



(3rd Bite)



Author:
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka

Butareba

The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig



(3rd Bite)

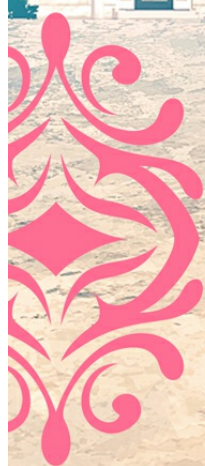


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(5rd Bite)



Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

[NAME]

Kento

profile

A male high school student in modern-day Japan. For the second time, he teleported to Mesteria, along with two other pigs.

[NAME]

Marquis

profile

The reigning king of Mesteria who succeeded the throne after Eavis. He's also hailed as the mage with the most raw power.

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-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

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Characters

.....

[NAME]

Hortis

profile

Marquis's blood-related younger brother. He left the royal capital years ago. His current whereabouts are unknown.

[NAME]

Lithis

profile

A Yethma that the Liberators took under their wing. Lithis isn't her original name.



“Wow!
Mister Pig, look!
The view is
marvelous!”

She looked content
from her sense of
accomplishment, and the
evening sun only enhanced
her beauty. Delayed
realization struck me—I was
with a beautiful maiden in a
secret place where no one
else would visit, and I had
her all to myself. *If I weren't
a pig right now, I...*

“Please don't
fall.”

<<Nope, I won't.
I don't want to
turn into minced
meat.>>





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The Recollections of an Elderly Man

Of the pair, the youth was the target. The reason was clear: his mage status.

But in a twist of fate, the Grim Reaper's scythe loomed over his friend instead.

"Please spare me, I beg you," the youth's dearest friend pleaded as he fell to his knees on the muddy ground. "I have not done anything!"

"A spell preventing others from reading your mind. A spell that allows you to evade detection," listed off the attacker's merciless voice. She sounded young—the youth would even go as far as to describe her voice as attractive. "I cannot turn a blind eye to either. Regrettably, I have judged your death as imperative."

Realization struck the youth. *The one who painted a target on my dear friend's back was none other than myself*, he thought numbly. *The spells I cast on him for protection were imperfect in some way, which led to this woman's scrutiny. Now, despite not being born as a mage, he is offering his life as a sacrifice—to die as a mage in my stead.*

Every single move he'd made had backfired.

The youth had kept a low profile and learned ways to hide. That was how he'd managed to survive until this very day in the Dark Ages. Even after the mage he'd served was conquered, he'd protected himself and his dear friend's family with seclusion spells, hiding them from the world and this woman's malicious clutches. But now, those exact spells were what paved the way to his dear friend's murder.

As for the youth, he could only hold his breath inside the darkness nearby and watch on helplessly.

"Why are you killing *us*?!" his dear friend cried, his word choice deliberate.

The woman replied dispassionately, "Magic is a terribly dangerous power. There must be a limit to the number of people who possess it."

"I can swear upon my life that I have done nothing wrong! That is the

unadulterated truth!”

The youth became aware of one fact. His dear friend only had to say two sentences to preserve his own life: “I am not a mage. The real one is hiding over there!” However, he maintained the facade of a mage. *He’s protecting me...by wagering his own life.*

“I’m afraid that dragging on conversations is not to my liking. My apologies, but I will have to end things here.” In one fluid motion, the woman raised her hand.

Instantly, his friend drew his sword with a speed that rivaled lightning and swung at the woman’s neck.

A deafening bang. Hideous dark crimson dyed the ground.

His friend was nowhere to be seen. Only fine shreds and chunks of flesh were scattered around the woman.

She didn’t seem particularly fazed as she skimmed through the paper in her hand. Her slender finger imprinted a single mark onto it.

As he watched the woman take her leave, the youth could only shake in despair. Her mana had been more than an abomination; he’d felt as if its aura alone could frost over his skin. It was hard to believe that she’d risen to such heights within the blink of an eye.

The victor, Vatis, must have collected the supreme treasures everyone had feverishly sought: the Contract Stakes. Ancient and terrible relics that had been responsible for dispersing death and calamity across the entirety of Mesteria.

Chapter 1: Don't Thoughtlessly Sniff a Maiden's Legs

"Mister Pig, have you ever heard the legend about the three supreme treasures hidden in Mesteria?"

The sacred visage of a beautiful blonde maiden peered down at me from the bed, and I looked up at her from the carpeted floor. <<Nope, never.>> *The first two would be the right and left sides of Jess's chest...hmm, but what's the last one?*

"Um, you really don't have to be considerate in *that* way..." Jess sat up and fixed the collar of her nightgown before lying chest-down on the bed once again.

My fully automatic, uncouth thought patterns had an impeccable incompatibility with Jess's ability to read minds. <<You don't have to respond to the narration.>>

"I know that, but...I can't stop myself from reacting."

After we went through this exchange for the umpteenth time, I steered our conversation back to the topic. <<So, what are these three supreme treasures?>>

Jess's eyes seemed to light up. "They are the Destruction Spear, the Salvation Chalice, and the Contract Stake."

Pretty glamorous names you have there. <<What do they do?>>

She inclined her head slightly. "Good question. The legends only mention their names and that they're hidden away somewhere, but no one seems to know what they do. Apparently, such legends have been around since ancient times—long before Lady Vatis established the royal court."

<<Wait, weren't all records of pre-Vatis history erased?>>

I recalled what Jess had told me. The Dark Ages had been a bloody era of endless conflict where mages turned on their own kind. The progenitor of the

current dynasty, Vatis, had been responsible for ending it all. She had deceptively rewritten the history before the Dark Ages, tweaking it for the royal court's convenience.

“Yes, that's true for most records. But some legends and stories have been preserved in the form of children's stories and fairy tales. Those three supreme treasures make frequent appearances in them.”

Huh. Interesting. <<Since they were treated as special treasures even during an era with abundant mages, they must be considerably valuable relics that even mages can't make.>>

“Oh, good point. I agree, that would be the logical conclusion.”

I looked at Jess, who seemed deep in thought, and asked, <<But why did you mention these supreme treasures all of a sudden?>>

“Well, I happened to overhear King Marquis mentioning the Destruction Spear today.”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<That prissy, straitlaced, stubborn old guy was talking about it?>>

Marquis was the Mesterian King and the father of Shravis, Jess's fiancé. He had a quick temper, a forceful attitude, and a calculating personality. He certainly didn't seem like the type who would like fairy tales. Far from it.

“Now now, using such words isn't very respectful,” Jess admonished. “But...yes, it was unexpected for King Marquis, of all people, to talk about such a topic. And so, I suspect that the supreme treasures might be more than simple legends.”

<<I see. From the sound of Destruction Spear, it seems like an offensive instrument of some sort...and there's only one potential target I can think of.>>

She seemed to be on the same wavelength. “Yes. I suspect that he wishes to use it on the Clandestine Arcanist.”

The Clandestine Arcanist was an immortal mage who'd risen in opposition against the royal court. Marquis seemed to be searching for ways to kill the elderly mage, but even now, he seemed to be struggling to find a solution. Until

the day he vanquished the Clandestine Arcanist, the members of the royal court and the people it ruled over would have to endure the ever-present threat of death. And of course, Jess was one of them.

<<So Marquis thinks that the Destruction Spear might be the key to bringing down the Clandestine Arcanist, huh?>>

“I think so. I hope we’ll find it soon and end the war quickly.”

<<Yeah.>> Then, Jess’s gaze crashed right into mine, and I silently looked away. <<Well, we’ve got to focus on tomorrow first though.>>

Jess nodded. “Right. We’re finally going to confront *him* tomorrow.” Her voice was low, like a whisper.

Tomorrow, at long last, we were going to pay a visit to the Liberators. A week had passed since my earth-shattering deduction. We’d gained Prince Shravis’s cooperation, and all the preparations had been finished—we were ready to confront our suspect. The only ones in the know were Jess, Shravis, and me. It was a secret operation to bridge the rift between the Liberators and the royal court.

Seeing Jess’s restlessness, I said, <<Relax, we’re only heading off to meet a cute little doggy. If I’m mistaken, the worst you’ll have to endure is that dog licking and sniffing you. If I’m right...>>—Jess gulped—<<I’ll do the necessary negotiations. All you’ll need to do is act as our go-between.>>

The maiden breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s reassuring to hear. I was worried for a moment you’d say that if you were right, you’d lick and sniff me in his stead...”

She’s a sharp one. I was actually just about to say that. <<This is serious business,>> I declared solemnly. <<I could never dish out jokes like that.>>

“But your mind is rather honest.” Jess wore a half-exasperated smile.

<<...May I lick and sniff you?>>

“No.”

Hearing her immediate reply, my seasoned and sliced mimiga ears drooped despondently.

“Um, you have to take things step-by-step when it comes to such matters.” Jess’s face grew bright red before she sneaked under the cover of her sheets.

I didn’t know what exactly we were doing “step-by-step,” but considering there was a black pig who’d licked a thirteen-year-old girl all over immediately after returning to Mesteria, I believed that minor physical intimacy like this should be acceptable.

After all, I was a pig.

Silence fell over the bedroom. Jess quickly waved her hand and put out the ceiling light with her magic.

“I feel like there are butterflies in my stomach,” Jess nervously spoke from the bed. “The fate of the Liberators...the fate of Mister Naut, Miss Ceres, and the others might depend on us, right?”

Indeed, this wasn’t a happy-go-lucky event like heading off to have fun at a dog park.

In this world, despite being born as mages, young girls were collared and distributed as slaves to stabilize the society and preserve the mage race. They were referred to as Yethma, girls who mostly ended up dying in their teens as prey for Yethma hunters. The royal court wished to protect this system, while the Liberators wanted to raze it to the ground. Though these two powers had formed an alliance to combat a common enemy, the Nothen Faction, anyone could tell that their relationship would collapse sooner or later. And now, we were heading off to persuade a neutral key person who had the potential to prevent that.

<<Yeah. Don’t worry, it’s not like we’re fighting against a foe. We’re only going to propose a war tactic to an ally. Just mind the hem of your skirt, Jess.>>

“I shall choose a tactical outfit with the least openings he can exploit.” Jess sighed.

<<That’s for the best.>>

Silence.

The royal capital was under the protection of powerful spells cast by the kings

of each generation. It was tranquil and peaceful, as if the discord in this world were a fever dream. There was shuffling and rustling—Jess was moving around under her blanket.

A part of me couldn't help but think, *If only this moment would last forever.*

"Um, Mister Pig?"

<<Go on.>> *Fudge. How could I have forgotten that Jess can read the narration like a book?*

"...Good night."

<<Yeah. Good night.>>

The moonlight gently spilled in from the window.

At this point, we were all utterly oblivious to the fact that our decision would escalate into a great tumult that would decide the fate of the royal court.

"Hurry up and get on, pig," Shravis commanded.

We were at the summit of the capital. A gigantic, terrifying black dragon was lying down in the plaza. I walked up the slope created by the frame of the dragon's wings before nestling myself into the gap between the seats fixed to its spiny back. The seats looked as if someone had taken out a single roller coaster car and attached it to the dragon. Of course, there were no such things as seat belts or the like.

After seeing that I'd gotten on, Shravis let out a commanding bellow, instructing the dragon to rise. Vast wings struck the air on both sides of my vision. It seemed that Jess also wasn't used to such air travel as she tightly gripped her seat cushion next to me. I stared at her hands and artistic legs (which featured socks that reached her thighs) to calm my fluttering heart down. Regret settled in my heart. *Advising her to wear unrevealing clothes might have been a mistake.*

The dragon soared high into the heavens and steered itself towards Munires where Naut and the others were situated. If I were to give a review on our

ride's comfort, I would describe it as a ship pushing forward on a stormy sea. In other words, it was downright awful.

The seats on the dragon's back were protected by magic, so although the wind should be lashing at us gleefully, the air was tranquil. Shravis was sitting in front of us, and I watched his mop of golden locks bob around leisurely with the movement of the dragon's wings.

Shravis's voice rang out. "Do you like Jess's bare legs?"

I sputtered and replied without thinking. <<Huh? What did you just say?>>

"I'm referring to your speech in your mind. You mentioned that advising her to wear unrevealing clothes might have been a mistake."

Ugh. Hey, Jess is going out of her way to ignore me, so why are you going out of your way to bring up the topic and repeat every single word? <<Got a problem with that? Any man would be fond of a girl's bare legs.>>

I could almost hear his puzzled frown in his voice. "Is that really the case...?"

<<Totally.>>

While we were having our little chat, next to us, I spotted a flush on Jess's face as she looked down.

<<Look,>> I said with reproach, <<Jess is embarrassed thanks to you bringing up an obscene topic.>> *Shame on you, Mister Atrocious Sexual Harassment. You should take note of your surroundings first—this isn't the right place for such a conversation. Not at all!*

"The blame is on you. You were the one who started having vulgar thoughts."

Darn it...! What do I do?! I can't object at all!

The mages of the royal family had apparently all mastered the technique that prevented others from reading their minds, which meant that Shravis's internal monologue would never leak out and be overheard by Jess. *This taciturn handsome guy's definitely entertaining aaaaaall kinds of thoughts in his mind, I'm sure of it. It's not fair. Why am I the only one who's broadcasting everything?*

Shravis turned around to face me. "Perhaps...you would have good chemistry

with my uncle.” Thick brows, chiseled features, and fair skin. They were a combination that made him almost look like a sculpture.

<<You mean Hortis?>> I blinked. <<Why in the world would you think that?>>

“Like you, uncle was... How do I put this...” He faltered. “He was someone who had lascivious tendencies as well.”

Oh my. Curiouser and curiouser...

I recalled Naut’s buddy, Rossi. My impression of him was a dog who loved licking and sniffing girls. That trait was especially prominent during my initial journey with Jess when he’d brazenly smell her bare legs whenever he could, as if that were the natural thing to do. If he were truly Shravis’s uncle and was taking advantage of his status as a beast to indulge in his perverted whims, his actions were simply inexcusable.

“Excuse me, but is the pot calling the kettle black...?” Shravis muttered.

I ignored Shravis’s retort at the narration and got back on track. <<All right, let’s go over all the facts and our plan.>> Shravis turned to me and nodded. <<So, we’ll head off to meet Naut. Our goal is his pet dog, Rossi. Five years ago, Rossi and Naut came across each other. This period is rather significant because it was just after Baptsaze’s convent burned down, and Naut was on his journey to find and save Eise, a special person in his heart who’d been kidnapped during the incident.>>

It sounded like a fateful encounter. *But what if there was, say, a reason behind it, turning it into more than a mere coincidence?*

I continued, <<Around the same time, Marquis’s younger brother, Hortis, vanished from the capital. He couldn’t forgive Marquis, who’d set fire to the convent and ruthlessly murdered Yethma, as well as King Eavis, who didn’t raise objections against his actions. After learning such facts, we deduced that Rossi might be Hortis in disguise.>>

Shravis nodded. “I concur. My uncle’s magic wasn’t particularly strong, but he was a mage of technique and polish. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if he managed to master the art of animal transformation. The theory has its merits.”

Jess added, “Furthermore, according to the librarian, Mister Hortis seemed

interested in transformation spells.”

All the above information was the fruits of our labor from the past week. <<Right. And now, we’ve even learned that both Rossi and Hortis are perverts. He’s getting more and more suspicious. Let’s thrust these facts at Rossi and force him to fess up. Then, we’ll ask him to negotiate with the royal court as a member of the Liberators.>>

In the present, the standing of the Liberators was overwhelmingly weak and brittle. They possessed a fair number of fighters and the support of the masses, which was why the royal court allowed them to roam freely, but once Marquis decided they were more trouble than they were worth, anything was possible. We needed a bargaining chip or a secret weapon that the royal court either craved or feared—and the king’s younger brother would fit the bill perfectly.

“We’re keeping our plans a secret from father, yes?” Shravis asked for confirmation.

<<Yeah. Trump cards are only meaningful when you use them at the right time. Your pappy’s buried under work due to politics and the war. Keeping a secret from him won’t be too hard.>>

“Understood.” Shravis nodded. “I will assist you in every way I can.”

“Let’s do our best!” Jess assumed her usual “I can do this!” pose and pumped her fists.

Shravis briefly glanced at her before turning to face forward again, adjusting the dragon’s direction with the reins.

A journey on foot always seemed to take forever, but a journey through the sky was over in the blink of an eye. A while later, the grand cityscape of Munires entered my vision. It was the greatest commercial city in South Mesteria. Numerous royal court troops were stationed here to form a robust defense, making it a safe place.

The dragon maintained its altitude until it was above Munires. Then, it unhurriedly made its vertical descent and landed in the royal court’s army post.

Marquis had created this dragon from a lizard, and it could radiate light from

its abdominal side to match the color of the sky. Therefore, if it flew at high altitudes, it was very difficult to spot from below. It was likely an application of counterillumination like what some deep-sea fish used to reduce the contrast of their silhouettes against the background. To make full use of the special trait, the dragon had maintained its altitude even after we approached the city and had only begun its descent when we were within the bounds of the army post.

The Liberators' base was adjacent to the royal court's army post. The benevolent king had granted them splendid stone houses where the central members of the Liberators lived.

We made our way to the large residence assigned to the commanding officers, a magnificent mansion with three floors and outer walls painted a pastel blue. Trees were arranged neatly in the spacious courtyard, dressed in gorgeous autumn coats that fluttered in the breeze.

Naut, who came to the entrance to welcome us, also wore attire that fit his environment—a long, brown coat that made him look like a wealthy young man rolling in money and class. Just like the last time I'd seen him, he had a black shawl wound around his neck, and his twin shortswords gleamed at his hip.

"What brings you here, mophead of the royal court? Did you come here especially to die at my blade?" Naut greeted him casually before shifting his gaze to look at Jess and me. "Glad to see that you guys are alive and kicking as always."

We hadn't seen Naut since the battle at Mautteau. Shravis hadn't backed us up during our confrontation with the Clandestine Arcanist, and Naut seemed to be rather skeptical of the prince.

Shravis didn't make any ostentatious display of emotion as he handed a large leather bag to Naut. "Inside are money and ristae. You were a great help during the battle a while ago. Take it as thanks."

Naut accepted without a shred of hesitation, as if it were his rightful reward. "Pretty hefty, huh? Shouldn't have expected anything less from the royal court. The mountain of profit from selling Yethma has to go somewhere, after all." He dished out a scathing comment.

That was when the mansion door opened, and an introvert with long bangs

walked out into the courtyard. “What’s that guy doing here? I’ve already got enough targets for my bow.” On his back was an enormous, shining crossbow. He was Yoshu, a commanding officer of the Liberators and a remarkable arbalist.

Naut handed the leather bag to Yoshu. “He’s here to hand out supplies, apparently. Take it with you.”

Yoshu stared into Naut’s eyes before dutifully returning to the mansion.

Naut turned back to Shravis. “Since you came in person, I assume you want to talk. Get to the point already.”

Shravis glanced at me. Through Jess, I said to Naut, <<I’m the one who has business with you, Naut. Sorry, could you call Rossi over?>>

“Rossi?” He quirked an eyebrow. “What do you want with a *dog*?”

<<I’ve just got a couple of questions.>>

He knitted his eyebrows together, baffled. “That guy can understand a good amount of the human language, but he can’t talk, you know.”

Jess chimed in. “It’s perfectly fine! Please tell him to come here!”

Naut didn’t seem convinced, but he nodded begrudgingly. “Got it. I will.” He whistled through his fingers.

A few seconds later, a white silhouette leaped out from the side of the mansion and charged right at Jess.

Jess yelped. “Huh? H-Hey, Mister Rossi!” Rossi approached from behind. The first thing he did was bury the tip of his snout into her soft butt cheeks. “Ah!” He then pushed his face between Jess’s thighs and began sniffing around ecstatically.

I’m so jealous— I mean, someone needs to put that dog on a leash. <<Hey, I don’t want to bother you, but could you get that pervert dog under control?>>

Naut raised his eyebrows a little. “Rossi, stay.”

The large dog, which had been wholeheartedly sniffing Jess’s thighs, sat down immediately before poking his head out from between Jess’s legs to look at us

on the other side. Jess awkwardly smiled, staying still as if she didn't know what to do.



<<Shravis, try talking to him,>> I instructed.

This was the moment of truth. I tensed up. Shravis crouched down in front of Jess and looked into Rossi's eyes. "Uncle."

The dog, who'd been sticking out his tongue and smiling while panting, froze in that pose.

Naut looked incredulously at Shravis. "What the heck are you saying?"

"The pig over there realized something," Shravis explained. "The period my uncle disappeared matches perfectly with the period this dog, who would go on to be your good partner, appeared near you."

Jess looked down awkwardly at the dog that was poking his face out of her thighs. If Rossi was truly Hortis, this scene would be a little too obscene for an emotional reunion between uncle and nephew. After all, it wasn't every day that you'd see your uncle going, "Hello there!" from beneath your fiancée's crotch.

"You are my uncle..." Shravis's expression was solemn as he stared right at the dog.

Rossi's response was averting his gaze and looking in all directions. It seemed that our deduction had been on the mark. *All right then, shall I catch you red-handed and send you right to jail, you depraved pervert?* I scowled.

"Don't be ridiculous, there's no way..." Naut scrunched his eyebrows together as he looked down at his buddy's face. The gazes of three humans and one beast convened at Jess's crotch.

A moment of silence.

"Arf, arf, woo..." Rossi let out a feeble voice that I'd never heard from him before. Perhaps he was putting up a last, futile struggle to pretend he was a dog.

Naut's eyes widened. "Rossi, you..."

There was a lengthy pause. Rossi tucked his tongue back into his mouth, and the smooth, charming voice of a middle-aged dude echoed in my mind. <I figured you would come here eventually, my wonderful nephew and you little

clever pig. You too, Jess. I had faith that the three of you would arrive at the truth!>

The white dog quirked the corners of his lips to form a smile. *Bruh! This guy's throwing all shame out of the window and pretending it was his plan all along!*

Naut was likely the most shaken among all of us since he hadn't braced himself for such a revelation. He placed a hand against his forehead—for once, he was rattled, and he showed it. "Hold on... Rossi's a...human?" He shoved Shravis aside roughly and faced Jess's crotch. His hand reached out and grabbed Rossi's chin harshly. "This is a joke, right?"

<...I'm sorry, Naut,> Rossi said softly. <I hid my identity from you for the past five years. But I had my reasons, and circumstances forced my hand. Please give me a chance to explain everything now.>

Naut's grim expression didn't falter. "If you're the mophead's uncle, that means you're actually a mage of the royal court."

Rossi shifted his head—he didn't seem very comfortable. As for Jess, who'd been stuck in place due to her awkward position, she let out a muffled "Mn...!"

Um.

I didn't let the stormy atmosphere faze me. I marched right up to Naut and Rossi. <<I know some of his story. It isn't what you think—it might even work out in our favor.>> I looked at the dog and continued in a polite tone, <<But first, Mister Hortis, please remove yourself from underneath Jess. That place belongs to me, I'm afraid.>>

After whining like the dog that he appeared to be, he bowed his head and slipped out from between Jess's thighs. Jess breathed a sigh of relief.

<Sorry about that. My doggy instincts took over for a moment...>

Though I wanted to protest and say that he shouldn't use his instincts as an excuse for everything, this was a serious confrontation. It certainly wasn't the right time to make a dig at someone. I decided that I would determine the pervert's sentence later on. *For now, we need to get back on track.*

<<Mister Hortis, please return to your human form first,>> I requested

through Jess. <<I know that it sounds rich coming from a man in a pig's body, but it is rather difficult to hold a conversation with a dog.>>

The dog shook his head slightly, almost casually. <Unfortunately, I can't transform back by myself.>

Shravis frowned. "Why is that?"

<Allow me to tell you the whole story first. I want to clear up your misunderstanding as soon as possible, Naut.>

I glanced at the man in question. Naut placed his hands on the hilts of his swords with a murderous look on his face, as if he were going to decapitate Rossi any moment now. <<Naut, calm down. Even if he's a member of the royal family—>>

"Shut up, you perverted swine," Naut hissed. "You're telling me that my buddy, who's been with me for over five years, was actually a mage of the rotten royal court all along? Who could be calm after hearing that, huh?"

Though that was what he said, under the stare of the white dog's big, puppy dog eyes, Naut released his sword hilts. "...Whatever. These are times when even a pig's going around preaching to people. I won't be scared dumb by something small like this. For now, I'll listen." Naut scowled and sat down with a thud on the grass. "Tell me everything. No secrets, no lies."

Rossi also sat down on the spot, creating a formation where three humans and one pig could listen to the great and noble pupper give his sermon.

<Allow me to introduce myself first. My name is Hortis, and I'm King Marquis's younger brother. I've watched over all of you for a long time, so you don't have to introduce yourselves again.> His speech was fluid and succinct. Judging by his manner of speaking, he was likely a rather sharp and capable man.

He continued, <My circumstances are awfully simple. I can't stand the ways of the royal court. I have the same reasons as Naut and everyone in the Liberators. That's why I left the royal court. I didn't want them to find me, and I loathed the thought of staying a mage too. Therefore, I transformed myself into a dog and used this bangle>—the dog raised his left front leg to display a silver bangle

coiled tightly around it—<to seal my magic before abandoning my royal status to live in the wild. That was when I came across a young boy who had been dragged into the injustices of this world. I felt that the young boy had potential and a bright future. That’s why I decided to stay by his side until the day I die.>

Hortis chose his words carefully and seemed to be skirting around the fact that none other than Marquis had been responsible for the fire that devastated the convent. *A wise move*, I thought. This wasn’t yet the time for Naut to learn that truth.

Naut slowly said, “In short, despite having royal blood, you deserted the royal court, cast away your magic, and acted as a hound for a random huntsman while wagging your tail, huh?”

<Precisely. And I have no regrets. If the clever pig and the others never found out, I fully intended to stay this way for my lifetime. All the potential trouble just isn’t my thing.>

I’d heard that mages were well-versed in techniques that prevented others from reading their minds. Indeed, if he maintained his dog disguise, he could probably deceive everyone for a lifetime.

It was hard to believe that this dog was the one who’d been sniffing all over Jess’s lower half until moments earlier. He was the picture of calm and composure now.

“Interesting,” Naut said casually. “Well then, does that mean if we chop off your left leg, you’ll regain your magic and tear the royal courts to the ground with us?”

<No, I can’t do that.> The pupper gestured for his owner to stop with his front paw. <I cast a restitution spell on this bangle. Even if you try to remove it by force, it will only coil around my body once again. I took measures so that I would never be able to return to my original form by myself. We need to go through the proper procedures.>

“Procedures?” Naut knitted his eyebrows.

That was when the dog turned to face me. <The items necessary to restore me to my former glory are inside the capital. Could you retrieve them for me?>

A clear, sunny sky greeted us that early afternoon. After Jess and I returned to the capital, the two of us decided to search for the items in question immediately. As for Shravis, he'd gone off to his battle drills.

"Why did he specify our destination through such an enigmatic method?" Jess wondered aloud.

<<Who knows? Maybe it's because he's a pervert.>>

The capital had been carved into the slope of a rocky mountain. It was a complex, three-dimensional city. Whitish cobble paved the narrow paths, whimsically weaving their way between the stone buildings before suddenly stopping at stairways or sometimes leading into caves in the rocks. Under Jess's guidance, we headed to our first stop.

The instructions of the man in question were as follows: *"I want all of you to procure fountain water and the sealed history text. I'll tell you where to look, so please remember everything I say."*

The details about the "fountain water" were jotted down on the piece of paper that Jess was holding.

To reach the fountain you seek, there are three places you must peek.

The land of the beginning is a plaza of flowers so fine, flower beds decorated with never-wilting blooms are your sign.

The second place is just within sight, where two large mountains are delights.

As for the third, eyes are your guide, look for two little fruits that are rather slight.

The left wing is what you must choose with glee, aim for the fountain that will set the seal free.

As an expert on metaphors, especially in a certain category, I had an extremely ominous premonition about this. But for some reason, Jess's eyes had lit up with anticipation, so I ended up going along with her.

“The first place is easy,” Jess claimed. “Ahead of this path is the Flower Plaza, which Lady Vatis apparently built. Flowers made of stone have been blooming there for over a hundred years, or so they say.”

With a spring in her step, Jess turned a corner and walked out into a big street from the narrow alley. If we ignored the fact that there were no children to be seen, the people walking back and forth on the streets of the capital looked like perfectly normal citizens. Along the road, cozy little shops snuggled between residences built with white stone.

After walking down the street for a while, my vision suddenly opened up as we entered a circular clearing. <<So this is the Flower Plaza, huh?>>

Jess nodded. “Seems like it!”

The plaza had been constructed in the middle of a slope, and half of it was jutting out of the capital—towards the western sky—like a viewing platform. Beyond the far end was an overlooking view of Mesteria’s vast lands. The other half was carved into the slope, and terraced flower beds stretched on lavishly. However, the blooming flowers weren’t real flowers—they were roses made of white marble. They were incredibly detailed, right down to their stems and leaves. It was almost eerie.

<<They look as if someone transformed real roses into stone,>> I commented.

Jess, who’d been admiring the stone flowers eagerly, turned to face me. “Perhaps that was how she made them.”

I see. Well, as someone with overwhelming magic that put an end to the Dark Ages, a spell like that might be a piece of cake. <<The flower beds decorated with never-wilting blooms should refer to this place. Okay then, let’s look for the mountains.>>

“Yes!”

When we’d arrived, I’d taken a look, and just like I’d thought, there was nothing in the western scenery outside the capital that fit the description of “two large mountains.” The Flower Plaza seemed to act as a small traffic circle, and five paths led away from it. Since the mountains were supposed to be within sight, they were likely down one of these paths.

Jess and I walked around the plaza and checked all the areas they led to. Two paths led to big streets that drew gentle slopes with no particular landmarks. One of the paths led to a small plaza with a water fountain shaped like a trophy. Another quickly branched off into two paths, and at the fork was a statue of a naked woman. The final one changed into downward stairs midway, and at the end was a garden with a lawn and a grand tower.

“This is rather difficult...” Jess mulled over the facts solemnly. “One could describe the tower below us as a mountain. The issue is that there is only one, so I wouldn’t call it two mountains... Referring to statues and fountains as mountains seems like a stretch as well. Hmm, maybe if we head a little further down the big streets, we might see something that fits the description.”

...

I took a deep breath. <<Hey, Jess, can I tell you the answer already?>>

She looked down at me, her eyes wide with surprise. “Whaaat?! You’ve already figured it out, Mister Pig?”

You might have realized as well, my brethren. Let me give you a hint: those with a pure mind can’t see those mountains. <<Once you realize what that pervert was implying, it’s simple. Let’s go.>>

“Huh?! But, um, please wait!”

Hearing her call, I halted and turned around. <<What’s wrong?>>

“Sorry, but I...I want to try and find the answer by myself.” Jess pursed her lips and looked a little frustrated. This was rather novel.

I likely didn’t have many opportunities to see Jess acting so innocent and childlike. I made a decision. <<Gotcha. I’ll wait for a while, so go on. Think about it.>>

“I will!”

Jess muttered, “Two mountains, two mountains...” under her breath as she walked in circles around the plaza. I trailed behind her. Though I felt bad for thinking this, I was willing to bet that she would never arrive at the answer.

A few minutes later, Jess stopped in her tracks. “Um...” I had a good inkling

about her next words. I tottered in a circle until I was right in front of her feet. “I’m sorry, but I still can’t solve it... Could you give me a hint?”

Very well. Under Jess’s watchful gaze, I said, <<Right now, there are two mountains in your vision.>>

“Huh?” Jess swished her head back and forth.

<<No, not there. Look in my direction.>> I sat down right in front of Jess.

Her gaze lowered until she could see me. “Um... I can only see you and my feet, Mister Pig...”

<<Can you see something that’s a little higher up?>> *I mean, in her defense, these mountains aren’t too big.*

She seemed to have realized what I meant, and her face immediately flushed scarlet. “Ah... I see! *Th-Those* kinds of mountains!”

Finally connecting the dots, she walked down the path that led to the statue of a naked woman. We stopped in front of the life-sized marble statue. There were no inscriptions or anything of the sort. There was only the realistic depiction of a woman looking up. She had a large bosom and a loincloth around her waist. Two large mountains were in sight—it had been an innuendo. That man hadn’t changed one bit from the time he’d pretended to be Rossi the dog. He seemed to be the worst kind of depraved pervert.

<<All right, this is the second place. We gotta look for the third place next. He mentioned “eyes are your guide,” so...>> The woman’s statue was facing a direction that was rather high up. I looked at the other end of her gaze, and...

“There seems to be another statue if we climb all the way up the stairs ahead of us,” Jess noted.

Quite high up on a slope so steep that you couldn’t even build houses, there was something like a staircase landing where a statue glowed white under the shower of sunlight. I couldn’t see it clearly, but it seemed to be the statue of a naked young maiden. Her hands were outstretched as if she were about to take flight at any moment.

