will that be two beers?”

After a moment, Naut replied, “Yeah. Two, thanks.”

The woman’s feet shuffled away. A while later, cutie-pie Ceres’s feet entered my field of vision. There was the sound of two mugs being placed on the table. But before I could observe cutie-pie Ceres’s slender legs, their owner left in silence.

“U-Um... This is...” Jess said hesitantly.

“Hm? Do we have a first-time drinker here?” Naut asked.

“Yes. I have never tried alcohol before...”

“The stuff they serve around here is to die for. If it isn’t to your taste, I’ll finish it for you. Take a sip, at least.”

“Thank you for your graciousness. I shall go ahead, then.”

There was the clinking of glass against glass as they toasted. *Aaah*, I wailed in melancholy, *I haven’t tasted alcohol yet either...* A friend of mine had been one of those students who would take the yearly university entrance exams over and over until they got into their desired school, and they had been over twenty, the legal drinking age in Japan. They’d described beer as bitter, but was that the case for beer in this world as well? It likely wasn’t chilled, and the brewing process must be different as well. I was *very* curious about the taste.

But was it okay for a pig to ingest alcohol? A pig’s liver functions shouldn’t be that different from a human’s, but...the enzymes that broke down ethanol might not be as effective. In general, humans of Asian descent tended to have lower alcohol tolerance compared to Europeans due to genetic factors. Some other ingredients that humans could eat safely, like spring onions, were poisonous to other types of animals. With that in mind, ingesting alcohol in a pig’s body sounded like a dangerous gamble...

If I didn't fill my mind with useless thoughts like these, I had the feeling that my heart might not make it.

Jess seemed to take a liking to the taste of beer. After a while, their conversation turned to the topic of heckripons.

"Mister Naut, why did you kill that heckripon?"

"Those things bring about misfortune. That's why."

"So they are unlucky symbols in this area, I see."

"Yeah. Well, it only started a few years ago, though."

"I see..."

Ceres came over and laid out their meal on the table. She also left food in front of me—thoroughly washed vegetables, a small apple, and what seemed to be steamed grain. Out of consideration for me, she'd prepared food that a human would eat.

<<Thanks.>>

Cutie-pie Ceres crouched down and met my gaze. I gazed at her short hair, her large eyes, and her pastel lips. Her features hadn't yet lost their childlike quality; her golden hair was silky and fine, and her skin was pale and immaculate. My impression of her hadn't changed—she was an ethereally beautiful young girl.

<No, it was nothing,> she replied.

After stroking my head slightly, cutie-pie Ceres returned to the kitchen. She was a much more difficult girl to read than Jess.

Naut's voice rang out. "By the way, is that pig a pet of yours?"

"He's...a friend."

"I see. You seem to take awfully good care of him. Have you been looking after him for a long time?"

"No, not exactly, but, um... You could say that he's a pig I share my destiny with."

"Sharing your destiny? Well, I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised hearing

that from a Yethma.”

That’s right. I’m Jess’s buddy. We’re partners until we fulfill our destiny or arrive at a bitter end. That’s why I should only focus on fulfilling my role, nothing more. I shouldn’t poke my snout into what’s none of my business.

For a while after that, I munched on my vegetables, forcing down my emotions and strangling them before I did anything I would regret.

A little later, I heard Jess say, “Um, I’m a little sleepy...” It seemed that they’d finished their meal.

Naut stood up. “I see. I’ll escort you to your room.”

“I...” Jess hesitated. “Thank you.” She stood up, but her feet were unsteady.

Without a moment’s delay, the taciturn Naut supported her shoulder.

<<You okay there, Jess?>> I asked.

She looked over at me and smiled.

<Yes, I’m fine. I feel wonderful.>

<<That’s not what I’m worried about. This man might—>>

<Don’t worry. Mister Naut would never assault me.>

With Naut’s slight support on her shoulder, Jess walked towards the lodgings.
She says she’s fine. I should trust her.

At a slight distance, I followed the pair. Naut walked all the way to Jess’s room, marched in, and helped Jess lie down on the bed. Inside the door was a modest and cramped private room. The only illumination was the moonlight spilling in from the windows. I decided to wait outside until Naut left the room.

Naut was standing up when he said, “Jess. Do you have a moment?” There was no reply. “Did she fall asleep?”

“Huh?” Jess mumbled. “Um, I’m still awake. I’m just a little drowsy...”

“Oh.”

I didn’t know what was going on in Naut’s mind, but he stood right inside the open door and stayed there, motionless. I narrowed my eyes. *Don’t you dare*

get any ideas...

Just as I was about to snort loudly at him to usher him out, right before my eyes, Naut closed the door from inside. I heard a rattle—he had latched the door. I was left behind in the corridor.

Huh...?

I pushed the door with my snout. However, since it was latched, I couldn't open it from the outside. I charged at it with some force, but I only succeeded in making the door protest noisily. I made a fuss, grunting, "Burhoi!" But the door didn't budge. I strained my ears. There was no sound.

Panicked, I said, <<Je—>>

I was interrupted by Naut's muffled voice from across the door. "...se. Hug me."

The next moment, there was the creaking of a bed.

What? ...Huh?

My thoughts froze. An intense, unpleasant emotion like never before filled my stomach in a flash. It almost felt scalding, or something that was trembling and fragile as it swallowed me whole.

I didn't know what to do. I edged back from the door. *No, you know what to do. Do nothing. Jess is safe. She clearly said that Naut wouldn't assault her. Believe in Jess.*

I shouldn't be here.

I rushed out of the inn. I was running before I knew it.

In the dead of the night, the creaking of an opening door roused me.

After I'd been locked out, I had taken cover in a bush in front of the inn. I'd been on the lookout for any unsavory characters.

Roughly at the thirty-minute mark, Naut had come out of the inn and disappeared into the darkness of night. I had passed by him and returned to Jess's room. When I'd arrived, I saw Jess sleeping peacefully. I had no way of

knowing what Naut had done in those thirty minutes. And, in all honesty, I hadn't even wanted to think about what that bastard could have done while Jess was in his arms. Immediately after I'd entered the room, I'd settled into a cramped crevice on the side of the bed, curled up, and slept.

Back in the present, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Inside the dim room, I furtively turned my head to check the source of the noise. The door was half-open, but no one entered. I was on alert immediately. *Who opened it?*

<Oh, Mister Pig. I'm so sorry for waking you up.>

It turned out to be Ceres. Her petite face and slender neck poked out from beyond the door, and she looked at me meekly.

<<What's going on? Why're you here in the middle of the night?>>

<Could you have a chat with me? I want to ask you something. I won't take up too much of your time.>

<<Got it. Where do we go?>>

<Can you come outside with me?>

<<If possible, I don't want to leave this area...>>

<It's all right. We won't go too far away.>

Ceres guided me outside the inn. Countless stars decorated the sky above like gems. The village barricaded by forest was all but the opposite—it was as dark as an abyss sucking all light away.

There was a convenient meadow nearby, and Ceres plopped down onto the ground. I lay down next to her. <<So, you said you wanted to chat. Is it something a pig can help with?>>

Ceres looked at me with a torn expression on her face. "Yes."

<<Well, go ahead. I'll do what I can.>>

"I...want you to reveal your identity to Mister Naut first thing tomorrow morning, please."

Oh, that. <<We probably won't come back to this village, so I don't mind. But why? What's the point of us going out of our way to find him and tell him that?

We'll be gone in the morning.>>

"No, you don't have to go find him." She shook her head. "Mister Naut will definitely come look for Miss Jess early in the morning."

Now why is that? As I pondered the possibilities, my mind pulled up the memory of what had happened earlier tonight. I recalled Naut, who had shut the door in my face, locking himself and Jess away from the rest of the world. I recalled the mature youth—old enough to understand the proceedings of romance and desire—climbing onto the bed. I'd been under the impression that he was a sensible guy who could tell right from wrong, but perhaps behind closed doors, he had pinned Jess down and—

Ceres stared at me with a face devoid of emotion for a while. I stared back. Her eyes were large, enough for them to capture the reflection of brightly twinkling stars. Now that I had a good look at her, I could see a small mole perched quietly below the outer corner of her right eye. Under the moonlight, her mole glimmered.

The next thing I knew, tears welled up in her eyes and made trails down her cheek.

<<Hey... What's wrong?>>

A twelve or thirteen-year-old girl was crying in front of me. I was in over my head.

"I knew it..." She sobbed. "I knew it, Mister Naut has feelings for Miss Jess...!"

All her dams broke, and she started bawling loudly. I was frozen in place, feeling completely lost. Then, she leaned forward onto my back and threw her arms around me. Her delicate sternum made contact with my spine. Her hiccups and sobbing continued without rest.

Ah... I thought with a tinge of regret. In the heat of the moment, I'd forgotten that my thoughts were an open book to Ceres as well. Perhaps I should have tucked them away in a place where this young girl with a budding blossom of love couldn't see.

"I'm already thirteen," Ceres whispered between sobs.

<<So... You like Naut, Ceres?>>

I could feel Ceres's nodding motion against my back. "I know that I'm a Yethma. I know that I'm a child. I know that I'm not worthy at all, and I have no right to ask this, but..." She finally lifted her torso from my back. "But...I don't want him to leave."

<<To leave? May I ask what you mean by that?>> I asked gently.

Ceres sniffed. "He's planning on going to the capital with Jess."

<<He *what*?>>

"He wants to be Miss Jess's chabirone."

<<'Chabirone'...? Wait a minute, what are you talking about?>>

Tears trickled down her eyes and nose, but she did the best she could to respond. "A legend says there's a certain requirement for Yethma to enter the capital safely. These Yethma all have a shrewd and brave companion called 'chabirone,' but...the chabirone will always disappear together with their Yethma partner...forever..."

I see. So Naut has the resolve to throw his current life behind him to accompany Jess to the capital—to the capital isolated from the rest of the world, to a city with no escape. And Ceres doesn't want that to happen. That's why she wants me to reveal my identity and tell Naut that Jess already has a partner—she doesn't need another one.

"You wouldn't want Mister Naut to become her chabirone either, would you? After all, Mister Pig, you—"

Hey. Stop right there.

"After all, you like Miss Jess!"

Her sentence cut into my sensitive otaku pig's heart like a knife.

It took me a while before I could answer. <<The words "like" and "love" aren't that simple, you know, especially in the complicated world of adults. The woman in the inn implied that you've worked in this place for around five years now, right? Which means you must have taken a long time to fall in love with Naut, didn't you? That's admirable. I think it's wonderful, and I think that your

feelings deserve to be voiced, to bear fruit.>>

“Are you saying that your feelings aren’t worthy, then?”

<<Nope.>>

“Why...?”

<<Jess and I only met yesterday. She was nice to me, and I ended up with a one-sided infatuation with her for a flimsy reason like that. That’s all to the story, and it ends there. I’m a pig right now, remember? How could a lowly pig ever think about asking Jess to be his special someone? It’s selfish, *too* selfish. Jess is kind to everyone. She’s the kind of person who showers her compassion equally on everyone she meets. She will never be mine alone. That’s how things should be.>>

Jess was kind to everyone—and her trust towards Naut was evidence backing that up. I must never forget that her kindness wasn’t only aimed at me. I didn’t have any opinion about it, especially now that I had time to calm down. I hadn’t been a virgin for nineteen years for nothing, after all. It wasn’t anything new.

Some kind of noisy, muted huffing from nearby entered my ears. I soon realized it was my own erratic nasal breathing. *What the heck are you getting worked up about? Clam down.*

As I tried to steady my breathing, I noticed Ceres leaning forward and peering into my eyes. “But you’d be upset if Mister Naut becomes her chabirone, right?”

<<Maybe. But I could never allow my egotistic feelings to get in the way of Jess’s journey. Never can, never will.>>

“Huh? Does that mean you’ll...” Her large eyes grew damp again.

<<Don’t come to conclusions so fast, relax. I *will* tell him my real identity. I’m willing to do it for your sake.>>

“Ah, I see... Thank you, thank you.” She rubbed hard at her eyes before looking up at the starry sky. “But... I’ll probably never be a match for Miss Jess no matter how many years I persevere. I mean, it’s only been a day, but she has...” Ceres chewed on her lip with sorrow.

<<Hey, that's not true. You're a charming woman as well, Ceres. In fact, you're drop-dead gorgeous. If I were a human right now, I'd have glomped you already.>>

She grimaced. "Um. That's... No, thank you."

Oops. She, uh, looks utterly scandalized at my words. It's a misunderstanding, ma'am, I swear!

"Do you have a preference for very young women, Mister Pig?" she asked slowly.

<<No, I messed up just now. If you can, please forget what you just heard.>>

A subdued smile lit up her face slightly. It was the first time I'd seen her smiling, and she was so adorable she made my heart melt. She whispered, "I know that I can never compare, though. Because...Miss Jess looks like her."

Looks like "her"? Who's this— But before I voiced that question, a series of memories suddenly strung together in my mind.

"After all, they're somewhat similar, aren't they? I thought the same thing when I first met her."

The woman in the inn had said something along the same lines—that Jess reminded her of someone else. Considering all the information I had, it must be a woman close to Naut. Was he her admirer? Or were they lovers in the past?

My intuition latched on to something else immediately. *Have you realized it too, my brethren?*

"Sorry, I must've given you a shock just now. It's a policy of mine to kill every heckripon I see."

Yes—Naut's almost obsessive animosity towards heckripons.

"So they are unlucky symbols in this area, I see," Jess had said.

"Yeah. Well, it only started a few years ago, though," Naut had replied.

Naut's hatred had begun a few years ago. That was a tentative deduction I could make from that conversation. And what had happened a few years ago, that I could remember?

“It happened five years ago. You see, we used to give shelter to Yethma who turned sixteen and help them take refuge inside our convent.”

“Are you referring to Baptsaze’s convent, perhaps?”

The tragedy of Baptsaze’s convent. Many Yethma had lost their lives in the fire, or at the hands of Yethma hunters. To add to that, the collar of one of these Yethma had been put on display in the inn in memory of them.

“One of our huntsmen snatched it back from those Yethma hunters. Our village takes pride in it.”

Judging from the conversation between the woman and Naut, it was natural to assume that Naut was the huntsman in question. Considering his prowess when he’d slaughtered that heckripon, he must’ve ranked as quite a remarkable huntsman among his peers in this world. It wouldn’t be strange for the village to take pride in him and his achievement. To quote a certain detective: one coincidence is just a coincidence, two coincidences are a clue, and three coincidences are proof.

In other words, I suspected that Naut had romantic feelings for a Yethma named Eise, who had perished five years ago.

The story probably went like this:

When Naut was young, he had a crush on Eise, a Yethma who worked at the inn. Once Eise turned sixteen, she didn’t journey to the capital, instead staying behind to live secretly in Baptsaze’s convent. However, the convent went up in flames, and Eise was murdered by Yethma hunters. The heckripon must have done something significant during this incident, like gathering in packs. That was why this village began seeing heckripons as omens of misfortune, and in Naut’s case, he even swore to murder every single one on sight. Later on, Naut reclaimed the collar of the girl he was enamored of from the Yethma hunters.

If we went along with this deduction, all the pieces of information I’d encountered so far would click into place perfectly.

“You have a very sharp intuition, Mister Pig,” Ceres said in a soft voice. “Yes, you’re right. Mister Naut was in love with a girl called Miss Eise. But in the end, his feelings didn’t bear fruit...”

<<Have you ever seen Eise in person?>>

“No, I’ve only seen a picture of her. Mister Naut always wears a glass pendant printed with her image.”

<<He’s loyal, huh?>> *Surprising for a man that crawled into Jess’s bed.*

“Yes. Not only that, but do you remember his twin shortwords? Miss Eise’s bones were used for parts of the hilts. As long as his obsession remains, the flames of his swords will continue to burn through ristae as they cut down the targets of his vengeance.”

Ah. So “loyal” isn’t the right word for it, but an obsession he can’t move on from. It was the flames of hatred that killed the heckripon. <<I see.>>

“His heart already has someone else’s name engraved on it. There...is no space for me.” Ceres hung her head.

I should change the topic. <<Just wondering, how did the heckripons become symbols of misfortune?>>

After a moment of silence, Ceres finally said, “I think it’s exactly what you thought. Apparently, sometime before the fire, heckripons started making frequent appearances in the area around the convent. From what I heard, they didn’t seem to cause any harm, but ever since then, the villagers have shunned them as omens of disaster.”

<<Interesting. Thanks for telling me.>>

After a pause, Ceres said, “I think it’s about time we head back.”

<<Yeah, you’re right.>>

I looked at cutie-pie Ceres’s legs on our way back to the inn. Just before we reached the entrance, I called out to her. <<Hey, could I ask you one last thing before we go?>>

She turned around, then crouched down to look at me. “Yes. Please ask anything.”

<<Can you wait for us at the pub early tomorrow morning? I want your help with the persuasion.>>

“Understood. Of course.”

<<Thanks, that’d be great.>>

“Okay then, I shall lead you to your room.”

Ceres escorted me all the way until I disappeared into Jess’s room. And now, I was finally alone. I could start planning my next move.

Though I’d known Jess for an inconsequential amount of time, I believed that I understood her personality and outlook on life, to a certain extent. She, who had likely taken notice of Ceres’s affections, would meet Naut’s offer with a firm refusal even if I weren’t around. That was the kind of girl she was.

What I needed to contemplate was a way to persuade *Jess*.

I woke up to the creaking of a bed. I cracked my eyes open just a sliver, and the light of dawn was pouring in from the windows.

Jess patted me lightly on the back. “Um, time to wake up, Mister Pig.”

<<Mnn... It’s already morning?>>

She fidgeted. “Last night, I...” She faltered. “I’m so sorry about my rudeness.”

<<Hm? About what, exactly?>> Against my will, my words came out slightly more like a gibe.

“I, well... I fell asleep immediately once I returned to my room after dinner, and I must have neglected you. You chose to stay by my side, and I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry.”

<<Don’t sweat it. You must’ve been tired. It’s not your fault.>>

“Are you...mad at me?” Jess climbed out of the bed and faced me. There were creases on her dress, but her clothing didn’t show any notable disarray.

<<Why would I be angry? If you got a good night’s sleep, I’m satisfied. How do you feel? Does your head or...body ache anywhere?>>

Jess blinked at me with confusion for a moment, but she immediately smiled at me in the next. “I think I’m all right, yes. I feel very energetic!” She clenched both hands into fists and pumped them in front of her chest with vigor.

<<I see... Okay then, let's grab breakfast and head out.>>

We entered the pub to find that one lone customer had beat us to the punch—Naut. *Curse this bastard and his good looks.* His blond locks were suffering a case of bedhead as he sat next to a window with crossed legs. His head leaned against the glass, and his mouth was wide open as he snoozed away.

Jess fetched her breakfast from the kitchen and took a seat at a table some distance from Naut so that she wouldn't disturb him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ceres peering out of the kitchen and stealing glances at me.

If I just stay quiet and let Naut sleep on without being any the wiser... That thought flashed through my mind, but I hardened my resolve and deliberately sneezed loudly. "Achooinkchoo!" An indescribable and unpleasant sound made my nose quiver.

Naut sat up with a start and a loud rattle. He rubbed his eyes and looked over at us. Jess turned around, and their eyes met. "Oh... Good morning, Mister Naut," she said.

There was no immediate response from Naut. He stood up unhurriedly and walked over to us. Then, he plopped down with a thud on a chair near Jess. "Hey, Jess." He cleared his throat once. "I thought it over last night, and, ya know. How about I, er, go with y—"

"Um!" He was interrupted by Ceres, who ran over with small steps. "Mister Naut, there's something I have to tell you."

He blinked in surprise at her. "Ceres, what is it?"

"Mister Pig over there is a human!"

Naut stared at her with his mouth wide open. *Oh, Ceres, you're not a tactician, are you?* I fought the urge to facepalm.

"Pig?" Naut echoed. "What did you say about the pig?"

"The pig accompanying Miss Jess is actually a human on the inside. Right?" Ceres looked at me.

<Try talking,> Ceres's voice rang out in my mind.

I turned to face Naut and communicated, <<Uhhh, mornin'.>>

He whipped his head around, startled. “Was that you just now?”

It seemed that the Yethma telepathy could also function like a wireless router. <<Very much so, good sir. I’m the pig.>>

“I doubt that. Jump for me or something.”

I hopped on the spot. Instantly, Naut’s face grew red.

<<Was that enough evidence for you?>>

“You... When did you...” he stammered.

<<I’ve kept my beady eyes on you since our first encounter yesterday. And I continued watching even after you encouraged Jess to drink, for your information.>>

Naut stared at me, flabbergasted. His ears were bright red.

Frantically, Ceres said, “Miss Jess already has a chabirone. And—”

<<And as her chabirone, Naut, I have a request for you.>>

“What?” he grumbled.

<<Can you come to the capital with us?>>

“Huh?” Ceres and Jess exclaimed in unison.

Naut fixed his gaze on me as he demanded, “Explain yourself.”

I tottered forward as I gave him my answer. <<I’ve seen your skills with the blade, and I’ve heard of your achievement, retrieving that collar from Yethma hunters. If I want Jess to arrive at the capital in one piece, you are indispensable. So please. Can you please accompany her as her bodyguard until she is just outside the capital? It shouldn’t be an issue—after all, you came here this morning with such intentions, didn’t you?>>

All I received from Naut was silence. He seemed to be gauging the sudden turn of events.

Ceres was looking at me with an awfully bewildered expression. “Mister Pig... This isn’t what you promised.”

Jess spoke up. “Um, even if Mister Naut doesn’t come with me, I’m fine. I

have Mister Pig with me.”

<<Are you sure about that? I suppose, yes, we managed to deal with that scarred man by ourselves. But that was only possible because he had one lame leg, and he didn’t possess any significant weapons or skills either. Despite that, I sustained severe injuries. There is no guarantee that we can escape unscathed from our next assailant.>>

Jess fell silent. Then, I heard her unvoiced message.

<But what about Miss Ceres?>

This time, I turned to Ceres. <<Hey, Ceres. There aren’t any other customers around. This is your chance to voice your true feelings.>>

Her eyes grew wide. “Huh?! I could never!”

<<What are you hesitating for? Naut is going to leave if you don’t tell him now.>>

<Mister Pig,> Jess communicated hurriedly. <Miss Ceres has reasons for her reluctance.>

<<I know. I heard all about it from her last night.>>

Knitting his eyebrows together, Naut’s gaze flitted between the three of us. “Tell me what’s going on, Ceres.”

“Oh, I...” Ceres’s voice grew smaller until it wilted in her throat.

Go, Ceres. This is your last chance.

She took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to leave. Because...I like you, I really do.” It was the first time I’d seen the lovestruck look of a maiden on her face. She looked at Naut as if he was her whole world.

Ugh, I’m envious. He’s living the dream—if only I had cute girls confessing to me like this. But dreams are dreams for a reason. It’s not going to happen—not in my lifetime, at least.

“Ceres, you...” A blush crept up Naut’s cheeks. Five years ago, Naut must’ve been around the same age as Ceres was now.

“I know that I’m not worthy,” Ceres whispered. “I know that I’m not anyone

special in your eyes. But I still can't stop myself from saying that I don't want you to go. The thought that you'll leave with Miss Jess and that I'll never see you again in my life makes my chest so tight, so painful..."

<<I won't let that happen.>> *Sorry for cutting in, but I need to say this.* <<I'll make sure that Naut returns to this village before we enter the capital. He ought to be your chabirone when you turn sixteen, Ceres. Only one person will disappear with Jess, and that is me.>>

Ceres looked at me. "Can you promise that?"

<<Yeah, I swear.>>

"In that case... I guess I don't have a reason to stop Mister Naut, then."