Just in case, I asked, <<As for what “two little fruits” means... Can you figure it

out on your own now?>>

Jess placed her right hand over her chest self-consciously as she gave me a wry smile. “Yes, I can. After all, I have the vague impression that on the festival night at Kiltyrie, a certain someone had similar thoughts when he ate the apples I offered to him.”

Nah, you’re probably imagining things. <<Let’s go, then. It’s a pretty steep uphill path. Are you okay with those?>>

“Of course!”

By the time we reached the young maiden’s statue, we were dead tired. At the landing surrounded by an elegant stone railing, the naked maiden spread her hands out like a ballerina. The statue was extremely realistic—I could even see details like her slightly protruding ribs and her soft, delicate muscles.

And she had *tiny breasts*.

When I looked at her up close, a memory floated to the surface of my mind. At the end of my journey, a certain nude maiden had brushed me. Even now, I could vividly recall the scene I’d witnessed back then. In the category of boob size, the maiden I was thinking of would likely be the winner. *You can trust me on this. I’m a proud boob connoisseur.*

“...Ummm, the next part is ‘the left wing is what you must choose,’ right?” Though her reddened ears tipped me off, she dutifully ignored the narration and looked over the paper in her hand.

Perhaps because we were on the outskirts of the city, there was no one else on this high platform. I walked around the maiden statue until I was right in front of it and began observing it with Jess. Just like the statue of a naked woman earlier, it seemed that all the statues in the capital were true to life, all the way down to the little details. Beyond the maiden spreading out her hands were paths—

“Ah!” Jess gasped in delight. “I think I’ve got it! If you look at her from the front, the two branching stairs are extending out just like wings behind her. He mentioned the left wing, and from our perspective, that would be the right stairs. We just have to head up that staircase, right?”

Almost at the same time as me—no, in fact, Jess seemed to have made the deduction a few seconds earlier, and I was impressed. She gave off a somewhat airy and mellow impression, but she was actually very sharp when it came to certain matters. You couldn't let your guard down around her.

<<Yeah, I think that sounds like a plan. We've only got a little more to go. Let's do this.>>

Feeling the refreshing autumn breeze brush against my skin, I climbed the narrow staircase. I was one step behind Jess.

"His clues were a little eccentric, but I have to say, this was kind of fun!"

Hearing Jess's words, I stopped trying to peer up her skirt. <<I agree. It was like experiencing a dirty mystery game. Pretty cool.>>

Though I didn't know what was happening in Hortis's mind, I felt he was a rather tasteful and charming guy. At the very least, he had more of a sense of humor and playfulness than Marquis and Shravis.

"Mystery games?" Jess turned around with curiosity twinkling in her eyes. "Such things exist?"

<<Back in my world, yeah. We have all kinds of games in that category, such as mystery games, escape rooms, puzzles, riddles... The organizers come up with fun questions, and the player solves them. In some of these games, once you solve a few questions, new mysteries pop up so you can keep going.>>

"Huuuh. They sound really interesting!"

Her enthusiasm was so profound that I proposed, <<Once things calm down, let's play one of them eventually. I don't have much experience in that field, but I don't mind coming up with the questions.>>

"Wait, really?! Oh, I'm so happy right now!" Her eyes shined like jewels before she looked right into my eyes. "It's a promise, okay?"

My body stiffened briefly before I gave her a small nod. Promises weren't exactly my cup of tea.

She tilted her head quizzically for a little while before she smiled at me. "But...if you incorporate the size of my breasts into your questions, I'll punish

you.”

How did she find that out?! I didn't even write it in the narration!

She huffed. “Lately, I’ve gotten a relatively good understanding of your indecent thought process, you see.”

<<Huh... Well, I’m in trouble.>> *Looks like the cat’s out of the bag. She dug up my identity as a boob connoisseur who made a name for myself with my astoundingly accurate estimation of chest sizes using my eyes alone.*

As we leisurely made our way up the stairs, Jess pressed her index finger on her chin. “While we’re on the topic, Mister Pig, you often pay an undue amount of attention to the bust size of women.” Honey-brown eyes filled with suspicion and curiosity turned their gaze to me. “Does that mean that you have seen the breasts of other women, perhaps?”

My perspiration from climbing stairs abruptly transformed into a cold sweat of nervousness. <<Um...?>>

“You are a virgin, right...?” she asked slowly.

<<Uh, yeah, I’m none other than a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin in the flesh.>>

“Then why are you so knowledgeable about breast sizes?”

Is she someone who habitually picks at details? <<O-Our bath was the only time I ever saw them, well, in...person, anyway... But back in the country I’m from, we had stuff like indecent books, ya know, and some of them featured stuff we called “photographs,” images that copy real things down to every last detail...>>

“So you stared at the depictions of women’s naked bodies while squealing and grunting?”

I sensed the Miffed Force was strong with Jess and hurriedly tried to explain my way out of this crisis. <<No, I only examined them out of interest in biology and statistics, nothing more.>>

“Huh. Is that so?” I sensed that her gaze held scrutiny and a hint of disdain.

<<I mean... Surely you’ve read an indecent book or two before, Jess?>> I

protested.

Jess's flustered reaction was unexpected. "Whaaat? N-N-N-N-Never! There aren't such improper *fotograffs* in Mesteria to begin with! Everything here is expressed through artwork, nothing more!"

Hmm...? I raised an imaginary eyebrow. My intuition was telling me that something wasn't quite right about her speech, but before I could mull over it, we'd already reached the top of the stairs.

The stairs led to the edge of a cliff. It was a small place overgrown with a carpet of luscious grass. One section of the grass parted to expose the white rock below, and within that area was a fountain with water gushing forth. After sniffing it for a moment, I drank a little mouthful. It was cool and fresh.

"Wow! Mister Pig, look!" Jess exclaimed. "The view is marvelous!"

Hearing that, I approached the edge of the cliff. There was no fence or railing. Below the precipitous cliff—if someone fell, it would be an instant game over—wove the streets we'd just walked.

Jess placed a hand on my back. "Please don't fall."

<<Nope, I won't. I don't want to turn into mince pie, much less ground meat cutlets.>>

Directly under the cliff was a small plaza where a solitary statue stood. Quite some distance from it was the vast Flower Plaza. With my eyes, I traced the path we'd come. To the right of the Flower Plaza was the huge chest, then the flat chest.

I noticed something. <<That's our starting point, and those are the statues we passed by, right? Looks like he led us around on a big detour.>>

"Oh, you're right. Why would he do that?" Jess wondered.

<<Welp, maybe that super pervert just had a personal preference for boobs.>> I sighed. <<He's beyond salvation.>> I turned around and headed towards the fountain.

Jess was hot on my heels. "Once we collect some water from here, we can check our first goal off our to-do list." As she spoke, she took out a glass bottle

and drew some water before sealing it tightly with a cork. While she was at it, she scooped up some water with her hand and tasted it. “Yum,” she whispered, taking out a handkerchief to wipe her mouth.

She looked content from her sense of accomplishment, and the evening sun only enhanced her beauty. Delayed realization struck me—I was with a beautiful maiden in a secret place where no one else would visit, and I had her all to myself. *If I weren't a pig right now, I...*

I shook off all unnecessary thoughts. <<Next up is the sealed history text, right? If you're tired, we can resume our search tomorrow. What do you think? >>

She replied with a big smile and said, “If you don't mind, Mister Pig, let's search for it after dinner. I know it's inappropriate for me to say this, but...this has been pretty fun.”

<<That's good to hear. Should we look for a shortcut on our way back?>>

Jess shook her head unhurriedly. “Mister Hortis mentioned that the evening view from the Flower Plaza is breathtaking enough to make it onto the list of the top five sights in the capital. Since we're already here, can we take a look before we head back?”

I had no objections. Nothing could be better than going on a little adventure with a beautiful maiden.

We retraced our path back to the Flower Plaza. When we headed down the stairs, my eye level was higher than the hem of Jess's skirt, so I couldn't hope for anything on that front. Instead, I looked forward and was met with the majestic sight of the dazzling westering sun gradually sinking below distant mountains. It was as if someone had gleefully scattered shards of the sun across the misty sky. Gentle orange light splashed down on the white stone houses arranged along the western slope of the capital, coating them with a gorgeous sheen.

“We might just make it in time for sunset when we arrive at the Flower Plaza,” Jess said with a bright smile.

The cobblestone path swerved with the curvature of the mountain, and it was

overflowing with people hurrying to their respective homes. Even if all their children were fated to be snatched away from them, the citizens in the capital seemed to lead relatively blissful lives.

There were no groups of parents with children in sight. However, plenty of people seemed to be enjoying themselves—friends were deep in conversation at the terrace seats of a cafeteria, married couples walked hand in hand, and so on. The evening hours in the capital were filled with mundane stimuli you'd find everywhere, such as the mouthwatering aroma of grilling meat or the clinking of colliding tableware.

"Do you feel a sense of longing too?" Jess asked.

From her side, I looked up at her face. <<Longing for what?>>

"Longing for a calm life like this," she spoke softly. "Peaceful days where someone precious to you won't be taken away, where you won't lose your memories, where you won't be dragged into the horrors of conflict, where there's no one out for your life... Doesn't that sound like a dream come true to you, Mister Pig?"

I considered it. <<I'm not sure. The thing is, the world I came from was such a peaceful place.>> But I'd never felt it was particularly happy or blissful.

"Oh, I see..." Jess hung her head.

<<I get why you'd long for it though, Jess. You've lived in a world of upheaval your entire life, after all.>>

A solitary life as a servant until she was sixteen, then a perilous journey to the capital while countless dangerous fiends wanted her dead. It didn't even stop there; she was suddenly offered an opportunity to join the royal bloodline, and the king sealed her memories. Finally, she managed to cling to survival even as wartime fire mercilessly dragged her in. Jess's life was a tumultuous one.

We arrived at the Flower Plaza and made a beeline for the observation deck with its grand view. Between the gaps of the railing—which was adorned with floral-themed embellishments—was a panorama view of West Mesteria. Right below us was the Needle Woods, where we'd once been involved in a battle to the death. Beyond the stretch of the forest were fields and gentle hills.

Jess had been right—we were just in time to witness the sun sinking down, about to hide itself behind the edge of a mountain. The sky glowed, as if it'd been set ablaze, while the land quietly pulled over the curtains of darkness, composing a splendid contrast.

The maiden in question was looking at the scenery as she slowly said, "That's not the reason..."

<<Huh?>> I blinked. <<What do you mean?>>

"It's not that I dislike living in a world of upheaval or anything. I like adventures too."

<<Ah... Then, what caused your longing for a mundane life?>>

"What I dislike is being worried every waking moment that the world might tear me away from someone precious to me." Jess's profile was turned to me, and the evening sun traced dazzling lines down the contours of her face. "It's a little too late to change things now, but...I think I wouldn't have minded a life as an ordinary citizen in the capital if it meant..." She paused. "If it meant I could be with you forever and ever, Mister Pig."

Like hefty stakes, her words punctured my pork heart and stayed there. <<...Hey, I was with you in the past, and I'm still with you now.>>

"Yes. I'm happy right now."

I went quiet.

Jess whispered, "It would be nice if this happiness lasted forever."

On our way back, night had begun to settle in, and the streets were dark—perhaps we'd gone past the point of "leisurely" to "taking our sweet time." The sky smeared a coat of dark purple onto the cobblestone paths, while the illumination of the houses and the lanterns hanging off the edge of the eaves dabbled their gentle glow onto that canvas. Jess and I toured the capital carefreely as we headed back into its inner recesses.

And...I felt considerable fear creep into my heart. About the fact that I'd spent a peaceful, ordinary day with Jess. About the fact that I might end up spending more peaceful, ordinary days with her.

The palace's royal library was a jungle of both wisdom and taboo. Within the sturdy building—that only offered one door as an entrance—were systematically arranged shelves packed with archaic books. The scents of aged paper and slightly bitter ink enveloped me, inducing a sense of zen in my heart that made me feel like I'd been released from all worldly desires. Since the aisles were narrow, the situation was out of my hands—I had to cling to Jess's legs as we walked.

The maiden's voice echoed in my mind, shattering the silence as she pointed out, <That doesn't mean you have to rub your cheeks against my calves though.>

My word! I was so focused on avoiding the books that I didn't realize my cheeks bumped into her legs. How rude of me!

The aisles between the shelves were dim. Magical lights were suspended from the ceiling, and their red tint created an eerie atmosphere. Jess magically lit up the tip of her right index finger with a white light that illuminated the aisle and the ground beneath our feet.

<<Jess, can you summon that light in places other than your fingertips?>> I asked.

Jess puffed out her chest proudly. <Yes, of course. I can move it anywhere I want, just like this.> Light flowed fluidly from her fingertip to her palm, to her wrist, then to her elbow.

<<Then, in theory, you can light up any area of your body, huh?>>

The moment I made that statement, the magical light vanished. <My boobs will not light up.>

What...? Did she just read me like a book?

Jess illuminated her fingertip once again. <You are *such* a perv, Mister Pig.> She harrumphed and turned away sullenly before schooling her face into a serious expression. <Let's look for what we came for: the sealed history text.>

Oh, right. We'd come to the library deliberately at night to look for the history

text that would break Hortis's seal. How could I forget?

The most hideous history text is deep, surrounded by the most virtuous books it sleeps.

Sacrilege against life adorns a disguise, from behind the skin of a hymns of life it spies.

Showing the most respect is what you must do, there you will find the twins of taboo.

The instructions of that depraved pervert were, once again, poetic and abstract. This attitude was ridiculous for someone who was asking us to look for something in his stead. But those were the only hints he provided, leaving us with no choice other than to play along with his riddles.

<Um, Mister Pig... I can't make heads or tails of this.>

After a lengthy while of going around in circles between the bookshelves, Jess sighed with a troubled expression. The books seemed to be sorted into categories, but we couldn't find any sections that had restricted access, nor were there any bookshelves that seemed particularly virtuous.

I gave the riddle some thought as well, but I felt that the three lines he'd provided weren't enough on their own—far from it. When you couldn't interpret a text based on the contents alone, the classic approach was to analyze it while taking the subtext and speaker into account.

<<The only hint that indicates which shelf it's located on is the verse "surrounded by the most virtuous books it sleeps." That pervert thought this information was enough for us to find it. Therefore, we must consider the subtext and his personality while trying to solve it logically.>>

<Subtext and personality...> She trailed off.

<<It's probably easier if we start with his personality. Jess, what's your opinion of that man?>>

<Well, I feel like he is a slightly eccentric person.>

<<Exactly. It's already clear enough from how he sniffed you all the time that he's definitely a pervert. Next, what about the subtext? Think back to the fountain water. His riddle seemed like a respectable one on the surface, but in actuality, it was extremely vulgar, wasn't it?>>

She nodded. <You're right. That man does give off a slightly indecent feel.>

<<That means we should follow the same slightly indecent train of thought for the riddle at this library. What would that pervert call "virtuous"?>>

Realization dawned on me immediately as I spoke. "Sacrilege against life" was in the guise of a "hymn of life." This contrast should parallel the structure where the "most hideous history text" was surrounded by the "most virtuous books." The life drive and the death drive—a good comparison in my world would be Freud's Eros and Thanatos.

Jess tilted her head quizzically at the otaku's rapid and rampant thoughts, which I kindly explained to her. <<The "virtuous books" he was referring to are what he describes as "hymns of life." In other words, dirty books.>>

<Huuuuuh?! D-D-D-D-Dirty books?!>

Even within the dark library, I could tell that Jess's face had turned a bright red.

<<The history text, with contents that are "sacrilege against life," is pretending to be a "hymn of life"—a dirty book. It's hiding itself in a bookshelf filled with dirty books. We only have to head there and look for the so-called twins of taboo.>>

<Um, dirty books...might be referring to erotica? If I remember correctly, those should be...> Jess averted her gaze and walked ahead of me with somewhat quickened steps.

<<Erotica? Just wondering, but what are they like over here?>>

<Well, I rarely ever read them, but um... They are love stories featuring frequent explicit portrayals. Based on what I know, many of these books are a combination of both text and art.>

Huh. Are they like the explicit light novels in our world? <<On that topic, Jess,

you know where the bookshelf is, hmm? You mentioned that you “rarely” ever read them... Does that perhaps mean you’ve read a few?>>

<N...N-N-N-Never!>

Within my mind, I heard her fervent denial—she was very insistent, almost unnaturally so. *Oho? Well, well...* I raised an imaginary eyebrow.

<No, um, that’s not what I meant at all... I just, um, you know...was a bit curious...> Jess’s whole face was cherry red from her hairline to the tip of her chin as she stopped in front of an antique bookshelf.

Oh well, let’s not hound her too much about it. She’s already sixteen, after all.

<I believe the shelf you’re looking for is this one.> Jess kept her face turned away from me as she pointed at the shelf in front of me. The bookshelf was packed so high that Jess couldn’t even reach the top of it if she were on her tiptoes. It went all the way down to the bottom, which grazed the ground. However, dust covered the shelf, and I could even count the few traces left from removing books.

I suppose I wasn’t all that surprised. Based on what I’d heard, only members of the royal family and select citizens of the capital were permitted to enter this library. Therefore, there were barely any people of culture who’d come all the way here to browse through indecent literature.

<<Okay then, let’s think about what “showing the most respect” means,>> I proposed.

Without hesitation, Jess crouched down.

I blinked. <<What are you doing?>>

Jess fixed her gaze on the shelf. She wouldn’t meet my eyes. <I believe that showing respect means bowing. How about we look through the lowest rack?>

Good point. <<Hmm, I suppose we just have to figure out what the “twins of taboo” means,>> I said while looking at the bottom rack below my pig eye level. Barely any light made its way to this tier, and a coating of thick dust told me that these books had long vanished from everyone’s memories.

“...ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?” Jess stared at

the book spines intently as she whispered those words.

<<Huh? Come again?>>

<That is the title of one book here. In it, blood-related siblings are helplessly drawn to each other, and they... No, um, I heard it's a story about an older brother and his younger sister falling in love. It's a famous book that was popular long ago. Would taboo refer to something like this?>

Wow, the title's totally like a light novel's, LOL! But with this, that's one mystery solved. It's the incest taboo. <<But what does the "twins" part mean? The siblings you mentioned aren't twins, are they?>>

<No, they aren't...> Then, Jess let out a small exclamation before gasping. <Mister Pig, there are two spines with the title *ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?*!>

Jess reached out with her lit-up finger towards the bookshelf. There, two spines with the exact same title were slotted next to each other. One was a big book bound with leather. The other was a square wooden box around the same size. It was probably a slide-in case for storing or packaging a book. *In other words...*

<<Does that mean someone deliberately took the book out of the box and displayed them separately?>>

Jess, as sharp as always, carefully took out the wooden box. <The question is what's inside the box.> Her petite hands gently brushed off the dust before removing the box's contents.

What appeared was an eerily black book. Whether it be the binding or the pages, they were all an obsidian black color that looked like a void had sucked up all the light. Nothing was written on the outside.

<<Huh.>> I scrutinized it. <<It doesn't look like an indecent piece of literature.>>

Jess quietly slotted the box with *ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?* on the spine back onto the bookshelf before she looked at me. <I agree. Most erotica features, well, erotic art on the cover...> Readily and obliviously digging her own grave, Jess stood up. <Mister Pig, shall we take a

quick peek at the contents?>

<<Sounds like a plan.>>

We left the shelf behind us and moved to the reading corner of the library. An aged wooden table was surrounded by red cushioned chairs that looked like they'd seen better days. Right in the middle of the table was a small, magical lantern that illuminated the tabletop with a warm light. The corner was surrounded by ashen stone walls, and the rest of the area was dark, as if someone had drawn black curtains over it.

A tall, elderly woman slipped out abruptly from the darkness. "You've come again." Her gray hair was long and straight, reaching down to her waist. Wrinkles were carved into her skin. She was Vivis, a citizen of the royal capital and the librarian here.

"Good evening, Madame Vivis," Jess hid the pitch-black book behind her with one hand as she greeted the woman.

A gentle smile warmed Vivis's wise features. "I notice that you have a rather nostalgic book. Young Prince Hortis often used to read it over here." She hadn't overlooked the book.

"You know about this book, ma'am?" Jess placed the pitch-black book on the table.

The elderly woman's eyes, framed by wrinkles, gazed at the item. "Why, of course I do. It could be deemed the most dangerous book inside this building—it's a duplicate of the history text that has a detailed account of our true history."

True history... It was likely referring to the history of Mesteria before the royal court came to be. I climbed onto a chair and snorted slightly to catch Vivis's attention before saying politely, <<What information was Hortis trying to gain?>>

The elderly woman dragged out a long sigh. "Who knows? I'm afraid I'm not a nosy person who would disturb the young prince while he was studying so enthusiastically."

<<Did he ever ask you for advice about anything?>>

Hortis had, apparently, often turned to Vivis for help when he wanted to look for books. She was also the one who'd informed us that Hortis had studied the art of transformation. If we wanted to find clues that would shed some light on Hortis's past, Vivis might be the best person to ask.

"If it's about that book, there was only one thing that he asked me."

Jess leaned forward. "What was it?"

Vivis pointed at the history text. "Please open it and try flipping the pages."

As instructed, Jess began flipping through the pages from the very beginning. All the paper was completely black, while texts and illustrations were drawn with white ink. "Ah..." Her hand stopped abruptly.

<<Something the matter?>>

"The pages are stuck," she explained.

I took a look. Dozens of pages were firmly pasted together; it almost looked like one entire block.

"See? A part of that book has been sealed away by magic, so you can't read that specific section," Vivis explained. "The young prince came up to me and asked me whether I could break the seal, but I responded that because King Eavis had enchanted it personally, my magic didn't even stand a chance."

The *sealed* history text. This must be what we'd been searching for.

Some of the pages were stuck together under Eavis's seal, and though there might be no correlation between the two, that phrasing rang a bell.

"Oh... Thank you anyway." Jess's shoulders slumped. Perhaps her curiosity had been gnawing at her.

Vivis gazed at Jess as the corners of her lips lifted slightly. "Young miss, make sure to return that book to this library when you're done, please."

Immediately the next morning, with Shravis taking the lead, we visited the Liberators' base.

Ceres was the one who received us—she'd been watering the flowers in the

front yard. The black pig was by her side, frolicking as he ushered her to spray water on him.

The moment Ceres laid her eyes on us, her face lit up. “Miss Jess!” Her large eyes and slender limbs stood out—as always, she gave off the impression of an innocent fawn. She ran over with small steps and opened the gate. And just like before, a bulky, oppressive silver collar wound around her neck.

“Oh, Miss Ceres... Good morning.” There was a somber hint in Jess’s voice.

I looked up at her. Her complexion was awfully pale today. She even had bags beneath her eyes.

Jess continued in a subdued voice, “Could you call Mister Naut over? We have an update about our discussion yesterday.”

Ceres nodded and immediately sprinted into the mansion.

Frowning, I commented, <<You look like you’re under the weather, Jess. Don’t push yourself too hard.>>

After a delay of a few seconds, she turned to face me. Weariness was clear in her eyes. <Don’t worry, I’m all right. I just...haven’t gotten enough sleep, that’s all.>

<<If you say so...>> I wasn’t very convinced.

And that was when I noticed the black pig, Sanon, staring at me. He moved his head and flapped his ears repeatedly, as if he wanted to convey something, but the voice of his mind didn’t reach me.

<<Hey, Jess, if it’s not too much trouble, could you act as the go-between for the black pig and me?>>

Pigs couldn’t speak human languages. Unless someone with telepathy acted as our router and broadcast our inner voices to each other, we couldn’t communicate.

Jess, who’d been staring down at the lawn in a daze, gasped and placed a hand over her mouth. “Sorry, Mister Pig, could you repeat that?”

<<Can you relay my words to the black pig, and vice versa?>> I asked patiently.

“Oh, right! Sorry about that...”

Her head seemed to be in the clouds—perhaps she was nervous. Meanwhile, Shravis, who stood next to her, silently stared at her. *Did that guy realize something?*

Sanon’s voice echoed in my mind, so I focused on the black pig again. <Mister Lolip, thank you for all your hard work regarding Mister Hortis’s request.>

<<I assume you heard it all from Naut?>> I replied politely.

The black pig nodded slowly. <I have also discussed many matters with Mister Hoho himself.> Sanon switched to his usual nicknames. <I must say, he is such a wonderful man! I believe he is the real deal.>

I tilted my head slightly. <<A real pervert, you mean?>>

<No, I mean that he is truly our trump card. He has connections with the royal court, which is exactly what we need. He can use magic. And more than anything, he cares about and treasures us, the Liberators. He is indeed an ideal secret weapon. I cannot thank you enough for realizing his identity, Mister Lolip.>

In front of Jess’s skirt, the black pig respectfully bowed his head.

<<You really don’t have to. Please raise your head. At that angle, you might get a peek up Jess’s skirt.>>

<Oh dear, please excuse my blunder.> The black pig twisted his neck with what seemed like disappointment and frustration as he retreated.

Oy, I swear, I’m ready to call the police at this point. <<Is Ceres doing well?>>

There was a short pause before the black pig nodded. <Just like before, when she gets out of bed, her half asleep face is awfully adorable every single morning.>

Uh, no, that wasn’t my question...

Sanon hesitated once again. <But there is just one thing—>

Before he could finish his sentence, the mansion doors opened to reveal Ceres, Naut, and Rossi—Hortis in disguise. When Rossi spotted Jess, he ran

straight at us before pouncing on Jess and pinning her down on the lawn. He then began to lick her cheeks enthusiastically.

Jess was at his mercy. “Ah! Um... Excuse me...”

Shravis seemed like he couldn’t bear to watch any longer, so he stepped forward forcefully. “Uncle. We have already discovered your identity, and I believe you should refrain from such conduct.”

The pervert dog didn’t tuck his lolled-out tongue away. Instead, he kept panting as he lifted his dignified muzzle. <Sorry, I couldn’t help my doggy instincts...>

Do you really think that’s a foolproof excuse for everything? I scowled.

Naut caught up from behind. Ceres remained at a slight distance while stealing furtive glances at the huntsman.

“You’ve already found everything? That was fast.” Naut held his hand out to Jess, who stared at his palm, mystified. “Give me the water and the history text. I’ll use them to transform Hortis back.”

Shravis cut in from the sidelines. “Those two items are in my possession. The water isn’t an issue, but I’m afraid that I can’t allow you to look at the history text. I’ll hand them directly to my uncle.”

“Huh,” Naut muttered grumpily before looking down at Rossi. “Well then, Hortis. Transform back.”

<Understood. May I have the water and the history text?> Rossi turned to his nephew.

Shravis held out the items—the history text was tied up with a ribbon—towards Rossi’s mouth. The dog opened his big mouth wide and skillfully held both between his teeth.

<<Mister Hortis,>> I called out, <<will you truly be able to become human again with these?>>

Rossi nodded. <If the two of you fetched what I needed, the transformation should be smooth.> He turned around and began taking small steps away from us.

“Uncle, where are you going?” Shravis detained him.

Rossi looked at us over his shoulder. <Unfortunately, no matter what measures I take, I’ll be stark naked the instant I transform into a human. Just in case, could you let me do my transformation on the other side of the mansion?
>

A few minutes passed.

The man who walked out was a pervert to the core, no matter how you looked at him. His curly golden hair brushed against his shoulders that matched his beard, which gave his face a refined, sophisticated look. He was a tall, good-looking man in his prime. He boasted a fit physique—despite being lithe, he had toned muscles. But there was one problem with him: he wasn’t wearing *anything*.

“Sorry about the wait, everyone,” he said. “Once again, I’m Hortis. Nice to meet all of you again.”

Ceres looked away with a flushed face. Jess stared hard at Hortis for a while before letting out a panicked “Ah!” and burying her face in her hands.



I couldn't help but retort, <<What was the point of transforming out of eyeshot, then?>>

The good-looking guy flashed his teeth, giving us a wide, infectious smile. "It would've been embarrassing if my body was all flabby and sagging. But luckily, it worked out in the end. Since I exercised properly in my dog form, I haven't declined to such lows." Hortis rotated his arms, and his shoulders made cracking sounds.

That's *what you care about*? I was aghast.

At his wit's end, Shravis sighed. "Uncle, may I remind you that it is my fiancée who is covering her face over here? Please get dressed as soon as possible."

During occasions like these, Mister Deadpan Reply was rather useful for a change. Hortis nodded with an "I see." before spreading out his arms. A large piece of white cloth manifested in the air and twined itself around his body. The result reminded me of the togas that ancient Romans used to wear.

"Fiancée...?" Naut muttered as he glanced at Jess.

As for the maiden in question, though she'd stopped covering her eyes, she remained silent with no intentions of replying.

The perverted ancient Roman walked towards us gracefully before crouching down and stroking me. Between his parted knees was—let's just say it was unbearable to describe. If it were Jess in his position, I'd be squealing and celebrating, but unfortunately, this was reality.

"Allow me to thank you officially, Mister Virgin," he said. "Thanks to you, I avoided a miserable future where I lost everything meaningful in my life. Thank you, truly."

Though his wording felt slightly out of place, I still replied, <<No, it was nothing. Let's work together and protect the Liberators.>>

With a look of satisfaction, Hortis lightly slapped my pork jowl before standing up. He then moved in front of Jess and drew a helix shape in the air with his finger. Almost like water gushing out of a spout, a white, palm-sized coiled seashell appeared out of thin air.

“Jess, sorry about how rude Rossi was,” Hortis said. “I apologize on his behalf.”

Hey, trying to pass the buck isn't going to work here, bro.

While I harrumphed, beside me, Hortis offered the seashell to Jess. He continued, “You can contact me with this seashell. If you speak my name into this opening, you can communicate with me no matter where or when. Make good use of it when you need help.”

“Yes... I shall,” Jess replied meekly.

After handing over the seashell, Hortis’s hand reached out, almost as if he were trying to pat Jess’s weary and drooping head. But in the end, his fingertips only brushed the air before returning to his side.

He then clapped a couple of times. “All right then, I believe I should head off and greet everyone else as well. Let’s head back to the mansion.” Hortis placed a veiny hand on his former owner’s shoulder.

Shravis cleared his throat. “Excuse me, uncle. If you are finished, could you please return the history text?”

Hortis shrugged, looking somewhat apologetic. “Well... I accidentally damaged it when I was releasing my spell. Could you wait a while? I can fix it, but I need time. There should be one more copy of that book, so it’s not like you need this one.”

His nephew argued, “I understand where you are coming from, but in the unlikely event that someone discovers its absence from the library, the situation might spiral out of control.”

“It’s fine. Books are the last thing my brother’s interested in. That book has been kept hidden for a long time, and there is no chance of anyone finding out about it. Plus, I plan on returning it eventually. That’s a promise.”

Shravis, who’d knitted his thick eyebrows together with doubt, finally relented with a nod, though his expression was still stern. “I understand. I shall place my faith in your words.”

In the end, we returned to the capital empty-handed.

Jess lay on the bed, and worriedly, I sat beside her pillow. <<Jess, are you feeling ill?>>

“Oh, sorry, you’ve got the wrong idea. Like I said earlier, I just didn’t get enough sleep...” She lifted the blanket until it reached her chin and shifted her gaze away from me. I followed her line of sight, which led to a window that offered a glimpse at the azure autumn sky during the day.

<<How about you get some sleep, then?>>

“No, I’m afraid I’m not drowsy in the least.”

That’s strange. She should have had plenty of time to sleep last night. Is there a reason she wasn’t able to rest? And if there is, is it a topic I can probe into?

Feeble muttering reached my ears. “I...I stayed up the entire night to read the history text.” It was shaky, as if something had frightened her.

<<You did?>>

Then again, I shouldn’t be surprised—if Jess were a golem, her building blocks would be curiosity itself. There was no way she could sit still and do nothing after hearing the words “true history.” I’d been focused on returning Hortis to his human form and hadn’t had the heart to multitask, but she must have been dying to learn the book’s contents. That was why she’d ended up so engrossed in reading that she’d forgotten about sleeping. What she read there, however, likely wasn’t that pleasant, and her queasiness must have chased sleep away even more.

Hortis’s words echoed in my mind. “The most hideous history text.” “Sacrilege against life.” <<Is it all right if I ask you what was written in it?>>

Jess turned over in bed to face me. “Yes... I think if I talk to you, it might be a weight off my shoulders.” Her delicate brows were furrowed with unease.

<<Seems like the history in this world was rather brutal.>>

“Indeed. I braced myself for the worst, but...” She took a deep breath. “It was basically one incident after another where countless people perished easily—helplessly. It was...terrifying.”

The Dark Ages of Mesteria were nothing to laugh at. Mages threw around their boundless power and fought each other relentlessly, dragging all the races across this land into their civil war. The death toll was unthinkable.

“When Lady Vatis established the royal court, there were apparently several hundred thousand citizens within Mesteria. But before the Final War started by the mages, the text says that we had over ten million citizens in this country. Can you even...believe that...?”

Compared to ten million, several hundred thousand was nothing but a minute difference that could be rounded off to zero. *If there were only that few survivors, the roughly ten million left would have been...*

<<That must’ve been heartbreaking to read,>> I said softly.

Jess’s honey-brown eyes stared into mine. “The thing is, I’m not shaken because of that fact.”

<<Oh, really?>> *So there was...something more dreadful than massacres caused by war?*

“Mister Pig, I think I told you once upon a time that there is only one method for Yethma to smoothly earn a fortune—selling our sexual organs.”

Ah. I think it was back when we had just met each other, and Jess was trying to buy that black rista.

“Um... We sell our...”

<<Sorry, what do you sell again?>>

<Our...sexual organs.>

<<I see, that means you sell your bodies, right?>>

“Yes, you...could put it that way.”

<<Yeah, prostitution is a pretty unappetizing topic as well,>> I agreed.

But just after the words made it out of my mind, I realized something peculiar. There were two rules involving Yethma. The first was that one must

never permit Yethma to ride in vehicles. The second was that one must never violate a Yethma.

Earning money through prostitution was illegal. That...implied...

I whipped up my head in alarm. <<Hang on, by selling, you meant...>>

“Yes,” Jess answered my unfinished question. “We cut open our abdomens and sell our internal organs. What fetches an especially handsome price is our sexual organ—our uterus. There is an ancient belief passed down that a Yethma’s uterus has many beneficial properties. They are ingredients in elixirs that are said to have wondrous effects. Unlike our bones and collars, we can sell them without dying in the process, so many Yethma voluntarily sell our wombs. Of course, I hear that a significant number of Yethma fall prey to people who plunder them by force, while some perish during surgery due to unsanitary conditions.”

Just hearing that was enough to make bile rise to my throat. One more mystery had been solved—Blaise, who’d been held captive underground in that church. The wound on her abdomen had been festering, and she’d been so worn down that she’d braced herself for her inevitable, fatal future. Those men had likely cut open her stomach in the church’s basement and robbed her of her uterus.

It was a topic that made me sick to the stomach. Just the thought of how cruel and merciless humans could become made me shudder. <<But...you knew about the uterus topic from the beginning, right?>>

“Yes. But I learned something new when I read the history text. A Yethma’s uterus—in other words, a mage’s uterus—is actually used differently.”

I gulped. <<How do they use it...?>>

Jess blinked ever so slowly. “The uterus of a mage supposedly holds extremely potent mana that can also serve as a source of life force. If a normal human ingested them in bulk, they would be cursed, but if a mage did...they could apparently gain immortality.”

I was speechless. *It can’t be...*

I recalled the words of the Clandestine Arcanist. “*My body has incorporated*

hundreds of fruits. It will not perish that easily."

Hundreds.

The Clandestine Arcanist was a survivor of the Dark Ages roughly a hundred and thirty years ago. He was an immortal mage who resurrected endlessly, whether he was burned, frozen, or smashed into pieces. *Did that man ingest hundreds of mage—no, Yethma uteri to gain his immortality...?*

Jess's voice trembled as she continued, "According to the history text, mages all unanimously targeted female mages during the Dark Ages, tore open their bellies, and snatched away their wombs. In most cases, fearing revenge, they ended up killing those women. Since powerful mages were more difficult to hunt down, they focused on young women who hadn't undergone that many ecdysias..."

<<That's...awful.>> Those were the only words I could find.

I reached out my front leg to touch Jess's shoulder from above her blanket, but I ended up having second thoughts and withdrew my limb.

For a while, time trickled by silently.

That was when a thought suddenly occurred to me. <<Hey, Jess, Vatis managed to annihilate all her enemy mages, right?>>

"...Yes."

<<Among her opponents, there must've been some mages who acquired magical immortality. In that case, how did Vatis kill those immortal mages?>>

The Recollections of a Youth

At the end of his journey, the boy—who was still young enough to qualify as a child—arrived at a dark, cramped room where copious amounts of blood clung to every surface. The floor and all the walls were made of black, flat stone. Though it seemed that someone hosed them down with water occasionally, it hadn't been enough to wash away all the blood that had been shed in this room.

The boy pinned a plump man onto the odorous floor and pressed the blade of his shortsword against the man's neck. "Tell me the truth. If you don't, I'll slit your throat." This boy didn't have the courage to kill a human. His raspy voice, caused by his voice changing during puberty, carried a peculiar tremble.

"I-I didn't do it 'cuz I wanted to!" the man protested. "They threatened me to lend them this place. I only received some of the leftover organs, that's it... Ya gotta believe me, it's the people higher up than me who did the dirty work."

The word "organs" echoed out as if to gouge out a hole in the boy's stomach. "Is she alive?" the boy pressed.

Wide eyes indicated that the man didn't seem to understand the question. "Huh...?"

"They brought a Yethma to this room two days ago. I'm asking you whether she's still alive."

The brief silence that followed was more than enough to make the boy's heart clench with despair.

Finally, the man said, "I'll say this 'cuz there's no point lyin', but, sonny, the purpose of this place is dissectin' Yethma. We chop off their heads, we cut open their stomachs, and we scrape off meat from their bones. No Yethma leave here alive."

The boy's stomach abruptly convulsed, and he barely managed to fight down its contents that threatened to flow up and spill out. The shortsword he held

slipped out of his hand, letting out a hollow clatter as it fell. Making use of that opening, the plump man hurriedly stood up and moved to the entrance.

With pitying eyes, the man looked over his shoulder at the boy. “Sonny, is yer name ‘Naut’ by any chance?” Tears of anguish flowed down the boy’s cheeks as he raised his head. “I ended up overhearin’ some screams. Knowin’ that lot, they probably don’t remember a thing, but...that Yethma’s last words must’ve been yer name.”

This time, the boy couldn’t keep it down—he heaved. A chaotic mixture of tears, snot, and vomit dripped down from his jaw.

The man hastily left behind the miserable boy.

A while later, the boy drowning in despair encountered a certain white dog.

Three days after that fateful encounter, the boy succeeded at snatching back a collar and a small number of bones he could find.

Chapter 2: Male Virgins Always Stay That Way for a Reason

By the time I woke up from my nap, it was evening. Jess and I waited for Shravis at the training grounds entrance since he was due to finish his drills soon. When the prince walked out of the vast and durable facility, I saw that he was wearing a loose, navy blue robe. Though the breeze was cool and refreshing, sweat drenched his fair face.

Shravis walked at a brisk pace as he asked Jess, “What brings you here? Something urgent?”

Jess nodded. “Yes. I wish to quickly discuss the history text.”

“Could you put that off until later? Father is calling for me.”

I spoke up. <<We actually have a request for your father.>>

His footsteps ground to a halt, and he looked down at me. “For my father? What do you want from him?”

<<The history text we gave Hortis this morning was a copy with a segment of it sealed by the late King Eavis. Since it’s a replica, the original must be somewhere. Considering Eavis’s involvement in the seal, the natural conclusion is that the original history text is passed down from one king to another. We want to see the original book and read the parts that were sealed away.>>

After a moment of thought, Shravis resumed his march. We followed him.

“Mister Shravis?” Jess asked tentatively, as if she were trying to sniff out his reaction.

Did we say something that displeased him in some way?

Shravis continued to look forward. He didn’t even turn as he asked, “Why do you want to read the sealed segment?”

<<A method of defeating the Clandestine Arcanist might be written within.>>

After a conversation with Jess, we'd come to one conclusion: judging by the timeline of the texts immediately before and after, the sealed part likely entailed the sequence of events that led up to Vatis uniting the entire country. By analyzing that section, we might figure out how to stop an immortal mage.

"I see." Only rotating his head to face us, Shravis said, "You seem to share my father's opinion. Father asked mother to analyze and decipher the history text he inherited from grandfather. They managed to locate the Destruction Spear, one of the supreme treasures of Mesteria. I'm heading there to observe the retrieval."

"The Destruction Spear?!" Jess exclaimed before she turned her head back and forth, scanning our surroundings. She lowered her voice and continued, "So that's the key to vanquishing immortality. Where in the world is it?"

"We should arrive soon. Come with me." He paused. "But be very careful—keep your thoughts in check when you're in front of father."

His words were a reminder that the person whom we were trying to hide Hortis's existence from was a mage who could read the narration. *But it's okay. I have a foolproof strategy up my sleeve. There's a method that will stop Marquis and Wyss from reading my narration. Please keep your eyes peeled, my brethren.*

Shravis's destination was the Golden Cathedral. Shiny black marble formed the building blocks of this majestic structure, which was sprinkled with gold embellishments that enhanced its dignity. It was also where all the previous kings slumbered in eternal peace, including Eavis.

With a heavy, solemn groan, the cathedral doors gave way. When I looked forward, deep in the building were King Marquis in stylish ceremonial robes and Queen Wyss adorned in a white, frilly dress.

Quickening his pace, Shravis headed in the pair's direction.

Marquis turned his ashen eyes, which gleamed like a hawk's, to his son. "That took you long enough. If training is that enjoyable, shall I personally drum the etiquette of battle into you?" His slicked-back golden hair and lithe frame oozed the aura of someone you couldn't let your guard down around, just like a

capable securities broker.

King Marquis was the mage with the most raw power in Mesteria. In the eyes of Shravis, who was still training and growing, this man was likely the last person he wanted to face in a match.

“I beg your pardon,” Shravis said. “Though it is precisely the appointed time, I apologize.”

Marquis scoffed at the tiny thorn of sarcasm. “Why is the woman with the pig here?”

The ungracious word choice made Shravis’s cheeks raise. “No matter where I bring my fiancée, I believe it will not deprive you of anything, father.”

In the company of his son, who was bold enough to talk back at him, Marquis sighed with annoyance. He then turned to face his wife. “Wyss, explain the proceedings in a way that even a fool can understand.”

Wyss smiled demurely. She was a mature, beautiful woman with big boobs and long golden locks. *My brethren, do you remember the metaphor of sunflowers and violets? When I mentioned that even a man who likes small flowers, such as violets, would naturally end up turning his gaze onto a large flower, such as a sunflower?* Though she was a married woman with a child, if I had to use a metaphor to describe Wyss, she was like a sunflower freely spreading out its gorgeous petals beneath the dazzling sun. Though she should be, well, relatively high up in the age department, neither her enchanting, intellectual face nor her brilliant sunflower figure had lost any of her youthful charm. I could probably go as far as to declare that this woman was on the same level as Hollywood celebrities.

My mind entertained such thoughts for a long time, and eventually, Marquis averted his gaze from me while Wyss cleared her throat.

The queen indicated the enormous sarcophagus enshrined on the altar that faced the cathedral’s entrance. It was where the remains of the royal court’s founder, Vatis, slumbered.

“The Destruction Spear, which can only be used a single time to take any life in existence, is sealed within,” she explained. I heard Jess suck in a sharp breath

next to me. “According to the history text, the spear is hidden behind the lid of the sarcophagus. Only one person in all of Mesteria can unravel the seal—the legitimate successor of the royal court, or more specifically, the youngest royal of Lady Vatis’s bloodline. And that is you, Shravis.”

I could almost hear the thumping of Shravis’s heart echoing inside the extensive, silent cathedral. Nervously, he walked forward into the space between his parents—towards the sarcophagus of the royal court’s founder.

Alongside the prince, I approached the coffin and scrutinized its lid. Though it wasn’t conspicuous, I noticed a symbol that resembled a long and narrow arrow carved into the lid’s rim. Was it perhaps a mark that indicated the spear’s hiding place?

Shravis opened his mouth gingerly. “What...should I do?”

“You only have to touch the lid while wishing for the Destruction Spear,” Wyss explained.

Shravis glanced at his father. Marquis jerked his chin towards his son.

After bowing politely at Vatis’s statue on the altar, Shravis slowly stretched out his right hand until it was above the sarcophagus. All eyes inside the cathedral convened on a hand with pronounced bones and veins. It gently made contact with the sarcophagus lid.

There was faint creaking—the sound of a bulky stone slab shaking. But that was it.

“What are you doing?” Marquis’s voice was sharp with impatience. “Wish again and repeat the process.”

As instructed, Shravis touched the lid once more. The stone slab shook again, but just like before, nothing else happened.

Silence.

Marquis marched in large strides until he was right in front of Wyss. He leaned forward forcefully and began in a demanding tone, “This is just for confirmation.”

“...Yes,” Wyss replied meekly.

“Is Shravis my child?”

The air practically froze.

Wyss let out a startled “Huh...?”

“I am asking you so that I can eliminate that possibility. Are you certain that the child you gave birth to is a legitimate heir of the royal bloodline—in other words, my child?”

The woman shrank into herself with fright. “Of course he is, dear! How could I ever have a child with anyone el—”

Without warning, Shravis’s body sprung up as if he’d been flicked away from the ground. His limbs were spread out before he was fixed in the air like a museum specimen. Marquis aimed his hand at Shravis.

“What are you doing, father?!” Shravis’s face, which was usually cool and composed, was now distorted with agony. Marquis clenched his hand like a claw, and invisible hands began strangling Shravis’s throat. The youth’s fair skin instantly turned scarlet.

“Dear, what are you doing?!” Wyss tried to intervene, but her body collided with an invisible barrier and was flung away by the impact.

“If Shravis is my child, then who are you, since you are not?” Marquis furrowed his brows. He was radiating a ghastly aura that didn’t just feel intimidating—it was an overwhelming sense of pressure that spurred on a delusion that the surrounding walls were about to split apart and crumble down at any moment.

Shravis remained suspended in the air, fixed in a spread-eagle position as he groaned in pain.

I couldn’t do anything. I was frozen like a decoration in front of a tonkatsu restaurant.

“My king!” The first one to find her voice during this critical moment was Jess. “There might be some kind of misunderstanding here. Please stop strangling him!”

Eyes blazing with wrath shifted and pierced Jess. Next to me, Jess’s legs took a

step back.

“A misunderstanding, hmm? Give me an example—what possibilities are there? Speak.”

Jess couldn't think of a response.

I mustered up all my courage, stepped forward, and snorted noisily. <<The procedure might be wrong. Perhaps someone has already retrieved it in the past. Even if you don't throttle him, surely there are plenty of methods to check whether he is the real Shravis. Or...are you implying that *this* is all your magic can achieve, Your Majesty?>> I snorted once again to provoke him.

Marquis turned his fed up gaze upward before lowering his hand readily. Shravis, still suspended in the same position, had a coughing fit. “What an impertinent pig,” Marquis muttered. “Perhaps I should roast you and eat you whole.”

Oh. He's not going to eat me raw?

Marquis continued, “But, well, you make a good point—indeed, my skills can achieve a lot more. I suppose I shall do a test.” He put his hands together and cracked his knuckles. The next moment, he swung his right hand vigorously and aimed it directly at Shravis.

There was a loud bang as a shock wave shook the air. Shravis's body bent backward before falling to the stone floor in that posture.

“Shravis!” Wyss exclaimed.

When Wyss ran over to him, Shravis sat up by himself. “I'm all right. I haven't sustained any injuries,” he said, his voice hoarse and raspy.

Mister Domestic Violence looked at the pair before letting out a tiny sigh. “I cast a spell that can dispel any transformation, but as you can see, it was ineffective. It seems that there was a mistake somewhere. Investigate the cause and report your findings later.” With that, Marquis strutted away, appearing to be displeased. He left the cathedral, never turning back.

<<Shravis, you okay there?>> I ran up to him.

The handsome mophead wore a clumsy smile on his face. “I hope you didn't

peep at my underwear. Surely.” The hem of his navy blue robe was spread out like a skirt.

<<No, I’m not interested in men’s underwear...>>

Just after I spoke, I felt Wyss’s frosty gaze on me. *Oopsies. My wording was rather misleading and made it sound as if I were interested in women’s underwear. But no, that’s not true—Jess’s underwear is my only concern.*

Wyss wiped the sweat rolling down her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Just this once, I shall turn a blind eye to the fact that you are sending licentious gazes in the direction of my son’s fiancée. Your courageous speech was invaluable assistance. You have my gratitude.”

<<Oh, not at all, it was nothing,>> I replied politely. A thought suddenly occurred to me. <<By the way, madam, the history text passed down through the royal family is currently in your possession, yes?>>

“Indeed. What about it?”

<<Have you read the entire text?>>

Wyss tilted her head quizzically, perplexed by my question. “No, only one part. My husband thought information about the Destruction Spear was useful, and he asked me to decipher the part to do with it. And so, I utilized all the spare moments during my work to figure out its hiding place and how to retrieve it. Since I didn’t have much time on my hands, I haven’t read any of the other parts.”

Due to the death of the previous king, King Eavis, the royalty left behind were apparently devoting all their time and efforts to the administration of the royal court. When your work schedule was packed to the brim, there was a limit to how many resources your brain could allocate to other matters.

<<I have a proposal. How does leaving the rest of the deciphering in the hands of Jess and this humble pig sound? Perhaps there are still clues to do with retrieving the Destruction Spear hidden in other sections of the text.>>

Wyss considered it. On her charming face, which was as stunning as an actress’s, were dark, prominent bags under her eyes. “That is not a bad plan at all. But I do have to warn you—the content of the history book is exceedingly

brutal and unpleasant to read. I know you might be able to handle it, but, Jess, can you say the same about yourself?”

“Of course!” Jess declared instantly.

Wyss looked at the beautiful maiden with admiration. “I see. That reminds me, I haven’t even managed to find time to hold proper magic lessons for you recently, have I? Jess, please work hard on deciphering the text together with Mister Pig. It should be a good learning experience too.”

“I will!” Jess replied with joy.

Nodding, Wyss took the history text—which had been left next to an altar—and handed it to her student. “At times, information is more powerful...and dangerous than magic. Please proceed with caution,” she said gently before looking down at me. “As for you, watch yourself and stay prudent if you wish to avoid a future where we suddenly have an extra dish on our dinner table. At my level of magic, turning a pig into a whole roast is a breeze.”

It seemed that the royal family was very stubbornly against eating pigs raw. *Smart.* <<Understood. I will not lay a single finger on Jess.>>

“Hold on, pigs don’t have fingers,” Shravis promptly shot off one of his usual deadpan replies.

Darn, I was hoping to exploit that loophole, but he went ahead and ruined everything. <<Don’t worry, I won’t lay a single hand on Jess.>> *Joke’s on you, pigs don’t have hands either!*

“You...should pay a little more attention to the fact that the thoughts in your mind are broadcast for everyone to hear.” Shravis smiled, exasperated.

Well, that’s a better look on him than a pained expression, at any rate.

I turned to face Wyss again and indicated the history text in Jess’s hands with my snout. <<Now then, we shall be borrowing this for a while. Jess, let’s get started right away.>>

“Yes!” Jess’s hands looked like they were itching to flip open the book.

In the dead of night, Jess, lying face down on her bed, said this to me while I

sat next to her. “It seems that the method was right after all. Has someone already taken it out?”

Just putting it out there to prevent any misunderstandings, but we aren’t doing anything wrong or immoral. There aren’t many positions that will allow a pig and a human to look at a book together. That said, the area beneath the collarbones of a maiden lying chest-down is a rather—oh, how do I put this—breathtaking view. The artistic curves, emphasized by the pull of gravity, reminded me of the mysterious, secluded depths of mountains in a world where heaven and earth were reversed.

“Um, could you please look at the book?”

<<My bad. You see, a pig’s field of view happens to be wider than a human’s.>>

“I understand it’s out of your hands, but...please be careful. Even while you were in the cathedral earlier, you began thinking about Madame Wyss’s chest right in front of King Marquis. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Ahhh, that. <<Actually, that was my strategy to prevent Marquis from reading my mind.>>

“Whaaat?!” Jess’s eyes widened. “It was?!”

<<Of course. Marquis hasn’t displayed that much interest in a pig like me from the start. If I keep my mind in the gutter the entire time, he’ll probably refrain from reading my mind out of annoyance. I deliberately entertained dirty thoughts for as long as possible so he wouldn’t probe into our secrets.>>

“So that’s why...” She nodded. “For a moment there, I thought you were a pig with no restraint.”

<<No way. Jess, your boobs are the only ones I like. Trust me on this.>>

“That’s kind of also not... I mean, I would feel a little lost if you placed such high expectations on me...” She seemed self-conscious about her chest area while she flipped over a few pages of the inky black history text. “Let’s return to the topic of the Destruction Spear. My guess is that someone has taken it out before us.”

I also moved my gaze from Jess's "valley" to the history text once again. <<Hmm, but that theory has a tiny problem. The text mentioned that Vatis sealed away the Destruction Spear right before her demise, right? Vatis annihilated all hostile mages before she passed away, so there's no reason for her royal descendants to retrieve the spear anymore. Knowing the powers of a mage, as long as an immortal mage doesn't pop out of thin air, the royal family should be capable of killing anyone they want, even without the spear.>>

In other words, the people who had access to the spear had no reason to use it. Therefore, the theory that someone had already removed it seemed a little strange.

"That's a good point..." Jess placed a finger on her chin and seemed to be stuck as well.

<<The only possible person who might have a motive to get his hands on it would be Hortis. If he had the Destruction Spear, then he'd have the upper hand in the competition against his powerful older brother. However, that scenario is also quite unlikely.>>

Jess nodded. "Yes. The method of taking out the spear is written inside the part where Hortis's copy of the history text was sealed by King Eavis. He shouldn't know how to retrieve the spear to begin with."

That begged two questions: Who took out the spear? And was the spear actually missing, or was it still there?

<<Well, we'll probably figure out this mystery eventually. For now, let's search for another promising plan to overcome the Clandestine Arcanist's immortality.>>

"That reminds me, you had an epiphany earlier when we read the section on —"

<<Yep.>> I noted. <<The Contract Stake. Or, well, stakes, now that we know they used to be plural.>>

Jess opened up the page with the relevant entry. This was also one of the pages that Eavis had sealed off in the other copy. On it, the three supreme treasures of Mesteria were depicted with simple illustrations.

The first was a skinny, screw-shaped spear adorned with decorations: the Destruction Spear. The description said that it was a spear that could be used a single time to take any life in existence.

The second was the Salvation Chalice. It was a small chalice with an assortment of jewels as ornaments, and it could evidently be used a single time to save any life in existence.

Finally, there was a jewel shaped like a pointed triangular pyramid—a Contract Stake. It could be used a single time to grant miraculous powers to any life in existence.

<<There's only ever been one Destruction Spear and one Salvation Chalice in Mesteria. But that wasn't always the case for the Contract Stakes, right?>>

Jess opened the page I was referring to. "It's written that 'One after another, the queen located the several dozens of Contract Stakes hidden across the expanse of Mesteria and utilized them all with one exception. The end of the Final War was nigh, and the remaining stake had become one of its kind.' Apparently, Lady Vatis consumed the many Contract Stakes to gain control over the tides of the Final War during the Dark Ages."

<<This history text isn't very user-friendly. It doesn't include a detailed description of how she used the stakes, but we can make a reliable deduction based on the facts.>>

She blinked. "We...can?"

<<Yeah. To begin, let's come up with a summary of what the Contract Stakes can be used for.>>

"Weeell..." Jess muttered as she dutifully turned back to the corresponding page and double-checked. "When you stab the Contract Stake into one's chest, it will transform into light and disappear before granting magical powers to the target. That's what it says."

<<Right. Now here's a question for you: how can you win a battle while taking advantage of that effect?>>

Jess hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe she created an army of mages that obeyed her command?"

<<During the Final War, Vatis either killed or enslaved all the mages other than herself—of course, the Clandestine Arcanist was an exception. Your theory doesn't really match well with that historical fact. She wanted to become the only mage in the world—increasing the number of mages by granting people power would defeat the purpose.>>

“Hmm, um...” She continued thinking. “I heard that Lady Vatis obtained supreme power after experiencing forty-three ecdysias and ended the Dark Ages with her own abilities. This is my first time hearing about her using the Contract Stakes to help her win the war. Hmmmm...”

<<What if I said that those two sentences are connected?>>

“Connected...?” That was when Jess gasped as realization dawned on her. “I understand! When you use a Contract Stake on a *mage*, they will undergo ecdysia! That was how Lady Vatis managed to achieve forty-three ecdysias!”

<<That's my guess,>> I agreed. <<Even Eavis, a mage unparalleled in skill, only experienced twenty-one, right? Forty-three is an abnormal number.>>

Ecdysia was something like magical molting for mages. They sneak up on young mages like a seizure, knocking them out while resetting all spells and enchantments on their bodies. Then, the mage would wake up with drastically more potent powers. Basically, it was like a grandiose version of leveling up. Since a mage's abilities were dependent on their aptitude and their experience as well, we couldn't say that this rule was set in stone, but the more ecdysias a mage underwent, the stronger they were.

<<The Contract Stakes don't just transform non-mages into mages. If a mage uses one, they can forcefully instigate an ecdysia and obtain more powerful magic. Vatis repeated that process over and over again to become the strongest mage in Mesteria.>>

It worked somewhat like a specific kind of Rare Candy.

“But...” Jess tilted her head. “Let's see... I understand how Lady Vatis became the final victor of the Dark Ages. My question is, how does that connect to a method of defeating the Clandestine Arcanist? Even if King Marquis uses the last Contract Stake, it will only change his nineteen ecdysias to twenty, right? I'm not sure whether that's enough to take down our enemy.”

Jess looked anxious, but I replied to her with full confidence. <<Nope. We won't use the last Contract Stake on Marquis—we'll use it on the Clandestine Arcanist.>>

"Huuuh?!" Jess's eyes widened. "That would be strengthening our enemy though!"

I launched into my explanation. <<Do you remember when you shouldered the curse on my behalf and nearly died a while ago?>>

"Yes..."

<<How did you survive a curse that even successfully took Eavis's life?>>

"I tried to recover the memories King Eavis sealed, which caused an ecdysi—" She gasped. "Oh!" She was sharp as always, which was rather helpful.

"Immediately after an ecdysia, all spells and enchantments vanish from the mage's body. We can use this method to remove the Clandestine Arcanist's immortality too, since it's a form of magic!"

<<Exactly. We can just stab the Clandestine Arcanist with the Contract Stake and obliterate his vulnerable body after his ecdysia. He'll be gone for good. I suspect that Vatis also used the same method to kill her immortal enemies. She used the Contract Stakes in two ways: to strengthen herself and to overcome immortality. That was how she managed to end the Dark Ages.>>

Jess's eyes lit up. "I just had a thought. Maybe the Clandestine Arcanist lacked offensive powers of destruction because he's been suppressing his ecdysias to avoid losing his immortality."

<<That would make a lot of sense.>> I nodded.

Information was fitting together perfectly like a puzzle. It was probably safe to say that we'd arrived at the correct answer.

"Let's report to King Marquis right away!" Jess exclaimed. "If we can locate the last remaining Contract Stake, we can defeat the Clandestine Arcanist even without the Destruction Spear!"

I narrowed my eyes in thought.

After a moment of silence, I finally said, <<No, wait a minute.>> I looked at

Jess's cleav—I mean, face. <<How about we look for the Contract Stake by ourselves?>>

She blinked. “Huh...?”

<<If you feel like the two of us aren't enough, we could ask Shravis for help. But the one man who mustn't know about it is Marquis.>>

“Why is that?”

<<Think about it. The Liberators have Hortis as their trump card, but that doesn't mean they have all the materials necessary to negotiate with the royal court as equals. At the end of the day, they've only gained a person with close connections to the royal court as an ally. But what if they also possessed a supreme treasure that could vanquish the Clandestine Arcanist?>>

Jess lowered her voice. “You're right. It would be even more advantageous for them.”

<<In the present, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the survival of the Liberators all depends on Hortis. In the worst-case scenario where Marquis somehow wins Hortis over, the Liberators would be reduced to nothing but a disposable tool. If they cause even the slightest inconvenience for Marquis, I won't be surprised if he massacred all of them. That's why the Liberators need one more trump card to prevent such a future, and we'll be the ones to procure it for them.>>

“So we're going to use the Contract Stake as a bargaining chip.”

<<Yeah. Just like how Shravis pretended to be a hostage to establish an alliance between the royal court and the Liberators, machinations and valuable cards are necessary if we want to change anything in Mesteria right now. We are the ones who will take the initiative this time.>>

Jess clenched her hand into a fist. “Let's do this. Let's look for the last Contract Stake and work towards a future where everyone can be happy, for both the royal family and the Liberators!”

<<Sounds like we're on the same page. If we read the history text carefully, I think we should be able to find the method to obtain the last stake. Let's gather clues and set off as soon as tomorrow. Should we ask Shravis to come with us?

>>

She seemed a little unsure. “Um... Wh-What do you think?”

<<Of course, having him around would be really heartening. Mister Deadpan Reply is trustworthy. There aren’t any downsides to him joining us. If you have to pick one shortcoming, well, I suppose the risk of Marquis finding out is a bit higher.>>

“You’re right! I’m sorry, let’s call Mister Deadpan—I mean, Mister Shravis as well.”

Why is she apologizing? <<Strike while the iron is hot, as the saying goes. I want to ask him first thing in the morning. Until then, we can peruse the history text and hopefully get a rough idea of where we should look. Jess, can you keep at it a little longer?>>

She clenched her hands into fists in front of her chest and pumped them to psych herself up. “Of course. Will you be all right, Mister Pig?”

<<Yep. We both had a nap together today. The night is still young.>>

Jess shrunk her delicate shoulders into herself and curled her lips into an impish smile. “Prepare yourself, Mister Pig. I’ll make you keep up with me all night long.”

When we charged into Shravis’s room in the morning, the half asleep prince’s mophead was even more full and puffed out than usual.

“In short, you want to fish out the location of the Oath Chamber from my mother,” he summarized after our explanation.

Though the furniture in his room was tasteful and elegant, it was mostly of a modest wooden make—it wasn’t extravagant in the least. Even his sofa and curtains shared a plain gray theme. One of the walls had a built-in bookshelf packed to the brim with books of all sizes, while on another wall there was a neatly arranged display of weapons and armor. It was a rather humble room for a prince.

Shravis’s drowsy yawn didn’t deter Jess from replying. “Yes. The history text

says that the tool for locating Contract Stakes is hidden within.”

The description in the history text had left no room for misinterpretation. A tool called Ruta’s Eye, which Vatis had used to collect the Contract Stakes, was stored safely in the Oath Chamber. However, no matter how carefully we’d searched the book, there was no indication of the chamber’s location. We’d only learned that it was a place where royalty would exchange marriage oaths.

Shravis hummed in thought. “I hear that under normal circumstances, the location of the Oath Chamber is only disclosed to royalty immediately prior to their marriage. If we don’t cook up a convincing excuse, she likely won’t tell us where it is.”

<<We can simply lie and say that the information is necessary to obtain the Destruction Spear,>> I proposed.

“You make it sound easy, but...” Shravis combed through his hair with his fingers and averted his gaze.

Jess hesitated. “Is there...something difficult about that?”

“Mother is an incredibly astute woman. And since I’m her son, she sees through my lies every single time.”

<<Should we ask Marquis, then? We’ve probably got a slightly higher chance of deceiving him at least.>>

His anguished face turned to me. “Are you really going to say that after what you saw yesterday? Yes, perhaps lying to him might work, but he’s already harboring suspicions about mother and me. If he realized our lie by some chance, I’d be killed on the spot. I’d rather be spanked by my mother.”

I tilted my head. <<You mean, lying to Wyss will earn a spanking from her?>>
In that case, maybe I don’t mind volunteering myself to be the liar.

Possibly because of his slip of the tongue, Shravis closed his mouth and grimaced. Indeed, lying in person didn’t seem to be in his skill set.

<<Well, whatever. We only have to change up a few words—instead of saying that we’re searching for the Contract Stake, we’ll say that our goal is the Destruction Spear. Let that be the only lie you use. If you’re ever stumped, I’ll

back you up.>>

“Really?” Shravis’s eyes, which reminded me of a pair of jade stones, shifted to me. “Mother is a more fearsome opponent than father in this department.”

<<Relax. Who do you think I am?>>

There was no response from anyone.

...I’m a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin in the flesh, mind you.

Shravis furrowed his eyebrows. “Even when she’s talking to a super-virgin like you, mother isn’t someone who would make light of anyone and overlook the flaws in their reasoning. If she discovers our lie, the information about the Contract Stake will likely reach father as well, and if they question us, we might even put uncle’s secret at risk. I hope you are truly confident that you won’t fail no matter what.”

Being called a super-virgin by a guy kind of grates on my nerves. <<I am. I have a secret weapon up my sleeve if push comes to shove. Trust me and help us out.>>

He stared at me for a while before he finally nodded. “Fine, then. Follow me.” After clicking his fingers on both hands, his mop-like bedhead was instantly fixed.

The three of us left Shravis’s room and departed for Wyss’s study, which was separate from Marquis’s. The king mostly attended to highly confidential matters, so he usually secluded himself in the heart of the royal palace. Meanwhile, the queen mostly dealt with affairs concerning the citizens of the royal capital, so her study was located on the outskirts of the royal palace so that she could interact with them.