<<That's what she says, Jess.>> I turned to the girl I addressed. <<What are you going to do?>>

"I..." Jess hesitated before giving me an affirming nod. "If you say he's necessary, I hope that he will come with us."

Finally, I faced the star of our conversation. <<So, Naut, it's all up to you now.>>

"What's with you?" He glared at me with the fierce glint of a huntsman in his eyes. I'd set him off, and he was *mad*. "In other words, you're ordering me to do charity and guard her for free, aren't you?"

<<Did you really think there would be any compensation? You're necessary to protect Jess's safety. Isn't that all the reason you need?>>

He clicked his tongue with displeasure. "It's not my responsibility, so why should I?"

<<Are you fine with her getting killed by Yethma hunters, then? Are you going to snatch back her collar and make new swords with her bones? Is that what you want?>>

His eyes widened. "You..."

<<A real man never goes back on his word. You came here this morning because you planned on traveling with Jess, didn't you? There might be a pesky pig tagging along, but please, once you've made a decision, see it through to the

end. I'm begging you. Please don't let Jess die.>>

Silence stretched on for a while. Naut stared up at the ceiling with a big scowl, glanced at the collar on display, then finally looked at me. "Fine then. You better not regret this, you cursed swine."

After paying the woman the bill for our breakfast, the three of us made our departure from the village. This time, Jess and I had a new companion—Naut. At the entrance of the inn, Ceres saw us off.

It was time to leave. "I will definitely return Mister Naut to you," promised Jess. "Goodbye."

As Ceres stroked me, I gave her my brief parting words. <<Thanks for all your help, Ceres. Take care.>>

In a low voice, Ceres said, "I hope your wish comes true too, Mister Pig." She gave me a small smile.

When we finally left the inn, Ceres waved her petite hand as hard as she could, sending us off with her blessing.

Chapter 3: Don't Laugh in the Face of a Desperate Prayer

Naut brought a dog along with him without even asking, as if it was the natural thing to do. His name was Rossi. He was a large white dog, and he was so majestic that he could have passed as a wolf. On his left front leg was a tightly fitting silver bangle. Rossi turned out to be surprisingly friendly, and he was currently sniffing all over Jess's bare legs. I decided to hold my tongue and not say, *Let me sniff you too!*

According to Naut's guidance, we would cross the Oil Valley after leaving the village, then stay the night at a large city called Munires and stock up on food. On the following night, we would spend the night at a stretch called the Impaling Stones. Once we were past the Impaling Stones, we would walk nonstop through a hilly area and aim for the capital in the center.

The capital itself was surrounded by a dense forest called the Needle Woods. It also served as a breeding ground for Yethma hunters, and heckripons lived there in swarms. Naut had boasted about his plans to burn it all down to the ground one day.

Thus began the journey of a band of misfits with the following cast: a beautiful maiden, a handsome hunk, a pig, and a dog.

Naut was mostly taciturn during our travels. He instructed Rossi to walk around while he himself strutted on with an impassive aura. I'd requested Jess to be our router so that Naut could hear my bracketed thoughts as well, but I seemed to get on his nerves somehow because he didn't try to look at me or even talk to me at all. He treated me like plain domesticated livestock.

In contrast to his distant demeanor, Jess smiled wide and talked to me about every little thing that came to her mind. For example, she'd say, "Oh, look! What a pretty butterfly," or "The water here is tasty."

A secluded, withdrawn otaku might get the wrong idea instantly, but I was a

pig, so I wouldn't act so foolishly. At most, I would give her replies that were stereotypical for a university student with a science major. Respectively, <<That's a species of butterfly under the subfamily *Danainae*. It can fly significantly long distances and even travel across mountains,>> and <<The water here is probably soft, with little calcium. There're a lot of volcanic rock around this area, so the minerals that make water taste hard don't dissolve as easily.>>

Jess's curiosity knew no bounds, and she'd bombard me with endless questions. In the back of my mind, I thought, *If she were born into a different family or world, she might have become an impressive scholar.*

As for the last member of our crew, Rossi, getting along with him was easy. It seemed that loitering around Naut and sniffing Jess's scent wasn't enough for him—he even came over to play games with me. Sometimes, he'd put his chin on my bottom and frolic around, and he was so adorable that I couldn't help but indulge his whims. I observed him as he found all kinds of ways to entertain himself, and I concluded that he must be a particularly clever dog.

We arrived at the Oil Valley. Hanging across a ravine with clear water flowing down in a stream was a magnificent suspension bridge. Naut, however, walked in the opposite direction of the bridge.

"Aren't we going to cross the bridge, Mister Naut?" Jess asked.

In a standoffish tone, he replied, "If we pass through conspicuous landmarks like suspension bridges, some pesky parties might take interest in us. We'll head slightly downstream, hike all the way down to the river, then hop across stepping stones. Grit your teeth and bear it."

"Oh, I see! I shall persevere and walk the whole way!"

We pushed our way through grass and shrubs as we went down the steep slope, and while we were on the move, Jess gave me a lecture. "The origin story of this area's name has to do with a battle during the Dark Ages. It's supposed to have had a lovely name long ago, but thousands of people passed away during a battle that occurred here. Their blood stained the valley, and it almost looked like oil trickling down, which apparently led to the name 'Oil Valley.'"

She spoke casually, as if it was useful trivia that might come in handy as soon as the next day, but the actual content itself reeked of brutality and horror. <<The “Dark Ages” refers to the period when mages were at war with each other, right?>>

“Yes. They say that it was a period when many mages subjugated other races and turned them into their own armies. With these troops, they dived into endless wars against each other and vied for absolute authority. These mages were disaster personified, and most of these wars ended with the death of the mage on one side. When two evenly powerful mages were against each other in a drawn-out battle, there were apparently so many casualties that the shed blood stained entire rivers red.”

<<The mages were such powerhouses, but nearly all of them perished, and only one bloodline survives to this day? Were there no other surviving mages, or ones that went into hiding?>>

“Hmm, I’m not quite sure,” Jess admitted. “It’s unclear whether the survivors were massacred by our current king’s great ancestors, or they managed to escape from Mesteria. Most of the records about the history before the Dark Ages have been lost to fire, and there are very few documents we can refer to. If you look into it, the mainstream history books are all based on stories from the perspective of the current royal family’s ancestors, so there doesn’t seem to be much information about our ancient history.”

History was written by the victors. It seemed that this rule held true no matter what world you were in.

This was when Naut cut in. “They massacred them all, obviously.” He didn’t even turn around as he spat those words. “People with power are potential threats unless they’re dead. The best way to protect yourself is to end your enemies for good.”

But if you keep killing your own kin, wouldn’t there be a higher chance that your race would go extinct? If they truly continued to kill each other, though, I suppose it wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that the mage race was destined to ruin from the moment of their birth.

We trudged on without rest. It was evening when we finally arrived at the next stop, Munires. There was a vast main street paved with cobblestone, and from what I could see, it was a flourishing commercial city. Numerous carriages came and went down the main street, and humans of all ages and genders crowded the shops that lined the sides of the streets.

Jess removed the scarf from her wrist and wrapped it around her neck so that she wouldn't seem suspicious up close. Naut made a trip to a weapon store and purchased a pile of small articles before meeting back up with us.

We settled down in a plaza with a small water fountain, which was decorated by a sculpture of an unclothed girl.

As Naut sorted through his baggage, he said, "Soldiers under the flag of the royal court are stationed at Munires, so it's a relatively safe city. We'll find lodgings here tonight and rest until morning. We have a long journey ahead of us. Rest your sore feet while you can."

I had a proposal I wanted to make. Through Jess, I addressed Naut. <<Hey, Naut, the transportation system of this city seems rather convenient. Wouldn't it be safer and faster if we arranged a vehicle like a horse-drawn carriage?>>

He scoffed at me. "What, are you a foreigner or something? The law strictly prohibits Yethma from riding vehicles. The Yethma involved will naturally gain a death sentence, and so will the parties who gave them permission."

Capital punishment just from getting into a vehicle? I never knew... Let's hope that a pig doesn't count as one. <<That's news to me. Why is there such a law?>>

He shrugged. "How'm I supposed to know? That's what the royal court dictates, and we commoners have no choice other than to obey."

<<I see...>> I felt frustrated with myself—I'd never even thought about seeking out such fundamental information. <<It sounds like there must be other rules I'm not aware of. Could you tell me more about them while we're here?>>

Naut didn't make an effort to answer.

I turned to Jess, and she expanded on the topic. "There are two rules involving Yethma. The first is that one must never permit Yethma to ride

vehicles—in other words, you must never transport them. The other is...” She trailed off. After a moment of hesitation, she continued, “The second rule was that one must never violate a Yethma—it’s a law forbidding illicit intercourse.”

Naut seemed to be inspecting a small metallic sphere of some sort. There wasn’t any particular reaction from him. <<Is breaking that rule a crime that calls for capital punishment as well?>>

“Yes...” Jess said slowly.

Good news, my brethren. Our cutie-pie Jess remains chaste, just like me. But if that’s the case... <<Uh... How do I put this... What’s the exact condition for the death penalty? Is there a specific line you have to cross?>> The moment I said those words, I realized that I’d been too thoughtless. *What in the world are you asking a sixteen-year-old girl?* I scolded myself. Hurriedly, I added, <<You know, I was just wondering how things worked with male Yethma.>>

Without warning, Naut interjected with a bite in his tone. “Don’t take me for a fool, you swine. How can there be male Yethma?”

<<Excuse...me?>> I blinked. <<Are there only female Yethma?>>

“Yes,” Jess replied.

I tilted my head quizzically at the answer. *Does the Yethma race reproduce asexually? Or do they prolong their race by mating with humans? ...Whatever, this doesn’t matter right now.* <<Okay, I learned something new today, but... Naut, so your actions last night don’t count as an infringement of that law, huh?>>

The question slipped out of my mouth. Though I spat at my own ugly and unseemly actions, I couldn’t rein myself in. This was my chance to learn what Naut had done to Jess in that locked room last night, and I gave into temptation.

The man abruptly stopped fiddling with his gadgets and glowered at me. “Shut up.” His ears were bright red as he hissed, “Are you poking fun at me?”

<<No, that’s not my intention...>>

“Just putting it out there, but I respect the rights of Yethma,” he declared.

“Huntsmen are folk who uphold freedom. We treat everyone as equals, including Yethma. That means even if there wasn’t such a law, I’d never take unfair advantage of Yethma. Even if you meant it to be sarcasm, you’re going too far.”

Huh? Sarcasm? Why in the world is he reacting like that?

He folded his arms grumpily. “Do what you like. If you want to make fun of my actions last night, go ahead. I didn’t know you were listening outside the door, so I put on a rather pathetic display, I know. But even the strongest man will have moments of misery and woe. I cried because I was drunk, am I clear? On any other day, you can never hope to see me shed a single tear.”

Just like I’d planned, Naut had mistakenly thought that I’d been listening the entire time outside the door while he had been with Jess. But what took me by surprise was that the scene I’d supposedly eavesdropped on was a far cry from what I’d feared.

So that’s what he meant when he said, “Hug me.” He only wanted to cry on her shoulder and let out all the sorrows he’d tucked away. Oh...

Judging by the flow of events, I’d missed my opportunity to confess that I hadn’t heard a thing last night. Naut’s face was flushed as he turned away sullenly. Jess pressed her hand over her chest nervously as she glanced between us two.

An overwhelming sense of self-loathing threatened to swallow me whole. My imbecilic suspicions had utterly ruined the atmosphere. *Ugh, this is why I hate my otaku debuff! Be more considerate and stop jumping to conclusions, darn it! You should also take care, my brethren. Don’t assume and pry into matters between a man and a woman when it’s none of your business. You’ll regret it.*

What I’d done was completely unfair to Naut, so I fessed up. I told him that I hadn’t heard anything last night and had suspected that he’d done something unsavory to Jess because of my lack of information. That had led to my earlier words.

The only response from Naut was a terse “Huh.” After this incident, we began looking for an inn, but he didn’t look my way even a single time while we were on the move. However, from my angle, I could see his ears poking out of his

short hair. For a while, they were red like apples.

You know, I keep taking digs at him, but he's not actually a bad guy at the end of the day. Perhaps the memory of the girl he loved had driven him to seek comfort from Jess. He might have wept because he couldn't forget Eise no matter how much time had passed. No, not "might." He hasn't forgotten her. His murderous hatred towards heckripons must be the explosive outlet of his fiery emotions.

I'd decided to ask Naut to join our party because I'd counted on his devout—almost fanatical—passion. If Yethma hunters ever attacked us, he'd likely eliminate them even if he didn't owe us anything. My job was to escort Jess to the capital and to make sure she arrived there safely. To achieve that, I had to make full use of everything at my disposal. I *had* to shamelessly pursue safety measures for Jess, and I was willing to do anything. Even if it meant selfishly taking advantage of the crush of a thirteen-year-old girl or toying with the heart of a pure huntsman. Because this was my role.

<I see. That was what you were thinking... You were doing it for me.> Jess used her telepathy so that Naut wouldn't hear her.

<<All of that was narration. It's embarrassing, so if you're going to ignore my wishes and continue to read it, I'll ignore your wishes and help myself to a view of your panties,>> I threatened.

<Sorry, I can't stop myself from hearing, even if I want to... So if you'd like, you can look at my panties whenever you want to too, Mister Pig.>

<<...That's not the point. I may be a pig, but I'm not the Oolong kind from a certain dragon deez balls, so I'm not interested in a mere piece of cloth.>>

<Wool...long?>

<<Ignore me. It's a reference to something from back in my homeland.>>

While the two of us entertained ourselves with silly chatter, the sun had hidden itself beneath the horizon, and Naut had located a suitable inn. Against the outer wall, painted with light brown plaster, were lanterns glowing with an orange tint, dimly illuminating the flowers on display. Though the establishment was small, it looked snug and clean. According to Naut, the innkeeper here was

acquainted with the woman from before—the mistress Ceres had served—so they should be trustworthy.

We ate dinner at the inn's dining hall. Naut mostly remained untalkative, but once he had some beer in him, he gradually began participating in small talk with me and Jess. Jess, on the other hand, refrained from drinking beer, perhaps due to the incident yesterday. Unlike her, it seemed that Naut didn't have the words "discretion" and "restraint" in his dictionary.

As for me, I was beneath the table, munching on mixed root vegetables on the floor. On a whim, I looked up at Jess, and her thigh—I mean, I noticed the silver collar of a Yethma decorating the wall. It was arranged in the same way as the inn where we'd met Ceres—two long swords intersected inside the collar.

<<Hey, Jess, there's also a collar on display here. Is it some kind of superstition or amulet?>>

Jess was all smiles as she explained, "That is what we call a silver crest. The silver crest ornament is a sign representing Yethma protectors."

<<It is?>> I frowned slightly. <<Scoundrels who snatch away collars by force could easily make counterfeits, though.>>

"One special trait about Yethma collars is that once they are removed from their owner, they'll disintegrate while releasing a tremendous amount of mana. Normally, the silver would turn black at once. But if someone who's respected by Yethma possesses it, the color doesn't lose its brilliance, as if it has emotions of its own."

As Naut fed Rossi meat on the bone, he looked down at me. He added, "On the other hand, if a heartless person who'd murder a Yethma approached it, the collar would turn black and eventually turn into dust in the wind. Which means that as long as that collar is shining, this inn is safe."

<<How can you be so sure? It might be a fake collar.>>

Naut furrowed his eyebrows in annoyance. "You're such a fussy pig. Yethma can tell whether they're the real deal on sight."

I glanced over at Jess. <<Really?>>

Jess nodded. “Yes. I can see a unique light coming out from it, and a faint sound that reminds me of someone singing.”

Naut seemed slightly startled. “Huh, you can even hear a sound? That’s rare.”

I was kind of lost, but according to Naut, this ability meant that Jess was outstanding even among her peers. He then went on to make his own conjecture, theorizing that it must be the reason Jess was employed at an influential family like House Kiltyrin.

As our group of two humans and two animals chewed away, Jess and Naut gave me a lecture about Yethma collars. The silver crests were protected by a special spell. They also told me that if one were to control the disintegration of the collars, they could serve as potent sources of mana.

During this discussion, I voiced a handful of fundamental questions. <<Hey, when are Yethma collared? Actually, if there are only female Yethma, where do they all come from? Who gives birth to them?>>

A sinister smile lifted the corner of Naut’s lips. “Oh? You don’t even know stuff like this, and you still had the gall to volunteer yourself as a chabirone, swine?” He took an audible gulp of beer before wiping the foam from his upper lip with his hand. “Fine, I’ll enlighten you. The royal court puts Yethma on the market when they’re around the age of eight, and they’re always sold after receiving training as a servant. Families with clout and money purchase them. By the time they are delivered to the buyers, the Yethma already have collars around their necks.”

He continued, “If you’re wondering, no one knows anything about what happens before that. Everything’s a big mystery: Who’re their parents? When were they collared? Where were they trained? The Yethma themselves don’t have a single memory of what happened before they arrive at the household they serve.”

I could only stare blankly at him while trying to pick up my jaw from the floor. My brain was struggling to compute all the information. *They are sold at a mere age of eight with collars on and work as servants? That’s no different from...*

Jess’s voice cut into my scrambling thoughts. “Um, don’t worry, Mister Pig. Life as a servant isn’t that horrible. Only privileged families can purchase

Yethma, and those born into privilege are all owners of kind hearts. I have served House Kiltyrin for a long time, but I received payment, and I also had time off to do what I like. They even let me study, and I think I had a very happy life there.”

Naut gazed at Jess with pity, but he didn’t say anything. I also didn’t have it in me to correct Jess’s opinion. Rossi cheekily crunched up the bone of some animal in his mouth.

Finally, Naut said, “I think it’s time to sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.” He chugged down the remaining contents of his mug and ended the conversation there.

We would spend the night in a cramped room with two spaced-out beds. The moment Naut stepped into the room, he dived into one of the beds without hesitation and immediately started snoring away. Rossi curled up on the floor nearby. Jess sat down quietly on the other bed and beamed at me.

<<What is it? We should rest early.>>

Jess chose to communicate with me in the silent way available to her.

<Mister Pig, could we have a little chat?>

<<Well, I suppose a little one is fine, yeah.>>

<Come over here, please.>

Jess lightly patted the free space right next to her.

An unprecedented incident had just occurred. A beautiful maiden was inviting me to join her in bed. My brain short-circuited without a struggle. My mind was blank as I climbed up to Jess’s side and lay down. Jess scooted over a bit, and she was *right next to me*. Her waist and the side of my torso made contact. My nervousness must be the reason my bone-in pork ribs were tensing up. I would have much preferred to have a pork backbone instead.

Jess’s hand gently stroked the back of my ear. *Being a pig is bliss, oink...*



<<So? What do you want to talk about?>>

There was a faint blush on her cheeks as she smiled shyly.

<It's not that I want to talk about anything specific... I just wanted to chat with you.>

<<Oh, okay. Then... Let's talk about something.>> I sounded like a moron.

<Is there anything you'd like to chat about with me, Mister Pig?>

That was what she asked, but I hadn't been thinking, so I struggled to come up with a response. <<Nothing in particular, I guess? I'm having trouble coming up with something on the spot.>>

<I see. In that case, I shall...>

She trailed off and cast her gaze down slightly, looking somewhat pensive. Though the wait was supposed to be nothing special, for seemingly no reason, my pork heart felt like it was sizzling over a grill. Jess's gaze turned to me.

<Um, Mister Pig, I owe you an apology.>

<<For...what?>>

<For what I did last night. I drank alcohol and felt nice... And in my daze, I left you to one side and allowed Mister Naut to enter my room. I just, um, thought that I did the wrong thing.>

The memory of that door closing in my face made my stomach feel searing hot—as if my organs were being roasted alive. *What in the world is this bitter taste in my mouth?*

<<It's not a big deal. You only kept him company while he was crying. You knew you were safe because you could read his mind. See? You don't have anything to apologize for. But I do have to say that if you feel sleepy after alcohol, maybe you should abstain from drinking in the future.>>

<Um, that's not what I mean... Oh, how should I put this? Mister Naut is technically a man, isn't he?>

I cocked my head in confusion. <<Yes...? What about it?>>

<You are the one who promised to share my fate with me, Mister Pig. Even

though I already have someone like you, I let Mister Naut into my room...>

This was when I finally realized what Jess was implying. In a panic, I stammered, <<D-Don't get the wrong idea, dummy. It's not like I... I'm not asking for that kind of loyalty from you, okay?>>

<Re...ally?>

<<Of course. As long as you are safe and alive, no matter what you do with whom, it's not my problem. For example, even if you smooched Naut that night and engaged in some tongue tango, I'd never, it's not I'd ever get jealous or—>>

Jealous...? Me, jealous? Ridiculous.

<<At any rate! Don't feel obliged to accommodate me in unnecessary ways like that. It's actually a nuisance.>>

The moment I thought those words, I realized that they came out much harsher than necessary. I looked at Jess, and she looked flustered as she placed the fingertips of both hands against her chin.

<I-I'm so sorry... I should have known, I...I let it go to my head a little, and I said something insolent. I'm sorry...>

Seeing her apologize so helplessly made all the bitterness flee from my chest, replaced with heavy remorse. *What the hell did I just do?* <<No... Sorry, I shouldn't have put it like that. What I wanted to say was... Uh, well, you didn't do anything wrong, Jess. That's what I wanted to say. I'm happy that you care about me, but it's better for the two of us to, you know, have a more easygoing relationship?>>

Jess blinked. <Easygoing...>

<<Yeah. If you want an example, an elder brother and younger sister would be good.>>

She looked at me with confusion. <But I'm not your sister.>

<<We don't know that for sure. You don't even know who your parents are, right? Isn't there a chance that we might be siblings separated at birth?>>

<You're...right?>

Yeah. I'm starting to feel that this role might do the trick. <<It's only natural for an older brother to protect his youngest sister, and it's also normal for a younger sister to help her older brother. See? Being siblings is great, right?>>

<Yes. That might be a good relationship as well.>

Indeed, it was a good relationship. A sister wouldn't pay an undue amount of attention to her brother and a brother wouldn't get all jealous over his sister. *That's right.* <<Looks like we both agree about that. Okay, I think we can end that topic now. Familial love is wonderful. The end. It's getting late. Off to bed you go.>> I forcefully concluded that topic and cut the conversation short.

Jess tilted her head slightly. <Wait... What were we talking about again?>

<<Don't overthink it. We were just engaging in some idle chatter.>>

<We...were?>

I hopped off the bed and curled up on the floor near Rossi. <<Come on, you need to sleep early. Our journey won't get any easier. Okay, good night.>>

For a while, there was no response from her until I heard the shuffling of cloth—Jess was tucking herself into bed. Then, I heard her whisper, “Good night, big brother.”

That's not really what I'm looking for, I thought, but like the simple otaku I was, I rolled around excitedly in my mind. A little sister was the holy grail of tropes!

A noise woke me. It was late at night, possibly close to dawn. I lifted my head to find myself face-to-face with a pair of irises shining eerily in the darkness. My blood ran cold. *It's going to eat me!* But the next moment, I realized it was Rossi. He looked like he'd just woken up too, and his ears were standing at attention as he surveyed the room. Almost immediately, Rossi and I faced the same direction.

Jess sat up and moved to the edge of her bed. She seemed anxious as she stared out the window. It was still pitch-black outside.

<<Something the matter?>> I asked.

Jess glanced briefly at Naut, who was sleeping on the other bed, before she communicated with me.