When we arrived, we were welcomed into a parlor connected to Wyss’s study, which was dedicated to receiving the capital citizens. From what I remembered of Marquis’s study, it had a calm, subdued atmosphere with its main theme of dark wood furnishings. In contrast, this parlor boasted a flashy and garish interior garnished with colors like white and gold. Even the details of the furniture were decorated with carvings and engravings, and gold foil lavishly

embellished them. I spotted a glass cabinet decorated with jewels that displayed dozens of Yethma collars stacked on top of one another. Perhaps the royals wanted to maintain appearances in front of outsiders.

Our party of two humans and one farm animal sat down on the giant, super fluffy sofa and faced the weary Wyss.

“If possible, please keep it brief.” Wyss drank a mysterious fuming blue liquid from a small glass goblet before sitting on the sofa across from us.

Choosing his words carefully, Shravis politely began, “Could you please tell us where the Oath Chamber is?”

Wyss, who’d been sipping from her goblet, suddenly choked and splattered the mysterious liquid all over the place. Patches of material on the carpet sizzled and melted away.

She took a deep breath before regaining her usual beautiful, demure smile. With a few waves of her hand, the melting carpet repaired itself, as if she’d rewound time. Then, she placed the goblet on the table. Smoke was still rising from the blue liquid.

“The Oath Chamber... Have you gone mad? Why in the world do you want to know about that?”

Shravis shuffled restlessly and corrected his posture next to me. “A lead might be hidden there that will help us find the Destruction Spear.”

Wyss considered it. “Was it written in the history text?”

Shravis didn’t reply to that question, so Jess spoke up. “Yes. Mister Pig and I deciphered it.”

Wyss nodded. “That was originally my responsibility, and I should follow through to the very end. I shall head over to the chamber and take a look, so please tell me the corresponding part in the history text.”

This time, Jess didn’t reply either.

I snorted noisily with my snout. <<To tell you the truth, it wasn’t written distinctly in the history text. It all stems from a rather unconventional deduction of mine, so there is a high chance that our search might not yield results. You

are already busy enough, and I would feel extremely guilty for making you go out of your way.>>

“That place is where royal couples head to strengthen their bond with each other and exchange marriage vows.” Wyss sighed before pouring the contents of the goblet down her throat. “It is improper for an outsider like you, or those who haven’t even scheduled their wedding, to enter.”

<<But these are times of strife, where we must even worry about the royal family’s survival. Should we really be concerned about such traditions right now?>> I challenged.

Wyss quirked her delicate brows slightly as she turned to me. “That might have worked against my husband, but taunts will not be effective against me. I am not foolish to the extent where I would lose rational judgment due to such a statement.”

In the corner of my vision, Shravis’s butt fidgeted, as if he wasn’t very comfortable.

She continued, “Mister Pig, it seems that my proposal is undesirable to you for some reason. If you hide that reason, then I couldn’t even bring myself to listen to you properly. Be honest and tell me, please.”

She was a tough nut to crack. Steeling my resolve, I stared back into Wyss’s eyes. <<The first reason is what I said from the beginning. It was an almost nonsensical thought of mine that might not be right, and I didn’t want to interrupt you during these busy times. There is a second, but unless you really, *really* want to know, personally, I am a little reluctant to talk about it now.>>

“Go on.” In a dignified manner, Wyss crossed her long, slender, and gorgeous legs.

After a short pause, I spoke up. <<Shravis and Jess are against the idea of getting married, and I want to change their minds.>>

There were exclamations of surprise from both of my sides.

“You *what?*” was Shravis’s incredulous one.

“Huuuh?” was Jess’s yelp.

<<Since I have the opportunity now, I shall be frank, but these two have no intentions of marrying each other at all. Shravis treats her as his fiancée reluctantly because she needs a connection to the royal family, while Jess is going along with it equally reluctantly because I told her to.>>

Silence.

Wyss was the one who shattered it. “You two... Is that true?”

Neither Jess nor Shravis offered a single word. And that was answer enough.

From between the taciturn pair, I spoke up. <<I thought that heading to a place where royalty exchange marriage oaths would be the perfect way to break the stalemate, but...if my opinion was mistaken, I apologize. I should have kept my nose out of other people’s business.>>

Wyss’s mouth parted slightly in shock. It took her a while before she could find her voice. “I...see. Your honesty is appreciated. In truth, ever since you returned to Jess’s side, I have been apprehensive about that as well.”

Jess opened her mouth, as if she wanted to protest, but she ended up closing it without saying anything. Perhaps she couldn’t find a good response.

Wyss continued, “Of course, I don’t believe that they will have a change of heart simply because they went to the Oath Chamber. That said...” she trailed off. “I understand. My schedule is truly demanding. As long as all of you take care and stay safe, it is best for all of us if you are willing to go.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Shravis asked for confirmation, “I assume that means you are willing to tell us its location?”

“Very well, I shall. The two of you were supposed to head there eventually anyway.” Wyss went to her study and returned with a small map in hand. “The Oath Chamber is in the depths of the cave where Lady Vatis exchanged her vows with her spouse, Ruta. It is located on the fringes of the Impaling Stones.”

Her slender finger indicated one spot on the map, and a red dot appeared, almost as if she’d blotted ink onto the paper. She continued, “This place is exclusive to members of the royal family, and only those who have inherited Lady Vatis’s blood can open the Oath Chamber. I believe it should be safe, but please be very careful.”

Shravis stood up promptly and gave her a small bow. “Thank you very much, mother.” Then, he ushered Jess and I out of the parlor.

Whether it was during our journey to the Impaling Stones on the dragon or our walk to the cave in question after getting off, Jess had been quiet, casting her eyes down the entire time. My explanation that our trip was meant to encourage the pair’s marriage had been a lie to distract Wyss, and I’d explained that to the pair properly, but it seemed that, just like I’d feared, it had rubbed a delicate part of Jess’s heart the wrong way.

<<Hey, Jess.>>

In the rocky forest, I called out to Jess by adding angle brackets, but all I succeeded at was making her huff and turn away from me.

We knew the general direction of the cave, and Jess hurried along the downhill path towards our destination—a creek at the bottom of a valley—while leaving the rest of us in the dust. Ahead of me, I could only see the fluttering defensive black robe left behind by Eavis cloaked around Jess. She refused to even spare me a glance.

Shravis walked up until he was next to me and whispered, “It’s pretty rare to see Jess get *this* mad.” He was also wearing the maxed out defense robe.



<<I don't think rare is the right word,>> I said anxiously. <<It might be a first for her.>>

No matter how many peeks I'd stolen at her *Les Panties*, no matter what kind of depraved thoughts I had going through my mind, Jess was the kind of girl who was willing to let it slide with a smile. I'd never expected her to be so sullen just because I'd hinted at her marrying Shravis, not to mention that I'd even had a justifiable reason for doing it.

"Well, even if she doesn't get angry, I think you should stop looking at her underwear out of basic manners."

A deadpan rebuttal was fired at me from my side. *I am deeply ashamed of my behavior. But I'm a pig; I can't control myself.*

Once again, the guy retorted in a solemn tone. "You defend yourself with the same excuses as my uncle." He shook his head. "Having the appearance of a beast doesn't mean your actions will be tolerated."

<<You know, you'd do me a great favor if you ignored the narration, thanks.>>

Hearing that, Shravis gave me a small nod before changing the topic. "I mean... In your defense, you did the right thing, and I was personally marveling at your quick thinking. I could never evade mother's questioning as skillfully as you did." He pulled his lips into a clumsy smile—it seemed that he was trying to cheer me up.

<<I only took advantage of a mother's concern for her own child. It's not anything praiseworthy.>>

Shravis seemed to ponder for a while before he echoed the phrase "A mother's concern for her own child...?"

<<Yeah. Wyss wishes for you to lead a peaceful and happy life. I think she's taken a liking to Jess, and I'm certain that she's looking forward to the day your engagement is set in stone. By implying that your engagement is in danger of falling apart and making her think that I'm trying to salvage things, I managed to worm into the softest part of her heart as an "ally.">>

“I see. So that’s what happened. I *did* feel that it was quite strange for mother to show understanding that quickly.”

We chased after Jess. For a while, the two of us marched on without a word.

“...Hey, pig,” Shravis began as he continued facing forward, “are you really going to leave this world?”

A cool breeze darted through the forest, making branches rustle as they shed withered leaves.

<<Yeah. I’m going to leave.>> I was surprised at my lack of hesitation, but I kept navigating the rocky terrain without a hitch. <<I’ve got a life back in my original world, and I don’t want to be a pig for the rest of my life.>>

“Then, what if you found a way to turn back into a human with magic? Uncle was able to transform into a dog. Now, I can’t guarantee this because I’m unaware of any precedents, but it might even be possible to transform a pig into a human.”

He was asking a rather difficult question. <<If I returned to my original form, it would shatter Jess’s illusion of me. She dotes on me because I’m a pig. Once I become a human, I’ll be nothing more than a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin.>>

“I don’t think Jess would care about outward appearances—”

<<Plus, Eavis told me to go back. He said to return to my world during a meaningful moment.>>

Shravis paused. “Are you saying that you’ll die if someone tells you to?” He looked ahead with an aloof expression as he matter-of-factly interrogated me. “Why won’t you take Jess’s and your own happiness into consideration? You like her, don’t you? And I believe that Jess returns your affections. Why won’t you gratify this simple dynamic?”

Why should I care? <<If I hadn’t come back, then Jess would’ve eventually gotten her happily ever after, marrying you and becoming royalty. It takes courage to sacrifice such happiness, and in the end, I lack that courage.>>

“But the reality is that Jess doesn’t think of me in that way. Are you really fine with making the woman you like marry a man she doesn’t care about? If she

marries me, the youngest in the royal family, she will need to have children with me eventually.”

...Why should I care?

<<That might be true right now, but you don’t know how Jess will feel in the future. Knowing how the world works, her feelings for me are likely transient and short-lived. She might even fall in love with you one day,>> I explained. <<You’re a good guy. Your jokes are some of the worst I’ve ever heard, and your deadpan replies make me want to facepalm, but you’re a man with responsibility, honesty, and empathy. You’ve even got a handsome face. If she marries such a fairy-tale prince, I’m sure she’ll forget a mere low-life swine in time.>>

“My mother—” Shravis looked at me. “My mother often confided in me about one thing. She said a woman can only have feelings for the person they fell in love with. It can’t be forced.”

I blinked. <<What a weird statement.>> *That’s obvious though. It’s true for everyone, not just women.*

“My mother bid farewell to the person she loved and reached the capital alone as a Yethma. Her strength, intelligence, and lack of a partner were highly regarded, which was why she was chosen as father’s spouse.”

<<Oh... It wasn’t a marriage out of love.>>

He nodded. “Indeed. I grew up hearing my mother tell me that I’m the only one she loves in this entire world.”

I realized the point he was trying to make, and my mind went blank.

“I don’t think marrying into the royal family is a happy thing,” he said solemnly. “You should confront your situation with Jess properly and think about what you should do. You jump to conclusions too hastily.”

Before I knew it, we’d arrived at the creek at the bottom of the valley. There was no sunlight, and within the shade, numerous black rocks were scattered about. In front of a small cave where water trickled out in a stream, Jess was waiting for us. She ambiguously clasped her hands together in front of her chest and stared at the ground.

“This seems to be the right place,” Shravis commented as he checked the map. “Let’s go. It’s dark in there, so don’t stray too far.” He lifted his left hand and conjured a magical light. Its warm hues illuminated Jess’s profile. She was chewing on her bottom lip, looking distressed.

The cave led to a tunnel that was a little cramped for two humans to walk alongside each other. Shravis was at the front, while Jess and I followed as we walked side by side. For a while, we trudged on.

Jet-black pebbles were piled up at our feet. Water seeped out from between them, coating the rocks in moisture. Jess’s robe was rather long, and since it reached her ankles, her le— *No, ignore me.*

Jess turned to look at me. Her expression wasn’t exactly sulky or mad; in fact, it seemed more like—no, it was *definitely* filled with sorrow. It was as if someone she trusted had just betrayed her, or as if her beloved abruptly asked to break up with her.

Shravis’s voice cut into my thoughts. “It’s a dead end.” He commanded the sphere of light to drift upward and shed light on our vicinity. The end of the cave tunnel opened up slightly, but there didn’t seem to be any paths forward.

<<Only the members of the royal family can enter the Oath Chamber, if I remember right,>> I recalled. <<There might be some kind of biometric identification system—a mechanism that scans and detects the unique traits of your body.>>

“Good point. I’ll try looking for it.” Shravis leaned his face towards the stone wall and began his investigation.

Next to me, Jess was silent for a while as she seemed to survey the wall, but after stealing several glances in my direction, she crouched and spoke up. “Um... Mister Pig, I...I’m sorry.” Her voice was a whisper, but it resounded loud and clear inside the tunnel.

Shravis’s back fidgeted for an instant, but the responsible prince resumed his search immediately.

<<Hey, what’s this? Why are you suddenly apologizing?>> I asked.

“No, I was...I was too blinded by my emotions. You haven’t done anything

wrong, Mister Pig, but I took it out on you. I'm sorry. Can we please make peace?" There was a smile on her face. For some reason, I was reminded of when I first met her.

<<It's not just on you. I think I said something insensitive. It was my bad.>>

"No, that's all right."

That was when quiet coughing echoed out. I turned to the source of the noise, Shravis.

"I found traces of magic. I think we can get in through here." As he spoke, the prince placed his right hand on the damp rock surface. The large rock wall moved smoothly like a revolving door, opening up to reveal an entrance large enough for humans to walk through. It was likely a secret door that only those with royal blood could open. "Ready?"

The two of us nodded and trailed after him. When we stepped inside, antique lanterns made of gold and glass lit up one after another along the walls, shining on the cramped interior.

The room featured an altar and realistic wall paintings in pastel colors. Windowless rock walls surrounded us in every direction, creating a relatively intense feeling of being trapped. Yet, the atmosphere didn't feel oppressive, probably because of the colorful wall paintings. They depicted the story of a blonde woman and a man with black hair, from their first encounter to their strengthening bond, then finally, to their arrival at this cave.

As for the altar up against the middle of the wall in front of us, there was a statue of a woman on it. She placed her left hand on her chest and raised her right hand high into the air. It was Vatis, the founder of the royal court.

"These wall paintings probably depict Lady Vatis and her spouse, Ruta," Shravis observed. "Here, a member of the royal family and their partner would dedicate their prayers to Lady Vatis."

Hearing that, Jess quietly averted her gaze from Shravis.

<<Is that all you do after coming here?>> I asked.

Shravis placed a hand on his chin. "Who knows? Since they are supposed to

exchange oaths, I doubt simple prayer would suffice. There should be some kind of ceremony.”

We assembled and explored the room. There was utter silence in the room enclosed by thick rock walls, so even at the height of a pig’s head, I could clearly hear both Jess and Shravis breathing.

Jess gingerly took out the history text from her bag. “In here, it’s written that Ruta’s Eye, which indicates the location of the Contract Stakes, is embedded into the wall of the innermost area. Where in the world would that refer to?”

“I assume that means there are even deeper parts than this room,” Shravis muttered as he looked at the walls.

The door we’d entered from had closed, transforming this chamber into a rectangular cuboid with no exits. *It seems like a dead end, but...* <<The wall paintings seem to tell a story,>> I observed.

Jess nodded. “Yes, it’s just like what’s written in the history text. ‘At a plunge pool they met, at an orchard they conversed, at a rocky plain they bravely fought, to a forest they fled, at a cave they exchanged oaths.’ The journey of Lady Vatis and Mister Ruta seems to be portrayed faithfully in these wall paintings.”

“I see.” Shravis pointed at the painting near the entrance. “This is the painting of the plunge pool. And”—his fingers slid to our right and touched the next piece of art—“this is the orchard. Next to it is the rocky plain, followed by the forest, then the cave. The paintings stop at the scene where they entered this cave.” His gaze rested on a painting of a woman advancing down a cave tunnel while leading a man by the hand.

Jess looked at the area next to the painting. The altar was there, but there was no artwork. “Hmm... The most important scene of them exchanging oaths isn’t here.”

<<There’s probably more art around...in a place we can’t see.>>

I didn’t have to spell it out; Shravis took a step forward and touched the painting depicting the cave. There was a harsh grinding sound. A square section of the stone wall pushed inward, hinting at a space within.

“Found it. There’s one more secret door,” Shravis said as he pushed the wall forward and opened it. Total darkness greeted us.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, lanterns made of glass and gold lit up one after another inside the darkness, illuminating a straight passage that stretched on from the secret door. It was a long and narrow path, and we couldn’t see what was on the other side.

“Let’s head in!” Though she tried to suppress it, a hint of excitement was in Jess’s voice. Shravis and I nodded. It was clear that we were steadily approaching Ruta’s Eye.

We walked inside the wall door and discovered that the wall paintings continued inside the long passage. The first painting featured a man and a woman passionately kissing.

My male virgin sensors honed in on the phrasing of “exchanging oaths” immediately, letting out a warning beep. I recalled a certain detail: when Shravis had tried to fish out the location of the Oath Chamber from Wyss, she’d been so shaken that she’d choked.

“Have you gone mad? Why in the world do you want to know about that?”

Wyss was married to Marquis. She should have visited this place before. What did she see? What kind of scene was painted at the end of this passage?

I hesitated. <<Jess, this place seems pretty cramped, so maybe Shravis and I can head forward by ourselves and take a look. I mean, it was designed so that only two people can enter it, right? How does that sound? It might be really uncomfortable for us to try and squeeze in, so could you wait in the room with the altar?>>

Displeased, Jess tried to press forward. “Why? I want to see what’s inside too.”

“Is something wrong?” Shravis asked.

Two pairs of innocent eyes focused on me, and I felt torn. *Ugh, this is why the purehearted are trouble sometimes.* <<Well, do what you want, I guess. Don’t come complaining to me if you end up regretting your decision.>>

I moved aside so that they could walk ahead of me. The pair didn't pick up on the ominous atmosphere I oozed; they walked ahead without hesitation.

Like I'd mentioned before, the passage was cramped. Shravis ducked so he wouldn't drag his hair across the ceiling as he walked in front. Jess was hot on his heels with a spring in her step. I took up the rear.

On the whitewashed walls were paintings that continued the story from moments ago. Like the storyboard of a movie or anime, these paintings depicted a detailed sequence of events. In this segment, the pair's clothes creased and unraveled before fluttering onto the floor.

After we continued to walk for a while, the couple on the wall paintings became completely naked. Shravis, who'd come to the point of no return, marched on quietly with his ears bright red. Meanwhile, Jess seemed to realize the implication as well, as she was now staring at the ground as she walked.

Both of them reminded me of a teenage boy who'd forgotten his textbook during a specific topic of health education class and a girl sitting next to him who ended up sharing her textbook. They were simply adorable. Someone at my level didn't even bat an eyelid at tame drawings like these.

The very end of the indecent passage opened up into a small stone chamber even smaller than the room with the altar. A thick carpet lined the floor, and on the walls were grand and majestic drawings of the couple hugging each other tight, their bodies entangled.

The moment Jess spotted that painting, she froze like a statue. It was easy to tell that Shravis had also lost his composure; he hurriedly whipped his face around and turned his body towards me. Though the cave was cool, both of their faces were flushed cherry red, and I even spotted perspiration on their foreheads. *Sheesh. Well, don't say I didn't warn you.*

"If you had such suspicions, you should have told us earlier." Shravis's exquisite face was contorted into a bashful grimace.

<<I distinctly remember telling you that you shouldn't come complaining to me if you regret your decision,>> I reminded him, indifferent.

Shravis opened and closed his mouth several times, as if he wanted to retort

something. *That aside, Shravis is always cool and composed. I didn't expect him to be this shaken up. Is he a virgin?*

“Wh-What’s wrong with...b-being a virgin?!” The handsome prince seemed to take that as a personal attack and snapped back at me. You could already cut the tension with a knife, but his statement sent it beyond the limit, and the air seemed to freeze.

Jess cast her gaze at her feet, trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

Shravis defended his case, talking rapidly with his face bright red. “As someone with royal blood, it’s my responsibility to only engage in procreative activities with the right woman at the right time. Lady Vatis’s blood is divine. If I ever made any mistakes, it might even lead to the ruin of the royal family itself. Furthermore, if I messed about, it would be unjust to my uncle, who was prohibited from loving women due to his status as the king’s younger brother. Unlike you, I haven’t maintained my virgin status because of my lifestyle; I’m a virgin because I hold myself to strict standards out of that sense of responsibility.”

For some reason, the sight made me feel a sense of kinship with the guy. <<Never mind, sorry, I get it... I’m the one to blame, so please, ignore the narration as much as possible...>> After all, if he peered into my head without permission and was one-sidedly offended by what he saw, there wasn’t much I could do.

Shravis stole a glance at Jess, who was watching over us cautiously with an uncomfortable smile. Seeing that, he let out a deep breath and calmed his erratic breathing. “No, uh, I should be the one to apologize. I got too worked up.”

Yeah. We’re both male virgins, so we should take this as an opportunity to bond instead.

Shravis walked forward to the other side of the room unabashedly while avoiding the carpet altogether. This was a sealed, secret chamber where a couple was meant to exchange “oaths of marriage.” It wasn’t hard to imagine what people did on that carpet.

<<Jess, if you want to head back, you can go ahead,>> I called out to the maiden who was fidgeting at the entrance.

She shook her head firmly in response. "I'm all right. I was just a little surprised."

In the end, Jess and I trailed after Shravis until we all lined up in front of the wall painting depicting a man and a woman intertwined.

"I don't see it," he said bluntly.

Ruta's *Eye*. I focused on the man's face on the wall painting. The part where one of his eyes should be drawn had a hollow hole dug into the wall.

"Oh no..." Jess's voice, frail with dejection, echoed out. "Has someone taken it out before us...?"

"Well, the description of it was written in the history text." Shravis shrugged. "Perhaps grandfather already pulled it out of the wall."

<<Or maybe one of your older ancestors was responsible.>>

Hearing that, Shravis shook his head. "I doubt it. I heard that grandfather was the one who released that history text from the ancient seal cast by Lady Vatis. He apparently stored the original copy very carefully and saw to its management personally. Furthermore, the section concerning the three supreme treasures in the replica was sealed away by him too."

Facing the obscene wall painting head-on, Shravis continued his unemotional analysis. "Only one person could have possibly arrived here before us, and that's my grandfather. I believe he has already obtained Ruta's *Eye* and hid it somewhere else."

I stared at the indecent wall painting as well and scrutinized the man's gouged-out eye. Then, when I cast my gaze downward, I noticed something. <<There's also the possibility that someone else came here a lot more recently.>>

Two pairs of eyes turned to me.

"But we should be the first ones to visit after King Eavis's passing, shouldn't we...?" Jess wondered.

With my snout, I indicated the ground beneath Shravis's feet. <<Look. Whoever dug out the item from the wall left behind tiny shards of stone during the process. It's all concentrated in this one spot—it hasn't been dispersed or scattered about.>> They were clear as day from a pig's perspective: fine fragments of stone had fallen and created a pile. It seemed fresh. <<When you think about it, there's actually one more person who might have arrived here before us.>>

Shravis inclined his head quizzically. "Other than the three of us, mother and father should be the only ones who have read the hereditary history text. Those two haven't left the capital in a long time, and there's no reason for them to conceal the discovery of Ruta's Eye from me."

I gave him a hint. <<You're forgetting one more person. Someone else who had access to the history text.>>

Jess gasped, her eyes widening with realization. "Do you mean Mister Hortis?"

<<Exactly. We were distracted by his dirty riddles and overlooked a detail that's suspicious after some consideration: why did he need both the water and the history text to return to his human form? These two are rather mismatched as a set—they have absolutely nothing to do with each other. Both items could only be obtained inside the capital, and once you're there, they would both be relatively easy to procure. In that case, why did he go out of his way to configure two separate keys to his bangle? Was it really necessary?>>

Jess placed her hand on her chin thoughtfully. "Um, you mean... In truth, the water was enough for him to transform back into a human, but he wanted the history text and lied that there were two keys?"

<<Got it in one. When he transformed back, Hortis went off somewhere to hide, claiming that it was because he'd end up naked. But even after he regained his human form, he didn't return the history text to us, saying that he damaged it. I smell a rat.>>

In summary, he made us retrieve the unnecessary history text during our errand to fetch the fountain water. Hortis couldn't enter the capital, so he'd used Jess and me as tools for his own personal gain.

Shravis inclined his head and gazed at me. “Your theory has some merit, I agree. But the history text we handed over was a replica, and the pages with the key information were sealed away by grandfather, weren’t they? Uncle shouldn’t have access to the part detailing the whereabouts of the supreme treasures.”

The thing is, that might not be true. <<Recall the incident with Jess’s memories.>>

“My memories...?” Jess echoed.

I nodded. <<Choosing to seal pages instead of tearing them out and throwing them away altogether means that you’re expecting the seal to be broken one day. Do you think Eavis, with all his foresight, would cast a spell that would keep those pages sealed forever even after his death?>>

Without a moment’s delay, Jess replied, “When he cast that spell, he must have crafted it so that it would be easier to remove after his death. That’s what you’re implying, isn’t it?”

Shravis hummed. “It would be just like grandfather to do that. Uncle is a mage with exceptional control and skill. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was capable of removing grandfather’s weakened seal.”

<<Well then, it’s time to check whether our deduction is right.>> I walked until I was next to Shravis’s feet and sniffed the ground. Beyond the most prominent scent of stone...was indeed a scent I recognized. It was the smell of a dog.

The passage leading to this stone chamber had been cramped. He must’ve chosen to move around in his canine form, which was small and more mobile compared to his tall human form.

<<Yep, we’re right,>> I announced. <<Hortis has visited this place recently enough for his scent to still linger.>>

It was just past noon when we arrived at the Liberators’ mansion.

“So he isn’t here after all,” Shravis said to Naut, who was on the other side of the gate.

The huntsman glanced briefly at us. “He isn’t. Hortis mentioned he had some business to attend to, so he’ll be away for a while. I assumed he went to meet up with you guys, but it doesn’t sound like it.”

“Is this his first time going outside after returning to his human form yesterday morning?”

“No, he wasn’t here yesterday afternoon either. He came back at night, then went out again this morning.”

Hortis had gone out twice. After deciphering the history text he’d obtained yesterday, he’d immediately left to search for Ruta’s Eye. His trip today, meanwhile, was a search for the last Contract Stake. That theory would explain his number of trips perfectly.

The three of us traded glances before Shravis nodded at Naut. “I see. Thanks. That’s all we wanted to ask.”

But Naut detained us. “Wait. I answered your questions, so you guys owe me an explanation about what’s going on. There’s that seashell Hortis gave Jess. Why didn’t you contact him with that thing? Where did Hortis go, and what did he do?”

Naut pulled his black shawl up to his jaw as he interrogated us with a sharp look in his eyes. It seemed that he didn’t completely trust Hortis, who had a chance of becoming the royal court’s spy if left unchecked.

Shravis took one step towards the gate. In a hushed voice, he explained, “Uncle is acting independently. He seems to be scheming something, but he hasn’t just kept it from you—he also didn’t tell us anything. Based on what we know, his plans might be disadvantageous to the royal court and beneficial to the Liberators.”

Naut also stepped towards the gate. “So? Are you trying to take a shortcut and stop him before he can carry out his plans?”

Though both of them had charming faces, their conversational skills were practically nonexistent. Sensing the tension in the air, I walked forward near their feet. <<Naut, it’s actually the opposite. We want to cooperate with him if it’s a plan that’ll benefit the Liberators. The problem is that I still have trouble

trusting Hortis. He gives me the impression that he's manipulating us as he pleases and moving around independently for his own goals.>>

Naut furrowed his eyebrows. "You have a point there. That depraved pervert jokes and acts as if he's messing around, but I feel like he's hiding something grave behind his mask. Sanon said the same thing and warned me against trusting him blindly."

I nodded. <<I concur. Right now, we're searching for a treasure that might shift the power balance and give the Liberators an edge. But Hortis was one step ahead of us.>>

"Give the Liberators an edge?" Naut raised an eyebrow. "What kind of treasure's that?"

<<Simply put, it's a tool that can kill the Clandestine Arcanist.>>

Once again, Naut tugged the shawl up to his chin. *Is he cold?* "So you're trying to find a way to give the Liberators a better chance against the royal court, even if it's just a tiny change. And you don't want a shady, depraved pervert to interfere and snatch it away."

<<I think Hortis is on our side, but there's no harm in being cautious just in case. You can't place too much faith in a person who's cooking up something while maintaining his secrecy.>>

Naut nodded. "Got it. I'll also keep an eye on him."

It seemed that I'd convinced Naut, so I made a proposal. I asked him to allow us into the garden, where we were going to contact Hortis together as a group of three people plus one beast. Our communication tool would be the seashell Jess received.

<<Shravis, you mentioned that he can't read our thoughts through this transmission, right?>>

Shravis turned to look at the seashell in Jess's hands. "As long as you don't speak it out loud, he won't know. A mage's ability to read minds won't activate unless you're nearby and he's focusing on the target. There are only exceptions in fairly particular circumstances."

A certain memory from long ago surfaced in my mind: on the outskirts of Munires, the city we were currently in, a certain prayer had reached Jess. *Fairly particular circumstances, huh? Well, our present situation probably doesn't count.*

Inside the garden surrounded by cypress trees, we sat in a circle on the well-maintained lawn. Jess held out the white seashell she'd received from Hortis. "Okay then, I'll start now." After looking at everyone, Jess leaned her face towards the seashell. "Mister Hortis!"

I waited motionlessly. Approximately thirty seconds flew by in absolute silence after Jess's call before the white seashell turned reddish-brown in the blink of an eye.

A man's warm voice replied, *"Why hello there, Jess. Miss me?"*

Along with his voice came noisy roaring in the background. He didn't seem to be in the neighborhood.

"Ah, um, I wouldn't say it's to the extent of *missing* you..." Jess replied honestly.

There was a pause just long enough for someone to hang their head despondently. *"How may I help you?"*

Whoa. He composed himself pretty quickly.

"There's something I want to discuss." Jess hesitated. "Mister Hortis, may I ask where you are right now?"

"It's rather difficult to describe. Right now, I'm in my birthday suit and becoming one with Mother Nature."

Hmm. He dodged the question.

Just like what we'd instructed her during our prep meeting, Jess asked, "You aren't with the Liberators?" Now, we just had to see whether he would take the bait.

For a while, there was no response. Only the enigmatic roaring sound rang out from the seashell. Jess looked at me with anxious eyes.

<<Don't worry,>> I reassured her. <<If there are any problems, I'll definitely

back you up.>> Our exchange wasn't vocal, so the man on the other side of the transmission should be none the wiser.

Tension melted out of Jess's shoulders. She seemed relieved.

"Hmm... There seems to be someone pulling the strings behind the scenes. The pure and innocent Jess I know wouldn't try to deceive people like this. Did that young virgin plant that idea in your head?"

I wasn't the only one who reacted with a flinch. Shravis—and even *Naut*—jolted. *LOL!* <<No, calm down. By virgin, he means me. Jess, tell him that the pig is with you.>>

"Um, Mister Pig is with me," Jess repeated dutifully.

"I guessed as much. But, strange... You're at the mansion of the Liberators, so you must have heard about what I'm up to from Naut. Plus, since you've gone outside the capital, Shravis should be with you just like last time."

Fudge. I didn't know he enchanted the seashell with a tracking spell. That means he must have seen our movements since we left the capital this morning.

Naut shifted his cool gaze onto me. Meanwhile, Shravis placed a hand on his forehead.

If I didn't come up with something in a flash, our silence would stretch on and rouse suspicion. Doing everything I could to avoid him gaining the upper hand in terms of information, I considered the facts I could disclose. <<Tell him that only Shravis is with us. Let's pretend that this exchange is happening without Naut's knowledge. You can admit that you heard about his absence from Naut.>>

"Um, sorry..." Jess apologized. "Mister Shravis is here."

"What about Naut?"

"We're contacting you in secret. We haven't told him."

"I see, I see. So it's okay for me to bring up the topic of how the three of you were in an indecent room until moments earlier, then."

Naut looked at us incredulously. Once again, Shravis placed a hand on his forehead. *This man... Hortis is a considerably shrewd and capable person. He's*

threatening us by suggesting that he's going to chat openly about the secrets of the royal court. If Naut was nearby, there's the risk of this conversation quickly becoming undesirable for us.

However, even in the unlikely event that Hortis began prattling about the royal court's secrets, Naut was a guy we could trust wholeheartedly, so there weren't any problems. In fact, it should strengthen Naut's trust in us since we were willing to share our secrets.

<<There's no need to bow to his threat. Shravis, insist that Naut isn't present,>> I instructed.

"Uncle, Naut is not here." When it was Mister Deadpan Reply speaking, it was extremely convincing.