<I can hear a voice.>

I frowned. <<A voice?>>

<Yes. Someone called Blaise is talking to me.>

I strained my ears and concentrated. However, I couldn't hear anything that resembled a voice. <<Sorry, but I don't hear anything...>>

<I suspect that only Yethma can hear this message. Would you like to listen as well, Mister Pig?>

I nodded, and at once the voice of a girl resounded in my mind. It wasn't Jess.

<...ase I beg you please save me save Blaise from this dreadful darkness please I beg you please save me save Blaise from this dreadful darkness please I beg you please save me save Blaise from this dreadful darkn—>

<<Time out. Wait a minute, could you stop it for a moment?>>

All drowsiness was startled out of my mind, and I shivered. The voice that repeated the same sentence over and over without stopping to take a breath was just like a scene from a horror movie.

<Um, I need to go save her.>

<<Huh...?>>

<I need to go save the owner of this voice, Miss Blaise,> Jess repeated firmly.

She's right, my sleep-addled mind thought, but I quickly caught myself and reevaluated the situation rationally. <<Hold on. Don't be hasty. We don't even know who she is or what she's asking us to save her from. It's dangerous, so even if we decide to go find her, I can't let you leave by yourself.>>

Not wasting any time, I woke Naut and gave him a rundown of the situation. He scowled at me with displeasure at being disturbed from his sleep, but once Jess broadcast the voice to him, his expression turned grave in the blink of an eye.

"It must be a Yethma," he said as he armed himself. As he got ready, he asked

Jess, “Do you know which direction it’s coming from?”

“Yes, I can tell to some extent.” She pointed out the window. “It’s from somewhere far away in that direction.”

I looked in the direction she was pointing. It seemed to be the outskirts of the village, with few buildings and an abundance of trees. <<What’s over there?>>

For a while, Naut narrowed his eyes and surveyed the outside environment. Then, he finally said, “If you’re asking what’s there other than a forest, if memory serves, there should be a few farmhouses and a small church. I can’t see a thing right now, but we’re probably in a race against time. We’ll think over things along the way.”

Our group, consisting of two people and two animals, left the inn before long. We walked down a cobblestone alley that had hardly anything that qualified as a light source. All the lanterns were off, and the only illumination we could rely on was the shining moon beyond the thin veil of misty clouds. The wind tonight was slightly biting—it was a little too cold to be comfortable.

As he walked briskly, Naut lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. “You said that the owner of the voice was far away, right? Someone who can communicate their thoughts over such a distance can only be a Yethma with special powers of the mind. Not to mention, I sensed a northern accent in her voice. This Blaise girl must be a Yethma who’s been abducted from a faraway place for some reason.”

I interrupted him. <<But don’t you think something’s strange about this?>>

Naut looked down at me with annoyance. “What?”

<<Just for confirmation, Yethma have the ability to choose whom they communicate telepathically with, right?>> After all, Jess and Ceres had had conversations with me while keeping Naut out of the loop.

“What about it?” Naut said impatiently.

<<Why can’t we hear that voice, then? If she’s calling for help, wouldn’t it be much more effective for her to communicate with a great number of people rather than Jess alone?>>

“How’m I supposed to know that?” He scowled. “She might’ve thought that if she called out without discrimination, her pursuers might find her. I could come up with a thousand reasons that could’ve forced her hand. To begin with, if she were thinking straight, she’d at least tell us her situation and location, but she didn’t. What’s important right now is that we know a Yethma needs our help. End of story.”

I frowned slightly. <<Jess, have you tried talking to her from our side?>>

She hesitated. “Yes, I have, but there’s no response at all... I actually wonder whether it’s possible to communicate your thoughts to someone you can’t see and don’t know. I haven’t ever done anything similar myself, at least.”

<<Then how is she sending her voice to you, Jess? She doesn’t know you, does she?>>

“That’s...” Jess trailed off. “I think there must be some method that allows such communication.”

Then Jess and Naut continued walking as if nothing had happened. *Oi, are you for real? Are you really going to march into the forest at night based on a negligent conclusion with as many holes as Swiss cheese? You’re way too naive... Are you two Little Red Riding Hoods in disguise? If you lead my lovely angel who can’t be this cute into danger because of your carelessness, Naut, I’ll never forgive you! You hear that?*

I spotted Jess glancing at me with a perplexed expression. *Oh, oops. I used some vocabulary that makes me sound like a certain light novel protagonist who’s crazy about a younger girl. That’s not the case for me, so I need to watch my thoughts.*

Rossi repeatedly looked around us, restless—perhaps he’d sensed the reek of a conspiracy as well. We shouldn’t overly rely on animal instincts, but we shouldn’t disregard them either.

In my mind, I analyzed the situation. Jess had heard a telepathic call for help which only Yethma could hear. The message “please save me save Blaise from this dreadful darkness please I beg you” had been repeated over and over like a broken record. The person transmitting the message was apparently a Yethma. On top of that, we couldn’t make contact with the person in question from our

side. *Well, well. Where are all these clues leading us?*

<<Jess, can you still hear that voice?>>

“Yes. It’s ceaseless.”

<<Hey, both of you, hear me out for a bit.>> I raised a question. <<If you were ever locked up in a dark place and were calling out for help from someone outside, what would you guys say?>>

After a moment of thought, Jess replied, “I would tell them my location and situation.”

“Get to the point already, swine,” Naut said brusquely.

<<It doesn’t make sense. Naut mentioned this earlier too. Blaise won’t tell us details about her situation, yet she keeps including unnecessary information like her name or that it’s dreadful or that she’s begging us. She won’t even wait between each message for a response. Say, Naut, if you fell into a well, what would you keep yelling out, “Please save me save Naut from this dreadful darkness please I beg you”? No, you wouldn’t. You’d shout, “I fell into the well! Help!” And then, you’d wait a while for an answer.>>

After a moment of silence, Naut admitted, “Yeah, that’s what I’d do. But we can’t say that it’s the same for everyone out there.”

Even as we talked, Naut and Jess didn’t slow down the pace of their strides. The dark path led to a dense cluster of trees, and beyond it was a small dome roof. The only sounds that cut through the stillness of night were the foliage swaying with the wind, and our footsteps.

<<Let’s communicate with telepathy from now on. My intuition is painting a picture of the worst-case scenario.>>

Jess looked at me worriedly. <The...worst-case scenario?>

<<It isn’t a call for help. What we’re hearing is a prayer.>>

<What did you just say?> Naut, who’d stubbornly faced forward until now, finally turned around to look at me.

I spelled it out for him. <<An emotional and abstract appeal. The incessant repetition that doesn’t ever pause to wait for a response. It can’t be a message

asking for help. It's a prayer.>>

If it were a prayer, it would all make sense. You would say your name, you would add in your feelings, you would plead...and you wouldn't wait for an answer.

<I suppose you have a point there,> Naut replied. <But there isn't much of a difference between a cry for help and a prayer, so it shouldn't matter.>

<<There *is*,>> I stressed. <<There's a world of difference. A cry for help is directed at someone out there, to call someone over. You pray when you're driven into a corner with no way out, with no salvation, but you still want to cling to something—to grasp at straws. Blaise isn't actually calling for someone.>>

Naut abruptly stopped in his tracks. This time, he spoke out loud. “So? Are you saying that we should abandon her?”

I shook my head. <<That's not what I mean. I'm saying that this might be a trap by someone else.>>

The two humans in our party looked baffled as they stared at me. *Oops, I skipped right to the conclusion. I should explain myself.* <<She had a Northern accent, right? I heard that we are currently in the southern part of Mesteria. Let's say that Blaise is truly a Yethma—in that case, why is she here? And I must raise another question: why is her prayer only directed at Yethma?>>

Like the pig that I was, I snorted thoughtfully. <<I can't explain it clearly yet, but something smells fishy about all this, and I sense the malice of someone else hidden behind it all. If she doesn't intend it to be a call for help, there's a chance that someone is using the girl's prayers as a tool to lure in other Yethma.>>

<I see,> Naut replied. <Thanks for the warning. Just in case, I'll ask Rossi to patrol this area.>

Immediately after, Naut resumed walking. He aimed a swift hand gesture at Rossi, who began roaming our vicinity. Naut stole a quick glance at Jess before he voiced his message in his thoughts.

<Hey, Jess. We're supposed to keep going in this direction, right?>

<Yes,> Jess replied. <I believe she's inside the small church right before us.>

<Inside the church? Strange...>

<Now that you mention it, yes. Hmm...>

I cut in. <<Hold on. What's strange about it? It's the most suitable place of prayer, isn't it?>>

Jess gave me an explanation. <Mister Pig, Yethma are a race who dedicate our prayers to the stars. Unlike everyone else, we normally wouldn't enter a church.>

<<Oh. I didn't know that.>>

Naut interrupted us. <Don't take her word for it. A church is where Mesteria's citizens offer their prayers to the founder of our monarchy, Vatis. It's a sacred place where Yethma aren't allowed to enter. The reason is simple—Yethma don't have the right to pray to a noble figure whom all the citizens worship.>

I see. I took a deep breath to steady myself. <<Thanks for informing me. I've gotten a clearer picture of what dangers might lie in wait for us. Follow my instructions.>>

A short time later, Naut knocked on the church door steadily. A while later, the hefty bronze door creaked open. On the other side of the door was a priest with a hunched back, holding a candle in his hand. He raised an eyebrow at the unusual pair of visitors: an armed young man and an agitated girl.

"What brings you here at this hour of the night?" the priest asked.

Naut was the one who replied. "Sorry for showing up so late. There's a voice coming out of this church, or at least that's what she says." He placed a hand on Jess's shoulder.

Jess was using her scarf to cover her head like a hood, obscuring her eyes from view. She stammered, "I-I came from the neighboring town to shop in this city. I'm Jess, a Yethma. Um... I heard a call for help from someone called Blaise, and I could not sit still..."

The priest observed Jess for a long while before turning his gaze back onto

Naut. “Now that is rather curious. I’ve never heard that name or anything similar before...and I’m the only one inside this church right now.”

“She might’ve fallen down a hole somewhere,” Naut insisted. “I want to save her as soon as I can. Mind if I head in and take a look?”

After a short moment of pondering, the priest replied in a noncommittal voice, “I see... There is a cellar beneath this church that we don’t often enter. Someone might have wandered into it and gotten lost.”

“That might be it. Could you lead the way?” Naut asked.

“Of course.” The priest opened the door even more and invited Naut in. Behind Naut, Jess fidgeted, as if she were wondering whether she should follow, but without a word, the priest made a gesture to stop her. Jess frantically bowed her head before backing away.

With a heavy, oppressive sound, the door closed, leaving Jess all alone outside the confines of the building. Everything so far had gone according to plan. Our enemies likely thought the exact same thing.

I’d been watching over the entrance from the cover of a bush, and now, I shifted my gaze onto the back door of the church. Earlier, Rossi and I had sniffed the vicinity of the church together, but we’d only picked up the scent of a single heckripon. We hadn’t sensed any humans lurking around. In other words, if someone had plans to assault the lone Yethma left outside the church, they’d come out of the building when the opportune time arose.

<<Don’t worry, Jess. As long as we go along with my plan, you’ll be safe. I promise.>>

Jess pressed one hand on top of another against her chest. She glanced at me.

<Thank you. I’m all right. I trust you too, Mister Pig.>

Hearing that title, I made an obligatory snort in my mind. *Oink!*

Just like I’d predicted, the back door opened immediately, and a tall man crept out. He held some kind of cloth in his hand. There was a simple sword or blade hanging from his hip, but I breathed a sigh of relief that we didn’t have to face a super heavily armed and burly man.

He was upwind. I sniffed the scent that wafted over to me. For a moment, I doubted my nose. For you see, I'd caught a whiff of halogenated ether.

Along with the surprise came the thought that it made sense. Once, during an experiment at university, I'd anesthetized a mouse before, and this scent reminded me of the isoflurane I'd used back then. Isoflurane is an inhalation anesthetic that can quickly induce general anesthesia in animals. I didn't know how this man had synthesized such a compound, but it seemed that the pharmaceutical industry in Mesteria was rather advanced. But what in the world were the scoundrels of this world doing with such a potent, state-of-the-art anesthetic?

The man likely assumed Jess was an employed Yethma. Killing an employed Yethma was a crime against her employer, and it was unforgivable. Therefore, these villains would likely avoid killing her until they had the chance to interrogate her somehow. *So this dude wants to drug Jess and do all kinds of wicked things to her while she can't put up a fight. What a monster.*

<<Jess, Naut, someone came out. He has anesthetic—a paralyzing drug. If we attack him right away, we should catch him by surprise.>>

<Got it,> Naut replied. <I'm done on my end. I'll head out now.>

A lanky shadow sneaked closer and closer towards Jess, who was clasping her hands tightly with unease. I'd been the one who told her to not worry, but when danger was actually closing in, I felt as if I were walking on hot coals.

<<Jess, you're safe. I'm watching you. Everyone is here with you.>>

<Yes,> she whispered back.

Rossi was crouching low to the ground in a thicket near Jess. He was ready to pounce on our enemy whenever necessary.

The front door of the church cracked open soundlessly. I saw a face peering through the gap—it was Naut.

"Nowoink!" I cried at the top of my lungs.

Without a moment's delay, Rossi's huge white body darted across the darkness like lightning and leaped at the man. The man was sent flying

backward to the ground, but he reacted instantly by throwing his bottle and cloth, then doing a backward roll and swiftly climbing to his feet. His hand reached for the hilt of his sword. Rossi growled as he stepped back. The man's gaze was fixed solely on the dog.

The next moment, crimson flames flashed in front of the door, flickering briefly as they drew a line in the air. Making full use of the recoil of his slash, the nimble huntsman's foot traced an elegant arc high above the crouching Jess, before landing right on target—squarely in the middle of the man's chest. The flames came hot on the heel of that intense kick, tearing into the darkness once again before piercing the back of the man's head.

A heavy thud resounded in the area, and the man collapsed face down.

I hurried over. <<Got him?>>

“Yeah. I didn't finish him, though.”

Judging by Naut's stance, it seemed that he'd struck the back of the man's head with the hilt of one shortsword, which he'd accelerated with the power of its flame. Naut used a rope to tie the man's hands behind his back.

Jess was shrinking into herself, hugging her arms as she remained crouching on the ground. I approached her. <<It's over now. There's nothing to worry about,>> I said gently.

“Th-Thank you...” she said in a small voice.

<<That must've been scary.>>

“No, not at all...” Her trembling hand reached out to stroke me.

In truth, I hadn't wanted to use Jess as bait. However, if we wanted to catch someone who was possibly armed off guard, we needed to give them the false impression that we'd fallen for their schemes. If Naut and Rossi had broken in from the entrance, brandishing their weapons, there would have been a risk of our enemies putting up a resistance and using the so-called Blaise as a hostage. Above all else, Jess had insisted on taking on the role of a decoy.

“Now that's done, let's go find their prisoner,” Naut said in a composed tone.

Jess nodded.

Our party of two humans and two animals entered the pitch-black church. Jess wavered about taking her first step inside, but Naut boorishly grabbed her wrist and dragged her in. *What did I just see? You think you're her boyfriend or somethin'? Like how there should be a space between "boy" and "friend," you should give her some space, hey!* I glared daggers at him.

But it'd be immature of me if I kept grumpily booing and snorting at him, so I decided to obediently walk in after Jess.

Naut held one of his shortswords in his left hand, and he lit it up like a torch, shedding some light on the church interior. Marble pillars. Wooden benches. To our front was an extravagant altar, on which the sculpture of a young woman was enshrined. Her left hand was pressed against her chest and her right hand was held up high. It must be the founder of Mesteria, Vatis. For a while, Jess stared at the statue in a daze. Perhaps it was the first time she'd laid her eyes upon the woman's visage.

Right next to the entrance was the unconscious priest, who'd been tied up and left leaning against a wall. Considering how he'd been awake at this ungodly hour and had proceeded to fulfill his role of isolating Jess outside, he was definitely in cahoots with the anesthetic man. I was left in awe at Naut's capabilities—he'd dealt with the priest in almost no time at all.

"We're here. Where's the voice coming from?" Naut asked.

Jess pointed downward. "It's from under the floor."

Rossi and I sniffed the floor and found two trapdoors beneath the carpet that led underground. One of them had the scent of animals such as mice. I struggled to describe the scent of the other one—there was a pungent, almost metallic smell leaking out, and it was distinctly different. While the two of us quadrupeds investigated, Naut swiftly tied the priest and the anesthetic man to a pillar.

There was only utter darkness waiting for us underground. The door with the animal odors was infested by a horde of mice, with nothing else—a waste of time. Had the priest perhaps planned on leading Naut to this cellar to throw him off?

We climbed into the other trapdoor and walked down a flight of flimsy

wooden stairs. Rossi was left behind to stand by on the surface.

The light radiating from Naut's shortsword faintly illuminated the area, surrounded by stone walls. At the end of the stairs was a long, narrow passage that led straight forward. To our right was a wall, and to our left were several rooms without doors. The nearest room was nearly a perfect cube, and a large stone platform sat in the middle. Black stains clung to it like tar. The pungent rusty scent drifted into my nose: it was the unmistakable smell of blood.

Just thinking about the danger that had closed in on Jess made me feel as if something was clawing at my organs, constricting them with its sharp talons.

The next room had shelves, on which were rows of glass jars of a size that reminded me of the special jars you used to brew small amounts of fruit wine. They were filled with a clear liquid, and a select number of them held what seemed to be whitish clumps that resembled warped light bulbs in shape. *Are they some kind of animal organ?* As soon as Naut glanced at the display, he marched to the next room. A shadow had fallen over his face, obscuring his expression, but I heard the sound of gritting teeth.

There were two rooms at the end of the passage, and both were fitted with metal bars like jail cells. The closest one was empty. I peered into the innermost room.

The first thing that entered my vision was a faintly glowing sculpture on a pedestal. It was a sculpture of a young maiden kneeling down and praying, and a silver-colored metal band was wrapped around her neck. And right in front of the sculpture was a girl kneeling in the exact same pose as she fixed her puffy red eyes on it. She didn't seem to take notice of us. A tattered rag that barely qualified as clothing wrapped around her almost naked form as she stared at the sculpture unblinkingly. The silver collar around her neck told me that she was a Yethma.

That clears up one of my questions, I thought. By making her pray to a sculpture modeled after a Yethma, her telepathy would be directed at Yethma as a concept, which meant that only Yethma could receive her message. That was probably the gist of it. With this, those two scumbags would lure Yethma over and capture them.

Naut shook the metal bars, rattling them loudly. There was no reaction.

“Hey,” he called out. “Get a grip.”

There was no response to his call either. Naut proceeded to kick the metal bars with all his might.

The deafening sound of his kick’s impact reverberated inside the confined chamber. The praying girl finally regained awareness, and she leaped farther inside the room before looking in our direction. Even the warm light of a fire couldn’t bring any color to her alarmingly ashen white face. Her long, curly blonde hair framed her intricate features.

“We came to save you. You’re safe now,” Naut said. He grabbed the keys hanging on the wall nearby and tested them one by one. The lock on the metal bars opened. The huntsman walked into the small prison cell and immediately hugged the girl.

The girl’s jaw was propped up on Naut’s shoulder, supporting her face that was as lifeless as a doll. But finally, she blinked for the first time.

Stating that these scumbags had committed more than enough crimes to earn a death sentence, Naut dealt with the aftermath flawlessly. He snapped the legs of the priest and the anesthetic man, locked them up in Blaise’s cell with their hands still tied, buried the key in the forest, then threw an indictment letter into what he called a local base of the royal court. Since we had to keep a low profile during our decoy strategy, he’d left that single heckripon alive, and it’d disappeared somewhere down the line. Naut had been extremely bitter over the fact that he’d let a heckripon escape his clutches.

As the sun rose on the next day, our party of three humans and two animals left Munires behind us. It seemed that Blaise had been granted minimum food and freedom—she could walk on her own. However, never once did she speak with her mouth, and she barely communicated anything with her telepathy either. Approximately ninety percent of what she said was either “thank you” or “understood.” The remaining ten percent was her self-introduction.

<I used to serve a gravekeeper household, House Esse, located in Lyubori. I am Blaise, a Yethma.>

Used to. This meant that like Jess, she was a Yethma past her employment age.

Blaise had blue eyes, fair skin, and a prominent nose bridge. Together, they gave her a dignified atmosphere. Though she was slim, unlike Jess and Ceres, her chest was rather ample. No. Her chest was *very* ample. In fact, Jess's clothing was so tight on Blaise that we had to procure a crude robe from the innkeeper. I'd been under the impression that Yethma were a modest race in this aspect, but it seemed that was a mistaken assumption based on a small sample size.

Jess placed her left hand on her chest and seemed to be a bit conscious of that area as she sent me a reminder with her telepathy.

<Um, Miss Blaise and I can both hear you loud and clear...>

Blaise seemed to have accepted the fact that I was a human with her standard apathy, and in fact, she didn't seem to pay even a shred of attention to me. The lone thing she did was walk on quietly right after Naut. Even from behind her, the bouncing of her— *No. Stop right there, you depraved pig.*

<<Sorry, I should have been more considerate. I'm reflecting on my actions.>>

<I mean, do what you wish, I guess. Please look at the one you prefer.>

Jess's tone was gentle, but I sensed something like a hidden thorn inside. I hurriedly said, <<No, you've got the wrong idea! I'm your chabirone, Jess. I swear, for the rest of my life, I'll only look at your chest!>> *Wait, that's not quite right either. That makes me sound like a pervert. That won't do, I'm the furthest thing from a pervert, and I'm sure everyone and their dog would vouch for me.*

She chuckled. <It's all right, you don't have to beat yourself up over it. In Mesteria, it's common knowledge that men prefer bigger ones. It's the same case with Mister Naut too. Look.>

As instructed, I glanced over at Naut. The naive, easy-to-read huntsman would direct his gaze behind him at Blaise from time to time, as if checking on her health. But every time he turned back to face forward again, his gaze would always pass by an area slightly below the girl's face. *This guy is beyond saving. Ridiculous! He's a depraved pervert who's even worse than a pig.*

That aside... What in the world is this so-called common knowledge in Mesteria that bigger is better? <<Jess, don't get the wrong idea. Our eyes are naturally drawn towards bigger ones in the same way that we'd look at a tall sunflower rising above the others. It's an instinctive reaction. Among the bastards that leer at the bigger end of the spectrum, there are some who prefer petite violets at heart, I can guarantee that. In the country I came from, those who like violets were actually the majority.>>

<That's...great?>

I might have fibbed a little, but I was sure that you, my brethren would understand me. *Surely you know how to appreciate the beauty of violets that meekly bloom on the side of a path!*

Ramblings aside, once again, I was forced to face the fact that this world was twisted to the core. Perhaps the only person who could change Mesteria was me, someone who originated from modern-day Japan, which upheld the virtues of modesty and humbleness.



Blaise was a girl who didn't let her emotions surface, reminding me of a doll who'd learned how to walk. She wore her robe with her hood lowered to conceal her eyes, which were cast slightly downward as she followed Naut in a detached manner. Jess and I lagged at a slight distance behind her. As for Rossi, he acted like a free electron as he ran around between us as he pleased.

I couldn't deny that I was curious. Why had she been confined in that church? What had happened to her there? But it certainly wasn't the right atmosphere to bring up such questions. It was probably best not to mention the unidentifiable, unpleasant odor that lingered faintly around her body.

Our traveling companions marched on solemnly towards the capital.

A thought suddenly occurred to me. After we left Munires, Jess had taken off her scarf to reveal the cream-colored "bandage" that Naut had wrapped around her collar, and she had then tied the scarf around her left wrist again. *She has a bag, so why didn't she put it away?* I wondered. *Is it because it would get wrinkled inside?*

As I mulled over that question, a demure smile curled Jess's lips, and she stroked me.

Twilight was hot on our heels when we reached the Impaling Stones. The terrain was uncanny, filled with spiky rocks between one and several meters long, and they clustered together like a bed of nails.

According to Jess, this place had also earned its name due to an incident during the Dark Ages. A certain mage had impaled countless humans on the rocks here like a butcher-bird spearing its prey on spines and thorns, which had led to the name Impaling Stones.

Naut had added his own two cents, saying that making an example out of the corpses and putting them on display had two primary purposes. The problem with this place was that the terrain offered many hiding places for ambushes, which made it subpar as a stronghold.

The first purpose the sight would achieve was to decrease the morale of the enemies and make them think twice about sneaking in. The second was to

attract birds, which would flock to eat the carcasses. The movement of humans would startle birds into flight, exposing troops in ambush. Mages had been invincible in direct combat, but they'd been cautious of surprise attacks. Thus, the mage had erected a forest of corpses to gain absolute control over this land. "Brace yourself," Naut added. "Don't faint if a human bone falls from above."

Uh... These mages should rename themselves to Bloodthirsty Mass Murderers. That sounds like a better description. They didn't have any sense of chivalry or warrior code of honor to speak of, huh?

Perhaps we owed it to Naut, who'd chosen an ideal route for us, but we didn't face any significant danger on our way. When night fell, we found an appropriate cave nearby and had dinner there, roasting meat and the like. My meal only consisted of grass and root vegetables, but it wasn't bad at all—in fact, it was delectable in its own right.

While we dined, Rossi slept to one side. Naut had said that Rossi was on nightwatch duty while we slept. I didn't know what kind of experiences Naut had amassed as a huntsman, but my impression of him was a man of constant vigilance who didn't leave any openings. Even during the church incident, Naut had displayed awe-inspiring physical capabilities and dependable leadership. *I guess my job here is done. I can pass the baton to him and step away from the limelight*, I thought. Though it was heartening, at the same time, I felt a little wistful.

At night, Jess fell asleep quickly. Though she was in the middle of a trial that required her to walk the fine line between life and death, her sleeping face was very peaceful. Naut looked at her with a conflicted expression on his face, and I looked at him with conflicted emotions churning in my chest.

Blaise, meanwhile, was praying to the starry sky near the entrance of the cave. Her eyes were shut, and there was a ghost of a smile on her lips. When Naut addressed her in his usual standoffish tone, advising, "Get some sleep while you can," the young maiden only nodded ever so slightly.

I lay down on my stomach and felt sleep weigh down on my eyelids until someone pinched my ear. *What was that for?* I thought, startled awake. The

next moment, I saw Naut peering into my eyes.

“Come outside with me for a bit,” he said in a low voice before promptly walking out the cave.

I didn’t exactly have a reason to decline, so I followed him. I spotted Blaise leaning against a barren rock wall as she slept, with Naut’s vest draped over her stomach. Hazy clouds hung over the night sky like a veil, but the moon was bright outside the cave. However, the size of the moon felt considerably smaller than my first night in this world—that night when Jess had waited for me under that tree.

Naut found a convenient rock and plopped down. I sat down in front of him and stared hard at his face, as if to ask, “What’s this about?” Now that Jess and Blaise were both asleep, I could only communicate simple messages to him with my body language.

He broke the silence with, “Hey. Do you have the resolve to sacrifice your life?”

I didn’t know where this was going. I didn’t nod and instead continued staring at his face.

“I’m asking you whether you’re willing to die for Jess if it comes down to it,” Naut continued. “Yethma who reach the capital will never step out again. It’s the same for their chabirone. All the companions who are said to have entered the capital with their Yethma partner have vanished without exception. The capital is an isolated realm that’s cut off from the rest of the world. No one knows what’s going on inside. There’s a chance that you might be killed or used as a tool of some sort. Even knowing that, are you still willing to go to the capital with her?”

I nodded firmly.

“Huh. You’ve got guts, that’s for sure. Count me out. After we’re past the Needle Woods and approach the capital, I’ll go back like I promised. I don’t trust the royal court, and I don’t want Ceres to cry.”

I looked straight into his eyes as I nodded once again.

“You said that you have the resolve to die for her, didn’t you? In that case, I’ll

give you these.” He reached into a sack next to him and took out two anklets embedded with small blue ristae. “They’re the same anklets as the ones I put on Rossi during a hunt. You can control water or manifest ice, and by using this power, you can change the terrain. You could summon up a flat sheet of ice to make your prey slip, you can make blocks of ice to trip your prey, or you can make bumpy, nonslippery ice to create a foothold. If there’s a lot of water available, you can even make a swamp to limit your prey’s movement.”

I let out a noise to indicate I was listening.

“To tell you the truth, I’m not used to killing. I hate Yethma hunters so much I want to murder every last one, but I’ve never actually killed any, not even once. Things went well last night, but that’s because you hatched a plan to catch them off guard.”

A tiny, artificial smile quirked the corner of his lips, allowing a glimpse at his sharp canines. He continued, “I fought a handful of people when I retrieved that collar. But the only thing I actually achieved was crippling the foot of a weakling and smashing one of his eyes. I was outnumbered, and all I could do after that was run for my life.”

“The most intelligent creatures I’ve ever killed are probably those heckripons.” He smirked, and it was clearly self-deprecating. “But Yethma hunters murder for a living, and I don’t know whether I’ll have the ability to let you guys escape safely when I’m up against them. You have some smarts, so you better put them to use. I want you to use this tool and back me up with Rossi.”

For one second, I’d been distracted by something else, but I nodded twice to indicate my agreement. Naut then proceeded to put the anklets on me. He disguised them with a similar piece of cloth to the one he’d given Jess, so that they wouldn’t stand out.

“As for how you use it, it’s intuitive. Practice on the way.” Rossi had approached us during our conversation, and Naut stroked his chin. “Any questions? Opinions?”

“...Oink.” This is the only thing I can say. Take a hint, please.

A clipped chuckle slipped out of Naut’s mouth before he looked right into my

eyes. “One last thing. When we inevitably end up in battle, listen to my instructions. Am I clear?”

I bobbed my head up and down.

“Rossi listens to everything I say without hesitation. That’s why we’re an effective team. But the moment you go against what I say, our coordination crumbles, leaving openings for the enemy to exploit. If you don’t want Jess to get killed, listen, and don’t question me.”

He exhaled slowly before continuing, “But in the worst-case scenario, I might use you as a sacrificial pawn. If that happens, I’ll leave the decision up to you. I’ll only abandon you if the situation forces my hand. It’s up to you to decide who dies between you and Jess.”

He didn’t even wait for a response—he walked right back into the cave. Rossi came up to me and smiled at me with his tongue lolling out as he panted. When I looked closely at him, I spotted countless scars on the heroic hound’s legs.

After a light meal the next morning, we set off. Once we were past the rocky terrain, we entered a vast hilly area with mild slopes. Another day of walking, and a grayish brown rocky mountain came into view ahead of us—the capital. It was an isolated, conical mountain like Mount Fuji, but its incline was much steeper and more sudden. It seemed to be roughly a thousand meters tall at most.

As we approached, I could tell that the lower part of the mountain wasn’t a normal rocky slope. The normal, more gentle foot of a mountain was completely absent—instead, it was surrounded by steep cliffs, and these structures were far from ordinary as well. The cliffs looked like towering walls that rivaled the height of a skyscraper. The mountain was encircled by stratified rock walls, which seemed to be arranged in layers that towered even higher the farther inside they were. These layered walls were irregular in shape—as if the mountain was developed haphazardly—forming descending tiers, hiding its contents from prying eyes. If I had to compare it to something, it reminded me of a fortified bamboo shoot.

According to Naut, the entire mountain served as a single fortress city. The

royal mountain was fenced in by a gloomy coniferous forest—the Needle Woods.

“It’s finally...within sight,” Jess said.

<<Yeah. We’ve finally come this far. All that’s left is to get past the Needle Woods.>>

Naut, who was walking at the front, turned around. “Have you guys heard this story before?” He curled his lips into a cynical grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Then, he took a sidelong look at Blaise as he fiddled with one of his shortswords with his right hand. “The mushrooms in the Needle Woods glow faintly at night. I’ve seen it before, and I gotta admit, it’s a pretty enchanting sight.”

Jess turned to face Naut. “I have heard of that, yes. No one knows the exact cause of the glowing, right?”

“Not quite.” Naut shook his head. “I heard the reason from a local huntsman. Not all mushrooms glow at the same intensity. In some places, they’re radiant, and in others, they barely glow at all.”

<<...What does that mean?>> I prompted him.

His eyes took on a dangerous glint. “It’s not the mushrooms that glow, but the Yethma blood they suck up from the soil.”

Right before sunset, we arrived right at the boundary of the Needle Woods. There, we decided to stay the night at a small inn. The inn itself was a sturdy Western-style building built from gray stone slabs. As for the interior, it was modest but well maintained, from what I could see.

In the dining area was a silver crest on display—the symbol of Yethma protectors made with a Yethma collar. However, the collar on the crest was dull, tarnished heavily by the color of soot.

<<Hey, that collar’s black,>> I said, slightly alarmed.

Hearing that, Jess gazed at the crest nervously. “You’re right... I’ve never seen such a dark crest before.”

Collars under the management of Yethma protectors would shine brilliantly. On the other hand, if someone with malice approached, the collar would become blacker and blacker. From what I remember, that should be how they worked.

With a frosty gaze, Naut said, “The Needle Woods is the breeding ground for Yethma hunters. Bloodthirsty ruffians treat this area as if it’s their own backyard and do as they please, and every year, around a hundred Yethma lose their lives here. Ill intent permeates this place. The degree of tarnishing on that collar still counts as one of the better ones.”

He then proceeded to walk all the way to a table in the far back before plopping down with a heavy thud. Jess, who was wearing her scarf, sat across from the young man, and Blaise took a seat next to her, her hood obscuring the more mature girl’s face from view. Rossi and I sat next to the table. From the small window, I caught a glimpse of the maroon sunset, slowly being eaten away by the navy blue of night.

“Tomorrow will probably be the last I see of you tw—you three. If all of you enter the capital, you’ll never meet me again in your life. And of course, the same can be said if you die,” Naut said in a matter-of-fact tone. After a pause, he continued, “I’m going to grab some alcohol. You guys order what you like. It’s that kind of inn.”

The man who made full use of his skills in the kitchen was a quiet elderly man with a hint of sorrow lacing his features. But the food we were served was glamorous and lavish. Naut didn’t expand on the meaning of “that kind of inn,” but I had a good guess. It was a place where those resigned to an eternal farewell shared a last, happy memory together before they had to face the cruel reality.

A fairly luxurious feast was laid out on the table, and Naut raised his mug of beer. “All right, tomorr—”

But before he could finish his sentence, Blaise’s voice echoed in my mind.

<My apologies, but...I shall take my leave. I want to sleep.>

I turned around, and beneath Blaise’s hood, I could see her pressing her pale lips into a tight, thin line.

Naut abruptly stopped his speech. He gazed at Blaise and asked, “Why? Stay and eat. You need to have enough energy for tomorrow—”

<I am simply very tired. I don’t have an appetite. Please, let me rest.>

For a while, Naut was silent as he mulled over something. Eventually, he picked up a piece of meat on the bone within reach and tossed it at Rossi. With a twist of his head, Rossi opened his mouth wide and nimbly caught the meat.

“Go get some sleep in our room,” Naut said. “Rossi will watch over you.”

Blaise bowed slightly before heading to our designated room in haste. Holding the meat in his mouth, Rossi walked steadily behind her.

Letting out a long sigh, Naut placed his mug on the table. “Come on, let’s dig in already.”

Jess cast her eyes downward. “Yes.”

<<He’s right. Let’s eat fast and sleep early.>>

Our last supper began, but it felt more like a funeral with the heavy atmosphere looming over us. Despite that, Jess seemed to relish the taste of every single bite of food she took, and she shared the dishes with me little by little.

“Look, Mister Pig. Is this quail meat, perhaps? It has plenty of salt and herbs, so I can only give you a bit, but...here you go.”

I gratefully chewed on the tiny chunk of meat from Jess’s palm. A pig’s mouth was clumsy. My lips would touch her hand when I ate. She giggled, as if she felt ticklish.

Tickling the palm of a beautiful maiden with my mouth was an extremely...*unique* situation, but my heart didn’t flutter or race. I mustered every bit of energy possible to taste the cuisine of this foreign world and voice my opinion. <<It’s good. It’s almost like high-end yakitori.>>

Jess blinked. “Yacky tour-ree?”

<<Something like that. You skewer chicken meat chunks and grill them over fire. It’s a cuisine in the country I come from.>>

“Oh, I see! So this exists in the place you came from as well...” Jess stared at the grilled quail with herbs intently before taking another bite and chewing blissfully. *She’s a strong girl*, I thought. *Most would react like Blaise in a situation like this.*

Naut, who’d been gazing vacantly at Jess as he chugged on his beer, lowered his voice to a whisper as he said, “Sorry to interrupt you two, but I want to discuss something in private.”

<<What is it?>>

Jess and I both focused our gazes on Naut.

“I want to talk about priorities.” Naut creased his forehead and scowled, as if he had a stomachache. “I don’t wanna say one life’s worth more than another. Whether it’s humans, Yethma...everyone’s lives are equal in weight, as long as they have a heart and soul. But...” He faltered. “But if our lives are at risk tomorrow... If we end up having to choose between Jess and Blaise... Let’s choose Jess without hesitation.”

Jess’s eyes widened. “Please wait! Mister Naut, that’s...!”

“Hear me out. Just...listen. You saw what happened just now. She’s not in her right state of mind, and I can barely feel any will to live from her. But you’re not like that, Jess. I’m sure that she’d be upset too if you ended up dying because of her. Of course, keeping everyone alive is our biggest goal. But if there’s no way out—we’ll make that decision now. We’ll prioritize Jess’s life first. If we hesitate at the wrong moment and Jess loses her life because of our indecision, I...”

He trailed off abruptly and took a swig of his beer.

<<Yeah, I agree with Naut. Let’s put Jess’s life above all else.>>

“You can’t do that, Mister Pig...” Jess gasped. “That’s not fair to Miss Blaise.”

There was a harsh rattle as Naut slammed his mug down on the table. “That’s the problem with you people—you Yethma. You always think about other people first.” His right hand fidgeted with his mug, and I could feel his ire. “First things first, that swine over there is *your* chabirone, not Blaise’s. He’s here with a mission to defend your life at all costs, not the life of a captive we rescued along the way.”

Jess didn't respond. She had a troubled expression as she struggled to find a reply.

<<Exactly what Naut said. From the very beginning, I came here to protect you, Jess, and you alone.>>

Jess looked at me with teary eyes. I couldn't tell whether her reaction was out of elation or sorrow. She slowly said, "I, um... I'm sorry. No one has ever said anything like that to me before, so I'm not sure what to say..."

<<Personally, I'd be really happy if you take it at face value and rejoice.>>

"Then, I'll rejoice."

I frowned slightly. *Is she an android that has only just learned how to feel emotions? Because she doesn't look happy at all.* It seemed that she'd read my narration, because she clumsily plastered a smile onto her face. *Well, she's cute, so I guess I'll let her off the hook.*

For a while, Naut gazed at Jess. Her reaction seemed to trigger something in him, and he spoke up. "Listen to me for a moment, Jess. You know, I had a dream." He launched into an abrupt speech. He was more talkative than I'd ever seen him before. "It was a dream that didn't come true—a dream that can never be fulfilled now. I wanted to head to the capital with a certain girl and stay by her side until I died. But now, her bones are part of my swords."

Naut placed his shortswords on the table. The unpretentious sword hilts were made from both metal and a material that looked like smooth, polished ivory—the bones of Eise, the girl who was abducted and killed when the convent had gone up in flames.

He continued, "If you think I sound like a fool, ridicule me all you want. But...you remind me a lot of her. The least I can do is escort you to the capital and see you reach a happy life. I want you to live, Jess. I want you to live a long, long life to make up for the girl who wanted to live but couldn't."

Tears glistened in Jess's eyes as she finally found her response. "Thank you. Let's all survive long enough to see the dawn of the day after tomorrow."

It was clear that her that "all" included Blaise. The crooked, disconcerting "greater than" sign within her mind stubbornly refused to change direction

from “Jess < Everyone Else” to “Jess > Everyone Else.”

Feeling something against my back, I woke up with a start. It was a silent night.

<Noble Pig, can you come over for a bit, please?>

For a moment, I wasn't sure who it was reaching out to call me over, but I soon realized it was Blaise. This inn didn't have large enough rooms to fit a big party of three people and two quadrupeds, so we were all sleeping in a cluster on the carpeted floor. We were supplied with blankets, of course.

Rossi was lying next to the window with his ears on alert. As for Jess and Naut, they seemed to be fast asleep. Without a sound, I stood up and shuffled over to where Blaise lay. Rossi's ears twitched, but after a moment, they returned to their standby position.

<Can you please come a little closer?>

Hearing her request, I edged over. There were thirty centimeters between me and Blaise, who was lying down with her hood still covering her face.

<A little more, please.>

With baby steps, I approached her until I was at the minimum distance my self-conscious virgin body could tolerate.

<Now, can you lie down for me?>

I did as I was told. The next moment, Blaise's slender arms wound around my neck.

I was lying down. Someone was hugging me. A *girl* was hugging me while I was lying down.

<<Huh? U-Um... Excuse me?>>

Blaise's intricate features entered the corner of my vision. I could tell that her bountiful chest was touching the side of my pig torso. A pungent smell drifted from somewhere close by and wafted into my nose, reminding me of rotting meat.

<Forgive my rudeness. I'm...slightly cold.>

Oh, I see. I guess it's hard to control your actions when you're freezing. Such moronic thoughts flashed in my mind while I felt Blaise's arms trembling around me. Feeling cold probably wasn't the only reason for her actions.

<<Is there something you want to talk about?>>

<...Yes.>

<<Okay. Go on, you can say anything.>>

Blaise swallowed audibly. She made a noise that sounded like she was in pain.

<Noble Pig, you came from another world, yes?>

It caught me by slight surprise. Jess and Naut hadn't ever expanded on the topic of where I'd come from; they seemed to consider me just "a strange pig from another nation out there." I'd assumed that all Mesterian citizens had little interest in this topic, but Blaise had just used the words "another world." In Blaise's world view, other worlds existed and weren't just fiction.

<<Well... Yeah. I came from a different world that's nothing like Mesteria.>>

<I'm begging you. Please tell me more about that world.>

Oh, that's all she wants? <<Sure. Could you give me an example? What do you want to know about?>>

<I am aware that eavesdropping is awfully impolite. However, I could not shut out your voice from my mind. Noble Pig, is it true that in your world, men prefer women with small breasts?>

That was a curveball question I could've never predicted. My brain crashed. It wasn't processing her question, and I didn't know how to reply. <<Sorry, but uh, I mean... I, er, like smaller ones, yeah, but... It's not—>>

<Then... In your world, a girl wouldn't unknowingly tempt men just because their breasts are large, surely...>

It didn't really sound like a question—it sounded more like her wish. I realized the implication hidden beneath her words. Something heartbreaking must have happened to her. <<Yeah, that's right. It's out of the question. Let's take you as

an example. Most people probably wouldn't even spare a glance in your direction.>>

<I see. I never knew such a world existed...>

She let out a long exhale before she continued.

<When I die tomorrow, oh, it would be so wonderful if I could be reborn in your world.>

Her tone was flat, but embedded within was a deep-seated, desperate grief. <<Hey, don't say ominous things like that. Don't talk as if you're definitely going to die.>>

<No, I *will* die.>

<<Who decided that? There's always hope, you know. Don't abandon it so easily.>>

The entire time, Blaise's arms were shaking behind my neck. After a moment, she spoke again.

<Can I tell you a secret, Noble Pig?>

I paused. <<If you want to, go ahead. I'm a tight-lipped pig.>> *But why me, of all people?*

<Because you came from another world. Ever since I began serving the gravekeeper household, I have been praying nonstop, believing that there must be other worlds beyond the stars. That is why I feel that you are the most suitable entity to dedicate my final prayers to.>

Welp, she read my narration without reservation. Anyway. <<I understand. I'm listening.>>

<Please take a look.>

Blaise distanced herself from me slightly and unraveled the front of her robe. On the spur of the moment, I closed my eyes. The next moment, that pungent odor grew more potent, and I couldn't stop my eyes from opening and turning to face her. Even within the darkness, I could tell: just below Blaise's navel was a big, black gash marring the white skin of her abdomen.

<It must smell horrid. The wound is festering. My skin and flesh have started decaying. The toxins seem to be circulating in my blood as well, and my whole body aches. I can feel death breathing down my neck.>

<<They...stabbed you?>>

<Yes. Inside the underground area of that church. I was stabbed with all kinds of things. There was a lot of blood.>

She fixed her state of undress before holding on to me again. Her arms were shaking feebly.

<<That's awful... How could anyone...>> Only useless, bumbling words made it to the surface of my mind.

<It's already too late. By the time all of you rescued me, my wound had already started opening.>

<<It must've been painful.>>

<Yes. Very.>

For a while, I was at a loss for words. After the silence stretched on, I finally found what I should say. <<Let's discuss this with Naut and Jess. There must be a way to heal you.>>

Blaise shook her head almost imperceptibly.

<Please don't tell them. This is a very dangerous place. Mister Naut is much too kindhearted—he would push himself too hard. Someone of his character would put himself at risk to save my life. That might indirectly cause all of you to lose your lives, which would go against my wishes.>

I felt as if all my organs were in the grip of some terrible claws, being squeezed hard and twisted sadistically. <<But if you want to reach the capital—>>

<I don't have to. I will dedicate my life to you and Miss Jess.>

<<No, you can't do that. You...>> Though I was the one saying those words, I could feel how superficial and flimsy they were.

<Death is salvation for me. Please let me die already. It was my fault for being

born like this. It was my fault for being born as a Yethma. It was my fault for tempting everyone with my body, with my looks, with my voice.>

<<That's not true at all. The fault is clearly with the bastards who selfishly exploit Yethma, not you.>>

<Is that a common way of thinking in your world, Noble Pig?>

<<Of course.>>

<Well, that makes me want to go there even more. Oh, Noble Pig, if I die, please take me to your world. This is my last wish.>

I could never wasn't the response I gave. There was only one right answer. <<I came here even without praying. You've prayed for so long, it wouldn't make sense if you couldn't hop over. You can definitely reincarnate in the world I came from, Blaise. I'm sure of it.>>

<I see. Thank you.>

Something gleamed inside the shadow cast by her hood. Tears were trickling down from her stunning azure eyes. It might have been my eyes playing tricks on me, but I had the feeling that, for the very first time, Blaise was smiling.

<<Sorry, but... Have you said everything you wanted to say? If Jess sees us, she might get the wrong idea.>>

<Yes, I have...>

Her hold on me loosened. But when I tried to get up, her arms clung to me in a firm grip once again.

<Please wait. There is one last thing.>

Whenever anyone said a line like this, it would be followed by extremely important information. Even our literature textbooks tell us that conclusions are meant to be impactful. I lay down on my stomach again and prompted her to carry on. <<What is it?>>

<There is one thing I desperately want to tell you.>

Her fingers gripped my back fat before she continued.

<I assisted with grave maintenance work, and I had many opportunities to

Speak with families of those who had passed away. During these conversations, I have heard a variety of things from people from all kinds of backgrounds. Several times, I have heard this peculiar story from them.>

<<Peculiar...story?>>

<The capital apparently has no entrance.>

I froze. <<Excuse me?>>

<The capital has no entrance,> she repeated. <Someone even claimed that all Yethma perish in the Needle Woods because of this.>

A chill ran down my spine. Traveling to find a safe area only to discover that there was nothing at the destination... It sounded like a stereotypical zombie apocalypse movie. *You've got to be kidding me.* <<Then...what was the point of us risking our lives to travel to the capital...?>> I said numbly.