There was an uncanny, possibly contemplative pause. *"It seems that the three of you don't trust Naut very much. He's a man that's dependable and trustworthy. I'm speaking as his pet dog, so you can count on my word."*

<<Jess, for now, let's ask him about his whereabouts.>>

Hearing that, Jess nodded with a solemn gaze. "Mister Hortis, may I ask where you are right now?"

"Well now. Why do you want to know that?"

Jess's reply was all according to plan. "I believe we're searching for the same item. Can we stop moving around independently and join forces instead?"

"If you let me sniff your thighs again, I'll consider it."

"Uncle!" Shravis exclaimed, representing my rage very well. "This is a serious matter, so please answer seriously. You are searching for the Contract Stake, yes? Furthermore, you have obtained Ruta's Eye, which indicates its location. Where are you heading right now? Please tell us."

There was a contemplative hum from the seashell. *"I don't mind you guys coming over, but unfortunately, it's quite far away from your current location. I'd feel bad if I made you travel all this way. I'm pretty sure I can handle things on my own, so could you entrust the matter of the stake to me?"*

Naut, who'd been scowling because he couldn't keep up with the

conversation, twitched in reaction. I didn't miss it.

<<Shravis, let's be bold here. Say that you want to head over and see him to strengthen our faith in each other.>>

There wasn't even a ripple in Shravis's expression as he nodded at me. "Uncle, right now, I want to meet up with you and search for the stake together—that will strengthen our faith in each other. No matter how far away you may be, I can fly over on the dragon. Please tell me your whereabouts."

There was a slight pause again before Hortis's voice rang out. It was one pitch lower than before. *"I'm sorry for saying this, but I can't leave a valuable and pivotal item in the hands of those with close ties to my brother. Forgive me, Shravis. This is my fight and my fight alone."*

The moment he finished his sentence, the reddish-brown seashell returned to its white color, and the noisy roaring vanished as well.

"Uncle, uncle!" Shravis called out. "...Prince Hortis!" The seashell, however, remained white and mute.

All of us turned to look at each other.

<<Looks like he cut off the transmission. I kind of get where that pervert's coming from, but he's even more suspicious now.>> Then, I addressed Naut. <<There's something I want to check. Let's leave the seashell here and talk inside.>>

Under my suggestion, we silently walked into the mansion. The interior presented a calm and harmonious contrast between the white wallpaper and the dark-brown wood floor. A mouthwatering aroma permeated the pleasant environment—it smelled like pie or some kind of savory pastry. Ceres was standing next to the window by the entrance, looking small and helpless. Beside her was a black pig.

She gazed at us with worry in her eyes. "Mister Naut, everyone! What brings you here?" Her position by the window likely meant that she'd watched the events that had transpired outside. When Jess saw Ceres, she stopped in her tracks and gave the younger girl a small bow.

Unlike her, Naut didn't even slow his pace as he said, "Sorry, but it's

confidential. Tell everyone to stay away from my room.” He marched right down the corridor and led us inside a door at the end of the hall.

It seemed to be Naut’s office. Though the room was spacious, there was only the bare minimum of furniture, such as a simple table, chair, and clothing rack.

“Sorry for making you talk while standing, but let’s get to business.” Naut sat on the tabletop with a heavy thud while facing us.

<<Earlier, when Hortis mentioned that he’d feel bad if he made us travel “all this way,” you seemed to react with slight surprise. Was there anything strange about that sentence?>>

“Oh, that.” Naut crossed his legs. “Hortis set off just before noon, and he said that he’d be making a quick trip to a place nearby and return before sunset. It just felt strange that he said he was somewhere far away during your conversation with him.”

Interesting.

Jess voiced her guess. “Does that mean he believed us when we said that Mister Naut wasn’t around, so he told us a lie that only Mister Naut could immediately expose?”

<<There’s a high chance of that. I’m glad we kept Naut’s presence from him. The fact that he told a lie and what he lied about might be significant clues. Silence and lies are the most eloquent ways of telling the truth.>>

With my pig trotters, I walked in circles on the vast plank flooring as I mulled over the facts. <<Why did he lie? Because he didn’t want us to figure out where he is. Then, why did he lie that he was considerably far away? It must be his way of hiding the fact that he’s actually relatively nearby.>>

Jess raised the history text into the air and said, “Mister Pig, there’s something that bothers me.”

I looked at her. <<Go on.>>

“It says that Ruta’s Eye indicates the direction of the stake. With a tool that only tells him the direction, is it really possible to know the distance before he sets out?”

She's a sharp one. The thing is... <<Hortis obtained Ruta's Eye in that chamber yesterday and traveled all the way back to this mansion with it. If the Contract Stake is nearby, it's possible to calculate the approximate distance after traveling that far.>>

She blinked. "Um, it is...?"

It was a simple calculation problem. <<Shravis, stare hard at Jess's chest.>>

Hearing that, Shravis turned his solemn face to me. "I won't."

<<It's necessary for my explanation. If you're shy, her face works too.>>

And so the naive virgin looked at Jess's face. I distanced myself a little from Shravis and fixed my gaze on Jess's chest. From underneath her white blouse, two gentle hills shyly proclaimed their existence. They were almost like paradise's— *No no, this isn't the right time.*

Shaking out unnecessary thoughts from my head, I said, <<Right now, Shravis and I are standing at different places and looking at Jess's chest at the same time. If Jess's chest is the treasure, the directions our faces are turned to represent the directions that Ruta's Eye indicated.>>

"No, I'm not looking at her chest..."

Ignoring the deadpan reply, I continued as I lawfully stared at Jess's boobs. <<If you only have information from one perspective, you don't know where Jess's chest is along our line of sight. But if you have two lines of sight, you know that Jess's chest is at the point where our gazes intersect.>> I explained. <<The same can be said for Hortis. If he travels a certain distance, he can roughly calculate the treasure's whereabouts. Of course, if the Contract Stake were far away, the directions that Ruta's Eye indicates would almost be parallel to each other, so accurate estimations would become rather difficult.>>

When I was done, Jess nodded with resignation. She then took out a map and spread it across the ground for my sake. "In other words, just like we thought, the Contract Stake isn't too far away from our present location."

"I see." Possibly because he'd stared for too long, Shravis automatically trained his eyes on Jess's profile as he spoke. He seemed to read the narration, for he suddenly turned his face away. "Moving on, can we deduce uncle's

location from this? Are there any other leads?"

I thought about it. *Do we have any other pieces of information?* <<When Hortis left just before noon, he mentioned he'd return before sunset. He only knew the approximate location—is that really enough for him to be so confident that it won't take too long? My guess is that after calculating the rough area, he found something notable—a landmark where the Contract Stake is likely hidden at.>>

Jess hummed in thought. "I understand. So there's a place that made him instantly think, 'This must be it!'"

All of us crowded around the map, scrutinizing the vicinity of Munires. *Hmm, there are several landmarks within a day trip's distance, but hang on...* I had an epiphany. <<That noise!>>

Jess's voice was filled with exhilaration as she replied, "Right! During the entire conversation, there was a roaring noise in the background."

<<There are only so many places that can produce such noises. If it's in the vicinity—>>

Shravis pointed at one spot on the map. "The waterfall." It was a large waterfall upstream from the Oil Valley, close to Munires. The prince's deep green eyes lit up with excitement—a rather rare sight. "That's the Encounter Waterfall, and it's said that Lady Vatis had her fateful encounter with Ruta there."

We immediately decided to head to the Encounter Waterfall after Hortis. Our chosen method of transport was the dragon. Apparently, Naut wasn't permitted inside the military base of the royal court, so Shravis ended up having to move the dragon all the way to this mansion's garden.

Naut promptly put on his coat before marching into the garden. Jess, however, stilled right before the entrance and looked back and forth.

<<What are you looking for? The bathroom?>> I asked.

Jess shook her head. "No, I was just wondering where Miss Ceres happened to be."

The faint sound of someone talking resonated from the end of the corridor to our right. <<She's probably over there. Do you have some business with her?>>

"It's not something as grand as a business. I just hoped I could have a quick chat with her." She peered down the corridor.

<<Well, why not head over and take a look? There should be some time before Shravis comes back with the dragon.>>

"Good point. I will. Mister Pig, please wait outside with Mister Naut."

I was about to say "Okay" on reflex before I had second thoughts. <<No, I'll go with you.>>

"Oh, are you sure? Let's go together, then."

We trod the carpeted corridor and headed to the source of the voice. The delectable aroma of baking flour and meat drifted into my snout. I took big whiffs of the scent and traced the flow of the air. The origin of the aroma, as it turned out, was right in front of us.

Curiosity drove me to peer quickly into the wide-open door. Inside, there was a large kitchen. Ceres was standing in front of a brick oven and her lone companion, the black pig, was sitting next to her.

Jess looked inside the kitchen with me and raised her voice in delight. "Miss Ceres!"

"Ah, Miss Jess...and Mister Super-Virgin." Ceres turned around and bowed politely. "Hello."

Jess puffed out her cheeks for a second when she heard the title "Mister Super-Virgin," but she immediately returned the bow. She walked into the kitchen and peered into the oven. "Hello. Are you baking a pie?"

"Yes, a rabbit pie... It's Mister Naut's favorite," Ceres replied.

Oh. Not pork? Just as I had that silly thought, Jess covered her mouth with her hands. "I'm so sorry. Mister Naut suddenly changed plans and is heading out with us soon..."

Ceres's large eyes widened by a fraction, but she immediately composed herself and smiled. "I see. In that case, I'll set aside Mister Naut's portion for

dinner.”

“But... It’s the fruit of your hard work. You must have wanted him to have some fresh out of the oven.” Jess chewed on her lip ruefully. “A pie takes a lot of effort, after all.”

Ceres shook her head profusely. “I can’t let my selfish whims get in Mister Naut’s way. I’m not worthy. Plus, I voluntarily made the pie because I wanted to.”

“Really...?” Jess turned her gaze onto the kitchen counter.

Following her example, I stretched my neck to look up at the counter. At the eye level of a pig, it was tough to get a good view, but I could guess from the aromas. There was a pot with the scent of meat juices left on it, and on the chopping board slightly jutting out from the countertop were the aromas of chopped mushrooms and fragrant herbs. Ceres claimed she’d made it alone to satisfy her own urge, but she’d clearly invested a lot of heart and effort into it.

“Well, I didn’t have anything else to do, so... Hee hee.” Ceres chuckled shyly before placing a hand on the back of her slender neck.

“Um, Miss Ceres?” Jess took a big step forward and approached the younger girl.

The black pig looked towards Jess and began twitching his snout, so I hurriedly rushed forward to defend her. *I can’t let Jess fall into the depraved pig’s evil clutches!*

Not minding our little battle on the side, Jess gently placed a hand on Ceres’s shoulder. “I keep causing trouble to you, don’t I?”

Ceres looked lost. “No, not at all.”

“Yes, I have. It was my fault that Mister Naut left Baptsaze, and it was because he fought to protect me that the Nothen Faction targeted him. And...he’s even heading out soon because I brought him some sudden business that changed all his plans.” Jess chewed on her lip. “I know that all you ever wanted was probably a peaceful life with him, but this keeps happening... I’m sorry. This is the one thing I really wanted to apologize about.”

Once again, Ceres shook her head fervently, as if to say, “That’s not true at all!”

But Jess continued without faltering. “I can empathize with your feelings very well, Miss Ceres.” She stared quietly into the younger girl’s eyes.

Ceres’s shoulders jolted. She stole a glance at me before turning back to Jess. It seemed that Jess had communicated something to the younger girl with her telepathy. “Um... But our positions are very different, Miss Jess, and...”

Jess shook her head slowly in disagreement. “Miss Ceres, please be more confident in yourself. Being able to live in the same era and world may seem like something insignificant, but it’s more than enough to qualify as a wonderful miracle.”

Solemn, Ceres blinked with what seemed to be surprise.

The scenery outside the windows abruptly grew dark, and I shifted my gaze to look. The dragon just happened to be landing steadily in the garden, flapping its wings. For some unknown reason, I felt a bit restless and awkward, so I put some distance between me and Jess.

<<Jess, I’ll head out first. Once you’re done, come to the garden right away.>>
Then, I practically scrambled out of the kitchen as if someone were hot on my heels.

As I walked to the entrance, my mind began processing the conversation. I didn’t know what Jess had told Ceres during their silence, but I had the feeling that she’d been talking about me.

I recalled what Jess had said two days ago. *“Peaceful days where someone precious to you won’t be taken away, where you won’t lose your memories, where you won’t be dragged into the horrors of conflict, where there’s no one out for your life... Doesn’t that sound like a dream come true to you, Mister Pig?”*

It might have seemed like Ceres was right beside Naut, but truthfully, there was an insurmountable wall between them. Jess must have felt a sense of kinship and sympathy towards Ceres. She felt guilty that she was at least a part of the reason behind that barrier, and she’d apologized.

I wasn't oblivious—I knew that Ceres was suffering because Naut didn't return her feelings. And I also knew that I was causing Jess to feel similarly. My heart sank with regret. I should have never said anything along the lines of encouraging Shravis and Jess's marriage in front of her.

But I'd chosen to say that. The decision I'd made was to push away the young maiden who'd said that she loved me—to push away the wonderful woman that I wasn't worthy of in the least.

I knew that I was fated to leave her one day. I knew that if the sorrow of our farewell grew any greater, it would crush me under its weight. And above all else, I knew that someone like me couldn't give Jess a happy future.

Surely you agree with me, my brethren. If you're an otaku, you should only focus on praying for your idol's happiness. When you're not someone of a caliber who can take responsibility for your idol's future, you don't have the right to whine and throw a fit about it.

I'm not someone capable of making Jess happy. Someone like me, who is supposed to leave Mesteria during a meaningful moment, shouldn't put up a futile resistance. I should obediently allow destiny to take its course and gracefully walk away from her side.

I walked out into the garden. Shravis was stroking the dragon's jaw, which was framed by pointed black scales. Though its body was big enough to cram into the vast garden, its face was surprisingly lizard-like—pretty cute if you asked me. It curved its lanky neck to offer its face to Shravis and made a purring noise in its throat that was almost like the humming of a car engine.

Shravis noticed that I'd come out alone and inclined his head. "Where's Jess?"

<<She won't take long. She's just in the middle of some girl talk.>>

It seems that Shravis had helped broadcast my thoughts because Naut raised an eyebrow as he placed a hand on his hip. "Never heard of that before."

<<It's basically a private conversation between girls,>> I explained. <<Should we have one too? Wanna engage in some male virgin talk?>>

Naut's face flushed bright red. He glared daggers at me. "Are you making fun of me, you low-life virgin swine?"

When it's a guy calling me that, it's not nice at all...

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Naut scowled at me as he said, "You know what happened in my past. I won't easily open my heart up to other women. Unlike you two, I've received marriage proposals from dozens of women, but never once has my heart wavered. Don't lump me together with you lot. I'm staying a virgin because I want to."

"'You lot'?" Shravis twitched. "What do you mean by that? Did you just insult *me*, of all people?"

"Well, well." Naut raised an eyebrow. "So I was right on the money, mophead. I guess it isn't a surprise—being a recluse in the capital means that you don't have any opportunities to meet women, hmm?"

"Are you taunting me?"

"Oh? Wanna fight me, mophead?"

While I watched the two virgins instantly create a stormy atmosphere in front of me, I began contemplating. A prince who was self-disciplined and stayed a virgin out of a sense of responsibility. The leader of the Liberators who stayed a virgin because he wanted to. What was I in comparison to these two?

I was nothing more than a dreary, lowly pig who'd spent his life doing what was within his power and ended up staying a virgin as a result. A virgin who didn't have his own beliefs or pride, who only thought about the most ideal path in an objective manner because he doubted himself.

But well, whatever. That's my way of life. I won't deny it.

As I watched the two handsome hunks draw nearer to each other with hostility, I thought that I should probably head off to fetch Jess soon. But Jess and Ceres chose that exact moment to come out of the entrance. The pair witnessed the virgins, whose tension was like a balloon on the brink of exploding, and froze.

"E-Excuse me..." Jess asked meekly, bewildered. "D-Did something happen between you two?"

Shravis cleared his throat before indicating the dragon. "Uncle might move

from his spot at any second. We should leave at once.”

Naut also exhaled slowly before straightening his clothes and posture. He began walking towards the dragon. “Took you long enough.”

And so, we climbed onto the dragon’s back while leaving Ceres and Sanon behind. The large, folded wings immediately spread out and flapped mightily, ascending us into the air.

Ceres waved from the garden the entire time, but Naut didn’t show any signs of noticing.

The dragon made its way directly to the Encounter Waterfall. Beyond the enormous black wings was a vast forest where broadleaf trees—naked and brown because they’d shed their leaves—mingled with coniferous trees of inky blackish-green. Shortly after we took off, I spotted a single, jarring gap in the forest, almost as if it were opening its round mouth wide. It was a pool of azure water beneath a waterfall.

“That’s the plunge pool of the Encounter Waterfall,” Shravis explained. “It’s surrounded by the forest, so there aren’t any clearings for the dragon to land. We’ll get to the lowest altitude possible and jump down.”

“Jump down?” Naut scowled and gave Shravis an incredulous look.

“Relax. I’ll protect all of us with my magic.”

Shravis pulled on the reins and the dragon began descending. Soon, the dragon started to hover, and the prince looked down before muttering, “Looks good.”

I peered downward—in altitude, we seemed like we were still roughly a hundred meters aboveground. *Oy, this doesn’t look good. You think you’re a cat or something?*

“Ready? We’ll get off now,” Shravis announced.

My heart leaped into my throat with trepidation. *How in the world are we going to get off?* The next moment, the dragon folded its wings with a whoosh, swooping down and disappearing from beneath our bums. We were left behind

in midair a hundred meters aboveground. Most of us were still in our sitting positions.

“Eep!” Jess yelped as she clung to my stomach. But we’d both worried for nothing because we were suspended in place, surrounded by some kind of floating force. Far below the swaying, dangling pig trotters were the trees of the forest. I felt as if my pork heart were seizing up.

Feeling the wind blowing upward and the sensation of acceleration, I realized that we’d begun our plunge. Immediately after, my vision was shrouded by the fabric of Jess’s skirt.

...Fudge!

On the spur of the moment, I twisted my body and frantically stretched my pig trotters towards Jess’s crotch. I could barely feel anything with my hooves, but I was pretty sure that I’d succeeded at holding down the material of her skirt at the area just below her abdomen.

The rustling of her flapping skirt was right next to my ears, but in the background, I still made out Jess’s voice. “Huh? Wha... Mister Pi... Mn!” She let out an unusual noise.



My vision was still completely obscured when my four feet touched the ground. Jess's skirt gently fluttered down, and I could finally see where we'd landed. We were in a part of the forest adjacent to the plunge pool. I looked around, and there was no one else present. There were piles of withered leaves carpeting the ground. When I looked up, I could see the gentle hues of the blue autumn sky from between the gaps of the trees that had shed their autumn coat.

Jess's face was cherry red. She pressed a hand against her abdomen as she stammered, "U-Um, Mister Pig, there are two other people with us, and, um, I think we should refrain from such...things..."

I inclined my head. <<Wait, what are you talking about?>> Jess didn't respond, so I turned around to look at Shravis and Naut. Both of them averted their gazes awkwardly. <<I'm asking this just in case, but you didn't see anything, right?>>

Naut fixed his shawl as he replied, "I didn't see a thing. You hid it well with your legs."

Jess looked lost—she didn't seem to understand what we were talking about, and she looked back and forth between all of us.

Meanwhile, Shravis trained his gaze on a patch of the ground in front of him. "I saw nothing. Sorry. I should have been more considerate," he whispered.

Exactly, I thought with a mental huff. During our fall, the wind was blowing up at us, and Jess's skirt had wrapped around my face—which meant that it'd failed to cover what it was originally supposed to. If I hadn't shielded her with my pig trotters, Jess's *Les Panties* would have entered the vision of these young male virgins.

"Oh, that's what you were..." After reading the narration, Jess seemed to have finally realized what had happened, and her already red face turned one shade redder. She was going to marry into the royal family, so I certainly hoped that she would be cautious about stuff like this.

<I'm so sorry, Mister Pig...> Her voice resounded in my head.

No. There's no reason for her to apologize to me at all.

That aside, these two depraved perverts around here, who were blushing because the wind had flipped her skirt, deserved some kind of punishment.

“Inside all of Mesteria, you’re the last person I want to hear that from.” Dutifully delivering his deadpan reply, Shravis cleared his throat before getting back to business. “Now then, we must be swift and find uncle. Pig, we need your expertise. Track his scent.”

I did as I was told and began sniffing around the ground. Shortly after, I detected the smell of a dog. <<There’s a strong scent lingering here. We’ve definitely got the right place.>>

Following the scent trail led me closer and closer to the waterfall. The Encounter Waterfall was wide with a glorious height of roughly several dozen meters. Crystal clear water gushed forth in abundance, shrouding the obsidian black cliff like a large curtain. The falling water was collected in the large aquamarine plunge pool and began a new journey as it flowed into a river.

With me in the lead, our group arrived right next to the waterfall. Behind the curtain of water was a rocky stretch we could walk across.

Naut folded his arms, looking like he was somewhat cold as he asked, “Are we going to walk behind the waterfall?”

<<Seems like it. Let’s go.>>

We weaved our way through the narrow rocky path and headed to the other side. To our left was the roaring wall of water, and to our right was the wet black wall of rock. We eventually found that one small part of the rock had been hollowed out to make a narrow passage that was barely large enough for one human to pass through. The scent trail seemed to continue into this passage. Without hesitation, I led the way.

I was showered with the cool, misty water as I advanced while a low, muffled rumbling of flowing water rang out in the background. Jess was behind me, followed by Shravis, then finally, Naut was in the rear. Though the rocks were wet from the droplets of water, I could still tell that the smell of a dog was growing increasingly intense.

When we reached what should be roughly the center of the waterfall, my

march ground to a halt. *Weird*, I thought as I began sniffing the vicinity.

“What happened?” Shravis asked.

I took a few steps forward. <<The smell abruptly vanishes around this area.>> I turned around to face him, and the ground sandwiched between us was where the trail ended without warning.

Shravis touched the wet rock surface. “There might be some kind of secret path nearby.” His fair hand fumbled around, but nothing of significance happened. The rock remained solid even when he pushed and knocked.

“Mister Pig, what’s the path ahead of us like?” Jess asked. “Perhaps water flows through this spot alone and washed away the scent.”

That would make sense. I lowered my snout towards the ground again and advanced for a while. *Hmm...* <<No luck, I don’t smell anything ahead of us. Hortis either found a secret passage inside the rock or he...>> I trailed off and turned to the waterfall.

The ground of the path we were treading abruptly cut off near the curtain of water like a cliff. Copious amounts of water plummeted down right next to us, and if I stretched out my pig trotter, I might be even able to touch it.

“If the scent disappeared here, there’re only two possibilities,” Naut announced. “He either headed back the way he came or rushed into the water and fell into the plunge pool.”

The path we’d come from had been a subtle uphill slope. If he fell from here, the distance to the plunge pool would be nothing to laugh at. <<He probably headed back. It seems unlikely that he’d dive right down.>>

“But, Mister Pig, you mentioned that the scent gradually got stronger on our way here, right?” Jess pointed out.

Oh, she’s right, I thought, eyes widening. *If he made a U-turn, his scent should have gotten fainter and fainter instead. It doesn’t make sense.*

Placing a hand on his chin, Shravis hummed thoughtfully. “This is hard. Was there some other way to travel from this spot...?”

While the three of us wrestled with the problem in our heads, Naut reached

the end of his patience and drew his twin shortswords. “What’s it like on the other side of the water?”

He pushed Shravis aside before stretching out his arms and intersecting his shortswords in the middle of the flowing water. The two swords glowed crimson. The blades and their aura of flames severed the flow, opening up a hole that was around the size of a small window. Naut’s face, which was illuminated by the scarlet flames, twisted, clearly surprised.

“The hell is this...?” he muttered in a daze.

Seeing that, Shravis leaned in towards the small window Naut had created. His eyes immediately widened with shock as well.

Unfortunately, a pig’s eye level meant that I couldn’t see through it. <<What’s there?>>

Naut sheathed his shortswords and turned to face me. “This way.” Leaving behind that abrupt and cryptic message, he charged into the flowing wall of water without hesitation, disappearing with a splash.

With a wry smile, Shravis faced his palm at the waterfall. “He’s an impatient one.” From left to right, he cut an arc-shaped hole out of the veil of water, opening an entrance to the other side.

Next to me, Jess sucked in a sharp breath. What lay beyond the entrance wasn’t the scenery we’d expected of the plunge pool and the forest—it was a gigantic limestone cavern on a scale I’d never seen before. A mysterious blue light seeped out between the gaps of the dripstones, creating an eerie atmosphere as it illuminated the white cavern interior. It was so large that it was as if someone had hollowed out an entire mountain—the tall ceiling was concealed by the darkness above. The waterfall had become something like a magical gate that divided our world and this other dimension.

Snapping out of my shock, I said, <<Let’s chase Naut.>>

The three of us jumped through Shravis’s gate and entered the limestone cave. It hadn’t been an optical illusion or a hallucination. We should have jumped in the direction of the waterfall, but our feet landed on solid ground. A shallow coat of water glistened on the limestone surface. My trotters felt cold.

Naut, who was drenched from head to toe, stared at us; we were completely dry. His expression practically grumbled, “You should have told me that I could have avoided the water.”

When I turned back towards the direction we came from, the grand, gushing waterfall had instead transformed into a miniature one flowing gently inside the limestone cavern. It seemed that the water served as a boundary.

With a mystified look on his face, Shravis touched the water. “I’ve never heard of such magic before.” His hand created a small opening, and through it, I caught a glimpse of the initial rocky area we’d been in.

“I don’t know how to describe it, but I sense some kind of dreadful power in here,” Jess whispered to me.

As I’d described earlier, the cavern was creepy. Misshapen dripstones, which looked as if they were melting, hung down from the ceiling that was likely far above our heads. Some even formed long rows like a giant curtain. None of the ground had been spared from the flooding of water, and the smooth white stone created tiers like terraced rice fields beneath our feet. Intense blue lights shined upon it all from every direction, throwing off my orientation.

Naut shook his head vigorously like a dog to fling away the moisture before addressing me. “Let’s get a move on and find Hortis. Low-life swine, is his smell still lingering here?”

Just as I was about to lower my snout, the sound of feet kicking up water resounded in the cavern. Two red lights crossed my vision—Naut had drawn his twin shortwords.

“There’s no need to look for me,” a low-pitched voice said. “I’m right here.”

A man’s feet entered my vision, and they were much closer than I’d expected. I lifted my gaze. Dangling right in front of my eyes was the very last thing I wanted to see in my life. The man, who’d slipped out from behind some dripstones like a ghost, wore the exact same attire as our first encounter: his birthday suit.

“I’m impressed you managed to make it this far,” he continued. “You have a brilliant mind that has far exceeded my expectations.”

“Please put on some clothes, uncle,” Shravis retorted, sounding unruffled.

“Yes, yes, if you say so.” Hortis waved his hand with a dramatic sigh. Almost like a sleight of hand, white cloth manifested from thin air and wrapped around his body beneath his shoulders. “I’d be in hot water if heckripons saw me, so I was moving around as Rossi. Whenever I turn back into a human, I always end up naked. There’s nothing much I could have done.”

I see. No, I don’t see. It certainly wasn’t a valid excuse for walking around stark naked, but at least that explained why I’d smelled a dog and not a person.

Hortis gave us a friendly grin, but Naut didn’t relax his guard. He maintained his battle stance, holding up his shortswords, which were glowing bright red. “Do you think a joke like that is enough to distract us, you exhibitionist? Explain yourself. Why did you lie and move on your own?”

The smile on Hortis’s face didn’t falter in the slightest. “Trying to negotiate with my brother using a supreme treasure is like balancing on a knife’s edge. If I’d involved all of you, the responsibility and liability would have fallen on you too. I didn’t want that to happen. I thought that I could deal with this alone. Based on what I know about you lot, I assumed you’d understand me even if I didn’t explain it explicitly. But that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Naut wasn’t convinced. “Oh? So you’re saying that you weren’t scheming to snatch away the treasure for yourself?”

“Snatch it for myself? Now why would I do that?” It was as if Hortis were blind to the flames on the swords; he took a step forward. “Think about it. I rebelled against the policies of my father and brother, relinquished my powers as a mage, and stayed by your side for five entire years in my canine form. If I wanted to betray all of you, I would have done it a long time ago. I’m on your side, everyone. I’m a mage with a conscience who wants the Liberators to thrive and to save the Yethma girls from their suffering.”

Considering he’d flaunted his nude body at a girl who was young enough to pass as his daughter, I highly doubted that his conscience was functioning. However, he made a good point; it was hard to imagine that this pervert was our enemy based on his track record.

Hortis gingerly held Naut’s hand and guided the tip of the red, blazing blade

until it was right in front of his throat. “If you suspect me, you can cut me down at any time.”

Naut’s eyebrows grumpily furrowed. They remained in that position as he returned his shortswords to their sheaths at his hip.

I felt that there was merit in trusting him. <<As a token of good faith, please show us the Contract Stake.>>

At that, Hortis shrugged. “The thing is, I haven’t actually gotten my hands on it yet. I have *this* thing though.” He presented his right hand to us. Sandwiched between his thumb and index finger was a glass sphere decorated with gold. It was filled with a clear fluid, and a lone human eyeball was suspended inside. The eyeball spun back and forth vigorously on its own.

Jess approached Hortis and inspected the item with curiosity burning in her eyes. “Is that Ruta’s Eye?”

“Yep,” Hortis admitted readily. “It took me a lot of effort, but I got my hands on it and managed to find this place. So far so good, but the moment I entered this cavern, it started going berserk and stopped performing its duties properly.”

Stating that it was a token of good faith, Hortis gently handed Ruta’s Eye to Jess before continuing, “An abnormal amount of mana permeates this limestone cavern. My guess is that this place has existed since prehistoric times, long before Vatis was even born. We must search for the Contract Stake without depending on our magic.”

“Prehistoric times...” Jess echoed in a whisper.

The eyeball continued to spin around fruitlessly in Jess’s hand, and after glancing at it, Hortis raised an eyebrow. “That aside, I never thought that all of you would arrive at the same conclusion as me this quickly. When I regained my human form yesterday morning, you looked as if you didn’t know anything about the Contract Stake, but today, you even found where Ruta’s Eye was stored... You must have invested a lot of time and care into reading that history text. What an admirable inquisitive spirit.”

I raised my snout triumphantly. <<Cutie-pie Jess read it all in one night.>>

Jess shook her head. “No, I only read the text mindlessly. Mister Pig is the one who pieced the information together in the end.”

Seeing the shy smile on Jess’s face, Hortis offered a small grin of his own. “Well, well, what a wonderful joint effort. In that case, I have a proposal. How about we split into two groups and see who manages to find the Contract Stake inside the cavern first? I’ll investigate with my adorable nephew. Meanwhile, Jess, the young virgin, and Naut will be the other group. That sounds more fun than simply splitting up to investigate, doesn’t it?”

Is this really the time to think about fun and games? was what I almost said, but on second thought, it wasn’t a bad proposal. This limestone cavern was massive—it was definitely better to split up somewhat for efficiency.

“Let’s not waste time, then,” Naut made the decision immediately. “I want to get back before sunset.”

We split up into two groups and began our search.

Naut marched on without stopping under the bluish-white light. Jess and I followed.

It reminded me of our journey to the capital—we were a rather nostalgic trio. Of course, I didn’t forget about Naut’s dog companion back then, who turned out to be Hortis.

As he weaved through the narrow opening between the giant dripstones, Naut asked, “Hey Jess, mind if I ask you something?” The path ahead of him was filled with twists and turns, and we could barely see anything.

“Ask away,” Jess replied while trailing after the youth.

“So, you’re that mophead’s fiancée now?”

A moment of hesitation. “I am,” Jess replied in a barely perceptible whisper.

“I haven’t heard the full story, but they warned me about memories or something along those lines, and I had the vague feeling that you’re in a difficult position right now. I’m not going to nag, criticize, or judge you. But there’s one thing I want to say: don’t do anything that you’ll regret.”

The hero of the Liberators spoke in an aloof tone as he walked, not even turning around to face her. Jess stole a glance at me, but she didn't say anything.

"By the time you lose something, it's always too late to take it back," Naut muttered. At his hips, his sheathed swords swayed with his movements.

<<Then...>> With Jess as my medium, I called out to Naut. <<Then, what should Jess do? You're right, she might not want to marry a mophead guy like him. But if she calls off their betrothal, she can't guarantee her safety anymore. It'll also be difficult for me to butter up the royal court and influence their decisions. That unreasonable king might use all of us as disposable pawns, whether it be the Liberators, Jess, or me.>>

"So what? What's the problem with that?"

For a moment, I thought I heard wrong. <<What are you talking about?>>

Naut's determined back spoke volumes. "No matter how the king treats us, as long as Jess is happy with her decision, that's acceptable."