<Don't worry, there are also many accounts of Yethma disappearing with their chabirone. There should be a way in. Of course, those who made it to their destination have never appeared outside, but...there is a saying that started spreading at some point about a way to enter the capital.>

<<What is it? Tell me, please.>>

<"Appeal to the king.">

I waited, but Blaise didn't seem to have anything else to say. <<Is that it?>>

<Yes. Such a rumor circulates in some areas of the north. They say that the only method for Yethma to enter the capital is to "appeal to the king.">

<<Does that mean we have to shout in the direction of the capital?>>

<I don't know. However, don't you think that it's rather peculiar for such an ambiguous rumor to spread this far? Normally, the stories that gain traction are more specific and shocking in some way.>

She made a good point. For example, it was unusual for people to gossip that "Person A has a sister." It's way more likely you'd hear something like, "Person A has a cute sister who's a stellar athlete, excels at academics, and has a brother complex."

<<You're right. Its ambiguity is what makes it sound eerily convincing, actually. Have you heard anything else about this topic?>>

<My apologies, but that is everything I know...>

<<I see, I see. Appeal to the king, huh...?>>

<I am aware that it might be useless information. However, you and Miss Jess are my saviors, and I want you to reach the capital no matter what happens. I thought it might possibly help you in some way, so I spoke up.>

Two streams of reflected moonlight glistened beneath her hood.

<Please, please, I beg you. The two of you must survive and find happiness.>

In the end, her last wish, her last prayer, was made for someone else. That thought made me feel empty inside. Though sorrow tore me apart, tears refused to flow down my cheeks.

Chapter 4: Rules Are Always Made for a Reason

The next morning arrived. It was finally time to step into the Needle Woods. The capital was within reach. Likely, our fate would be decided before the end of today.

That thought sent my heart out of control, declaring its existence by pounding in my chest. Jess kept biting on her bottom lip—she must be anxious as well. As for Blaise, she was silent as always, just like a living doll. It was as if last night had never happened.

Jess was quick to react.

<Last night? What do you mean by that?>

Oops. <<I had a quick chat with Blaise, that's all.>> Even if my life depended on it, I would never tell Jess that Blaise and I had watched her sleeping face and shared a laugh.

<Huh? You watched me while I was asleep? Oh, that's so embarrassing...>

<<Just kidding. I made that narration up. If you don't want to be led around by the nose, I suggest you avoid reading the parts you aren't supposed to.>>

She gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. But the next moment, she looked at me and puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

<In that case, you shouldn't look at my underwear without permission either. What a shame, I picked out my favorite pair especially for today.>

Wait, really? I hurriedly prepared to retract my previous statement, but I caught myself. The wise and sagely narrator realized that having the approval to look at her underwear whenever I pleased was abnormal to begin with.

On top of that, the even wiser part of the narrator realized that engaging in dumb banter like this was our way of desperately averting our attention from our fear of death.

The day was dim—it was cloudy outside. When the windows were opened,

the breeze that slipped in was humid and somewhat stuffy, but it wasn't so hot you could call it sweltering. Naut observed that it must be rather dark inside the forest today.

After packing up our belongings, we filed into the dining area. Jess was in her usual dress, and the scarf we'd bought together was wound around her neck. Blaise was shrouded by her robe. Naut had light armor made of leather and metal fitted to his arms and legs, which allowed great mobility. A few metallic trinkets that I'd never seen before dangled from his waist. As for Rossi, he was equipped with anklets on his front legs and what seemed like leather stomach armor protecting his torso. Last but not least, I stood there almost stark-naked, only armed with my anklets.

"The point is to lower their guards by looking like an innocuous pig at a glance," Naut said, seemingly lightheartedly. "You better pray that someone can heal your wounds in the capital if you get hurt on the way." The entire time he spoke, he was wiping off his sweaty palm on his clothes.

Naut seemed like he needed more time to find his resolve—even after breakfast, he dragged his feet about leaving the inn, stalling by perusing the notice board. As he dawdled, he found something of interest and called us over.

"Look." He indicated. "It says that a rista smuggler was arrested at the Kiltyrin estate." I looked where he was pointing and saw words written on a piece of parchment, which was likely a news report. "The date matches too. Were you two responsible?"

Jess looked at me. After I gave her a nod, she said, "Yes. Someone came to, um, assassinate me, and we locked him in a warehouse."

We told him the story from beginning to end, but I deliberately avoided the details about the appearance of the two men I'd witnessed in the back alley.

When I was done, Naut furrowed his eyebrows. "If we're talking about a big smuggling organization that'd extend its reach to Kiltyrie, there aren't that many contenders... Maybe Eise's murderers are among that gang."

So that Naut wouldn't change his mind, I steered the conversation away from the topic in a natural manner and proposed that we set off. *I mean, it's hard to not make a connection. The man we'd locked away had a lame leg and a scar on*

his left eye. Naut mentioned that he'd crippled the foot of a weakling and smashed one of his eyes when he snatched back the collar.

I wanted it to be—no, I hoped it was a coincidence. We would be in trouble if the flames of vengeance blinded him and led him back to Kiltyrie right now.

Crises always arrive unannounced.

The incident occurred less than an hour into our trek into the woods. Inside the gloomy coniferous forest, my ears picked up a rustling sound from somewhere above us. The next moment, a shadow dangling from a long rope swooped down rapidly towards us, using the rope as a swing.

“Hide!” Naut barked sharply, and drew out his twin shortswords in one swift motion.

Two waves of flames flew out from his hands and aimed right at the shadow with remarkable accuracy. Alas, the shadow released the rope and leaped upward, and the flames could only fruitlessly sear the rope. In the air, the shadow made use of the branches to make a sharp turn before hurling something in our direction.

The spinning projectile rushed forward—towards Jess, who was trying to take cover in a bush. But she wouldn't make it in time. My mind made a decision instantly, commanding my body to jump in front of Jess and shield her.

I heard a loud crunch.

I braced myself for death. There was no pain. Yet, hot liquid splashed onto my face.

The world froze.

A rope twined around Blaise's torso. Three big, pointed objects in the shape of caltrops were attached to the rope, and all of them pierced deeply into Blaise's body. Blood dyed the flax rope an unforgettable crimson right before my eyes.

Blaise staggered a few steps to distance herself from us before collapsing on the ground. Her hood fell away, revealing a smile of resignation on her pale

face. *No, how can this...*

A faint voice echoed in my head, so quiet that it almost dissolved into the air.

<Thank...you.>

Naut rushed over to us, his eyes still darting around our environment. Jess was safe—she'd hidden herself inside that bush. Naut, Rossi, and I surrounded her in a defensive formation.

At a little distance from us, Blaise faced upward as she lay on the ground, stretching out her limbs on the spongy bed of pine needles. Her robe had come undone, exposing some of her abdomen and the grotesque wound that marred it. It seemed that I'd never had the luxury of choice to begin with. Blaise had taken the initiative to sacrifice herself for Jess and me.

The shadow disappeared somewhere above us into the sea of trees. With a hand sign, Naut let Rossi loose while he himself watched the area above us warily.

From the recesses of the forest, the sound of galloping hooves drew nearer at great speed.

A gruff shout announced the arrival of our enemies. "Oi! I told you I want them alive. How're we supposed to have a good time now?" It was a giant on a large black horse. I recognized his voice from somewhere.

The next thing I knew, we were surrounded by four men on horses, including the giant.

I glanced over. Naut's expression mirrored my own—we both stared at the big man with shock in our eyes.

I reacted instantly and dashed over to where Blaise was lying. I made a show of obsession with her dying body, making clipped grunts as I prodded her arm with my snout.

That large man, without doubt, was the one who'd instructed the scarred man to kill Jess back in Kiltyrie. His target might be Jess—or, to be more specific, a Yethma with a pig companion. He'd never seen Jess in person, so he couldn't know what she actually looked like.

With deference, one man on a mount called out to the giant. “The pig is with her!”

It was a statement that could make it onto the ranking of “Top Ten Least Versatile Phrases to Learn in Another Language,” right next to “Where is the discotheque?” His specific wording couldn’t be any clearer; their target included a pig. I’d made the right decision.

“Well, well,” the big man drawled. “Looks like we won the lottery, boys.”

He commanded his horse to move closer to me. Both the rider and mount were clad in ominously gleaming steel armor. Fear seized my heart, but I continued my act. If I convinced them that Jess was dead, the risk we had to face would likely decrease somewhat.

“What a letdown,” the giant spat in a cold voice as he looked down at Blaise. “She’s dead and her stomach’s been emptied.”

“Don’t get any closer, bastard,” Naut hissed in a low voice, raising his swords high in the air and hissed his threat in a low voice.

“Oh? What’s this?” The giant raised an eyebrow. “Looks like we’ve got a spunky chap here.”

“I’ll kill you if you come over. I know that I don’t stand a chance against all of you at once. But *you*...” Naut pointed his left shortsword squarely at the giant’s face. “I’ll take you down with me, whatever it takes.”

The giant went on alert, placing his right hand on his broad longsword, but he still had it in him to leer uncannily at Naut. “Hm? Got a grudge against me or somethin’?”

“Do you remember the brat that snatched a collar from you lot five years ago?”

The giant mulled over the question for a moment. Eventually, he grinned wide, flashing his yellow teeth. “Ahh, you’re the kid from back then. Lookin’ all mature and handsome now, aye?”

While the giant spoke, I heard Naut’s instructions in my head. The three of us were connected through Jess.

<I need you to create mayhem here, Pig. I'll protect Jess. Go find a way to turn the tables, then get right behind the big guy and mess up his foothold. I'm instructing Rossi to take care of the front right. We'll charge to the front left.>

"That Yethma was pretty good quality, sonny," the giant continued. "It was a waste to kill her, so we used her as our plaything for three days before chopping off her head, if I remember right. Heh, even after all that roughin' up, she still seemed to have a clear head until we cut it right off. She didn't even know her place! A lowly Yethma dared to wail and even beg for her life."

His speech was sickening. Just listening to it made bile rise to my throat. However, I had a mission. As I loitered around Blaise, I concentrated on my anklets. I was lucky—there was a river nearby. There should be more than enough water here.

A glance at Naut told me that he was gritting his teeth. He was doing what he could to contain his anger, it seemed.

The giant continued, rubbing salt into Naut's wound. "That reminds me, you were the kid with bad taste who even took freshly harvested Yethma bones with you, weren'tcha? I remember. Are you still takin' good care of them?"

"Shut up," Naut hissed.

<<Naut, I'm going to knock over a tree.>>

<A tree?>

Causing pandemonium with the body of a pig was a challenge, and with such limitations, that was the only method that came to mind. *You might've been surprised by my idea, so allow me to explain myself, my brethren. In general, tree roots spread horizontally. For coniferous trees like the ones around us, their roots should be clustered above a depth of fifty centimeters at most below ground. This is because roots deeper than that wouldn't be able to absorb useful nutrients.*

Therefore, if I froze the area with the roots and then liquefied the layer below it, it should be easy to knock over a tree—that was what I was counting on.

The preparations were complete. I concentrated on my anklets and froze underground water, creating rising ice spikes right below the roots of a tree

that was on the other side of the giant. With a strenuous creak, the tree slanted in the direction of the giant, who glanced briefly at the tree. The other surrounding men let out gasps of surprise, their attention completely focused on what was happening above their heads.

I made full use of that opening and ran in a big circle until I was behind the giant. Rossi had gone ahead of me and had made a path of ice for me to tread. The rest of the ground had transformed into a swamp, thanks to him.

Just like I'd expected, a ninja had been lurking on the tree I'd knocked over—the ninja who had murdered Blaise. The scoundrel frantically tried to jump onto a neighboring tree, but an arc of flames flew up at them from below, severing their leg like a hot knife cutting through butter. Most of the ninja made it to another tree, but one lone leg rained down onto the ground.

Naut aimed another flame blade at the foot of the giant's horse, and it landed right on target. The horse's feet were guarded by armor, but it was still enough to startle the beast. With a loud whinny, the horse raised its front leg. Above the giant's head, the large tree trunk, accelerated by gravity, came crashing down like a towering bat.

The giant pulled out his longsword. The tip of his blade drew a grand arc in the air, and the falling tree was reduced to a shower of lumber shards that were blasted away. Wood chips filled the air like a sandstorm, obscuring everyone's vision.

Naut used the distraction to rush forward to the left while shielding Jess. I froze the ground behind the giant and created an icy surface pocked with numerous holes, each one just large enough to fit a horse's hoof.

As if he were performing an ardent dance, Naut wielded his swords and shot off one flame blade after another in a flurry. The giant used his broad longsword as a shield and skillfully parried the incoming attacks. The other three cavalymen quailed and fell back.

One of the retreating horses got stuck in the swamp Rossi had created and began writhing. The ferocious motion nearly shook the rider off, but not before Rossi lunged forward at his neck. In the blink of an eye, the blood of his victim splattered across Rossi's head. The rider fell from the horse, throwing up a

splash of muddy water with his weight. Rossi's execution was spectacular. *One down.*

The bloodied Rossi fell back closer to me, behind the hard surface I'd frozen. One of the other riders, who had circled around the swamp out of caution, aimed his crossbow at Rossi. He didn't accomplish anything, though, because the next moment, his horse's hind leg was stuck in one of the holes I'd made. It lost balance and stumbled heavily. A loud cracking sound followed—it must have broken its leg. I felt sorry for the poor horse.

The rider was flung onto the ground. Naut leaped over the intact part of the fallen tree and sliced the man's head off in an instant. Naut's hair was disheveled, and his chiseled features looked like they'd been reconstructed by wrath itself.

<<Where's Jess?>> I asked immediately.

<She's inside a rock. Knock down another tree and make it fall in our direction.>

Hm? Inside a what?

<I'm all right, Mister Pig,> I heard Jess reply. <I'm hiding with Mister Naut's tool.>

The sound of her voice made me finally breathe out in relief. Warm blood began circulating around my body once again.

Focusing, I prepared to topple a tree nearby. Meanwhile, Naut and Rossi used the fallen tree trunk as cover while they ran towards the tree where the newly one-legged ninja was located.

To my knowledge, the only remaining enemies were the giant, one cavalryman, and one ninja.

The giant swung his longsword, and the shock wave blew away the fallen tree we'd used as cover. *What an absurd strike.* I scrambled to get away and lay behind another tree while concentrating on my anklet, making the tree fall in Naut and Rossi's direction.

Two crimson flames licked the air—Naut's shortswords. They must have cut a

tree trunk, because a tree on the other side overlapped my falling tree as it slammed down.

I heard the giant's gruff voice. "Fall back, y'all!"

The two trees intersected, and they accelerated towards the giant and where his companions must be. Snapping sounds grated on my ears as the trees took down surrounding branches with their collapse. Naut dashed across the trunk of one fallen tree straight towards his target—the giant.

Suddenly, Naut stumbled and fell forward. I looked around and saw that the ninja, who had been clinging to the tree trunk, had grabbed Naut's ankle. Naut's head smacked hard against the trunk, and he tumbled to the ground. Rossi, who was supposed to be backing him up, was nowhere to be found.

<<Watch out!>> I yelled, but it was a futile shout. There wasn't anything I could do right now.

<Don't look down on me.>

It was Naut's voice.

There was a screech of metal against metal, followed in the next moment by a crescent of fire. Though his feet were unsteady, Naut managed to stand back up. There was a gash on the ninja's torso, and it was fatal. Without pausing to catch his breath, Naut swung his shortswords again and sent waves of fire at the giant and the other rider. To my dismay, the pair used their swords to block the brunt of the attacks, and the flames sputtered into sparks and dissipated.

"What's wrong? Is that all you've got?" the giant asked in a rough voice, holding his longsword at the ready. The other rider swiftly took out his crossbow.

And that was the precise moment when a deafening explosion rang out somewhere behind the men. Yet another tree slammed down at our enemies—it was Rossi's work. He'd moved there at some point without drawing any attention and had turned it into a pincer attack. A bolt shot out of the crossbow, eager to strike but instead flying in a wayward direction. The thunderous booms and clouds of dust threw the forest into utter chaos.

Since the tree was falling in my direction, I evaded by running towards the

escape route Naut had designated. Not a moment later, I heard his voice.

<Now's your chance. Run. Jess is near you, hiding inside a shelter camouflaged as a rock.>

<<But we're so close to finishing off all of them!>>

<Don't talk as if you know how battles work, amateur. It'll take time to kill that giant. You've served your purpose. You'll only drag me down.>

An invisible shock wave zoomed past me, turning a tree standing nearby into splinters. *He's right. If I stay behind, I could turn into minced pork in seconds.*

<We shouldn't be far from the capital. Don't waste your time on me. Go on without me.>

It was one of the most clichéd lines I'd ever heard. But when Naut was the one delivering it, it sounded remarkably cool. <<Don't you dare die on me here.>>

<That's my line.>

The flames of Naut's shortswords flashed somewhere farther than I'd expected. The low growling of his dog had also grown distant before I'd realized. And just like that, silence returned to our surroundings.

A nearby rock crumbled into sand, and from inside, Jess came out, covered by a linen cloth. She looked straight into my eyes as she said, "Mister Pig, Mister Naut has given us his instructions. Let's go."

If that's what Jess says...I have no objections. <<There might be more of them lurking around. Let's stay alert while we run.>>

With that, we left the battlefield behind us. Soon, the sound of clashing swords was nothing more than a faint whisper in our ears.



We stayed as inconspicuous as possible while single-mindedly heading for the rocky mountain, which we could glimpse through the gaps between trees. The whole time, Jess kept on touching my body with her hands.

<<Anxious?>>

<Yes... Will Mister Naut be all right?>

<<You know how strong he is. He must have already finished everyone off and is making his way back to the village where Ceres is waiting for him.>>

<Right. Mister Naut is powerful, so that must be it...>

Jess seemed shaken by the series of overwhelming events that had occurred within such a short span of time.

<<I can't overstate how much I want to change Blaise's fate. But I can't deny that thanks to her, in the unlikely event that some of our enemies escaped alive from Naut's clutches, they should report that you're dead. With this, no one will come to pursue us anymore. All we can do now is to hide ourselves as well as we can and pray that we don't come across Yethma hunters.>>

<You're right. I'll pray.>

<<Even if we *are* that unlucky, our opponents will underestimate us. You're cute, so many of those Yethma hunters might plan to...have their way with you before killing you. In that case, I should have more opportunities to help you escape.>>

<Oh, I'm...I'm not cute at all.>

<<Don't be so humble. An awkward virgin like me is calling you cute, so you're definitely cute.>>

There was a pause. <Thank you.>

<<All right. In that case, let's go over our options if Yethma hunters manage to find us. I received these magical anklets from Naut. They don't provide much offense, but they should be useful for hindering them to a certain extent. And, Jess, you used that "sielter" thing that can camouflage as a rock just now, right? Did Naut give you any other gadgets?>>

<Yes. I have one explosive and one sielter left.>

Jess took out two metallic objects from her bag. They were two silvery spheres around the size of golf balls, with intricate craftsmanship as decoration, and one small rista was inserted into each. One rista was red, and the other was yellow.

<And there's one more. Mister Naut told me to use this only when we have our backs against the wall.>

She showed one more metal sphere to me. A wolf's image was carved into the surface, and a green rista was embedded within.

<<What's that?>>

<He told me that it's a tool named "wolf call" used by huntsmen. It's apparently a tool that can summon wolves by emitting a sound that we can't hear, but it's highly risky because the wolves will attack us as well. But he said that when Yethma hunters are after us, if we gather wolves and hide inside a sielter, we might narrowly escape alive.>

I see, that's an ingenious plan. The problem is that it might take a while before the wolves arrive. If the Yethma hunters discover the sielter and tear it apart during the delay, it will all be for nothing. Our success will boil down to how we use other tools to buy time.

<<Well, with this many tools in our inventory, I think we'll make it. Trust me, Jess. I swear, I'll definitely deliver you to the capital.>>

Jess still seemed uneasy as she put away the three metal spheres into her bag.

<Thank you. No matter what happens, let's step into the capital together.>

Though I wanted to reply "yeah," there was something I needed to say.
<<Hey, Jess. There's one promise I want you to keep.>>

<What might it be?>

<<I probably can't get into the capital without your help. I mean, I'm a pig. But *you* can. You should be able to enter the capital even if you're alone. If, by some chance, the worst happens to me, you must march straight forward without

looking back. Am I clear?>>

And sure enough, Jess didn't look happy with my request.

<But if you aren't here with me, Mister Pig, I...>

<<Jess. Naut and I have risked our lives for your sake—to deliver you to the capital in one piece. That means you have a duty. Even if you are all alone, don't render our hard work futile. Please.>>

<You're right. I will.>

A bead of sweat slid down the outline of her chin. Then, it was sucked up by her scarf that was “the color of a crystal clear and slightly shallow lake.” She looked at me with eyes that were heavy with sorrow.

<<Is something wrong?>>

<Um, I...> But then, she quietly averted her gaze. <I...never mind. It's nothing.>

I chose to not pry into what she'd intended to say.

There was no path in the bleak forest. We could only walk on, praying that hope lay ahead.

What awaited us was a precipitous cliff. Our destination was the mountain, so we should have arrived. The only problem was the apparent lack of an entrance. At the very least, there didn't seem to be a way into the capital from where we were. Blaise's words floated to the surface of my mind—she'd said there was no entrance, and that we had to “appeal to the king” to enter. *The question is, how?*

<<I know it might be useless, but let's try shouting at the capital, Jess. Yell, “Please let me in!” We'll leave right away after that. We don't want Yethma hunters on our trail.>>

<Understood.>

Jess sucked in a deep breath. “Please let me in!”

Her voice echoed throughout the dark forest, and a handful of crows nearby were startled into flight. But nothing else seemed to happen. *Ugh, it didn't work*

after all. We didn't have much of a choice—we could only walk around and look for clues. The sun was edging closer to the horizon. I could hear the calls of crows ringing out from several directions.

<<Looks like our “open sesame” didn't work. Oh well, I guess we'll have to skirt around the edge of the cliff. Let's go.>>

We went back into the grove slightly for cover and began our trek with no end in sight. I was walking alongside a beautiful maiden, and our hearts—*well, more like minds*—were connected as we made our way through the evening forest. The only sounds that entered my ears were the faint whispers of trees, the trill of insects, and the singing of birds. I could only imagine how blissful I'd be if Jess's life wasn't in danger.

The sun sank below the horizon, and the sky grew dark with night. Soon, moonlight rained down on the forest. Naut hadn't been joking. Colonies of mushrooms were scattered around the dark forest floor, and they glowed faintly. Yethma like Blaise might have taken their last breaths near them, and the thought was infuriating and saddening.

No matter how many hours passed by, we couldn't find an entrance. Jess's steps began to falter. We'd already walked for an awfully long time. I commanded Jess to ride on my back.

<<Don't fall asleep,>> I warned.

<I won't. So...let's pass time by chatting the entire while.>

Jess and I talked about trifling things, and our conversation never ceased. Both of us were likely aware that this might be our last chance to talk with each other like this.

I lost track of how long we'd walked. It was probably already the dead of night by now.

My trotters halted. For a moment, I thought I'd heard footsteps from a distant bush.

A low whooshing sound rushed by us, followed by the thud of something hitting a nearby tree. Without a sound, Jess lost her balance and slid down onto

the ground from my back.

<<You okay?!>>

Jess looked up at me from the ground, brows furrowed.

<Someone seems to be close by.>

An inky black stain was blooming on the pale blue dress she wore, just above her right shoulder. With my left eye, I looked at the tree that had produced that thud earlier, and I spotted a short arrow wedged into its trunk. With my right eye, I scoped out the opposite 180-degree view.

In the darkness beyond the bushes, roughly ten meters away from us, was a lone man shrouded in black clothing. He had a crossbow at the ready, and he was watching our direction warily. The arrow he'd shot had grazed Jess's shoulder before piercing the tree. I crouched low to the ground to keep myself hidden.

The man's voice rang out gratingly—and he was deliberately using a sickly sweet tone to coax Jess. “Young miss, running away won't help you. Be a good girl and come out, will you?”

<<Don't move, Jess. Is the wound severe?>>

<No. I'm all right.>

Jess furtively moved her left hand to press down on her right shoulder. Below her hand was a growing black stain.

I couldn't breathe properly. Jess had been *hurt*. She claimed that she was fine, but she was the kind of girl who'd insist she was all right no matter what happened to her. It might be a grave injury. Our enemy was an armed man. *What should I do? How can I let Jess escape safely?*

<Um... I'm all right, really, so please... Run away, Mister Pig.>

Absurd words echoed inside my mind. At this point, kind wasn't the right word—coldhearted would be more accurate. <<Don't be silly. If I ran away here, that'd render our whole journey meaningless.>>

<They were...the best days of my life. So—>

<<You deserve better days than that! Jess, I will never abandon you, not in a million years. I'm begging you, please understand that much, at least.>>

I saw Jess looking at me. A tear slid down her cheek. She was smiling.

"Do you have someone else with you?" the man continued in his wheedling voice. "Whispering to each other won't get you anywhere. You see, that arrow had a coating of poison. You're already doomed. But if you have a friend, well, I suppose I could be kind enough to let them escape alone."

No, that can't— My mind went blank. I nearly panicked, but I composed myself in time to sniff Jess's shoulder. Other than the scent of a beautiful maiden's blood and the scent of a beautiful maiden's armpit, nothing stood out. There was no poison.

<<It's a bluff. He's only trying to find out whether you have other companions hidden nearby. You mustn't respond.>>

Jess, who'd been on the verge of opening her mouth, hurriedly held her tongue.

"What's wrong, young miss? You're my only target. I'm heading over now. Okay?"

The man was persistent in calling out to us, but contrary to his words, he didn't budge. He seemed to be vigilant about his surroundings. However, he might change his mind any second, and there was no guarantee that he was our only opponent.

I hurriedly went over the cards in our hands. First, my anklets that could control water on the ground. At this distance, however, it would be too slow to attack the man that way. Water was also scarce in this area, which meant that knocking over trees would be a challenge.

My second card was the body of a pig, manipulated by an otaku. But if the man intercepted my charge with his crossbow, it'd be a fatal wound. Lastly, there was Jess— *No. It's too dangerous. Even acting as bait would be too risky.*

We could only rely on the three tools Naut had bequeathed us, though I'd never used them before.

Jess must have read my narration. Though she remained lying on the ground, she secretly moved her bloodied right hand and retrieved three metal spheres from her bag, with their minuscule ristae inserted within—one red, one yellow, and one green. An explosive, a sielter, and a wolf call.

“Oh? You’re doing something. That’s bad news. I’m also alone, so it’d be troublesome if you were to resist.”

The man observed his surroundings as he cautiously took one step forward—or at least, he pretended to. His foot moved back to its original position. *I see... He isn’t in a hurry to kill Jess.* Yethma were a gullible race—they were like pigeons who’d walk onto a roast pit voluntarily and serve themselves on a platter with red wine sauce. She was even injured, so he didn’t have to worry about her running away. It wasn’t the Yethma he was wary of, but her minions who might be following her around. If Jess had comrades, he would deal with them first, then have his way with her once he was sure she was alone. There was probably also more...*entertainment* to look forward to if he didn’t kill her right away.

A cool wind rocked the trees in the gloomy forest. I sniffed it. There was no scent of humans from the left. But straight ahead of us was the man with the cloying voice, and another hidden human who reeked of sweat. They were concealing their strength to make us lower our guards. From that, I could assume that our opponents were cautious people who would make and follow a meticulous strategy.

But of course, I wasn’t going to let Jess die here. <<All right then, Jess. It’s our last battle. We’ll cling to life even if it kills us.>>

“Mister Naut, no! Don’t come over,” Jess cried out. Using her own voice as a distraction, she moved her hand to activate the wolf call.

Abruptly, two lengthy, deafening screeches rang out. The ultrahigh-frequency sounds were like knives stabbing into the back of my cranium. I’d braced myself, but just like I expected, it was agony. Wolves and dogs—and, of course, pigs too—could hear sounds of drastically higher frequency than humans. The “wolf call” clearly made use of that trait and let out earsplitting sounds beyond

human hearing range to gather wolves—more like provoke them, actually.

The man reacted to Jess's voice and turned to face her direction—to face the area behind me. Through the explosive noise rattling my eardrums, I could barely make out the man talking. "I knew it...there. Secretly...so I thought that might be the case. But...this Yethma's done for. Poison...Naut or something like that...give up and go home...alone, so I don't really want to...with you..."

As he spoke, he lifted his crossbow until it was level with his face, then took one step in the direction of where "Naut" was supposed to be. A light beam was projected out of the crossbow like a flashlight, illuminating the area in front of the man and his own cheek, which was framed by unkempt stubble. With the clank of a mechanism, the man's bolt shot out and pierced the void. He swiftly notched another bolt. At that moment, I charged forward, to the left, with haste.

A snap.

I accidentally stepped on a twig as I moved, and the next thing I knew, a sharp pain tore through my hind leg, as if I'd been burnt. It seemed that a bolt had hit the mark. I had the urge to squeal out, "Owoooink!" but I shoved it back down my throat. I mustn't drop the metal sphere I was holding in my mouth. I resumed my charge to my forward left, running through the bushes with my remaining three legs.

"Oh," I thought I heard the man mutter to himself. "It's just a boar."

The shrill screeching sound was still resonating in the area. I kept single-mindedly running left until I was in an area with no enemies. And now, one could draw a straight line connecting me, the rough location of the hidden man, and then the man with the sugary voice. *Good.* There was a convenient tree nearby. I gingerly placed the metal sphere near its roots. A small metal disk, shaped like a fingernail plate, jutted out from the metal sphere like a folding knife—Jess had pulled it out beforehand. *Next, I should snap this thing...*

I stomped on it with my front trotter until the metal disk bent. There was a clicking noise. *All right, time to get the hell outta here.*

To get into a position where I could support Jess, I headed farther upwind. The two men were downwind from me. Jess was half crawling as she distanced

herself from the men, and I could tell that she was aiming to meet up with me.

<<Any moment now. Get ready.>>

The moment I thought those words to her, a flash of orange light and a thunderous explosion pierced the still darkness with almost enough force to produce shock waves. Next came a sinister and relentless creaking as the thick trunks of coniferous trees slammed down in the direction of the men.

I could see the crossbow light beam waving around frantically. The other man in hiding stood up in a hurry and backed off, watching the site of the explosion vigilantly. He seemed to be saying something, but the sound of the wolf call smothered everything out. I needed to take advantage of their panic to lure them as far away as possible while Jess escaped and hid herself inside the sielter. It was only a matter of time before they'd discover her, but if the wolves arrived before that, the Yethma hunters would likely abort their mission.

Standing still, I focused on my anklets until I could see water steadily oozing out of the ground. Even while I was preparing my next move, trees snapped the surrounding branches as they fell down, obstructing the view in the immediate vicinity.

The screeching had yet to stop. The nauseating sound felt as if it were juggling my inner organs around like sandbags, but it only served to fire me up. <<Jess, leave the rest to me. I'll stall those men. Distance yourself as much as you can and hide in your sielter in an inconspicuous place.>>

Her meek voice echoed in my mind.

<Yes, understood.>

I breathed a sigh of relief. Jess should be able to escape alive. I concentrated even harder on the anklets and created a localized swamp. On top of that, I even froze over a few patches, doing what I could to make it as unfriendly to pedestrians as possible. *Don't make an enemy of a gloomy introvert. We take pride in our ability to make you miserable.*

Most of the setup was taken care of—the fallen trees and swamp should do the trick. Next, I retreated in the direction where Jess had headed and used my anklets once again while cautiously observing where they should be.

But then...

<Mister Pig, save me!>

...Jess's voice shook my mind and heart. I hurriedly sniffed the wind and rushed down the trail of Jess's scent. There, I found her collapsed on the ground. The body of a young maiden wearing a blue dress was lying motionless on the soil.

No way. No way. What happened?!

I dashed over frantically. The next moment, Jess suddenly clung to me with an agility that was unthinkable for someone injured.

<Crouch down, please!>

I got down as I was instructed, and there was a clicking sound next to my ear. A linen cloth spread out rapidly above our heads. *Wait, this is... She tricked me!*

The linen cloth was just barely large enough to conceal the both of us. With a rustling sound, most of the light that had slipped through the seams disappeared. The two of us were crammed into the darkness within the shelter. We were wrapped as tight as pigs-in-a-blanket in here. Inside the artificial rock, my body was pressed tightly against Jess's, and we were stuck in a posture that barely allowed any room for movement.

At a slight distance from us, the wolf call was still screeching like a banshee at a frequency range that humans couldn't hear. As for the Yethma hunters, I'd completely lost track of them.

<<You dummy!>> I said anxiously. <<I can't divert our enemies' attention like this. What if they find us?>>

But all Jess did was to hug me so tight that it felt painful.

<You're the dummy, Mister Pig. If I went into the shelter alone, what were you going to do when the wolves arrive?>

What was I going to do? I mean... The only thing I can do is weather out the storm somehow by coming up with something on the spot. Just as I was looking for a rebuttal, there were several howls in the vicinity, as well as the stamping of numerous feet. The stamping approached until it was nearby. Then it fell

silent.

I heard the yell of a man. “Wolves! Fall back!”

The sound of barking rang out right beside us. The beastly odor of carnivorous animals wafted in slightly from the gap between the shelter and the ground. The wolf call had served its purpose, gathering a pack of wolves. And now, the only thing we could do was wait and pray.

Even if I knew it wouldn't make much of a difference, I used my anklets to transform as much of the area around us as possible into marshland.

The wolves didn't seem to have any plans of leaving. Not yet.

<See? If you stayed outside, Mister Pig, you wouldn't have stood a chance.>

Jess's shoulder was supposed to be wounded, but she stubbornly held me tight in her arms.

<<You're right. I owe you one.>> Though I said that, the gnawing anxiety wouldn't leave my chest, and I added, <<But hindsight is always twenty-twenty. There was no evidence suggesting that the wolves would arrive immediately. Jess, I remember telling you to hide by yourself, and I'll tell you why. If you do that, I could distract the men and the wolves, and with this tactic, we can at least guarantee one person's survival. Your decision just now threw all those plans out the window. You put your life in danger—a life that Naut and I have risked our own lives to protect.>>

<Someone like me doesn't matter. As long as you're alive, Mister Pig, I...>

No matter how many times I tried to drill it into her, it wouldn't stick. At this point, it was starting to grate on my nerves. <<Hey, Jess. Tell me the truth. You don't want to die, do you? You want to reach the capital, don't you? Then be honest. Cherish yourself more.>>

There was no response.

<<I don't know what's causing you to have such extreme self-sacrificial tendencies, but you can't live like this. It's okay for you to be more selfish.>>

Jess shook her head barely, almost as if she were trembling.

<I'm already selfish enough.>

<<Not at all. When have you *ever* made any selfish requests?>>

<I'm making one now. I don't want you to die, Mister Pig.>

Jess leaned into me more than necessary. Her soft chest pushed against my belly. Her wet face touched my neck. We were both covered with blood and curled up inside a rock, trembling as if that was the only thing we knew.

No response would come to mind. I wanted to pat her head, but the joints of a pig weren't designed to do that.

Jess's voice echoed in my mind.

<Just the thought alone already makes me very happy.>

Don't read the narration, I thought.

The piercing wolf call had ended before we knew it. From somewhere far away, a distant howling rang out, a howl that made me feel a sense of kinship. The wolves began filtering out of the area.

Jess and I left the shelter and single-mindedly walked on, trying to get as far away as possible. The whole time, I prayed that we wouldn't suffer any more than we already had.

<<Has the bleeding stopped?>>

<Yes. Somehow.>

She'd wrapped a piece of cloth around her right shoulder. Scattered all over the creases of the cloth were expanding patches of blood. As for my hind leg, Jess had pulled out the crossbow bolt and wrapped cloth around the wound as well. The bloodsoaked cloth would squelch noisily with every step I took.

We would be truly done for if someone else set their eyes on us. No, even if we weren't hunted down, we probably had less than half a day before our bodies gave out. Not to mention that we might be attacked by wolves at night.

<Um, Mister Pig.>

<<Yeah?>>

<It's the first time in my life that someone's stayed so close to me for my

sake.>

I felt as if I were riding on a roller coaster that had suddenly plummeted into a steep drop. My heart clenched hard. <<Stop it. Don't do fatal foreshadowing like that.>>

<I was truly happy during the time I spent with you. I just want to tell you that.>

Without warning, my vision opened up. Jess, who'd been walking next to me, had tripped over a tree root. Flustered, I halted my footsteps. <<...No matter how much we advance, we don't seem to be getting anywhere. Let's rest here for now.>>

Immediately, I ushered Jess over to sit down on a tree root nearby. I lay down right next to her. I could feel blood trickling down from the makeshift cloth bandage on my hind leg. The wind was freezing. Breathing felt suffocating.

<What about you?>

<<What *about* me?>>

<Are you happy right now, Mister Pig?>

Jess's gorgeous honey-brown eyes were looking at me. The resignation in them meant that she was already setting her gaze on the end of our story.

<<Nope, I'm not happy.>>

The melancholic expression on Jess's face froze, and her mouth was half-open in surprise.

<<I haven't given up yet. Whenever I think that there is a much greater happiness waiting for me just a little farther down the road, I can't consider my past self as happy, no matter how hard I try.>>

<I see... That sounds just like you, Mister Pig.>

<<But well, I suppose I won't have any regrets even if I die here. If I led a normal life in my world, I would have never, *ever* experienced a beautiful maiden pressing her chest against me.>>

Jess's left hand reached for her chest. Her fingers, littered with scars and

scratches, gripped the cloth and—

<<Wait, that was a virgin joke,>> I said hurriedly and averted my gaze.
<<Don't take it seriously.>>

That was when my ears picked up a rustling sound right ahead of us. I was immediately on alert. <<Something's there.>> I strained my eyes and stared into the darkness. A big black silhouette was swaying exaggeratedly.

It was a heckripon.

White moonlight illuminated black fur, cutting its silhouette out of the dark night. Its main body shook left and right without rest. Its bald, batlike head remained unmoving, as if it had been pinned into the air by a rivet. A pair of large black eyes decorated its head.

Even though this creature was said to do nothing to other living beings, it was a monster that stirred up an instinctive terror in all those who looked at it. The heckripon fixed its gaze on us, swaying its main body as like a berserk pendulum.

<<You're sure that they're harmless, right?>> I double-checked just in case.

Jess placed a reassuring hand on my back.

<Yes. Heckripons don't do anything.>

The beast remained at a distance—which it could probably leap across in an instant—and continued staring at us as it swayed its body repeatedly. It was the beast Naut would kill on sight; a monster I'd never seen in my birth world.

...Hang on a minute.

In my head, there was a click as all the various pieces of scrambled information suddenly fell into place. *I get it. I get it now! I see. My theory should be right. It's almost like a mystery reserved especially for me, someone who came from another world.*

<<Hey, Jess. Heckripons don't do anything—that's what you think, right?>>

<Yes, it is.>

<<But in reality, the heckripons *are* doing something.>>

<They are swaying, yes.>

<<Not just that. Everyone's distracted by their movement and has overlooked the most important part. Look at it—the heckripon is *watching* us, isn't it?>>

<Oh, you're right.>

<<You said that heckripons appeared out of nowhere after the Dark Ages ended, am I correct?>>

<I did.>

<<The thing is, in my homeland, we had the same type of animals as the ones you find in Mesteria. But the sole exception is the heckripons.>>

My brethren, have you already caught on to the significance of that?

I continued, <<All living things live in a complex system where they influence each other in some way, such as being predators or prey, or two parties on opposite ends of deception. That's how an ecosystem works. Thus, an ecosystem where a heckripon is a common animal shouldn't otherwise contain exactly the same animals as the ecosystem I'm familiar with. It's impossible.>>

<Now that you mention it... It does sound a little strange that only heckripons didn't exist in your homeland, while the rest are identical.>

<<Therefore, we can make a certain deduction. Heckripons are a foreign or completely new species introduced to the ecosystem roughly around the time of the Dark Ages. If we take it a step further, I believe they're creations of the mages. Only mages are probably capable of creating such animals.>>

Jess seemed stunned. <But why would they...?>

<<Think about what the heckripons do. They're looking at us, aren't they? To put it another way, they're monitoring us. Remember what happened to Baptsaze's convent? It's absurd for a stone building to burn that fiercely. But what if, through the surveillance system of heckripons, someone found out that the convent was harboring Yethma, then burned down the building with magic?>>

I could feel Jess's hand shaking on top of my shoulder roast.

I took a deep breath. <<Ceres said that heckripons began making frequent

appearances within the vicinity of the convent some time before the fire.>>

<Was that to strengthen surveillance?>

<<It's likely. Among the regulations involving Yethma, there was one dictating that Yethma must never ride vehicles, and that's the decree of the royal court, right? Don't you feel like the royal court is afraid of Yethma slipping out of their surveillance network? They need Yethma to come to the capital or die once they reach sixteen, or else they'll be inconvenienced in some way. That's why they burned down the convent sheltering Yethma as punishment. They also don't want Yethma to travel somewhere far away and out of reach. That's the reason behind the vehicle law.>>

Jess didn't move. She was probably convinced by my theory.

<But we haven't done anything wrong...>

I know that. But that's how the world works here, because of a...certain reason. And now, I recalled the clue Blaise had told me last night: "Appeal to the king."

Her voice played back in my head. *"Yes. Such a rumor circulates in some areas of the north. They say that the only method for Yethma to enter the capital is to 'appeal to the king.'"*

Well then, how are we supposed to make our appeal? Shouting doesn't work; we tried that. What should we do, then?

It was almost like what you would do in an escape room game, so it might sound ridiculous, but the method I had in mind was likely the right one. *You know, while we're here, let's do something beyond "appealing." Threatening sounds like a good plan. We'll end this journey with an overkill finale.*

<<Jess, say this to the *heckripon*,>> I stressed. <<"Please let me into the capital. I wish to talk about the true identity of Yethma.">>

She looked at me and nodded slowly. I returned it with a nod of my own.

She sucked in a deep breath. In a shaky voice, she repeated what I'd told her. No matter how I heard her voice, whether it be in my mind or with my ears, it was beautiful and melodious.

The heckripon, like always, was staring hard at us as it continued to sway. *I guess I gambled wrong...*

But the moment after that thought crossed my mind, there was a loud clatter. A part of the cliff had collapsed nearby.

Jess and I traded glances.

<<Let's go.>>

"Yes!"

With great effort, we scrambled to our feet and walked frantically towards the source of the sound. I realized that the sky was brightening up faintly. Below the dim light of dawn the pitiless cliff loomed, towering over all else...now with a large hole in the wall.

We walked on. As we approached, I could tell that inside the hole was a stairway leading upward. I took a sidelong glance at Jess. She was heading towards the entrance with undivided attention. Even if we didn't exchange any words or thoughts, our hearts were united. Even as we staggered, we trudged on until we arrived.

We entered the hole, and I squinted hard at the area above the stairs. From deeper inside, a woman with long golden hair walked down. She wore an elegant white gown that seemed like it wouldn't look out of place on a Hollywood actress. I couldn't tell for sure, but she was roughly thirty years old. Her features were fine and mature.

She halted a few steps from the bottom, and with a smile, she said, "Well done for persevering this far, Jess. Please come in with your clever pig companion."

Her gentle voice was music to my ears. A rush of relief came along with exhaustion, and I felt as if my legs were going to buckle under me. *Finally.*

As for the entrance that had opened behind us, surrounding rocks gathered and buried it once more, as if we were rewinding a video. In front of us, meanwhile, was a narrow stone stairway leading forward, illuminated by the warm light of lanterns.

The woman blinked, as if she'd remembered something, and she lightly touched Jess's shoulder. The cloth that had bound Jess's shoulder disappeared with a flash of light, and her wound was healed in an instant. Next, the woman touched my butt. But of course, it wasn't because she was a molester. I felt the pain in my hind leg melt away into nothing.

We'd found salvation. That fact alone was enough to make my heart feel full.

The woman proceeded to lead us to an extravagant room inside the rocky mountain. There was no one else in sight. With the words, "I shall come fetch you when you are awake," she disappeared off somewhere.

Inside the lavish and spacious room, the two of us, covered in blood and dirt, were left behind. The room was completely different from the inns we'd stopped by so far—the interior reminded me of a medieval castle that'd been renovated into a first-class hotel.

With unsteady feet, Jess sank down onto a leather chair. "That was exhausting..."

<<Yeah. I'm dead tired.>>

"Oh, we mustn't sully the bedding. Let's wash ourselves before we sleep."

<<Good point. We both look like we've been through the wringer.>>

"I shall brush you. Please come over when I call out for you."

Without thinking, I replied, <<Okay. That'd be a big help.>>

Jess went into the bathroom a step ahead of me. A short while later, I heard the noisy sound of splashing water. This was a mountain where mages lived—there must be hot water at least, surely.

"Come in, Mister Pig."

Hearing her call, I headed in the direction of her voice. There was a changing area, and beyond it was a large door left wide open. Inside was the bathroom, which was filled with warm steam and covered with ceramic tiles of bright pastel colors. I spotted a big bathtub, as well as something that looked like a hot waterfall.

And above all else, Jess was standing inside, naked.

On reflex, I squeezed my eyes shut. <<Sorry... I, er, ended up looking for a brief second...>>

“That’s all right. Weren’t you the one who told me to save my undressed form for a special, impactful moment? Open your eyes, and please take a good look.”

Under the encouragement of her warm voice, I slowly lifted my eyelids.

The only word I could find to describe her was *beautiful*. Modest, artistic curves. Her fair, soft skin looked as if it was going to melt into the steam.



Jess beckoned me with her hand. “I shall give you a good scrub so that we will be presentable in front of the king. You’re not allowed to look away from me during that time, okay?”

My brain couldn’t think properly. Dazed and completely at her mercy, I felt her brush me down. The body of a maiden at point-blank range seemed more like an illusion despite the distance—completely surreal.

I felt Jess’s hand stroke my back. Right before my eyes, the two soft...um, they both swayed slightly, and I deliberately focused on another part of my vision.

“It’s no good. You need to take a proper look. This is the only way I can thank you right now.”

Fudge. She read me like a book. There was no escape. <<Don’t say that. You make me sound like a depraved pig. Just putting it out there, but to me, wholesome stuff like head pats and chatting are much better rewards, okay?>>

“But I’m doing that right now as well.” She huffed slightly. “This is the best possible thank-you gift within my power that I could come up with. Please accept it.”

<<I see... In that case, I guess I can only accept it gratefully.>>

Jess smiled. Perhaps her smile was truly the most worthwhile reward I could ever receive.

She looked at me and lifted the corners of her lips even higher.

<<Don’t force yourself to smile. You’re the most charming when you smile naturally.>>

“Okay, naturally...” She relaxed her facial muscles, which had pulled up the corners of her lips to an artificial degree, before looking into my eyes. “How about this?”