<<Don't be ridiculous. Jess has ties with the Liberators. Are you blind to the significance of her becoming the future queen?>>

Frosty blue eyes with no hint of warmth glanced at me. "I'm not anyone significant to Jess. No matter what kind of choices Jess makes for her own happiness, I won't criticize her. I'm doing what I want to do with all my heart and power. So, Jess should do what she wants to do with all her heart and power."

I saw Jess swallowing hard next to me. *No. That's not acceptable at all.* <<Our situation right now might be everyone's one and only chance to change this nation. Calling off the betrothal is a dangerous choice that might make this opportunity slip away before our very eyes. It's unthinkable. Absurd.>>

"Mister Pig..." Sorrowful eyes turned to me.

"Low-life swine, what you're saying is right, yeah. But the thing is, we're mortal humans who only have one shot at life. No matter what kind of justice, logic, or morality someone else shoves at us, we're not duty bound to accept and follow. I don't want Eise's death to be meaningless. That's why I'm here,

trying to change the world. But if Eise were still alive, I probably would have stayed out of all this and lived on humbly while cherishing my life.”

Hearing that, my mind finally painted a clear picture of what lay at Naut’s core as a human. If Jess was someone who constantly acted for the sake of other people, Naut was someone who constantly acted for the sake of himself. Naut had helped Jess due to his regret over his failure to save the person he’d loved. As a result, he’d succeeded at escorting his beloved’s sister to the royal capital, despite being completely oblivious to that truth.

At a loss for words, I quietly walked across the slippery ground. The narrow passage twisting between dripstones was a direct path.

The silence stretched on until Jess spoke up under the pale bluish light. “Thank you for your advice, Mister Naut. But I’m fine with how things are now.” Naut looked at Jess impassively without saying a word. “I believe in Mister Pig. He’s always prioritized my happiness over everything else. That’s why I will go along with whatever decision he makes.” After making that resolute declaration, Jess gently placed a hand on my back.

“If you say so. Do what you want, then.”

As I felt Jess’s slightly cool fingertips press against my back, I had the urge to make a rebuttal. <<Well, you say that everyone should do what they want to do, but what about Ceres?>> Naut, who began pressing forward again, didn’t turn around. <<I’m sure you’re not blind to her feelings. She was willing to leave her employer and come all this way just to be with you. Are you saying that it’s justifiable to treat her so coldly because you’re writing it off as “she’s doing what she wants to do”?>>

“What are you going on about? You said it yourself. Ceres is doing what she wants to do. I don’t see the problem with any of that.”

Next to me, Jess opened her mouth, as if she wanted to say something, but then she pressed her lips tightly together.

Neither of us could object. Everything Naut had said was consistent and fair. Everyone should just do as they pleased. Even if some kind of conflict or discord might arise as a result, it wasn’t their problem—what mattered was their own wishes. It was simple logic.

“Hammer this into your head, low-life swine. In your eyes, I might seem like a self-centered, egotistical person. But this world isn’t valuable to the point that you should spend your entire life deceiving yourself and others about what you actually want to do.”

He pulled the black shawl up to his jaw before turning around the cramped corner. Jess and I followed hurriedly, and we ended up crashing into him.

“Look before you walk,” Naut said standoffishly. His gaze was pointed at something in front of us.

I peered forward. The layout had made it look as if the passage should continue after the turn, but instead, there was a smooth white wall that looked artificial. It prevented us from proceeding any further.

Naut’s long fingers touched the wall. “Looks like someone blocked the way. It’s a dead end.”

I walked up to the wall and began inspecting it. The rock surface was perfectly flat—*Is this limestone?*—and left no gaps in the cramped path. Unless a stonemason with superior technique had carried a giant stone slab through the twisting tunnels, it was likely the work of a mage.

“Mister Pig! Look!” Jess pointed at the middle of the wall. Fine lines carved into the stone formed a tall isosceles triangle.

I think I’ve seen this somewhere before... I thought before the memory hit me. A symbol had been engraved in a similar manner onto the lid of Vatis’s sarcophagus—the hiding place of the Destruction Spear.

I nodded to myself, and I felt Jess’s hand tense up on my back. We were on the right track—we were approaching the stake step-by-step.

“Is that a clue? What are we supposed to do now?” Naut asked.

From next to him, Jess gingerly touched the wall.

The moment she did, the white wall abruptly pressed closer and closer, filling my vision. When I turned around and surveyed our surroundings, I realized that Jess and I had ended up on the other side of the wall; the scenery was completely different.

The cavern's narrow path opened up into an enormous chamber. Just like before, we were surrounded by white dripstones that reminded me of icicles, but a part of the tall ceiling had a circular hole in it, from which a warm ray of light streamed down in a straight line. Beneath the ladder of light was a stone pedestal. A solitary object sat on it.

"Mister Pig...!" Jess's eyes lit up.

I turned to look behind us again, but there was only a giant white wall. Naut was nowhere to be found. Before I could ponder about what to do next, Jess began approaching the stone pedestal. <<Wait, Jess, Naut isn't—>>

"It won't take us too long to head back. Let's take a look by ourselves first!" She looked over her shoulder at me with joy dancing in her eyes.

With a sigh of fond exasperation, I followed her and walked by her side. Only the sounds of our feet stepping in water resounded inside the stillness.

Soon, we arrived at the stone pedestal. It was small and had a flat surface at the top. Even at a pig's eye level, if I stretched my neck, I could see the item in question that was enshrined on it.

It was a colorless and transparent jewel—crystal clear to an eerie degree. It was shaped like a long and narrow triangular pyramid. The warm light that filtered in from the ceiling cast a white, dazzling glow on it.

"The Contract Stake..." Jess whispered in awe.

There was no mistaking it; this jewel oozing a sacred and mysterious aura was one of the supreme treasures. And, at the moment, it was our only method of defeating the immortal mage that was trying to bring down the royal court.

<<Amazing. It feels as if we found it in the blink of an eye.>>

"It's all thanks to you, Mister Pig."

I shook my head. <<All I did was have a few epiphanies and give you advice. *You're* the one who deciphered the history text to look for a solution, Jess. You should be proud of yourself.>>

After mulling over my words for a while, Jess finally grinned at me. "In that case, let's just say that we found this place together."

<<...Yeah. That's probably the best idea.>>

Ever so slowly, Jess reached out towards the Contract Stake.

"Mister Pig."

Hearing the abrupt call, I turned to look at her. My gaze crashed right into honey-brown eyes looking intently at me. Long lashes framed her orbs. Beneath them was her petite nose. Finally, her petal pink lips were pulled into a faint smile.

Jess's hand was fixed in place. She didn't touch the stake, instead blinking at me with an earnest expression. "Mister Pig, I can trust you, right?"

I paused. <<What are you talking about? I'll never betray you. Don't worry.>>

"I wasn't talking about that..." She seemed to be searching for the right words. After mumbling to herself for a while, she finally said, "Mister Pig, you're working very, very hard for the royal court, the Yethma, and the members of the Liberators. I don't doubt you for even a single moment in that regard."

The rays of light falling from the round hole in the ceiling splashed onto Jess's lashes. Beneath them were eyes heavy with anguish. She continued, "Thanks to your help, we were able to come this far. You know, I have the feeling that as long as you're with us, we can even go on to change this world."

<<Yeah. That's why I'm here. You can trust me.>>

"Of course I trust you. But...I'm just a bit worried."

<<Worried about what?>>

The distant rustling of trickling water reached my ears in the silence. Jess's hand remained still.

"If we keep moving forward step-by-step, checking off the list of what we can do, we might eventually reach the point where you finish all your responsibilities and duties. Even after that...you'll remain by my side forever, right?" It was almost as if she was threatening that she wouldn't take the Contract Stake unless I promised her.

<<No one can predict the future. But in the present, let's stick together and do everything within our power. All the while, I'll be here for you, Jess.>>

“That’s not what I mean. I’m not talking about the present.” The next thing I knew, Jess’s face scrunched up—she was holding back tears. Reflexively, I cast my eyes down. “Lately, I have the feeling that you’re trying to slowly but surely distance yourself from me. Why is that?”

My mind stuttered and went quiet.

“If you don’t like me anymore, then please tell me directly.”

<<Never. I could *never* stop liking you—>>

“I will change and fix everything about me that you dislike. I will also work hard at being better at indecent things. So please, I’m begging you. Don’t leave me.”

Tears glistened at the outer corners of Jess’s eyes. Her tears were my weak point.

<<No, there’s nothing about you that I find disagreeable, and you don’t have to try hard in terms of indecent things. I won’t leave you, so don’t worry.>>

“Really?”

<<Really.>>

“I can trust that you fully intend to be with me forever, yes?”

<<Yeah. I want to stay by your side.>> I wasn’t lying about that. Truly.

For a while, Jess stared hard at me.

I continued, <<This is a problematic and difficult world, but let’s both search for happiness.>>

Before this day, I’d never thought that I’d have the opportunity to say such a line while being dead serious. I put in the most amount of sincerity possible as I stared back into her eyes.

“Oh, I’m so happy,” Jess whispered, and with her sleeves, she wiped her tears that were on the verge of brimming over. “I hope you’ll keep that promise, because if you ever disappear again, I will chase you to the ends of the world.”

A smile curled her lips, but she seemed equally dead serious. Her gaze then shifted onto the stone pedestal, and her beautiful, snow-white fingers made

contact with one of Mesteria's supreme treasures.

The Contract Stake shined brilliantly. It was hard to believe that it was a prehistoric artifact.

The Recollections of a Beast

Among the gigantic crowd encircling the sandy arena stage was a single beast restrained with chains. He was a beast that hailed from another world. Since his knowledge had been deemed valuable, he was now reduced to a mere captive.

When a certain young girl was transported onto the stage with a pitiful gladiator, the beast widened his eyes. The girl's hair was long and messy, and her expression was as frigid as ice, but she was clearly the girl he knew all too well.

Nourris! She's alive? But why is she here, of all places? the beast thought.

Memories rose to the surface of his mind. He'd failed to save her in the past. She was a compassionate, freckled girl who'd saved him when he'd transformed into a hideous beast and lay prone on a farm. Even now, he remembered her sobbing and screaming as she was snatched away from her house and transported into the Atypidae Palace. He'd resisted—he'd fought to save her, but he'd been shot to death and forced to return to his original world.

She was the very reason this youth had returned to Mesteria. Saving her—saving Nourris was his mission.

The elderly man who sat next to the beast like a living shadow spoke in an apathetic voice. "So she was a friend of yours, hmm? Well, what a cruel coincidence, because that Yethma is going to die."

The beast felt all his hair stand on end. He growled fiercely, but it only earned a coldhearted smile from the elderly man whose eyes glowed gold beneath the sun. "No, I am not going out of my way to kill her. In a situation where only one can survive, a Yethma will likely kill herself. Watch on carefully, little brat from another world."

The gladiator of flames ran to the other side of the stage. There, a boy, who was still too young to call himself a youth, placed a blade against his own neck. The gladiator was running to save the boy. The girl who'd stood next to him

until moments earlier, however, was no longer in his sight. He was completely oblivious as the miserable Yethma aimed the tip of a sword at her own stomach and—

Nourris! No, stop!

But no matter how hard he tried to scream, the beast's throat could only produce a muffled, incoherent sound. No matter how much he thrashed and struggled, the chains prevented him from moving from the spectator seat. The beast was powerless.

The gladiator saved the boy. But the pitiful girl's blade stabbed into her own stomach easily. Blood bloomed on her abdomen like flowers, and the girl's body flopped onto the ground.

No. This isn't happening. This isn't happening. This can't be real. The beast didn't want to believe what he was seeing. He even gave up on struggling, only gaping in a daze next to the elderly man.

And that was when the sky abruptly grew dark. A distant roar quickly followed suit. One section of the arena crumbled into rubble, and he spotted the elderly man slowly turning his gaze in that direction.

In the blink of an eye, black smoke engulfed the entire world. Inside the darkness, chaos overtook the arena. Startled shouting rang out everywhere.

When the smoke cleared, for some reason, the girl's dead body was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 3: Gamble with Your Life, but Don't Throw It Away

When Shravis told King Marquis he wanted him to meet someone as soon as possible, His Majesty reluctantly agreed. Usually, he wasn't such a kind, indulgent father, but after hearing that this mystery visitor might know a way to defeat the Clandestine Arcanist, Marquis couldn't flat-out ignore his son's wish.

Shravis left the capital to fetch the visitor while Marquis sat on the Golden Cathedral's throne, just like he'd done during his audience with Naut. He was tapping his foot throughout the entire wait. Queen Wyss was by his side, sitting on a wooden chair, while Jess stood beside her. And finally, I sat down on the ground next to Jess.

All that aside, when Wyss and Jess are side by side, anyone would have the urge to have an internal philosophical debate about the definition of beauty. A high, dignified nasal bridge versus a petite, round nose. Eyes filled with maturity and self-confidence versus the anxious eyes of a young adult who's still a diamond in the rough. Long, flowing hair that oozes elegance versus relatively short, neat hair. A daring dress that bares her shoulders versus a conservative outfit that guards her skin vigilantly. Above all else, there is one set of large boobs versus one set of modest boobs.

For all these comparisons, the former tends to appeal to the taste of the masses more, but I'm on the opposing side for every single one. I'm not a lolicon or anything, really, but if it's between an older sister trope and a younger sister trope, I'll always pick the latter. After all, to me, a little sister is—

<Um... Big brother? I'm afraid that everyone can hear you...>

Hearing the admonishment of my little sister Jess, I turned to look at Marquis and Wyss. Marquis was facing forward and tapping his feet as always, while Wyss looked down at me as if she were looking at a lowly pig. *Well, well, this isn't bad at all. I'm relishing in the heavenly delight of being looked down on by an older woman with a wise and dignified aura!*

<<My deepest apologies for my rudeness. Please pretend you never heard any of that,>> I said with remorse. *Flaunting my fetishes ceaselessly before a country's king and queen isn't exactly the right thing to do.*

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Marquis sighed dispassionately. “We do not have the spare time to care about a pig to begin with. You can keep prattling on and rambling your nonsense as you please.”

Oh, I've never met a more magnanimous man!

And then, there was only silence in the Golden Cathedral.

It was still morning. The stained glass windows, which were facing west, were dark without the presence of the sun. The cathedral hall with its marble floor also seemed somewhat gloomy.

The silence stretched on until there was a loud creak. The grand doors we were facing protested as they opened. The weather outside seemed to be cloudy, but it was still brighter than the cathedral. I spotted the silhouette of a single man and a single dog.

The door closed, and the man and the animal—Shravis and a large white dog—walked towards us.

“I have brought him, father.” Shravis distanced himself slightly from the dog, who sat obediently in front of the foot-tapping king on the throne.

Marquis faced Shravis. “You brought the wrong beast. Where is the visitor you wanted me to meet?”

“This dog is the visitor I mentioned, father.”

“A *dog*...?” Marquis knitted his eyebrows.

The large white dog abruptly stood up on his hind legs. His form stretched vertically, almost like clay. Five seconds after his grotesque transformation began, the dog was no more—instead, a man stood before Marquis. A black cord wound around his neck loosely like a necklace, and on its very tip was a gleaming, crystal clear triangular pyramid.

Without a moment's delay, the man knelt on the marble floor and bowed his head deeply. “I heard that the royal court is facing a crisis like never before, and

I have made my return. I offer my most sincere apologies for my lengthy absence.” He raised his face. Long, curly hair. A blond beard. Finally, blazing bright ashen eyes of the same color as Marquis.

“Hortis,” Marquis spoke the name slowly in a deep voice.

I could practically feel the tension in the air prickling my skin. Marquis stopped being a professional foot tapper, quietly suppressing his shock.

Hortis didn’t seem fazed at all. Merrily, he asked, “My brother, have you lost some weight?”

Wyss was flabbergasted and speechless. I couldn’t blame her.

“Before you ask about my health, I believe it would be prudent to wear some clothes,” the king on the throne replied apathetically to his naked younger brother.

“Oh, pardon my rudeness. I’ve maintained the form of a beast for a long time, you see, and I’ve completely forgotten the custom of wearing clothes.” Hortis stood up and fluidly manifested a large piece of white cloth out of thin air before wrapping it around his body. Once he was dressed, he knelt again. During this entire sequence, Wyss and Jess both silently looked away from him.

After a pause, Marquis asked, “The last time I saw you was during the incident with the convent. What have you been doing for five whole years?” Perhaps he thought that showing surprise was the same as showing weakness because his tone sounded cool and composed.

“I sealed away both my magic and my human speech, assuming the form and lifestyle of a dog,” Hortis explained. “I lived and hunted with the lover of one of the girls who ran away from the convent before she ended up getting killed. Then, with that same youth, I escorted a certain girl all the way to the capital.” His eyes turned to look at Jess. Jess’s shoulders jolted like a startled bird.

Marquis spared a glance in Jess’s direction before letting out a small sigh. “So you weren’t satisfied with just abandoning the royal court—you even took the Yethma’s side and became a rebel’s mutt. Three death penalties wouldn’t be enough punishment for such sins.”

“We, who have inherited the blood of Vatis, are beyond this nation’s laws.

That's written on the first page of our regulations. There's no reason for you or anyone else to give me capital punishment."

Marquis scoffed. "You bookworm. But during my dynasty and reign, my words are the law. I will be the one to decide whether you should be killed or spared."

Conversely, Hortis laughed heartily. "Oh, my dearest brother. Aren't you being way too harsh on your younger brother after a long-awaited reunion? Knowing you, you're probably thinking, 'I have one more pawn.' Why not be more honest and express your joy?"

The exchange between the brothers was frighteningly sharp, as if they were trading blows with swords. The bystanders could only shut up and watch.

"Indeed, having one more mage in our faction is something worthy of celebration. Though I do have to remind you that it was your fault that we were one mage down in the first place."

"Good point." Hortis shrugged. "And making up for my absence is exactly what I came here to do. Today, I've brought the item you crave most at this moment, my brother."

Marquis lifted his chin slightly, as if his interest was piqued. "The Destruction Spear, I assume?"

"Do I look like I've got a spear hidden on me?" Still kneeling, Hortis straightened his chest, emphasizing the shining triangular pyramid just below his collarbones. "It's a Contract Stake. I retrieved the very last one remaining in Mesteria."

This time, even Marquis couldn't hide his astonishment. "The last Contract Stake...? When in the world did you...?"

Hortis chuckled triumphantly, grinning wide enough to flash his teeth. "See? You can't let your guard down around a bookworm, can you? The rule dictating that the one with the stronger brawn will win only applies up to apes on the evolutionary tree."

Veins became increasingly pronounced on Marquis's pale temples. "If you want to bring up victory and defeat, Hortis, I could choose to kill you now and take the supreme treasure for myself."

Hortis smiled wide, as if amused by a hilarious joke. “Now that won’t happen. After all, you must defeat an immortal mage who can use a deadly curse that no one can lift. In this situation, killing me, who can immediately contribute as a fighter, would only be a loss to you.”

“Well then, shall I deprive it from you with force?”

“Even if you snatched it away, it’s not like you’re going to directly march onto the battlefield and kill your enemy. It’s a dangerous mission with the risk of dying. Knowing you, you’re either going to send Shravis or me to accomplish that task.”

It seemed that Hortis had the initiative in this conversation. Marquis was evidently disgruntled. His index finger was incessantly drumming the throne armrest. “You make it sound as if the Contract Stake can kill the Clandestine Arcanist.”

“But of course.”

“Explain.”

“The Contract Stake doesn’t just bless nonmagical folk with magic—if you use it on a mage, you can forcefully spur on an ecdysia. We’ll drive it into the enemy’s heart and remove his immortality.”

As if impressed, Marquis curled the corners of his lips with a smile. “Are you implying that *you’re* going to take on that role?”

“Indeed. On the condition you pledge to Vatis that you will ensure that the Liberators will be safe and sound.”

“You want to make a deal.” Marquis turned to stare at Vatis’s statue, which was displayed behind his back. “That simplifies things. The moment you manage to kill the Clandestine Arcanist, I will ensure the Liberators’ well-being—which I will swear by Lady Vatis.”

Hortis nodded with satisfaction and stood up. “Then, my brother, could you tell me your tactics for this war? Where is the army of the Nothen Faction and the Clandestine Arcanist? I know what you’re like—I’m sure you’ve already started an investigation.”

Marquis recrossed his legs. “Don’t make light of me. I’ve already sent vanguards to every region of Mesteria. My investigation ended a long time ago.”

This was new information. I trained my seasoned and sliced mimiga ears.

He continued, “Most of the vanguards returned from their mission—except those I sent to one specific place.” With a fearless smile, Marquis raised his index finger. “My younger brother, I command you to capture Send-Off Island.”

Later, in the early afternoon, Jess and I were having a conversation in the inner courtyard just outside her room.

“Send-Off Island... I hear that it is an awfully dreadful place,” she whispered with trepidation.

The sky above was smothered by the fluffy white clouds, while the refreshing autumn breeze galloped through the ground below. A handful of butterflies flitted about, looking somewhat weary. Jess was sitting on a chair, which was painted white, on the lawn. She was slowly swaying her bare legs. Meanwhile, I walked in the vicinity while looking for the spot with a superb view that wouldn’t be obstructed by the hem of her skirt.

<<It’s that bad?>>

“Yes. Mesteria is a continuous piece of land, and there are barely any islands around because Lady Vatis sank them beneath the ocean. But a few islands were left behind for some reason, and rumors say that something terrifying is lurking on each of them—something completely foreign to these lands. No Mesterian citizen will approach them.”

Sank islands? What does that mean? But just after I had that thought, I figured Jess was probably being literal. The most powerful mage in history who ended the Dark Ages, Vatis, was just that omnipotent. <<I mean, you said it yourself: they are *rumors*. What people believe might not be the case. For now, the important thing is that the Nothen Faction’s army is using the island as their headquarters. If we capture that island, we’ll likely approach the end of the war very quickly.>>

Jess loosely clenched one of her hands into a fist and placed it against her chest. She leaned over in my direction. “Mister Pig. Are you really going?”

I recalled the audience earlier. Hortis had used the Contract Stake we’d obtained and safely established a deal with Marquis. He was also going to lead allied troops of the Liberators and the royal court in their march to Send-Off Island. The final condition for the well-being of the Liberators was a victorious campaign—in other words, killing the Clandestine Arcanist. After some discussion, it was decided that Shravis was going to participate in the campaign as well. And then, he’d come up to me and said that he would be grateful if I went along with him.

<<Yep. I’m going.>>

“In that case, I’ll go too.”

I looked into Jess’s earnest, solemn eyes. <<No, you mustn’t. It’s dangerous.>>

“Then, Mister Pig, please don’t go either.”

<<Why not?>>

“Because it’s dangerous.” Her expression practically asked why I couldn’t figure out something so obvious.

<<It’s my duty to help Shravis and act as the mediator between the royal court and the Liberators. This is a critical moment in this war. Even if it means taking risks, I want to give Shravis a hand.>>

“I feel the same way.”

Our gazes were locked with each other. <<Do you want to help Shravis too?>>

A faint flush blossomed on her cheeks. “N-No! Ah, sorry, you’re not exactly wrong... If I’m able to help Mister Shravis, I would be delighted, of course, but...” She faltered, and her speech was all over the place. *In that case, what kind of feelings does she share with me?*

She sucked in a deep breath. “I’m the same, Mister Pig. Even if it means taking risks, I want to stand by you and give you a hand.”

My eyes widened. All of a sudden, within my mind, the beautiful maiden

sitting in front of me seemed slightly different from the Jess I'd known. *I mean, of course, cutie-pie Jess is as cute as always, making me want to squeal.* But the powerless, naive, and unsuspecting young girl I'd protected up until now was no longer anywhere to be found. The person before me was a powerful, studious, and a tiny bit unsuspecting woman coming into her own.

<<I'm...happy you feel that way, but to me, nothing is more important than your safety.>>

Jess's bare legs stopped their simple harmonic motion, and the hem of her skirt blocked the magnificent scenery. "And once again, I feel the same way. I want you to stay safe. I might not look like it, but I'm a mage, remember? I'm even at the same number of ecdysias as Mister Shravis. I might not be as helpful in battle, but I should be capable enough to be helpful to you."

<<I mean, I can't argue against that, but you aren't so proficient that you can say you've mastered magic, are you?>>

"I admit that I'm still learning and inadequate. That said..."

Jess's hands, which had been placed on her knees, lifted slightly. The next moment, I felt something tickling my stomach. Startled, I jumped backward, but that something was still tickling me. I grunted as I rolled on the ground, and that was when I noticed that a few of the taller blades of grass sticking out of the lawn were moving by themselves and aiming for my pork belly.

"Mister Pig, are you going to surrender now?"

Everywhere I went, the grass tickled me, and I could only writhe about on the ground. <<Stop it, please. Okay, I know that you can use magic. I can't breathe!>>

A beautiful maiden being mean and tormenting me with magic was a very rare and prized opportunity, but I couldn't shamelessly ask her to keep at it.

Jess stood up from her chair and crouched down in front of me. "So you want me to be even meaner to you? Hmm..." She began tickling me with both her hands and the grass.



No part of my body, from snout to tail, was spared from the tickling session. I had nowhere to escape to. *Wheeeeze!* I squealed in my mind.

<<I surrender, Jess, please give me a break!>>

The tickling stopped. Lying on my back, I raised my head, and I came face-to-face with Jess's *Les Panties*. Having witnessed a pair of *Les Panties* within the closest possible distance known to virgins, I froze.

"Ah!" Jess frantically stood up. "Um, I can even heal your wounds. And when Mister Shravis is busy, I can act as your go-between in conversations. There's no Jess without you, Mister Pig, and the opposite is also true. So please, don't try to leave me behind."

With my four legs thrust out freely into the air, I answered her solemnly, <<I know I'm repeating myself, but it's dangerous. Remember the battle in the mountain castle? Both of us nearly died.>>

Jess nodded firmly. "I'm well aware. It's because this world is so hectic and precarious that I want to stay by your side, Mister Pig."

I felt as if a bee had stung the most tender part of my pork heart. I'd heard something similar before.

"Um... Is it too much of a bother if I stay with you?"

On the ship, a brave and admirable maiden had flung that question at the oblivious, handsome hunk that is Naut. *Why did my heart ache when I saw Ceres? What was the true, unfinished business that spurred me to return to Mesteria? I should know the answer.*

Maybe I shouldn't be so terrified of the moment when fate takes its course.

<<Well, same here. If possible, I want to be with you, Jess.>>

"Yes!" She beamed at me.

I flopped over with a thump before standing up. <<All right, then. Since that's our plan, there's something we've got to do during the wait before our departure.>>

"Intensive magic training, right?"

<<Exactly. It'd be a great help if you could select a few useful tools for me too. There are only three days left. Let's think about what we can do together and practice until we drop.>>

The capital's sturdy training grounds were made of stone, and they were apparently reinforced with magic so that they wouldn't collapse even if some kind of wild, powerful mage started rioting inside. There were several separate training grounds of different sizes; Jess and I chose the smallest one.

Though I called it "small," it was still spacious enough that I felt it could fit three tennis courts. It was a modest elliptical stadium, and it looked as if someone had hollowed out white rock to build it. Gravel carpeted the ground. When I looked up, there was an oval cutout of the gorgeous morning autumn sky, and the wind carried finely shredded clouds across it.

A beautiful maiden and a pig had this stadium all to themselves. The area, surrounded by lofty walls, was quiet. Our feet treading on the gravel were the only sounds echoing out.

"Now then, it's finally time for our intensive training camp!" Jess sounded extremely cheerful as she fitted an anklet around my front leg.

Shravis had procured two anklets for us, each with three different colored ristae. Naut had given me something similar before, but these were an enhanced and more powerful version. They didn't just control water—these remarkable gadgets even granted me a certain amount of power over fire and lightning.

I stared at the girl squatting in front of me and waited for her to finish putting both anklets on my legs. My gaze flowed from one part after another—her fine hair, her supple cheeks, her elegant neck, then finally, my eyes arrived at the mystical valley of wonders sandwiched between two gentle hills. The view was magnificent. *If I'm going to trigger this event every single time, then I wouldn't mind training every day.*

"Excuse me, but just a reminder that I can hear all of that." She finished putting on the anklets and stood up with a wry smile.

<<Oh, my bad. You were just so close that I couldn't control myself...>>

“Well, do what you like, I guess,” she commented with resignation before she walked to the middle of the training ground. “Now then, let’s work hard!” She pumped her fists in front of her chest to encourage herself. “Mister Pig, what should we start with?”

I stood in front of Jess and faced her. <<We don’t have much time. Let’s focus on polishing your greatest strength to the maximum before the campaign.>>

“Greatest strength...” She frowned slightly. “At the moment, the best I can do is create explosions with fuel.”

<<That works. Your greatest strength is the fact that you can create all kinds of fuel with different properties and the firepower they possess. In terms of offense, you’re probably good, so let’s figure out how to use separate fuels depending on the kind of fight you’re in.>>

Jess nodded solemnly. “I agree with that, but there’s just...one problem I have.”

I’d already taken it into account. <<Yeah. You can set fire to monsters like the ogurs, but you can’t do the same to humans. I know. And that’s exactly where these anklets>>—I raised one of my front feet—<<you equipped on me while giving me a glimpse of your chest would come in handy.>>

Pouting slightly, Jess fixed the collar of her blouse. I continued, <<The power to control water, or more accurately, liquids, can be used on your fuel. I can summon fire to ignite fuel or even remotely start an explosion with lightning. You’ll make the fuel, and I’ll use it to attack our enemies. Simple, right?>>

“I see, so we’ll divide our labor and use magic together!”

I nodded. <<First, I’d like to see how much fuel you can make. Can you try to summon the maximum amount of fuel possible for me?>>

“Got it!” Jess replied enthusiastically before energetically raising her right hand.

She squeezed her eyes shut and focused. A few seconds after that, a faint shadow abruptly blocked the sun, dimming our surroundings. Alarmed, I looked up at the sky to find a floating, transparent sphere above our heads that was big enough to cover the entire stadium—a clump of liquid so massive that it looked

as if someone had knocked over an entire pond.

My voice trembled. <<Wha... Jess, what in the world are you doing?>>

Jess tilted her head a little. “I mean, it’s what you told me to do. I only generated an amount of fuel to match the size of the training ground, that’s all.”

Stop. No more overpowered isekaiesque lines, thank you. <<This is no laughing matter! What are you going to do if it falls? Make that disappear for now.>>

Jess pursed her lips sullenly before twisting her wrist and clenching her open palm. With a whoosh, the sphere disappeared, and the light of the autumn sun once again rained down upon the gravel. “You told me to summon the maximum amount, so I invested everything I had, but you weren’t happy...”

<<Sorry, it’s all on me. Well, if you’re able to make that much, then there’s nothing we need to worry about. Thanks.>>

She grinned. “No, that’s all right. I’m actually happy that I managed to surprise you, Mister Pig.”

Simply adorable. <<Looks like you’re fine in terms of quantity. Let’s think about quality next. You mentioned that you did a lot of research and learned how to make all kinds of fuels, right? You even managed to do flame tests—you can mix metal salts into your fuel.>>

She blinked. “Flame...tests?”

<<A while ago, you demonstrated colorful flames to me, didn’t you?>>

“Ah, that’s what you’re talking about! When I mix in salt and saltlike things, I can change the color of the flames, yes.”

<<Yep, that. I want to put that into practical use and do some quick experiments.>>

Following my instructions, Jess manifested a sphere of fuel in front of her eyes and began kneading it like dough. “Huh? Wow... It’s getting all gooey now.” The viscosity of the liquid increased, and ripples ran through it slowly. This substance was somewhat similar to napalm. By mixing coprecipitated aluminum salts of fatty acids with a volatile fuel, you could produce a sticky,

gelatinous substance.

<<This way, you can stop it from vaporizing and causing explosions, and it will stick to your target when you fling it onto them. That's where I come in and light them up. Let's test it out at a distance.>>

Jess stretched her hand forward, and the gooey ball of fuel drifted away. When I deemed that it was a safe distance away, I aimed at it and swung one of my front feet upward. A small, sputtering fireball shot out from my trotter and struck the fuel. It went up in orange flames instantly.

"Woow, that's amazing!" Jess exclaimed. "It really doesn't explode!"

<<Right? I'd like to avoid becoming a roasted suckling pig if possible, so this is better. Of course, explosions would be more effective in certain situations. Starting now, we'll simulate all kinds of battle situations and practice using different fuels, as well as work on our teamwork during ignition.>>

"Okay!"

<<This is going to be intense. Make sure to keep up with me.>>

Two hours passed by.

<<Time out, Jess. Please gimme a break...>>

Right now, we were practicing our teamwork, where I ignited the fuel Jess summoned. Since she relentlessly created one sphere after another, I ended up having to kick up my front legs left and right just like a Cossack dance, and I nearly pulled a muscle in my pork shoulder. Dead tired, I sat on the spot.