<<Well, it’s natural all right.>>

“Ah, I’m glad to hear that. To tell you the truth, I still don’t really know how to smile spontaneously.”

I frowned. <<What do you mean?>>

Jess began scrubbing my stomach. “Being a servant is a very lonely job. My smiles were always worn for someone else to look at. It’s quite difficult for them to appear of their own accord.”

My eyes widened. I recalled all the smiles Jess had shown me so far.

She continued, “But that only applies to the time before I met you, Mister Pig. After all, you’ve made me laugh many, many times.”

<<Ah. That’s a relief to hear.>>

“In fact, when you performed your dance in front of Mister Kilins, I had to hurriedly hold my breath so that I didn’t laugh out loud.”

<<Stop, please. That was a dark moment in my life.>>

She chuckled. “If you’d like, I can discipline you and teach you how to dance.”

Huh? She’s willing to discipline me? Oiiink! <<After I turn back into a human, let’s dance together. Teach me, then.>> I tried to sound cool, but I ruined it completely by accidentally writing my true thoughts in the narration.

Suddenly, Jess’s hand stopped, and she stared straight into my eyes. “In that case, how about I discipline you in your human form?”

...Hweh?

“Ah, um, I was joking...” she stammered.

<<Oh, phew. You nearly gave me a heart attack.>> *I even imagined the scene for a moment, ack.*

I was looking forward to turning back into a human. But I also had a sea of anxieties—was it really possible? What plans did the king even have for us?

Jess must have been having the same thoughts, because a hint of unease seeped into her features as she continued scrubbing me. “Mister Pig.” As she washed the bottom of my chin, she leaned in and whispered into my ear. “No matter what happens to me tomorrow, I was a lucky and happy girl to have traveled with you.”

Emotions welled up in my heart. <<That’s...>> I didn’t finish the sentence. I didn’t know *how* to finish that sentence.

During my silence, Jess's lips gently touched the side of my snout. "Thank you, Mister Pig."

We fell sound asleep on the fluffy bed, and were woken up by the woman who'd welcomed us at the entrance. Judging by the height of the sun, I could tell that it was roughly noon. The woman assisted Jess with getting dressed before leading us "up," in her words. We entered a large, box-shaped room, which moved like an elevator and carried us in the opposite direction of gravity.

<<Um, excuse me, beautiful young madam,>> I thought tentatively.

Our guide turned around and smiled gently. "Yes. How may I help you?"

I checked her neck. Unlike Jess, she didn't wear a silver collar. <<It seems that you can read my mind, madam. Your aura also feels somewhat familiar. Are you perhaps a Yethma?>> I asked politely.

She lifted the corners of her lips meaningfully. "You are on the right track, yes."

Hearing that, Jess and I looked at each other. Jess must have understood the implications as well. If the woman used to be a Yethma, it meant that Jess had a high chance of living on respectably, like her. Jess's collar would likely be removed too.

The box room arrived at an unthinkable vast hall. The lofty ceiling was several dozen meters high, and it formed a colossal arch high above our heads. On the ceiling was a fresco painting depicting a multitude of people. Lining up along the walls of the hall were towering white sculptures, and they were poised to emphasize the imposing beauty of men and the artistic, curvilinear beauty of women.

At the center of the hall was a grand, round table with over ten armchairs surrounding it. There were already two occupants—an elderly man wearing a purple robe and a young man dressed in an unpretentious outfit, sitting in the twelve o'clock and three o'clock chairs respectively.

The woman led us all the way to the round table. When I approached and got a closer look, I noticed that there was one tall chair that had a notably large

seat.

An elderly voice addressed us. “Kindly take a seat. Wyss, you too.”

With the table itself in the way, I could only see the legs of the two people sitting there. I didn’t know what exactly happened, but I suddenly found myself floating into the air, before landing gently on the chair with the large seat. On the round table was a display of food, and a quick scan told me that the spread included bread, ham, vegetables, and fruit, among other things. The pair that were already sitting there seemed to be in the middle of enjoying their meal.

As for Wyss, the woman who’d served as our guide, she settled down in the seat that would be nine o’clock on a watch. Jess sat at six o’clock, with me next to her at seven o’clock.

“Eat,” the elderly man said, with bread still stuffing his right cheek. “You must be hungry. Jess, you may take food on behalf of the pig as well.” He looked like a wise man, with his elegantly curled white hair and his lengthy beard.

As for the youth, the curls in his golden hair were much more extreme. He had thick eyebrows, and his features were chiseled like a sculpture. He was eating vegetables in complete silence.

Jess voiced her thanks in a wavering voice before cautiously taking food onto the plates designated to us.

I’d braced myself for an audience with a great king, so I’d been under the impression that we’d have to prostrate ourselves on a carpet before a man reclining pompously on a throne. He’d be wearing a crown littered with jewels and holding a long staff. But it seemed that no, I’d been wrong. We’d been invited to dine.

“If you are dissatisfied with what you see, I do not mind reclining pompously on a throne, but it is easier to talk in this way, is it not?” the elderly man said unhurriedly.

He read! The narration! <<My deepest apologies for my rudeness.>>

“Do not fret, young man. After all, only a handful of people are aware that mages can read minds.”

Jess, who hadn't dug into her food yet, asked, "May I assume that all of you are mages, then?"

The elderly man nodded. "Indeed, we are. I am the king. Eavis is my birth name. The youth you see over here is my grandson, Shravis. I apologize on his behalf for his surly manner."

Shravis looked in our direction and bobbed his head slightly, still munching on herbs. He probably meant it to be a greeting. I nodded back.

"Now then," the elderly man began, "it seems that Jess has a request for us. You have permission to speak freely."

Jess, who'd been sipping meekly on juice, hurriedly placed her glass down on the table. "Yes, Your Majesty! Um, erm... I would like you to turn Mister Pig back into a human."

She cared more about me than her own situation. She was truly a kindhearted person to her very core.

Eavis smiled with a mouthful of bread, and then swallowed the contents. "That can be arranged. It is nothing complicated. However...I have a condition."

Jess nodded nervously. My heart leaped into my throat—*What is he going to say?*

He continued, "I want you to make one promise right now. No matter what method we use to return this young pig into his original form, swear that you will see it through to the end, Jess."

Ah, that's it? I felt tension ease out of my shoulder roast. At the same time, a shred of suspicion arose. Why was the king going out of his way to make this agreement first? *For now, we should—*

"Of course!" Jess exclaimed enthusiastically.

"I see. Excellent," the elderly man said unhurriedly. "A promise is a promise—do not go back on your word."

Ack, she already went ahead and agreed... Oh well, it's probably not going to lead to anything bad.

Wyss gazed at me and Jess with a conflicted look in her eyes. Somewhere

within her gaze, I picked up a hint of pity.

“Does that mean you are willing to help him?” Jess asked, her eyes shining with anticipation.

Eavis nodded. “I could choose to return him to his original form now, but, well... Hm, I suppose I shall do that before sunset today.”

Why is he deliberately giving us a time limit? Does he think that Jess will hesitate or something?

Eavis looked at me with a meaningful smile.

Jess leaned forward in excitement. “You will transform him with magic, is that correct?”

“Not quite.”

A period of silence stretched on. To one side, Shravis continued munching on his herbs.

Tilting her head quizzically, Jess asked, “Then...how can we turn Mister Pig back into a human?”

Eavis stared right into Jess’s eyes. “It is simple, Jess. If you want your beloved to restore his original form, you only have to kill that pig.”

Jess’s expression froze. So did my body. Tentatively, Jess asked, “Um, will Mister Pig really turn back if we do that?”

“Certainly. If you kill the pig, the young man’s consciousness will return to his original world.”

“Original...world...”

“As for how he ended up here, I believe it is better for you to reveal the truth, Jess, but this young man’s consciousness was wandering at the boundary between worlds when a powerful spell summoned him. Then, his consciousness settled in the body of a certain pig in this world. The young man’s real body is still slumbering away in his original world. If you kill this pig, his consciousness will return to his original body.”

“But if that happens, Mister Pig will...”

“Indeed. He can no longer remain in this world.”

I felt as if a gaping hole had opened up in my head, and another in my chest. My eternal parting with Jess was looming over me, ushered by the deadline of sunset. That fact filled my mind, leaving no room for any other thoughts.

“A promise is a promise,” Eavis added. “You might think of me as heartless, but this is the only correct choice. If we allow an entity from another world to stay, there is no guarantee that he would not become a threat to the nation we have built from the ground up. That, and if his consciousness remains in this world, eventually the young man’s body will perish. He will never have a chance to return to his birth world by then.”

Jess’s eyes glistened with a sheen of tears. Eavis stared gravely into her eyes as he continued, “Not to mention that if your beloved is present in this world, I will not be able to arrange a marriage between an outstanding mage like you and Shravis over here.”

Within the crushing despair, a certain sound ran out vividly in my head. All the pieces of the puzzle finally clicked into place.

Jess’s eyes grew wide. “Mage...?” She seemed to be taken by complete surprise.

I, on the other hand, felt like it made a lot of sense. I’d known that there was definitely more to the Yethma race than what I could glean from the surface. I’d had that fact in mind when I’d told Jess to make that statement, face-to-face with the heckripon before our arrival in the capital.

The true identity of Yethma were mages. It was a perfect explanation for a lot of the events I’d experienced and the rules of this world.

“Indeed,” said Eavis. “It seems that you are a lucky mage blessed with extraordinary talent. Of course, at your current stage, you would still fall under the category of what the general populace calls ‘Yethma.’”

Eavis raised his right hand silently and turned his palm to face Jess. Her soft, blue scarf, the color of a lake’s still surface, came undone and was folded up by an invisible hand before it was placed on the table. Then, Eavis raised his hand a little farther, and with a clink, Jess’s silver collar split into two halves. The left

and right halves of the broken collar glided through the air until they reached Eavis's hand.

"And now, Jess," Eavis began, "you are no longer a Yethma."

Her eyes still moist with tears, Jess froze, as if she didn't understand anything that was going on.

That was when I called out to the king. <<I understand that I'm not in a position to ask this, but I have a request, Your Majesty.>>

Eavis nodded. "I feel remorse towards you, young man. Ask anything."

<<You have my gratitude for enlightening me about a method to return to being human. I have the resolve to obey your decision dutifully, Your Majesty.>> Jess whipped her head around and looked at me in shock. *I'm sorry. I don't want this either, but...* <<However, there are still many things I'm struggling to come to terms with. If it is not too much to ask, could you please give us an explanation? Why does the status of "Yethma" have to exist in this nation?>>

Shravis stopped moving herbs into his mouth. He looked at me with surprise.

Eavis folded his arms and fell into thoughtful silence before he finally said, "Only a handful are privy to this knowledge. However, from what I have gathered from peering into your mind, it seems that the conclusion you have arrived at is mostly correct. In that case, it is only a matter of time before Jess learns of it as well. Very well. As my farewell gift to you and as my token of faith in Jess, I suppose I could disclose the truth."

<<You have my most sincere gratitude.>>

Eavis adjusted his posture in his chair with a dignified mien. He raised his palm above the table, and the next moment, the plates he'd used stacked up neatly before moving to one side. "Jess, do you perhaps prefer sweet over savory? You have barely eaten anything. I should also prepare some black tea for you. I ask that you dine without reservation."

One of the plates at the center of the table was filled with what looked like sweet Danish pastries, and it floated over to Jess. Steam rose out of a teapot and a clear, aromatic amber liquid flowed into four cups. A luxurious scent

wafted my way—it smelled like a blend of herbs. *Is it an herbal tea blend?* The cups were then served to each of the four humans around the table. All this was accomplished by Eavis’s invisible hand. I could almost feel the weight of his inconceivable power pressing down on my helpless porcine form. Any resistance against such might would be futile.

“Now then, young man,” he addressed me. “You have permission to voice your queries. Where shall we begin?”

<<My knowledge about the Yethma race is limited to what I have heard in the past few days. They wear silver collars. They work as servants. They can communicate without relying on their eyes or ears. They can create miracles by using black ristae. They appear out of nowhere when they reach their employment age and have to risk their lives to travel to the capital when they turn sixteen. There are only female Yethma. There are two rules relating to them: they must not ride on vehicles and must not be violated.>>

“It seems that you have an accurate understanding of the main points,” Eavis remarked.

<<There are reasons behind all the points stated above. These are meaningful to you people, correct?>>

“‘We people’ might not be the most accurate, but yes, they are significant.”

<<I suspect that the Yethma status is a system created to preserve the mage race.>>

Eavis looked at me with a steely gaze. “Allow me to interject with a question of my own to aid my explanation. Why do you think mages have declined to such extremes?”

Under the watchful eyes of Jess, Wyss, and Shravis, I said, <<My guess is your disastrous power and aggressive nature.>>

“It seems that we mostly share the same opinion.” He nodded. “An unparalleled magic, mismatched on a mortal body, combined with an overinflated ego. Due to these two traits, mages fell into endless war against their own kind and caused the Dark Ages to envelop this world. That is what I believe. And this silver collar’s exact purpose is to seal these traits away.” Eavis

held the two halves of the broken collar with his hand.

<<I see, so mages made the silver collars. They are infused with a great amount of mana to seal away the magical abilities of mages. So that is why Yethma collars fetch a steep price.>>

Jess pressed a hand against her mouth in shock.

Eavis nodded. “Correct. There are too many mages in this world, and that led to our kind killing each other, leaving only the most aggressive ones behind. That is why our great ancestor, Lady Vatis, placed collars on all the other surviving mages and sealed their magic away. They were absolved of their terrible power, only retaining their telepathic ability and prayers. That marked the end of the Dark Ages.”

In other words, Yethma’s unique telepathy and prayer powers with black ristae were remnants hinting at their true identities. <<I understand that much, yes, but what led to this extent of mistreatment towards collared mages? It is comparable to slavery.>>

“Because there was an unexpected but welcome effect.”

<<An unexpected but welcome...effect?>>

“Yes. Not only did the collars seal away the mages’ magic, they also locked away the mages’ egocentric character. Even if the collared mages were treated like slaves or faced discrimination, unlike before, they had no intentions of resisting at all.”

<<That may be the case, but why would that lead to the justification of such unfair treatment?>>

Being discriminated against, working like slaves, never receiving proper appreciation, and even being killed and having their bones sold as commodities. I thought of the earnest and purehearted maidens who were shackled to such a cruel destiny, and I trembled with rage.

Eavis closed his eyes and went silent. When he finally opened his eyes, he said, “But I assume that is true for your society as well. As long as humans exist, there will always be sacrificial lambs who draw the short straw. By turning the submissive mages without magic into the Yethma race and making these slaves

an outlet for negative emotions and undesirable tasks, our society will maintain stability. As we proceeded with the enslavement of Yethma, we slowly learned that undeniable truth.”

Eavis raised his hands, holding the broken collar. “The silver collar uses the Yethma’s own mana to maintain its effects. That is to say, it will do nothing to those without magic. We could only permanently seal away the egocentric nature of mages alone. It is indeed a revolutionary device that allows us to secretly preserve the diverse lineage of mages while making full use of their latent value to maintain society.”

<<But do you not think that the current system is going too far? Why do Yethma have to face the risk of death to head to the capital after they turn sixteen?>>

“To keep their numbers in check. The number of Yethma required for upholding our society is much greater than the number of mages necessary. Therefore, we only allow the superior Yethma—who have the ability to reach the capital—to survive. They will either become the mothers of Yethma or join our bloodline.”

<<Is that the same reason there are only female Yethma?>>

“Indeed. Though their magic is sealed, if they give birth, their children will be mages. Therefore, we have the mages abort their male children while they are still in the womb. It is difficult to keep track of when and where men will create offspring. As for the female children, we collar them. We monitor the females meticulously so that children with magic are not born anywhere without our knowledge. Under careful management, we rear Yethma, send them out into society, and only permit the return of talented ones. This life cycle was indispensable to fulfill Lady Vatis’s wishes to preserve the mages’ race and the stability of society.”

The relentless surveillance by heckripons. A law forbidding Yethma to ride vehicles. A law forbidding illicit intercourse—in other words, a law forbidding Yethma from bearing children.

All these regulations had two goals in mind—increasing societal stability while preserving the mage bloodlines. It was cruel but rational. If we ignored the tears

and suffering of young maidens, perhaps we could say that it had been the correct decision.

<<I have one last question. This society is established on a foundation that requires the wide distribution of Yethma and ristae—how long do you think it will last before it collapses?>>

Wyss and Shravis stared at me with wide eyes. Eavis barked out a laugh. His majestic voice had a tone that demanded submission. “Is that not obvious? Any society is doomed to decline one day. However, I have unyielding faith that this age is infinitely preferable to the Dark Ages. I have no intention of changing the ways of this world—at least, not during my reign. And if someone appears with such plans, I will likely utilize all my powers to resist them.”

That was the final nail in the coffin. I knew I had no chance of changing this world. In this society, there was only one way for Jess to find happiness.

And that means...I have to hide my feelings until the very end.

We were told we were free to do whatever we wished until sunset. So that I could return to my world on time, we were ordered to go to a place called the Golden Cathedral half an hour before dusk.

Eavis must have been aware that I wouldn't flee. With a magnanimous attitude, he gave Jess a detailed map of the capital.

Jess had voiced her wish to see Mesteria from high above, and accordingly, our first destination was a plaza in the topmost area of the capital. As we walked, a despondent expression weighed on Jess's face, and she barely spoke. I didn't really know what to say—or, well, telepathically communicate—to her either, and I became as mute as a real pig.

We soon arrived at the plaza. Towering stone pillars lined up like the world of Greek mythology, and in the middle was a vast area paved with cobblestone. It was almost like a heliport. I mean, I couldn't rule out the possibility that it truly was meant for some kind of literal Dragon “Airlines.”

Jess walked all the way to one edge of the plaza and settled down on a bench near a railing that connected stone pillars together. I sat like a pig next to her.

From the bench, we had a good view, and I could see a long way into the distance. The fine weather meant that barely anything obstructed our line of sight. Far, far away, probably in the direction where Kiltyrie was, I saw a mountain range.

The wind was strong today. Jess gently pressed down on her scarf with her left hand so that the gusts wouldn't snatch it away.

<<You're not wearing a collar anymore,>> I reminded her. <<You can take off your scarf now.>>

She shook her head. "I want to wear it at all times. You chose it for me, after all."

I felt as if my heart was being squeezed like a lemon. *That reminds me. Even when Naut took it off her half forcefully, she wrapped it around her wrist, didn't she? I...realized something that I really didn't want to know. I mean, I'm the same, I—* <<Hey, Jess, is Kiltyrie in that direction?>> I changed the topic.

"I believe so, yes. The shapes of those mountains are familiar to me." She paused. "They are...so very distant."

<<Our journey flew by in the blink of an eye, but huh. We've walked a long way.>>

"Yes. It's thanks to you that I made it this far, Mister Pig."

<<Not at all. I only gave you some simple advice, nothing more.>>

"That's not true. If you weren't with me, I would have been killed next to the Kiltyrin manor."

<<If I weren't with you, you wouldn't have needed to go purchase that rista. Therefore, there wouldn't have been a reason for that man to kill you.>>

Jess looked at me with a troubled expression. She looked as if she was conveying "Not at all!" with her whole face. After a pause, she said, "Then...if you weren't with me, I would have declined Mister Naut's offer to travel together. My journey wouldn't have been as smooth without him."

<<How can you be so sure? If I weren't with you, Naut might have chased you stubbornly until you caved in.>>

“How can *you* be so certain of that?” she argued. “You were also the one who noticed the trap with Miss Blaise. I was only able to enter the capital because *you* deduced the true identity of the heckripons. Admit it already. Without you, Mister Pig, I would be dead.” Her tone grew firm. It might have been the first time I’d ever heard her speak in this way.

<<You’re right. Looks like I managed to be your good traveling companion.>>

Jess seemed like she wanted to thank me. But in truth, I was the one who owed her gratitude. She was the one who had saved me, who had tried so hard to transform me back into a human.

In a small, small voice that nearly dissipated in the wind, Jess whispered, “That’s...not true.”

<<Hm?>>

“I’m referring to the narration. I...didn’t travel with you to turn you back into a human.”

<<...What do you mean?>>

“You thought it was strange, didn’t you? I remember your reaction when you heard that I bought a black rista before I met you... I remember you wanting to know why I kept it secret.”

<<Yeah, I did.>>

“I used the rista I bought for my own selfish wish. Alone one night, I prayed, ‘I’m scared of journeying to the capital alone. Please, let me come across someone who would save me.’ Then, the next morning, you appeared in the pigsty.”

Ah. I recalled the words of the king. My consciousness had been wandering at the boundary between worlds when a powerful spell summoned me. That powerful spell had been the power of Jess’s prayer.

Jess took a deep breath before she continued, “Back then, your only choice was to go to the capital with me to find a way to become human again, right? I’m not smart, so when I made my prayers, I hadn’t thought that far. But after you decided to join me on my journey, I realized the truth. If you were human,

Mister Pig, you also would have had the choice to head somewhere else. But that wasn't the case. You turned into a pig because of my wish. I realized that, but I kept it from you the entire time. I deceived you, Mister Pig."

My instinctive reaction was to protest, *No, it's not your fault at all!* But before I could say anything, tears rolled down Jess's cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "It's all because of me that you had to experience so many terrible things..."

Her tears were so pure—her heart was so pure that all words fled from my mind.

A while later, I finally managed to squeeze out some words. <<What's wrong with that? What's wrong with being selfish? Everyone has the freedom to pray to the stars. And you know, I am also glad that I met you, Jess.>>

Jess leaned in, and her face approached my snout. "Really?" Hot tears splashed on my face.

<<Isn't that obvious? I'm glad from the bottom of my heart that I met you, Jess,>> I repeated firmly.

Jess closed her eyes briefly. The next moment, the honey-brown eyes on her tear-stained face met mine. "Then... Can you please grant one more wish of mine?"

<<What is it?>>

"I don't want you to leave. Please don't go back to your original world."

Silence.

I took a deep breath. <<Sorry, but I can't do that. We promised the king.>>

"Why can't you? Is this really...what you want, Mister Pig?"

Yeah. I've really made up my mind. There's something I have to protect, even if it means turning a blind eye to my own feelings. <<You heard what the king said. If I'm out of the picture, you'll join the royal family. Even among all the Yethma that reach the capital, the happy, privileged future waiting for you is a cut above the rest. Meanwhile, I get to return to my own world too. See? That's the happiest ending anyone could ever ask for.>>

“But I don’t want that.”

Oh, why are you making this so hard for me? <<You might not know this, Jess, but I had a life of my own back in my world. I worked hard, studied hard, and finally passed the exams for a place we call university. It was a period when I started learning all kinds of new and exciting things, and I had fun friends too. I even had a super cute girlfriend, you know.>>

“You’re the one who said that you’re a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who’s been single since you were in your mother’s womb. Please don’t lie.”

<<...Yeah. I lied smoothly for my own gain. So what? Are you implying that you want to be with such a depraved virgin?>>

“I do,” she said without faltering. “I’m also sure that if we persevere, we’ll definitely find a way to turn you into a human.”

<<Even if I tried to stay in this world, I can already predict what’ll happen. The king will be displeased, and the results will be the same. Plus, even if I turn back into a human, I’m a scrawny glasses guy with lackluster looks. Naut and Shravis are way more handsome. You’ll only be disappointed.>>

She shook her head furiously. “Never, I’ll never be disappointed in you.”

I pressed my mouth into a thin line. <<Oh, why are you suddenly so willful at the very end?>>

“Weren’t you the one who told me that I can be more selfish? I don’t want this. I don’t want to be separated from you, Mister Pig.”