"Huh? Is that it?" Jess commanded several spheres to float around her as she began walking towards me. "Your stamina is surprisingly lacking, Mister Pig."

I'm a former scrawny four-eyes. Don't expect so much from me, please. <<It's already noon. I think it's about time we rest for a while.>>

"Okay, that sounds like a plan!" With her magic, Jess shot off the spheres. All of them struck the distant wooden ogur dummy we'd prepared in advance. She raised her hand swiftly to face the dummy and roaring flames consumed it.

Seems that this beautiful maiden is the type you must never offend.

We then moved to the vacant space outside the training grounds, a sunny meadow with a brick wall in the background, and began eating our prepared lunch. A cool breeze fanned our perspiration.

Jess helped herself merrily to sandwiches made with relatively hard bread and fillings such as ham. As for me, I sat by her side and greedily devoured numerous apples.

“Mister Pig...” Hearing her call, I looked up. “Practicing together with you like this is really fun.”

<<...I see. That’s great to hear.>>

Jess took a big bite of her sandwich and swallowed. “If this weren’t preparation for a battle, I’m sure that it would have been even more fun.”

Though it was a casual conversation, I could keenly feel Jess’s wish for peace. <<Agreed. Hey, are there any kind of spells that you want to practice after the war ends?>>

Her cheeks were stuffed with bread as she looked at me with surprise. “Ey fuhell hu harn hu warff inku ey hoowa—”

<<You can swallow first.>>

Audibly gulping down her food, Jess repeated, “A spell to turn you back into a human, of course.”

.../ see. <<In that case, you’ll probably have to work hard at practicing magic, huh?>>

“Yes. But I’ll persevere. There are so many things that I want to do with you after you transform back into a human.”

<<For example...?>> I cautiously prompted.

With a shy smile, Jess looked away. “For example...I’d like you to pat my head.”

Ahhh. I—

No, I’m relieved that her answer was so sweet. For a moment there, I was worried that she might make some kind of indecent request.

“I-I won’t do anything obscene! You’re such a perv,” she huffed.

While she berated me, I looked down at my split hooves. With feet like these, I couldn’t even pat her head. She was always the one patting and hugging me, whereas I couldn’t do anything for her.

As I cast my gaze down, in the corner of my vision, I spotted Jess turning to me. She was smiling. “Sorry... This isn’t the right time for this conversation, is it? Let’s start our afternoon intensive training!” She stuffed her cheeks with the last bite before meticulously folding up the wax paper.

<<Yeah. We’re only tagging along as support, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a war. Let’s do all the preparation we can.>>

Jess, determined, clenched her right hand into a fist. “Brace yourself. I’m going to squeeze you dry!”

Reinforcing four large ships in the royal court’s inventory with magic cut down on preparation time—in the span of a mere three days, we’d assembled a fleet for our campaign to Send-Off Island. Special gigantic ristae had been made especially for our journey, which propelled these ships. We planned to leave Nearbell—a port city—around sunset, so we would arrive at Send-Off Island by the next morning.

Together with Shravis and Jess, I rode on the dragon and landed in Nearbell in the evening. Not even a month had passed since my reunion with Jess here and being dragged into the Nothen Faction’s raid. The harbor had regained its spirit since then, and the mouthwatering aroma of sizzling meat and seafood wafted over from all directions. Though the fort hadn’t been devastated, I remembered that it’d suffered spectacular damage. But when I arrived today, it’d already been restored to its former glory.

We walked across the pier, which was guarded by soldiers, and approached the ships.

“Nearbell is the linchpin of the East. We promptly restored it after the incident and strengthened the security along the coast,” Shravis explained as the powerful sea breeze lashed at him. He was completely in his battle mode, wrapped in an invincible robe that could repel attacks, just like the one Eavis

had worn. “Because of that, we were able to reclaim the initiative and go on the offensive again. Slowly, we are recovering our territory on Mesteria’s mainland. Once we take down the Clandestine Arcanist and his headquarters tomorrow, the war should quickly come to an end.”

He then looked at the dark ocean in the East, which was embraced by the navy blue sky. Send-Off Island should be beyond the horizon in that direction. There was a strong headwind, and all the fleet’s ships inside the bay had folded their sails.

“Oh? Look who’s here.” A woman’s voice called out from behind us. “Mophead, his emergency rations, and the emergency rations’ caretaker.”

It was Itsune, and she was fiddling with her baleful greataxe. She was one of the executive members of the Liberators, and her weapon could shroud itself in lightning during battle. She had tied her black hair up high behind her head, and like always, she was wearing a revealing outfit that exposed much of her chest. Her eyes were sharp like a hawk’s, well matched with her weapon of choice. A girl with braids followed her. She was a Yethma, “Lithis.” Or at least, that was what Itsune chose to call her.

I took a good look at “Lithis.” Her eyes gave off the feel of a mellow and gentle person, and freckles stood out on her cheeks. Her limbs that stuck out of her green dress were long and slender, and she looked as if she was somewhat struggling to coordinate them perfectly. In the boobs department, she was bigger than Jess.

“Lithis” smiled at me, and I swished my tail. That was when a shadow fell over me.

“Listen up, low-life swine,” Itsune growled menacingly. “If you dare lay your grubby hooves on her... Do I have to spell it out for you?”

Nervously, I looked up. The blade of the greataxe, which had been polished to a remarkable degree, was hanging right above my head. It made little sparks that were accompanied by a crackling sound. Itsune must have cared about “Lithis” to an extraordinary extent, because she’d always kept the younger girl close to her.

<<My bad, my bad... I was only looking. I won’t ever lay my hands on her.>> I

defended my case through Jess, and Itsune harrumphed before standing back again.

However, the weapon was still fixed in place above my head. It was almost as if someone had locked its coordinates—even when Itsune pulled on it with force, it wouldn't budge. During that opening, I slipped away from the menacing blade.

"What was that for, mophead?" Itsune protested. "It was clearly a joke. Let it go."

Shravis stared at her, baffled.

"Oh, sorry..." Jess's whisper reached my ears, and finally, Itsune could move her greataxe again.

After giving Jess a bewildered look, Itsune walked past us and headed to a ship. "Let's go, Lithis." The younger Yethma trailed after her.

Shravis turned to Jess. "Were you the one who froze her axe?"

"P-Probably, yes... Sorry, I didn't do it on purpose..." Jess replied nervously.

"Well, it's not important. Let's hurry along and get onboard too." He promptly resumed walking.

As we neared the ship, I said, <<I understand. You protected me. Thanks.>>

Jess had a sour look on her face as she stared at me. "I dislike a Mister Pig without restraint." Then, huffing, she turned away. It seemed that my staring at "Lithis" had touched a sore spot.

<<No, you've got the wrong idea, Jess. There's a reason I was so focused on her.>>

The kindhearted Jess immediately turned to face me again. "A reason?"

<<She might be the key to our victory during this campaign,>> I explained.

"Lithis" was a Yethma whom the Liberators had taken under their wing when they'd found her wandering aimlessly without her memories. But I knew her true name—I deduced it based on the information I'd received from Kento, one of my otaku comrades from Japan. Her original identity might come in handy if

we wanted to defeat the Clandestine Arcanist.

<<Shravis, you brought the thing, right?>> I turned to him.

Shravis took out a single stone from his robe. To be more precise, it was a see-through jewel in the shape of a hexagonal prism—a black rista. Unlike normal rista, however, the black color was concentrated within the center. “Yeah, just like you told me to. I prepared extra that are separate from the ones we’ll use in battle.”

<<See, Jess? We’re cooking up a plan. I’ll tell you the details when we’re on the ship.>>

Jess, however, didn’t seem quite convinced. “But her chest size has nothing to do with your plan, I assume.”

Urk. There’s no getting out of this one. <<I couldn’t fight my instincts... There was a chest right in front of me...>>

“So you *are* a perv.”

Oink! I squealed internally with joy at the fact that a beautiful maiden had held me in contempt.

That was when Shravis cut in. “Let’s not waste time and get on the ship already.”

The sun was sinking beneath the horizon, so the eastern sky was almost completely dark. The ship we were boarding was huge, almost like a whale. The hull was covered with blackish metal, making it blend in with the gently rocking dark ocean.

Just like before, a strong headwind blew in from the East, carrying an uncanny chill with it.

When the ship left the bay, everyone was summoned to the captain’s cabin. Other than Jess and I, the ones present were Hortis, who was the commanding officer of this ship, and the executive members of the Liberators: Naut, the siblings Itsune and Yoshu, as well as “Lithis.” Lastly, Ceres and Sanon were also present in the corner of the cabin.

Inside the cabin that was swaying with the waves, we all sat on our own chair or crate of choice as we listened to Hortis speak.

“We are leading a military campaign together as allies, and our destination is Send-Off Island. Our goal is to utterly annihilate the Nothen Faction. Once we land, we will unleash devastating destruction and death on our enemies. We must reduce their fighting power as much as possible.”

For a moment, everyone other than Hortis gaped at him.

Knitting his eyebrows, Naut stood up. “Hey, this isn’t what we discussed. Are you saying that the goal of our expedition is to reduce our enemy’s forces?”

“Or at least, that’s what we’ll make the Clandestine Arcanist think.” Hortis, who was sitting on the captain’s armchair, lifted his index finger with a grin. “We’ve scouted enough of Send-Off Island to know that the Nothen Faction’s main forces are concentrated there. We’ll give our opponent the impression that we’re here to cull his troops. I’ll make use of magic to accurately and flashily wreak havoc. I would like all of you, my companions, to follow my example at first.”

Itsune was sitting on a wooden crate with her legs parted. She hugged “Lithis,” who was sitting between her legs, as she inclined her head quizzically. “I mean, no objections from us about that, but we’re aiming to kill an immortal mage, right? You sure about splitting up our forces and dedicating our might to other stuff?”

Hortis nodded. “No problem at all. Actually, if we don’t pull off something like this, the Clandestine Arcanist likely won’t show himself.”

Everyone fell silent and listened to his words carefully.

He continued, “The only situation where the Clandestine Arcanist would take things into his own hands would be one in which he deems it’s possible to kill a mage of the royal court. Look at what happened last time. During the battle at Mautteau, he appeared on the battlefield, stalled for time, and tried to lure out Shravis. That’s why we want to convince him that a mage is going on a rampage, thus taking the initiative to bait him out. We’ll use that opening to stab *that thing* into his heart.”

He silently reached out his hand and gestured at Naut. The huntsman fished out a clear, colorless triangular crystal on a string from his collar, which was right beneath the shawl around his neck.

“That’s the Contract Stake,” Hortis explained. “If we pierce his heart with that, the Clandestine Arcanist’s immortality will vanish. The next moment, the debt of time he’s racked up for so long will likely catch up to him and send him into the embrace of death.”

His grave eyes, which were framed by laugh lines, moved from one Liberator after another. He continued, “It won’t be an exaggeration to say that defeating the Clandestine Arcanist once and for all is the only way that the royal court would approve of and protect the Liberators. We can’t afford to lose it—protect it with your life.”

Once Hortis finished his speech, Naut tucked the stake back into his clothes.

There was a noisy grunt, and everyone’s gazes immediately assembled at the source. The black pig, Sanon, took a step forward. Through Ceres, he addressed everyone present. <Pardon me, but will it really be that easy? Yes, we have the advantage that they haven’t discovered all the cards on our side, and I believe that the overall plan is headed in a good direction. But we must not forget that Send-Off Island is the Nothen Faction’s territory—we don’t know what kind of traps might be lying in wait, and we cannot rule out the possibility that the Clandestine Arcanist will try to ambush us.>

I didn’t know whether he was doing it subconsciously, but the black pig was standing next to Ceres’s legs and his torso brushed against her. *What he said was reasonable and worthy of thought, but I think he should learn the concept of personal space a bit more.*

“The little piggy over here mentioned he has a proposal about that,” Hortis said, indicating me.

The gazes that had all been boring into the black pig now gathered on me. *Is this a pig show?*

With Jess as my go-between, I said to everyone, <<There is only one guy who might be able to act as our guide on Send-Off Island, and he’s there right now. Well, if he hasn’t turned into boar stew yet, that is.>>

Next to me, Jess gasped. Hortis and Shravis both maintained their poker faces. Everyone else inclined their heads quizzically.

I continued, <<The depraved black pig over there and I came to Mesteria from a certain country, and we had one more teammate with us. Based on the facts and information we have, we believe that our comrade is being held captive near the Clandestine Arcanist, likely in the form of a wild boar.>>

I'd had a conversation with Jess about this before. The Nothen Faction had specifically targeted the village we were in the morning after our second teleportation to Mesteria. They'd done it for a reason: our third comrade, †DarKnightDeaThWaLtz†keNto—Kento for short because that is way too long—had been captured by the Clandestine Arcanist and had likely spilled possible locations we could appear at. That was my theory, and before he'd passed away, the previous king had given me his seal of approval.

Information on the internal affairs of the royal capital was under strict management, and it was also hard to glean information about the Liberators after they entered an alliance with the royal court. From the Nothen Faction's viewpoint, Kento was likely a valuable source of information since he knew some of our situation. Therefore, there was a high chance that Kento hadn't been killed yet and was even in close proximity to the mastermind, the Clandestine Arcanist. That was my guess, and I was willing to bet on it.

<<We'll get our comrade, who's being held captive as a boar, to be our navigator.>>

Naut furrowed his eyebrows. "But, swine, you said it yourself. He's being held captive. How is he supposed to guide us if he can't move around freely?"

I lifted my right front leg and pointed directly at the girl in Itsune's arms. <<This is where she will play a big role.>>

"Lithis? Why her?" Itsune sounded stupefied.

The girl with the braid, who suddenly ended up under the spotlight, looked at me with shock.

<<Naut, do you remember the name of the Yethma who saved you and helped you escape from the arena?>>

“Nourris,” Naut replied immediately. “But she turned out to be—”

He was interrupted by the black pig, who let out a hideous “Ooooohoin!” Sanon immediately looked at Naut. <Really? Nattie, why didn’t you tell me such an important fact earlier?>

Looking downright confused, Naut paused Sanon with his hand. “Gimme a minute. The person who helped Batt and me to escape wasn’t actually a Yethma, but the king who disguised himself as one. Talking about what happened back then leaves a bad taste in my mouth, so I’ve never gone into detail... But why are you so worked up about the fake Yethma’s name?”

<Nattie, the thing is, there truly *is* a girl with that name. If he wanted a convincing disguise, he should have modeled himself after a Yethma who worked in the North from the beginning. And one such Yethma’s name was indeed Nourris. Here’s the important part: during Kento’s previous visit to Mesteria, the same girl took care of him.>

I nodded. <<So that begs one question: where did the real Nourris end up?>>

Now that we’d explained this much, Naut and the others should realize why “Lithis” was so important.

“I get it. So the resemblance wasn’t coincidental after all.” Naut stared at “Lithis.” After his escape from the arena, Naut had met up with the Liberators in Nearbell. During the reunion, he’d felt that the Yethma who’d saved him and “Lithis” had looked similar.

<<Exactly. The Liberators saved a girl who had amnesia and was out in the middle of nowhere, and she is actually the Yethma who looked after Kento in the North, N—>>

“She *isn’t*!” Itsune abruptly snapped.

There was pin-drop silence.

Itsune wound her arms a little tighter around the girl sitting in front of her and hugged her hard. “What kind of nonsense are you yapping about?” Her voice shook with turbulent emotions. “Everyone calls her Lithis, right?”

Within her embrace, “Lithis” looked lost.

Itsune was adamant about calling the girl she'd taken under her wing "Lithis" for a reason: it was the name of a Yethma close to her who was snatched away by death. The real Lithis's bones were used in the haft of the greataxe on Itsune's back.

Yoshu placed a hand on Itsune's shoulder. His crossbow, which also had Lithis's bones, was equipped on his back.

"Calm down, sis. The Lithis we knew isn't this girl—she has her own identity. We don't care in the least about what you choose to call her, but please don't impose your feelings on other people." His long bangs cast a shadow over his sanpaku eyes with white visible between his iris and lower eyelid. His eyes glinted in the darkness, and he turned to glare at Shravis. "The people whom you should vent your feelings to aren't this girl or the pigs. It's the heartless fellows of the royal court who executed her unjustly."

Looking somewhat distressed, Shravis tightened his lips into a thin line. As the prince, Shravis wasn't at fault—the culprits to blame were Eavis, the reigning king during the execution, as well as Marquis, the current king who'd been responsible for enforcing the law. However, the fact that Shravis didn't try to defend himself at all was a display of his sincere character.

Shravis read the narration and gave me, and me alone, a silent message. <It's not sincerity. I'm merely inarticulate.>

Jess watched over the proceedings with her heart in her throat. None of the people present were in the wrong. We should all be kindred souls fighting for the same goal. Yet, this world was a cruel place, and it reared its ugly head in moments like these. Someone would suffer unforgettable wounds, and the only choice they would have left was to hate someone else.

"Let's get our facts straight first." Naut coolly got the ball rolling. "So, the amnesiac Yethma over there was originally called Nourris. Before she lost her memories, Nourris was affiliated with a guy named Kento. Right now, Kento, who is in the form of a boar, is being held captive by the Clandestine Arcanist. That's the gist of it, right? What now?"

Under his prompting, I took another step forward. <<Shravis, show them the rista.>>

Hearing that, Shravis took out a special black rista and held it up high. It was almost transparent around the edges, but it was inky black in the middle. Only Yethma could use black ristae to realize their prayers. This was a special edition that could release a potent amount of mana instantly.

<<We'll get Nourris to use her powers of prayer. True, she might not remember him. But during Kento's previous teleportation, he risked his own life to try and save her. Their hearts must be connected by their bond, even if it's weakened. That's what I'm counting on. I want Nourris to pray that Kento will get free somehow and come rushing to us.>>

"Is that even possible?" Naut, doubtful, raised an eyebrow. "Plus, we don't even know where this Kento guy is right now."

Hortis gave him a toothy grin. "No worries. There's already been a precedent proving that no matter how much distance there may be, the young maiden's prayers will still reach her target."

Next to me, Jess cast her eyes down a little. There was living proof present—she'd summoned me from another world. Hortis must be right.

The girl with braids looked rather confused, but she eventually nodded. "Understood. I'll try!" Though her features gave me the vibe of a gentle and mellow person, her voice was sonorous and high-pitched, ringing out firmly.

"Lithis..." Itsune whispered weakly.

"It's all right," the girl placated. "Whether my name be Lithis or Nourris, I respect and adore you a lot, Miss Itsune." She stood up.

At that, Hortis got to his feet as well with a satisfied look on his face. "Tonight, we're blessed with a pleasantly clear sky. Since we're here, we might as well pray under the stars, right?"

We left the captain's cabin in single file and climbed the narrow stairs onto the deck.

"Wow..." Right next to me, Jess craned her neck to look up at the night sky.

We'd long left Nearbell behind us. Now, we were surrounded by a panoramic view of the black ocean, and above it was the dark sky. Countless stars

shimmered, looking as if someone had carelessly spilled white sand all over.

“I never knew there were so many stars at night,” Jess whispered to me in awe.

<<There isn’t any light pollution from nearby cities, the wind is strong, and the air is clear. Looks like we chanced across an excellent combination of conditions.>>

When I lifted my face, I saw Jess’s profile against the backdrop of the breathtaking, starry sky. She noticed my gaze and turned around to give me a sweet smile. Then, we admired the ocean of stars together.

Suddenly, my braised pork heart seized up painfully, and I stopped looking at the stars. I took small steps away from Jess.

I approached Lithis—or rather, Nourris, who was kneeling at the bow. I asked, <<Ready?>>

“Yes.” She nodded. “I’m not sure whether I can do this right, but I will pray with all my heart so that I can help the Liberators.”

With his black robe fluttering in the wind, Shravis offered the jewel to Nourris. “Use this rista. Unlike normal ones, all the mana will be released at once, but it definitely won’t cause you any harm. No matter what happens, remember to keep your composure and focus on praying, please.”

Nourris nodded solemnly before accepting the rista with her long and slender fingers.

The bow of this ship was structured like a slightly elevated wooden platform, and everyone who had been present in the captain’s cabin assembled there. Nourris faced the ocean and knelt on the bow. She clasped the rista tightly with her hands in front of her chest. Over her shoulders, I could see the stars that were hanging over Send-Off Island like a shroud even at this very moment.

Right next to Nourris, Itsune was watching over her worriedly. From behind Itsune, Yoshu quietly gazed at his sister.

For a while, Nourris stared at the starry sky above. Then, she gently closed her eyes.

Yethma were a race that prayed to the stars. Whether it be Jess, Ceres, or Blaise who was no longer with us, I was sure that they must have gazed up at the sky just like this at least once in their life.

Time silently trickled by.

With her eyes still closed, Nourris whispered, “I’m starting to see very hairy legs that are bound by chains.”

Hortis dashed over. From behind Nourris’s back, he muttered gently, “That’s right, what you want to do is free those legs. Then, can you please pray that he’ll come to the western coast tomorrow morning to fetch Nourris?”

“Understood. I’ll do my very best...” She squeezed her eyelids together and prayed to the stars.

Without warning, the air shook vigorously. There hadn’t been any sound. The air itself had heavily pulsed, as if there were an invisible, enormous heart beating out there somewhere.

“...Woow,” Yoshu whispered in a barely perceptible voice.

One large shooting star galloped across the sky in front of us like lightning. Another followed. Then one more. Five shooting stars in total—if I didn’t miss any—darted across the sky ahead of us and disappeared in the direction of Send-Off Island.

Even though we were sailing against the wind, the ristae-powered ship steadily cut across the ocean.

Heading to the island where an immortal mage lurked was a daunting endeavor, but right now, a single ray of hope parted the darkness.

Shravis’s voice roused me. “We are arriving soon. Get ready.”

I lifted my torso. Something slid down from my belly, and there was a thump as it struck the floor with cloth padding.

“Gnauph...” That “something” turned out to be Jess’s head. Perhaps she’d used me as her pillow. On the sides of her head were rebellious locks that sprung up after a night’s sleep.

“Huh...? Is it already time for breakfast?”

She seemed like she was still halfway in dreamland. <<We’re inside the ship,>> I reminded her. <<We’re not too far from Send-Off Island.>>

We, the representatives of the royal court, slept in the captain’s cabin that had been under special magical protection. The first to leave the room was Shravis, who opened the door and promptly headed out.

Hortis was grinning from ear to ear as he looked at us. “You two get on like a house on fire, and I’m not exaggerating. I’m almost jealous.” The depraved middle-aged man almost sounded as if he’d wanted to sleep in a pile with us.

<<Um, she was only using me as a pillow, nothing more...>> I replied slowly.

Hortis grinned even wider, flashing his white teeth. “Is that *really* all?” He then left the room.

I turned around. <<Did you get a good night’s sleep?>>

Jess nodded, drowsily rubbing at her eyes. “Yes. But I had a rather strange dream. I remember eating infinite ham that wouldn’t diminish at all...”

That reminds me, I also had a strange dream. I felt as if my ear was being ham-handedly, playfully nibbled bacon forth by something...

She blinked. “Wait...”

Oh. Uh.

We pretended to have noticed absolutely nothing while we prepared for our departure. Jess equipped silver anklets on my two front feet—they were the same type with three unique ristae that we’d used during training.

Once preparations were set, we also climbed onto the deck. The starry sky from last night had dramatically transformed into a misty white sky filled with wispy clouds. As usual, a chilly headwind swept across the ship.

When we walked up to the bow, we could see an island ahead of our ship. It was a jet-black rocky island with a silhouette that gently climbed up towards a volcano to our left—which would be North. A small trail of smoke glided up from the volcano.

“We’ll be arriving at the island in less than half an hora,” Hortis announced. He wore his Ancient Roman-style toga, which fluttered in the wind as he meticulously balanced on the bowsprit. “I suggest that those who haven’t had breakfast yet get to it promptly.”

Jess gave me an apple, and I munched on it while taking this opportunity to observe our surroundings. The ocean was rough, but the four ships, which were stabilized by magic, proceeded smoothly. The ship we were on was in the middle of the fleet and led the way.

Even though we might be bombarded by our enemies at any second, everyone seemed awfully calm and composed.

“Rest assured, pig,” Shravis called out to me. He was munching on the herbs in his hand, which looked similar to lettuce. “There’s nothing to worry about yet.”

I blinked. <<Why’s that?>>

After swallowing the leaves that he’d stuffed his cheeks with, the prince turned to face our destination. “Battles where an established mage is involved generally turn into one-way roads.”

Is he talking about that pervert who’s flashing his hairy thighs on the bow...? Only a moment after that thought, there was a blinding burst of light along the coast of Send-Off Island. A black sphere, aimed directly at us, soared across the sky.

<<Watch out!>> Immediately, I knocked Jess down and used my body as her shield.

“Ah!” She yelped.

With an earth-shattering impact, loud crunching sounds rang out as the ship fell apart—that was what I thought would happen, but no, there was only silence. There was one significant difference, however. Right beneath me, Jess, who’d been pinned down while facing upward, widened her eyes. The apple that slipped out of her right hand rolled across the deck. I looked at the soldiers who’d been patrolling our vicinity, but they carried on as if nothing had happened.

“Um... Well...” Jess’s face flushed cherry red.

From beneath his bangs, Yoshu looked down at the pig pinning down a beautiful maiden on the floor. “The heck are you doing? Rutting first thing in the morning?” he frigidly asked.

<<No, you’ve got the wrong idea,>> I explained frantically while I turned my snout to face him. <<I mean, wasn’t there a cannonball...?>> But maybe Jess didn’t help broadcast my message because Yoshu walked past us without another word.

“Oh, I see, so our resident young virgin still hasn’t experienced his first time yet.” At the bow, Hortis turned around with a smirk on his face. Roughly a hundred meters ahead of him, the cannonball was frozen and suspended in place. “Well then, allow me to demonstrate. Refined by fifteen ecdysias, *this* is the highest mastery over magical skill you’ll find in Mesteria.”

Even while he faced me and gave me his little speech, there were more flashes of light over on the island, and more cannonballs hurled at us at sonic speed. They didn’t get much farther than the first one—in fact, they stopped in precisely the same spot.

“Strike first, strike hard, no mercy. That’s my motto,” he announced.

Not a second later, there was the sound of something cutting through the air violently, and the frozen cannonballs disappeared. No, “disappeared” wasn’t the right word. They’d been sent back to the island while maintaining their initial speed.

The next thing I knew, the coast of Send-Off Island was engulfed with blazing flames. After a short delay, distant booming resounded across the ocean.

“I’ve maintained the absolute speed of their motion while only reversing their direction,” Hortis explained. “Therefore, the cannonballs will return straight to the cannons they were shot from. This way, we can efficiently destroy our enemy’s artillery batteries.”

I get it. Shravis wasn’t exaggerating when he said it was a one-way road. In fact, maybe I should even call him a Certain Accelerator.

“Um... Mister Pig?” Jess called out tentatively. “I think that’s enough, right?”

I finally recalled that I was on top of Jess. <<My bad, I forgot.>>

I hurriedly stepped aside. Jess stood up, looking self-conscious. Shravis turned a blind eye while continuing to munch on some herbs nearby.

Meanwhile, Hortis seemed to have too much spare time on his hands, because he was grinning from ear to ear as he stared at us. “They say a mage who hasn’t undergone ecdysia is equal to one soldier in combat prowess. But with every ecdysia we experience, our fighting capabilities are doubled. It works like this: With one ecdysia, we measure up to two soldiers. With two, we measure up to four soldiers. Now then, let’s do a quick calculation of how terrifying mages can be. Young virgin, are you good at arithmetic?”

Even if calculations weren’t my forte, anyone could comprehend how harrowing exponential functions could become. Let’s take a piece of paper that has only 0.1 millimeter thickness, for example. Folding it once would make it twice as thick, folding it twice would make it four times as thick, and folding it twenty-five times would make it—brace yourself—roughly the same height as Mount Fuji. Of course, this is only possible if you have a piece of paper big enough to be folded that many times.

“Our dear Shravis has experienced four ecdysias,” Hortis continued. “In other words, you multiply two repeatedly four times, making him approximately as strong as sixteen soldiers. As for me, I’ve experienced fifteen, which means...”

My eyes widened. <<You’re as powerful as 32,768 soldiers...?>>

He grinned with pride. “I do have to remind you that, naturally, those who inherited the blood of the royal family are special. I believe that the higher the number of ecdysias gets, the actual power level would likely deviate more and more from the exponents of two. We stop experiencing ecdysias around the age of twenty-five or twenty-six, but the overwhelming majority of normal mages can’t even reach ten before that point.”

Uh, ten times still counts as 1,024 soldiers, mind you, making the mage a literal one-man army...

There was a new round of cannon fire from the island, but Hortis didn’t even turn around as he bounced all of them back.

The exponential increase was way too outrageous, so it was probably safe to assume that as the number of ecdysias increased, the rule of doubling would probably be less accurate—as in, the increase would be less than two times. But even if I took that into account, there was no dispute that the leveling up of mages was spine-chilling.

Flashing me a toothy smile, Hortis said, “I’m sure you understand how dreadful the royal court can be now. My brother Marquis is at nineteen ecdysias, while my father Eavis was an incredible mage who even experienced a shocking twenty-one ecdysias. If we calculate it simply without taking other things into account, my brother has power equal to roughly 520,000 soldiers while my father had power equal to roughly 2,100,000 soldiers. They have certainly earned their titles as the mage with the most raw power and the unparalleled mage, respectively.”

I couldn’t pick up my jaw from the ground. I turned to Jess and asked her just in case. <<Hey, I think you mentioned this to me before, but how many ecdysias did Vatis, the founder of the royal court, experience again?>>

“According to the records, she experienced forty-three,” Jess replied.

Two to the power of forty-three. If we estimate two to the power of ten to be a thousand, a quick calculation would yield me... <<In that case, Vatis’s military strength was equal to roughly...eight trillion...?>> It was a scale that I couldn’t even fathom.

“She was practically in godlike territory, don’t you agree?” Hortis mused. “And traces of her power run through the veins of royalty even now. Her incredible strength stems from the fact that she hunted down nearly every single Contract Stake scattered across Mesteria, and though it’s gradually declining, that power is passed down to her descendants from generation to generation. The royal court has always arrogantly referred to this prestige as ‘divine blood,’ though I personally despise calling it that,”

The term rang a bell, and I soon found the memory in my mind. Shravis had mentioned it when he’d tried to make excuses about his virgin status.

I glanced over. The prince, who’d been munching on herbs indifferently while sitting on the railing, abruptly broke out into a coughing fit.

“I see, I see!” Even though we were drawing nearer to the island, Hortis laughed heartily as if he had no sense of stress. “Despite having such a cute young lady as his fiancée, my nephew is still piously guarding his chastity. How admirable!”

Whenever you went to family gatherings, there would always be that one irksome uncle who shared dirty comments that made everyone uncomfortable. That was exactly who Hortis reminded me of. *Does he hail from the Jinnouchi family or something?*

I didn’t want to see Jess’s face right now, so I walked until I was next to Hortis. I looked towards our destination and saw fumes rising from several places along the coast. Realization suddenly struck me. <<Hey, dirt—I mean, Mister Hortis.>>

“How may I help you, young virgin?”

<<If I remember correctly, you mentioned that you sent all the cannonballs back to the place they were shot from, yes?>> I asked politely.

“Precisely. I haven’t made a single mistake with my calculations. They should have all returned to their sender without even a margin of error.”

I narrowed my eyes. <<I can see many columns of smoke, but with one exception, they are all clustered closely in groups of five. Since they have to transport heavy cannonballs, it is likely more convenient to station cannons near each other.>>

“I think so too. Well, of course, it might also be because every five cannons share one power source—one Yethma collar.”

Understood. <<But there is a single exception—one column of smoke is rising independently. Don’t you think that is rather strange?>>

He quirked an eyebrow. “Indeed. In total, I bounced twenty-five cannonballs back, so you should be able to divide the columns perfectly by five.”

<<That means this single exception isn’t rising from an artillery battery.>>

He seemed to read my thoughts because Hortis nodded with a grin. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve found the perfect spot to land! Prepare the ships’ tenders!”

Hortis’s command sent the entire ship into a frenzy.

Jess walked next to me and asked, “How did you two decide on our landing point?” Curiosity was written all over her face as usual, and I felt some of my anxiety melt away.

<<There are five cannons lined up along each artillery battery,>> I started to explain. <<But there are a total of twenty-six smoke columns. There’s one outlier. This independent smoke wasn’t caused by that depraved pervert bouncing back the cannonball. It’s probably a smoke signal that’s taking advantage of the confusion to summon us.>>

Her eyes widened with realization. “It must be Mister Kento!”

<<Yeah, it’s very likely. That guy has a rather unique personality, but he’s also someone who can analyze things rationally. If he wanted to send us a message, he wouldn’t do anything weird. I’m sure that he’d give us a signal in a suitable method that we can anticipate.>>

Kento was a male high school student whose second occupation was an ultrastudious otaku. Also known as †DarKnightDeaThWaLtz†keNto, his academic results at school were apparently quite remarkable. He was an honor student at a high school with a standard curriculum.