...I’m begging you, don’t say something like that. I feel the same way, I don’t want to part from you either. Of course I don’t. I like you so much, how could I bear it?

Jess’s eyes, puffy from crying, moved until they locked with mine. “Rea...lly?”

I messed up. I wrote it in the narration. I wanted to hide it to the very end, but I messed up. I tried to feign ignorance. <<What are you talking about?>>

“Do you really...like me back, Mister Pig?”

<<...Pretend you never heard that. *Please.*>>

“Why? If you feel the same way, I’m begging you. Please stay with me.” Her voice shook with sobs, choked with emotion.

Despite being a mere pig who had no right to ask for anything more, I felt scalding trails of tears flow down my own cheeks. <<I can’t. I mustn’t get in the way of your life, Jess.>>

“You won’t. You’ve always helped me, Mister Pig, and I’m sure that will continue to be true.”

<<It’s natural for me to help you until now. You’re kind, but life wasn’t, and you were powerless. You know, in the world where I came from, it’d be unthinkable to abandon someone like you. But from now on, it will be different. You will become a mage; you’ll be royalty, someone who can carve out your future with your own hands.>>

“I don’t want this,” she repeated between sobs. “If you aren’t with me, Mister Pig, I can’t...”

I closed my pig eyes, squeezing out the tears building. <<It was your first encounter with someone who treated you nicely and helped you. You’re only clinging to what I represent. As for me, I was only presuming upon the fact that you needed my help. Our relationship doesn’t involve like or dislike, Jess.>>

“That’s not true. I like you, Mister Pig. I want you to be with me forever, I really do, but you...”

My heart ached, so much so that I thought I was going to perish on the spot. *Maybe I should just obey the call of my heart and—*

No.

<<If it were possible, I want to be with you too. But there’s something I want more, and that’s for you to live a happy life. And...I don’t have a place in that future.>> Though I knew it was unfair of me, I used the magic sentence that she could never say “no” to. <<This is my last request. Listen, Jess. The king’s proposal is a priceless opportunity we managed to grasp after all the hardships we went through together. Please don’t waste it. From now on, find happiness with your own power. Do it for *me*.>>

A howling gust of wind rushed through the rift between us.

“Is that your real wish, Mister Pig?”

<<...Yeah.>>

Jess was still crying. But I could feel the tide turning.

After a stretch of silence, Jess finally found her voice. “Understood. This time, it’s my turn to grant your wish.” She stood up from the bench, crouched down low to the ground, then threw her arms around me in a suffocating hug.

Jess and I put this incident behind us and enjoyed a sightseeing tour around the capital. The mountain had been carved out to make space for the colossal stone buildings that lined the streets, and the cityscape was simply stunning. The passersby all wore pretty clothes and seemed to be merry. They must be former Yethma and chabirones who had arrived in the capital safely. There were even pairs of young men and women walking together. I also noted the significant number of pregnant women. I felt sorry for the children that had yet to see the world, but, at least, this environment was far preferable to the outside world.

Under Jess’s tenacious insistence, the two of us went to a shop where we stood side by side and had what seemed to be a photo taken. Then, we arranged for that image to be burned onto a small piece of glass. Jess turned it into a necklace and gingerly placed it around her neck.

A pig and a maiden. *A peculiar photo indeed*, I thought.

The time had come. Along with the reluctant Jess, I made my way to the Golden Cathedral.

Within it was a large hall that was several times bigger than the room where we’d dined. At the center was an enormous golden throne, and on it sat Eavis, dressed in white formal attire. The final rays of the westering sun filtered through the stained glass windows, illuminating the dim interior. Smoke with a floral scent hung in the air like thin mist.

A dignified voice rang out. “O dutiful and courageous young man, I applaud you for coming here.”

Jess and I walked forward until we were below the dome ceiling.

Eavis continued, "The pig's final moments will be swift and peaceful. Your soul will return to your original world all but instantly. I shall cast the necessary spell. There will be no pain at all. You can think of it as a brief trip."

Just as I'd expected, Jess started crying. Inside the silent cathedral, only the sound of her sniffing echoed hollowly.

<<Can we be together during my last moments?>> I asked.

"Of course. Jess, keep him company."

Jess clung to my neck, as if saying that she would never let me go. She was just like a small child.

<Mister Pig, you were my first friend.>

Her voice echoed directly in my mind. The thought that I would never feel this sensation again made my heart break. I'd assumed that I wouldn't have to cry any more today, but I'd been wrong. Tears slid down my cheeks. My vision grew blurry.

<Even after we part, I will never forget you. So please...>

<<I know. Same here. I'll remember you for the rest of my life, Jess.>>

<Really...?>

<<Really. I could never forget you.>>

Jess's sobbing filled the cathedral. The sun seemed to have reached the edge of the mountain, because the light from the stained glass was rapidly fading away.



<<...Find happiness, okay?>> <I will.>

The sun wouldn't wait for us.

<<This is farewell, Jess. Take care.>> <You too, Mister Pig. Please stay happy and healthy.> Time silently trickled away. Eavis stood up unhurriedly.

I heard Jess's shaking voice right against my ear. "Goodbye."

A bell tolled twice. During my last moments, I tried to catch a glimpse of her.

She was throwing her arms around me, so I couldn't see her face. But I could almost make out every individual strand of her golden hair.

I closed my eyes and felt her warmth. I felt the strength in her arms. I felt the softness of her cheeks.

Then, everything I felt floated away from me, into the air.

Chapter 5: Butareba -The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

The third time's the charm, as the saying goes. I finally woke up in a hospital bed. Snow was drifting down outside the window. It seemed that not much time had passed since I'd "won" the raw liver food-poisoning lottery.

The noise and activity around me seemed to flow into, then directly out of my brain. For the longest time, I stared up at the ceiling as if my soul had left my body. A while later, my mother arrived and said something along the lines of, "How much longer are you planning on sleeping for? Get a grip already." She then promptly filled out the necessary paperwork before heading out.

When I finally sat up, I realized that this world was overflowing with objects, like the tube of the IV drip and the air conditioner. On a small desk nearby, I spotted get-well gifts from my friends. I picked up a box of confectioneries and stared vacantly at the small Japanese characters crammed onto it.

How many days have I slumbered away? I wondered. No matter what snapshot of my life I took, I would probably never experience something more profound than the sensations I had over the past few days. Not in the past, not in the future.

Only a hollow sense of loss was left behind in the hospital ward.

After an examination, I was told that I could go home.

I was alone on the way back. It seemed that people were celebrating Christmas, and in Japan, that was the season of lovers. However, that had nothing to do with me—I wasn't exactly living the life of merriment and romance. The moment I heard the chime signaling the departure of the train, the reality that I'd returned to my ordinary life came down on my body like a ten-ton weight. The next thing I knew, I was wiping my tears with my sleeve.

My life had been permanently turned on its head.

Due to my hospitalization, I'd missed out on a compulsory exam, and I had to repeat a year.

It wasn't all bad news. When I made a humorous post about how I'd eaten liver, got hospitalized, and had to repeat a year, it practically blew up, with three thousand retweets and five thousand likes. It satisfied my desire for attention and self-validation.

But the pain of loss still didn't heal. I would look in every shop, everywhere I traveled to, and even in the tiniest corners of newspapers for traces of Jess. I felt like my heart was taken prisoner—spellbound by that other world, Mesteria.

Another change was that whenever I watched a romance TV series, I would tear up at a moment's notice. My otaku friends had a field day when they'd learned that, and my social circle expanded rapidly. The video of me watching an anime movie at my friend's house and crying my heart out for real received over fifty thousand retweets in the blink of an eye. I received a hail of critical acclaim in the reply section, such as "LOL for realsies" or "You can't hate this otaku" or "It'd be so funny to have a friend like him" or "This guy could be a commentator at the Olympics."

Just like I'd thought, otaku and romance didn't mix. As I indulged in my otaku hobbies, I slowly started arbitrarily convincing myself that it had been just a sweet dream in the end, nothing more. A scrawny four-eyed super-virgin would never, *ever*, end up with a beautiful maiden with blonde hair.

But, well, to honor the memory of my sweet dream, at least, I turned my great adventure in Mesteria into a novel and uploaded it on a self-publishing website called Kakuyomu. With a sophisticated and elegant writing style, I weaved together a work depicting my "hue hue oink" life with cutie-pie Jess. A respectable number of people read it and my work received some recognition. I'd never known that the site had an option to comment on each chapter, and not just the whole work. *You learn something new every day*. I was grateful from the bottom of my heart to everyone who read it.

Ahem, anyway. There's one last thing I wish to tell everyone. Only one.

Cook your pig liver first.

It'll be painful if you eat the stuff raw, you might get hospitalized, and you might have a strange dream of turning into a pig that throws your life completely off-kilter. If you don't want to have a heartbreaking experience, make sure you cook your pig liver before eating it. Am I clear, my brethren?

I'll say this again and again, but this isn't a challenge goading you to do the opposite. Cook your pig liver first.

Even now, I would be sometimes tormented by a sensation that made me feel as if my stomach was being torn to shreds. I would recall a girl who might not even exist, who I wouldn't ever meet again, and tears would flow uncontrollably from my eyes.

If you don't want to experience the story of a man turned into a pig, cook your pig liver first.

It's not a threat, it's a promise, okay?

Time passed. The incident happened one day on the verge of March, when the lively mood of spring was just beginning to settle in.

There was a certain reply to my Twitter account. It was as follows: *I have read your novel. If it's all right with you, could we chat over DMs? There is something I want to discuss about the story you wrote.*

A look at their profile told me that this was a working male adult who was also a rather self-disciplined otaku. It seemed a little strange to me—why go out of our way to chat in direct messages? But at the same time, thinking that he might tell me about his thoughts and impressions, I began interacting with him in DMs.

Contrary to my expectations, however, after a brief chat about my novel, the guy began insisting that he wanted to meet me and talk in person. The exact wording he used was *"It's about something really important, so please come. I'll treat you to a parfait."*

Probably due to my regular otaku activities, I didn't feel that much resistance against meeting someone in person when we'd only spoken through the internet. He then sent me a photo of an extravagant parfait that apparently cost

approximately two thousand yen—at least three times the price of a family restaurant parfait—and persuaded me with *“We should be faithful to our desires.”* In the end, I arranged a meeting with him.

On the day of our scheduled meeting, three people appeared at the café. The first was the man I’d been in contact with—an oval-faced man with a beard, armed with a pair of black-framed glasses. He looked like a good-natured otaku. He’d mentioned that he was a mechanical engineer.

The second was a female university student. She had a short bob haircut, a pair of glasses with red frames, as well as merry and frequent laughter. She was an otaku as well.

The third was a male high school student. He had a fair complexion and glasses with thick lenses for a high prescription. He looked like a studious otaku.

Bruh. They’re all otaku with glasses!

But that wasn’t important. I took small bites from my giant parfait as I conversed with them, and I slowly realized that they were remarkably knowledgeable about the contents of my novel. No, they even went several steps beyond that. They expanded on the plot of their own accord, and even began talking about stuff I wasn’t aware of.

“The North declared independence and began a revolt against the royal court —”

“The Yethma hunters have amplified their influence by an incredible degree —”

“Naut was captured and sent to the arena—”

I was bewildered. At some point into the conversation, I no longer had the peace of mind to eat my parfait.

This was when I finally realized that the three otaku were claiming that they were returnees from Mesteria. In their accounts, for some reason, Naut had turned into a super big name in that nation.

The bearded man said something along the lines of this: “To protect the Yethma, the pig’s power is indispensable. The revolutionary Naut needs the

pig's help."

I could only stare at them with eyes and mouth wide. I couldn't tell whether this was a dream, reality, or pure insanity. But my head made my decision before my mind: I nodded in response without thinking. As the man gave his explanation, I felt my upper body lean forward. Hearing his earth-shattering invitation, I clasped my hands tightly, my nails digging into my palm. Ardent blood circulated around my body and steadily cooked my liver.

With an earnest expression, the man took a deep breath.

"Will you return to Mesteria with us?"

Afterword

It's nice to meet you, I'm Takuma Sakai. Thank you very much for picking up a book with such an odd title. I am downright elated that I could publish this book without changing its title to a mainstream one like "That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Pig" or "I Want to Eat Pig Liver."

I was only able to deliver this novel to my wonderful readers thanks to the help of everyone involved: all the judges of the twenty-sixth Dengeki Novel Prize, my adept editor Anan-sama, the godlike illustrator Tohsaka-sama, and many, many others. I would like to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart. It wouldn't have been possible without all of you.

Finally, please allow me to share a bit of my personal story.

I adore my grandmother. In the past, I often visited her house for fun. She is one of the kindest people I know, and she indulged all my spoiled whims when I was a child. Even now, after I've become a working member of society, whenever I go out to have dinner with my grandmother, she always sabotages me with the skills of a pro and stops me from taking out my wallet while saying, "I'm already really happy that you came to see me, okay?"

And, well, my grandmother is a big spender. I won't go into the details, but well... For example, whenever she has to utilize some kind of "compulsory" and complicated service she doesn't have a good grasp of, she uses money. Whenever someone suggests a new and "better" lifestyle to her, she uses money. Whenever a friendly shop staff member recommends some very "handy" optional extras, she uses money.

I can't deny that in this world, there is a significant—no, an enormous faction out there trying to bleed kind people dry. I think those who read the book would kind of understand why I would write about such things here, in the afterword of a slightly ecchi isekai fluff story with a fantasy setting, of all places.

I have written something that's, well, rather solemn, but my feelings will probably never reach the person in question. Ah, no, my grandmother is very

much alive and kicking. But you know, trying to imagine my grandmother picking up a slightly ecchi isekai fluff novel in a bookstore is kind of impossible. I can't imagine that ever happening. I would also be rather troubled if my grandmother asked, "What does 'cutie-pie' mean?"

But at the very least, I hope that my message will get across to you, my readers.

The world is getting more difficult and complicated at a rapid pace. Malice and greed are hiding craftily in obscure crevices and are setting their aim on the kindhearted people of our society. Without an overpowered skill, it might be a challenge to change such a world. But I think there *is* something we can do. We can stand by the side of those who would nod in spite of the malice they are targeted by and protect their happiness with our own hands.

You, my wonderful reader, might be the next savior of the voiceless casualties of our modern society, the cinnamon roll Yethma—no, the cinnamon roll *Yes-man* who doesn't know how to say "no."

(U-Um... I would be really happy if you pick up volume 2 if that ever gets published... I was trying to act super cool in the text of the afterword, but in the main story, I'll make sure to take it seriously and continue our slightly ecchi isekai fluff novel, so um... Please consider it...)

Takuma Sakai—February 2020



Author:
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka

Butareba

-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-

(1st Bite)

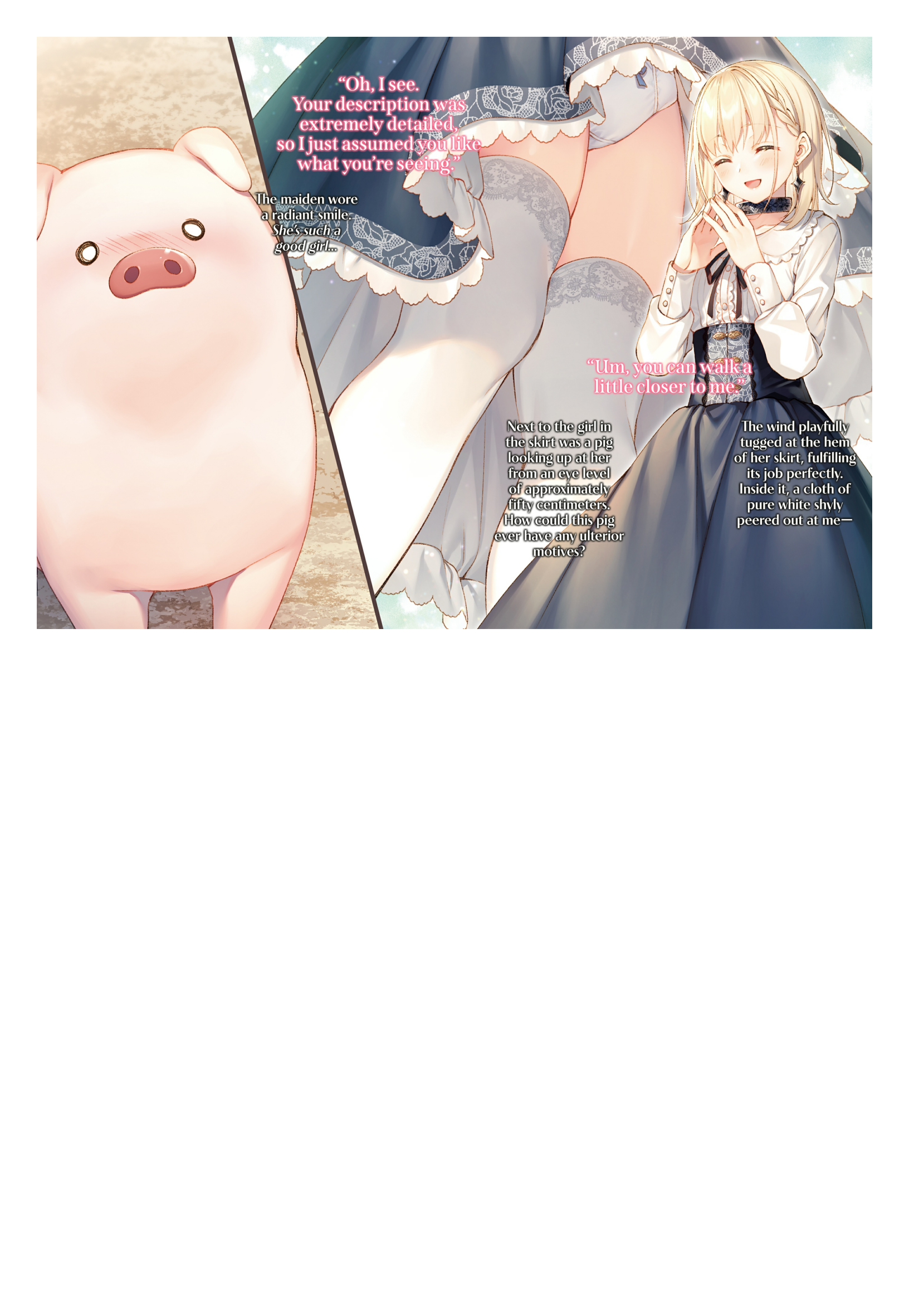
Author: Takuma Sakai

Illustrator: Asagi Tohsaka



Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-



*"Oh, I see.
Your description was
extremely detailed,
so I just assumed you like
what you're seeing."*

The maiden wore
a radiant smile.
*She's such a
good girl...*

*"Um, you can walk a
little closer to me."*

Next to the girl in
the skirt was a pig
looking up at her
from an eye level
of approximately
fifty centimeters.
How could this pig
ever have any ulterior
motives?

The wind playfully
tugged at the hem
of her skirt, fulfilling
its job perfectly.
Inside it, a cloth of
pure white shyly
peered out at me—



If a beautiful maiden's
willing to spoil me rotten,
this kind of reincarnation
isn't half bad!

The amount of force Jess used as she
brushed me was also superb. *Listen to this,*
my brethren. Have you ever taken off your
clothes, laid bare before a sixteen-year-old
maiden, and had the luxury of her washing
your body gently?

Profile

A handsome huntsman. He strongly opposes the way society treats Yethma. He also seems to take an interest in Jess... The pig feels extremely anxious about that. Handsome hunks are a crime against humanity.

Quote

“I’ll be your guard. Follow my lead.”

Naut



Profile

A Yethma, a race of people who can read minds. Even when the pig is broadcasting his dirty fantasies, this angelic girl simply smiles and shows compassion. She has a cruel destiny weighing on her shoulders.

Quote

“Sheesh, you have no sense of self-restraint, Mister Pig.”



[NAME]

Jess

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

Profile

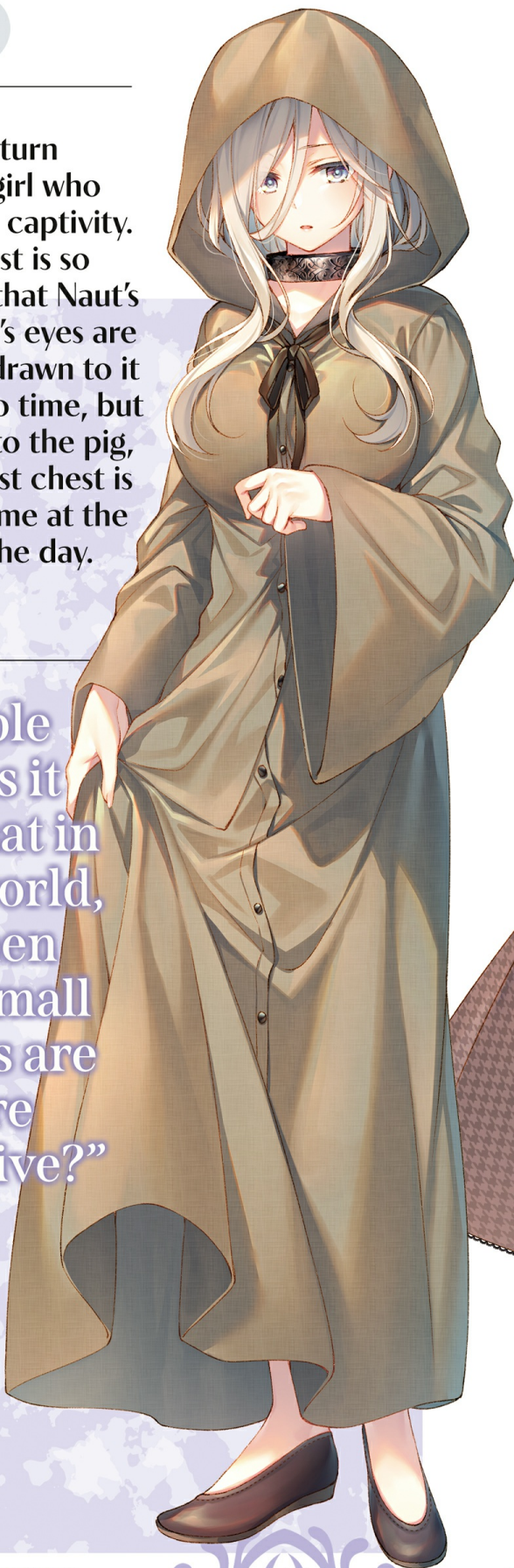
A taciturn
Yethma girl who
was held in captivity.
Her chest is so
impressive that Naut's
and the pig's eyes are
irresistibly drawn to it
from time to time, but
according to the pig,
Jess's modest chest is
more sublime at the
end of the day.

Quote

“Noble
Pig, is it
true that in
your world,
women
with small
breasts are
more
attractive?”

[NAME] 

Blaise



Profile

A meek and
withdrawn Yethma
girl the pig encounters
on his journey.
After the pig ogles
her legs and indulges
in his fantasies,
she realizes that
he's a human on
the inside.

Quote

“Um,
Miss Jess,
is that pig a
friend of
yours? He's
thinking
various...
things as he
looks at my
legs...”

[NAME] 

Ceres





Quote

“Oink oink!
This is
paradise!”

[NAME]

Pig

Profile



A run-of-the-mill science student otaku who reincarnates in another world as a pig, of all things! With no special powers to be proud of, he’s reduced to mere baggage—that is, until he finds ways out of crises with his knowledge, his quick wits, and his chitterlings!

Profile



Naut’s large companion dog. He’s Naut’s competent and trusty comrade everywhere he goes, even on the battlefield. He looks rather like a wolf, but he’s actually friendly, and he loves sniffing Jess’s bare legs.

[NAME]

Rossi





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