Feeling something poking my back lightly like a flower petal, I turned around to see Ceres smiling behind me. Sanon, the black pig, was huddling next to her feet. They were physically close as always.

Ceres explained, “Mister Super-Virgin, Mister Sanon wants to chat with you.”

In the corner of my vision, I saw Jess puffing out her cheeks with displeasure. Deciding not to worry about that, I focused on Sanon.

<I see that we are finally going to meet up with Kento.> The black pig was staring at the independent smoke column. He seemed to have arrived at the same deduction. <In the North, he was pushed to the point of spilling our location, was he not? I certainly hope that he is a free and healthy man right now.>

I knew very well what Sanon was getting at. Before our teleportation, the three of us had sworn to each other that we’d do everything we could to save the Yethma. However, the fact was that he’d ended up leaking information. We

didn't know whether we could fully trust him. Plus, if the prayer hadn't worked properly, he would still be in captivity, meaning that we couldn't rule out the possibility of the smoke signal being a trap.

<<Shravis assured me that the shooting stars were evidence that something definitely happened. Since Nourris prayed about Kento, some kind of miracle must have befallen him on Send-Off Island. Furthermore, we have the most technical mage of the royal court with us. Let's have faith.>>

<Yes, you make a good point...> He sighed. <My apologies, I just couldn't wipe away the ominous premonition in my gut, and I only wanted to calm down by chatting with you, Mister Lolip. And just as I planned, my anxieties have subsided. Thank you very much.>

During Ceres's stroking, the black pig's tail swished back and forth vigorously. A sweet smile bloomed on the girl's face, but I had an inkling that apprehension was seeping out from beneath it.

I took a step forward and approached Ceres's legs. She carried a pleasant fragrance around her that was a different type from Jess's. <<You okay there, Ceres? Would you like me to lend an ear?>>

Ceres gasped, widening her eyes before shaking her head profusely. "No, you really don't have to! Um, I'm perfectly fine, really..." She stole a glance at something behind me.

I turned over my shoulder to see Jess crossing her arms and looking as prickly as a porcupine. *Oh...*

Ceres ran off as if someone were chasing her, and the black pig trotted after her. Both Sanon and Ceres seemed somewhat on edge, but I didn't get the chance to figure out why in the end.

"Mister Super-Virgin," Jess chided, "if you keep getting distracted by other women, I won't stroke you anymore."

Meekly, I returned to her side. <<Sorry. We might end up splitting up during the expedition, and I wanted to memorize her scent just in case so that I could track her down in an emergency.>>

"Oh!" Jess covered her mouth. Her cheeks were bright red. "So that was what

happened. I...can't apologize enough."

Half of it had been an excuse, and hearing her response made guilt weigh heavy on my heart. <<Nah, it's not your fault. I mean, I can't argue the fact that I thought the legs of a thirteen-year-old girl had a pleasant scent...>> *You know, when I verbalize it, it sounds gross. Not just a little gross, but super disturbing.*

"Hey, Mister Pig..." At that, I lifted my gaze. Bashfully, Jess lifted the hem of her invincible robe. "Would you like to sniff my scent as well just in case?"

Jess was presenting her legs to me. I had the urge to pounce on her while squealing like a pig, but no, I must control myself right now. <<No, I won't have to. After all, I won't leave your side, even for an instant.>>

We split up, boarding small boats separately, and swiftly headed towards our destination. The surrounding scenery was unnaturally distorted in a circle, and we could only see one spot on the island coast, as if we were peering into a microscope.

According to Hortis, he'd manipulated the direction of light so that we were basically invisible from the island. Meanwhile, we were detecting our surroundings with ultrasonic waves. Our enemies couldn't find us, but if they ever moved, we would sense them.

Though he was a depraved, dirty old man, his word was probably trustworthy, and he was a rather dependable ally.

The coast was covered with rocks and boulders, but because Hortis created a path for us by instantly freezing patches of the sea, our troops of over a thousand managed to get ashore in the blink of an eye. A little farther into the ocean, the anchored ships of the royal court began firing their cannons in a random direction in the distance, further distracting the Nothen troops from the landing operation already shrouded by invisibility. Without the help of magic, it would likely be impossible for such a great number of people to get ashore without tipping off our enemies at all.

Ebony black volcanic rocks carpeted the vast rocky stretch that served as the shore. Some distance ahead was a large, sparse pine forest that fit the description of "nearly withered." A black column of smoke rose from one spot

in the forest.

The perverted mage with the white toga marched at the vanguard while the royal court's army assembled in an irregular formation behind him. They were all wearing matching black camouflage armor. Surrounded by the sentinels were the Liberators and us randos.

"Master, you okay there?" It was the voice of a young boy. I turned to look at the source.

Naut was walking while hunching his back somewhat, and a boy, Batt, worriedly placed a hand on his shoulder. When Naut had been held captive in the North, he'd saved this young boy from the arena during his escape, and the kid was roughly the same age as Ceres. His light brown hair was trimmed short, and he had big round eyes like a puppy's.

Naut was doing his best to act normal, but he'd pulled up the black shawl all the way to just below his nose, and his eyebrows were practically scrunched together. *Hmm. Could this be what Ceres was so anxious about?*

I requested Jess to relay my messages before I addressed Naut. <<Hey, Naut. You good?>>

Deep blue eyes sharply glared at me. "I'm just seasick. It won't affect my performance in battle, so you can rest easy." He increased his walking pace and distanced himself from us as if he were trying to avoid something.

I quizzically tilted my head. <<Was our voyage rough enough to cause such a reaction?>>

Jess also inclined her head, puzzled. "There was barely any swaying though... Perhaps he's simply sick or feeling unwell. When I overheard his thoughts, I could also tell that he was pushing himself very hard."

I see. Ceres has watched Naut carefully for a long time. I'm not surprised if she noticed that something isn't right.

The march of our troops abruptly ground to a halt, and I turned to look at Hortis, who was in the lead. He was stretching out his right hand to the side, signaling for us to stop. "Sanon, young virgin, could you both come forward?"

Under his summons, we stepped forward. Just before the bounds of the pine forest, a small, scrawny beast stood on the peak of an inky black rock. The beast had stiff, burnt umber fur, a long snout, and a single pair of fangs that protruded out of its mouth slightly.

It was a boar. It stared at us intently.

<Just like I thought, destiny has drawn us to each other. I have been waiting for you, my brothers.> The voice of a boy, which was just a tad obnoxious, echoed in my mind.

Now then, don't mind me, sometimes I'll have to add a couple of brackets here and there to translate what he actually means since he's a rather unique character. But don't you worry, without a doubt, this is the accurate tone of †DarKnightDeaThWaLtz†keNto—I mean, Kento.

Craning his neck with pride, the boar continued, <This encounter was, by no means, pure coincidence. A miracle [magic] released me from my restraints, and a dream has guided me all the way here. Mister Lolip, Mister Sanon, I am certain that the two of you arranged them. You have my gratitude.>

The two pigs addressed, Sanon and me, nodded. With this, the three otaku with glasses who'd attempted to reteleport to Mesteria—the three pigs who'd returned to save the Yethma—were all present.

<<I'm glad we all found each other in the end,>> I said. <<Looks like you managed to survive safe and sound, Kento.>>

During my speech, I heard the sound of frantic running from behind. The footsteps approached until they were right next to me. It was Nourris. “So you're...Mister Kento...” As she spoke, she took a step forward from my side.

The moment he saw the young girl, Kento's tiny eyes widened with astonishment. If they were having a conversation, I couldn't hear it. Only the purring and rumbling of a beast leaked out of the boar's mouth. He slowly approached us and leaned his snout towards the girl's feet.

“I'm sorry... I don't remember anything...” Nourris whispered weakly. The boar shook his head a little. She crouched down and hugged him tightly. A single stream of tears trickled down from his eyes.

Hortis, who looked down at the pair, spoke in an earnest tone that I'd never heard from him before. "If your hearts weren't connected, such miracles wouldn't be possible. Even if your presence vanished from her memories, all of your efforts were engraved somewhere deep inside her heart."

There was thunderous rumbling as the ground shook. A large cloud of smoke erupted from the volcano in the distance. Hortis turned to look at it. "I think it's about time we leave. We don't know how that mage is going to interpret your escape. Can we count on you as our guide?"

The boar pulled away from Nourris and turned to face us. <The place you seek [the elderly man's stronghold] is at the foot of that volcano. He has prepared numerous cheap tricks [traps] on the way there, but you may rest assured that my spectacular little gray cells [brain tissue] have perfectly memorized the ideal path.> That was all Kento shared before he turned around and faced the volcano. <Now then, let the games [counterattack] begin.>

Since we'd managed to find Kento, our operation began with a bang.

To recap, we'd make the Nothen Faction think that our goal was annihilating the Nothen troops and destroying the island. This would lure out the Clandestine Arcanist, who would likely come for the heads of our mages. We'd take advantage of that opening to finish the immortal mage once and for all with a small group of assassins. Hortis led the mass destruction squad while Shravis led the small assassin squad. Jess and I were backing the prince up.

I wasn't exaggerating when I said that the assassin squad was small—I could easily list all the other members: Kento, our guide; Naut, the guardian of the Contract Stake; Yoshu, the sniper who'd shoot the Contract Stake into the Clandestine Arcanist's heart; Batt, who was in charge of watching our surroundings and alerting us; and finally, Sanon and Ceres, who backed everyone up.

We stayed together as one group. For now, we would lurk in the rear of the mass destruction squad until the time was right. We hid on top of a slightly elevated stretch of rock and watched over the invasion.

Now that we didn't have to worry about accidentally killing Kento, there was

no reason for Hortis and Itsune, who led the charge onto the island, to use discretion. When we left the bounds of the pine forest, we reached the clearing where the Nothen Faction's military base was located. Their troops scrambled into battle formation, and our forces immediately launched their fierce attack.

And so, the banquet of destruction and slaughter began.

We could only watch the overwhelmingly one-sided battle from a distance. Hortis took down one enemy after another with bright flashes and bursts of flames. Those who escaped his wrath were hunted down by the soldiers of the royal court and the Liberators, who were led by Itsune.

Even the ogurs, monsters that were roughly three meters tall, couldn't put up a fight against a mage and Itsune. Hortis's inferno reduced the monsters to ashes, not even leaving bones behind, while Itsune's greataxe chopped off their heads with one swing. Just like before, all cannon fire from the enemy was returned to their senders. Our troops only went in one direction: forward.

Sanon spoke to me. <Well, well. Unlike battles on the mainland, we don't have to consider civilians, which makes it extremely favorable for us. Our enemies must be running out of options—at this point, they should be forced to send their mage forward.> He sounded satisfied.

Next to him, Kento nodded. <He only planted those cheap tricks near the volcano. I can already predict what will happen... Our adversaries will withdraw while leading our troops into that area where the elderly man will strike back. We should tread the parts that are free from his cheap tricks and take that man by surprise.>

A question abruptly popped up in my mind. <<Just wondering. You mentioned places without traps, but do they really exist?>>

The boar smirked, flashing his fangs. <You know of their monsters, yes? The Nothen Faction's factories are located on this island, and they were operating at maximum capacity until this morning. Right now, the staff are likely scrambling to evacuate due to the abrupt assault. The last thing on their minds would be taking their sweet time to prepare their petty tricks. We only have to go through those safe havens.>

<<I see.>> I nodded. <<There aren't any traps in the plots of land they use for

their own purposes.>>

<Bravo.>

The march of our allied forces was practically unstoppable, as if they were slicing through tofu. The sound of metal clanging against metal and the roar of explosions rapidly faded into the distance.

Averting her gaze from the bloodbath, Jess turned to me. “Ogur factories, huh...? I’m curious about how in the world those creatures were made.”

Ogurs were giant humanoid monsters covered with thick skin. I was well aware of how dreadful they were. <<Right, I’m kind of curious too.>> I turned to Shravis. <<Has the royal court looked into it at all?>>

The prince watched over the progress of the battle as he replied, “We haven’t. Or to be more accurate, we didn’t have the spare time or resources to investigate. They don’t pose a significant threat to mages and trained platoons. We didn’t deem them problematic enough for us to invest effort into locating their birthplace.”

“That makes sense. Everyone in the royal court seemed to have their hands full, after all...” Jess muttered, having witnessed it firsthand while living in the capital with the royal family during the three months that I was away.

<<After I returned to Mesteria, the royal couple did seem extremely busy.>> I frowned slightly. <<I never knew that was the case even before then.>>

Jess nodded. “Yes. The royal family is responsible for processing all important and confidential matters, as well as making significant decisions for the country. I heard that, even under normal circumstances, administrative work alone was enough to fill their schedule. But unfortunately, the revolt of the North happened, quickly followed by King Eavis’s passing, so I fear that they are literally shaving off their lifespan to deal with all their work.”

It seemed that absolute monarchy wasn’t a breeze at all. Plus, there didn’t seem to be any labor standards enforced by law in this world, which wouldn’t help.

“I’m worried about mother’s health,” Shravis muttered softly. “Recently, she’s even resorted to drinking monster tonics...”

For a moment, I couldn't believe my ears. He was speaking in the Mesterian tongue, of course, but the words he used could only be translated as "monster tonics" no matter how many times I thought about it. *Monster tonics? Are they what I think they are?*

Beside me, Jess helpfully explained. "It's what Madame Wyss was drinking when we went to ask her about the location of the Oath Chamber. They are drinks that will allow you to forgo sleep by spending mana, but they apparently have bad side effects on your body... I've tasted a little once, and it was a rather overwhelming experience. I was wide awake for an entire night and my body felt excited and restless all over."

My mind blanked. <<Your body felt...excited?>> I repeated on reflex.

Jess gasped and covered her mouth. "U-Um, you have the wrong idea! I-I haven't done anything unspeakable!" Judging by her cherry red face and how flustered she was, it seemed that she'd indeed done something unspeakable. Though I was a little intrigued, we were on a battlefield, so this wasn't the right time.

Shravis took out a small bottle of blue liquid and showed it to me. "There is a bottle of the drink here. Would you like to try it too, pig? I hear that if those without magic drink it, their teeth melt, their throats burn, and it punctures holes in their stomachs."

<<Bruh, not in a million years.>> I glared at him.

"I was joking."

I raised an internal eyebrow. *If you say so, sir. But I'm afraid I will have to decline because I will only drink our green monstrous tonics after I return to my native country.*

While we were busy being dumb, Hortis contacted Shravis through the magical seashell. After communicating with him for a while, the prince called out to us. "Our army has eradicated all the enemies nearby. Uncle mentioned that he would press on to draw attention. In the meantime, he wants us to take another route to the enemy stronghold and scout out the situation."

Naut and Yoshu expressed their agreement by standing up.

Under Kento's guidance, we ran as quickly as possible through the woods. The island wasn't too big—in less than thirty minutes, we arrived at one end of the ogur factory area Kento had mentioned. The factories were dotted across the vicinity of the volcano, and paths connected them like a mesh. We would travel across this zigzag path to minimize the risks while approaching our destination.

The first ogur factory we arrived at was on a desolate rocky stretch where a pungent odor permeated. We were on high alert as we slowly stepped inside.

Parts of the volcanic rock had been dug out like hot springs, and crimson red liquid filled each pool. Perhaps the viscous liquid was some sort of decaying substance because it made muffled bubbling sounds while releasing odorous vapor that reminded me of fish or something metallic.

"So the ogurs were manufactured here?" Shravis asked.

The boar, Kento, nodded. <They seemed to be cultivating those creatures inside the sludge while feeding them something that looked like meat.>

I blinked. *Meat...?*

We observed the factory as we advanced on. Naut had pulled up his shawl to cover his nose, while Yoshu blocked his mouth with his sleeve. Batt looked like he might throw up at any moment. Anxiously, Ceres followed Naut while repeatedly stroking the black pig that clung to her.

As for me, I walked beside Jess as I sniffed around. If they'd hurriedly evacuated this factory, they should have left traces that hinted at their ogur-manufacturing process.

"Mister Pig, look..." Jess whispered.

I looked in the direction she indicated. At a slight distance from us, a part of the ground was somewhat white. <<Huh? What's that?>>

Jess scanned our surroundings cautiously. "How about we head over there for a little bit and take a quick look?"

It seemed to be roughly fifty meters away, the length of an Olympic swimming pool. We deviated from the path for a short while and soon learned the identity of the white things.

They were bones.

An unthinkable number of human bones had been dumped here, exposed to the elements, which had turned them white. The dense stench of death wafted from the mountain of remains.

“Mister Pig, there’s something strange about that bone...” Jess’s voice trembled as she pointed her index finger.

I looked at the bone she indicated—it was a skull with a warped shape. The right half was shaped like a normal human skull, but the left half had large swelling lumps, retaining none of its original glory.

Upon closer inspection, there were plenty of other unnatural bones. Each of them looked as if they’d been in the process of growing bigger than their original size, and I even found ones that were longer than Jess’s entire arm.

A nasty premonition welled up in my heart. *This place is an ogur factory. Judging by these bones, it’s almost like they—*

“Sorry, Mister Pig. Let’s head back.” Teary-eyed, Jess looked at me. I didn’t say anything, instead replying with a nod.

When we returned to where Shravis was, we found him standing still and staring intently at something that had fallen into a crack between the rocks. Shards of glass were scattered about—perhaps they’d shattered a bottle or a jar. Inside the crack was a lone animal organ, and a handful of flies were buzzing around it.

Jess sucked in a sharp breath and placed a hand against her chest.

“It’s a uterus,” Shravis muttered, his voice much quieter than usual.

At this point, I was beginning to piece together how ogurs were manufactured. In my mind, I pulled up what Jess had read in the history text. *“The uterus of a mage supposedly holds extremely potent mana that can also serve as a source of life force. If a normal human ingested them in bulk, they would be cursed, but if it were a mage...they could apparently gain immortality.”*

Deformed human bones that looked as if they had been swelling. A fallen

uterus.

It was a simple deduction. Forcing mana potent enough to turn a mage immortal into normal humans likely mutated their bodies into monsters.

This place was so disgusting that I felt bile rise up my throat. Jess placed a hand on my back. I tried to look up at her face, but I was interrupted by Ceres's small gasp behind us.

"Mister Naut!" she cried.

In a panic, I looked over my shoulder to see Naut tumbling to the ground. Ceres tried to support him and nearly fell together, but the black pig slid in at the last moment for the save. Ceres and Naut fell on a heap onto the black pig.

Though Sanon let out a pathetic croak of pain, he stubbornly cushioned their fall and protected the pair.

<<What happened?!>> Flustered, we ran up to the trio.

Naut squeezed his eyes shut tightly. The black shawl covered all the way up to his nose, but the exposed part of his face was deathly pale. There was a sheen of sweat on his skin. *I knew it. This isn't seasickness at all!*

Ceres sat up and gathered Naut into her arms. "Mister Naut, get a grip!" She pulled away the shawl so that it wouldn't smother his nose and mouth.

She froze instantly. Everyone was rendered speechless with shock.

A dense black mesh pattern covered Naut's entire neck. The bruise-like marks had crossed over his jaw, shrouded his mouth, and had crept fully below his nose.

I'd noticed that Naut had recently worn this shawl everywhere he went. Now, I finally knew that its purpose had been to hide *this*.

Naut's breathing was extremely labored as he rested his head on Ceres's lap.

Apprehension tensing his shoulders, Shravis cautiously observed our surroundings. "...It's the Clandestine Arcanist's curse. When in the world was he attacked?" Naut having been cursed after we'd arrived at the island without anyone realizing it would be horrifying news with grave implications...

But I had a feeling that wasn't the case. <<He was cursed a long time ago.>> I sifted through my memories. <<After escaping from the arena in the North, Ceres healed Naut's wounds on the ship. Back then, I spotted a small mark near his throat. He must have been cursed while being held captive at the arena. Ceres's prayers healed all the other injuries, but the only thing they couldn't cure was that mark.>>

Ceres's big doe eyes turned to me. "Sorry, but what is this about a curse?"

Shravis violently tore open the cloth around Naut's chest. Two necklaces were still on his sternum—the Contract Stake and the glass pendant. Beneath them was black skin that looked as if someone had spilled ink all over his chest. A morbid, elaborate mesh pattern left no part of his skin untouched.

This was my first time seeing Naut's pendant—the image of a girl from the chest up was seared into it. A collared Yethma who somewhat reminded me of Jess, she was smiling mischievously. It was Eise, the maiden who was forever in Naut's heart.

Naut's chest heaved vigorously. His breathing was strenuous.

"Mister Naut, are you all right?" Ceres gently caressed his cheek as she called out to him. "Mister Naut?"

"I'm fine... I can stand by myself." Muttering deliriously, Naut jerked his torso forward. But all he achieved was sliding down from Ceres's knees.

Frantically, Ceres held him in her arms and supported him back onto her lap. "Please don't move... I'll heal you right away, I promise..." she whispered, her voice trembling with suppressed sobs.

Ceres was completely lost about what was happening, her eyes growing moist.

Shravis stood up. "This isn't good. The curse is progressing. It might have reached his brain or spinal cord." He took out the seashell, held it up against his mouth, and yelled, "Uncle, please rush here as quickly as possible!"

Hortis came sprinting over as Rossi. The moment he returned to his human form, he didn't even pause to wear some clothes before squatting down and

giving Naut a medical examination. At this point, no one made any disapproving comments about it.

Naut's eyes cracked open a sliver, and he stared back up at Hortis. Meanwhile, the man in his birthday suit solemnly observed Naut's neck and performed palpation.

"So this is the curse that killed my father," Hortis muttered. "I must say, it's certainly a tough nut to crack."

Yoshu widened his sanpaku eyes and demanded answers. "What do you mean by that? Explain already."

Hortis sucked in a deep breath. He manifested a toga cloth and wrapped it around his frame. "This pattern is an incurable curse that even killed the previous king. Naut's unrelenting determination seems to have deterred its progress, but now, it's finally arrived at his brain. If it continues spreading without interference"—Hortis glanced at Ceres and hesitated before continuing in an anguished voice—"death is the only outcome."

Tears trickled down from Ceres's eyes. "Please tell me that you're...joking..." Her earnest perseverance could move anyone, but Hortis only shook his head slowly after hearing her shaky voice.

She went silent.

Possibly because his stamina was giving out, the pattern started spreading across Naut's skin at a pace that I could make out with my eyes. Though it was sluggish, it'd already climbed up Naut's cheeks and was beginning to cover his eyelids.

He let out a painful groan. "A curse, huh...? Am I...going to die in a place like this?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Before I knew it, the heavens above the island had been smothered by dense, gloomy clouds.

Color draining from their faces, Jess and Shravis, who knew about the curse, could only watch helplessly. There were very, very few methods to lift this curse. Furthermore, the chances of successfully performing the only proven method we knew about were exceedingly low. Jess had managed to survive the

curse because of an almost miraculous combination of requirements, which wouldn't have been possible without Eavis's help.

<<Mister Hortis, do you have any solutions?>> I asked him desperately, grasping at straws. <<Can we use the Contract Stake?>>

But Hortis only continued to cast his eyes downward. "Ecdysias are phenomena that can only happen to mages. Even if we stab Naut with one stake, it will only grant him magic—the curse won't fade."

The black pattern completely covered Naut's eyes. Like ink seeping into paper, his sclerae were stained utterly black. As if that weren't enough, the curse began greedily reaching for his neat, well-defined brows.

"It's so dark..." he muttered in a barely perceptible voice while his eyes were open. Gazes of despair convened on him.

"No, don't do this, Mister Naut, no, please don't die... Mister Naut..." Ceres grieved, her voice trembling the entire time. Her tears splashed onto Naut's face.

From far away, I heard the harsh sounds of battle. We surrounded Naut, rooted to the spot as the sudden tragedy unfolded before our eyes.

One man broke the standstill—Hortis, who unexpectedly peered into Ceres's tearstained face. "Hey, Ceres. Do you have the resolve to dedicate your life to Naut?"

What the hell are you saying? Before I could cut in, however, Ceres firmly nodded.

Hortis tightly pressed his lips together and touched her cheeks. Slowly, he opened his mouth. "In that case, go on and do what you want to do. That's the only way we can save him."

His voice held a gravity I'd never heard from him before, and Ceres's large eyes focused on Hortis. The man's rough and bony hand glided down from her cheeks to her collar.

A soft click. The collar split in half.

Hortis swiftly removed the silver collar, which was supposed to be under

magical protection, from Ceres.

“Uncle, are you possibly...?” Shravis’s eyes widened, and he was clearly shaken.

His uncle, however, wasn’t taking any objections—he stood up and gestured at Shravis to stop. “Ceres’s soul is screaming despondently. All I did was set her cries free.”

The new center of attention was Ceres, sitting weakly on the ground with Naut’s head on her lap.

“What’s wrong, Ceres? Did something...” Naut began with a raspy voice.

Ceres suddenly leaned forward until her head was right above his face.

For an instant, it felt like time itself slowed to a crawl.

The girl’s petal pink lips drew closer and closer to Naut’s black stained lips; then, they gently overlapped.

Next to me, Jess sucked in a sharp breath.

It was the pure, clumsy kiss of a pure, clumsy girl. She squeezed her eyes shut and frantically pushed her lips against his. We watched over her in silence.



Staring would be kind of rude. Maybe I should look away to give them privacy.
No sooner had those thoughts crossed my mind than realization struck me.

Ceres's mouth was dyed a ghastly black.

By the time I figured out Hortis's aim, the pattern across Naut's body rapidly wilted away. In exchange, the black mesh pattern began to crawl over Ceres's cheeks, then down to her neck. She'd made the ultimate sacrifice for Naut.

Just like how Jess had saved me after I'd been stabbed by the Clandestine Arcanist, Ceres was transferring Naut's curse to herself. Hortis had likely removed her collar to elevate her keen prayers for Naut's salvation into an actual spell. After all, she was a mage first and a Yethma second.

The dark clouds parted above us, and sunlight swung down from the sky like ladders. It almost seemed as if they were beckoning a young maiden to ascend to the distant heavens above.

Naut coughed violently, and Ceres pulled away. Almost like actors switching positions under the spotlight, Naut sucked in a fierce breath and sat up as Ceres collapsed on the ground with her face and neck stained raven black. There was a thud as her petite head smacked onto the rocky ground.

"Ceres!" Naut, who'd regained awareness, shouted vehemently. No longer were there marks blemishing his skin.

Just like once upon a time, their situations were reversed. This time, it was Naut's turn to kneel next to Ceres, who was lying face up on the rocks. He reached out and cradled the back of her head before lifting it slightly.

"Mister Naut..." Ceres opened her eyes a little. From her mouth, a gruesome black pattern expanded across her skin like a stain.

His face still pale, Naut looked down at her in a daze. "Ceres, get a grip." Panic and despair took over his expression.

Conversely, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that Ceres's face was peaceful. "Mister Naut...what did my kiss taste like?"

He chewed on his bottom lip. "Why're you asking that of all things at a time like this?"

The girl opened her eyes to the fullest and stared intently at Naut's face. "Did it...taste like Miss Eise...?" Her voice was small and soft, as if it would melt into the air at any time.

Naut's eyes, framed by long lashes, widened. "...You moron," he whispered hoarsely, strenuously squeezing his voice past his throat. "How can it taste like anyone other than you?"

Ceres beamed. She looked like the happiest girl in the world. By now, the dark mesh covered eighty percent of her face.

This was when Hortis spoke up in a subdued voice. "I released the collar sealing her, making it possible for her to realize her fervent wish. Shouldering a curse for someone else like this isn't possible unless you wish for it from the bottom of your heart—it's a miracle of love that transcends magic."

Cold droplets of rain began splashing down.

No. This can't happen—it's not right. A young girl was dying right in front of my eyes. My mind almost went numb, but I forced it to think. Ah, right. There's a simple solution.

The Contract Stake was dangling from Naut's neck. Stabbing Ceres with it would save her life. Now that she'd been released from her collar, she was already a mage, meaning she could undergo ecdysia and extinguish the curse.

Knitting his eyebrows together, Hortis pressed his lips together tightly. *What is he hesitating for? Why can't Hortis carry out such a straightforward plan?*

Hortis turned to face me. His long hair drooped like a bamboo screen, obscuring his eyes. "The Contract Stake is a supreme treasure that can only be used once. If we lose it, we'll also lose our method of defeating the Clandestine Arcanist. The situation of the Liberators will become very precarious."

Ceres's head went limp. Her face, which looked as if she were wearing a black mask, turned to us. Mustering all the strength she could, she moved her petite lips. "I beg you, everyone... Don't protect someone like me... I hope you will protect this country. Don't use the Contract Stake...to save an insignificant life... Use it to defeat the enemy of us Yethma, please..."

Her eyes were the only parts that weren't stained black. They shined

brilliantly as she turned to face Naut, intent on searing her precious light into her mind during her last moments. “At the very end, I was able to help you in some way... I’m really...happy.”

Naut’s pupils, dilated with shock, turned to Hortis, just barely missing Ceres’s earnest gaze. “Oy. What’s she talking about? Can I save Ceres if I use the Contract Stake?”

After a second of indecision, Hortis nodded.

Naut’s hand reached for his chest. There hung the pendant with Eise’s image and the Contract Stake. He was clearly wavering about what he should do.

At the moment, the Contract Stake was the only item that could bring about the Clandestine Arcanist’s downfall. If we consumed it on one of our own, the royal court would inevitably deal us a heavy penalty. The Liberators would be stuck between a rock and a hard place. It was utterly unthinkable for a man like Marquis to let it slide easily.

Unable to turn a blind eye to his position as the leader of the Liberators, Naut’s hand was refusing to thrust the stake into Ceres’s chest.

But then, a tiny hand punched Naut’s cheek and vigorously snatched the Contract Stake from his neck. It was Batt.

Not giving anyone time to stop him, the boy with tears gleaming in his innocent eyes swung down the pointed tip of the Contract Stake in the middle of Ceres’s sternum.

Before I could even blink, the stake reacted.

A dazzling light burst out from Batt’s hand. The flash blinded me; I couldn’t see a thing.

The light subsided just as abruptly as it had exploded.

Batt sank to the floor. The Contract Stake was nowhere to be found—not in his hand or on Ceres’s chest. The only other visible change was Ceres’s skin; the pattern of the curse had vanished without a trace. Now, the girl had shut her eyes and was breathing steadily.

Eyes wide with astonishment, Naut looked at the younger boy. “Batt, you—”

“Master, you’re such a pea-brained jerk!” Batt yelled at the top of his lungs. “Why did you try to abandon Ceres to die?! You know how much she respects and adores you! I remember my master as someone who shed tears after a Yethma died! Where did he go?!”

Naut chewed hard on his lower lip, unable to come up with any objections. He helped Ceres sit up and hugged her tight. A single stream of tears flowed down from the sharp, striking outer corner of his eye. His lips quivered as they whispered, “You’re completely right, Batt. Looks like I turned into a hopeless idiot.”

For a while, there was silence in the rocky stretch where a repentant odor permeated as we stared at the weeping hero. Not a single one of us reproached anyone for the fact that we’d lost the Contract Stake.

It was at this untimely moment that Itsune’s yell rang out from Shravis’s seashell. *“Hurry up and come back us up! Our soldiers are turning black all over and dropping like flies! Even worse, a big army is charging right at us head-on! If you don’t rush here, we’ll be wiped out!”*

The color drained from Shravis’s face as he asked Hortis, “Uncle, shall we retreat?”

We’d used up our secret weapon, the Contract Stake. Meanwhile, on the side of the Nothen Faction, the Clandestine Arcanist was already on the move and attacking our allied forces. On the chaotic battlefield where soldiers from both factions mixed, our mages had to hold back when attacking with magic, and in that nightmare scenario, the Clandestine Arcanist might exploit that opening.

Hortis shook his head. “No. We’ve used up the Contract Stake, and if we retreat now, my brother will not let us off the hook. Furthermore, if they migrate their headquarters from this island, we can’t use our advantage of having Kento, making it even more difficult to take down the Clandestine Arcanist. Our only choice is to press forward.”

“But, uncle, we no longer have the Contract Stake—”

Nodding, Hortis indicated Ceres’s collar in his hands. “There’s a blessing in disguise. We can’t kill him anymore, but there’s a single method we can use to seal him away.” Gleaming dully in his hands was a silver collar of Yethma, which

could seal away magic. “The responsibility is all mine. I’ll make up for it somehow. We must capture the Clandestine Arcanist as quickly as we can.”

Kento guided us from one ogur factory to another until we were in a position to ambush the Nothen troops from the rear.

The rocky tract we were in offered an unobstructed view, but since it was surrounded by the forest, it was difficult for our enemies to discover us from afar. These were the most favorable conditions for taking our enemies by surprise.

Hortis sprinted at the vanguard. Naut was running with a grim expression while carrying Ceres on his back. Shravis held Ceres’s collar. The black pig, Sanon, looked worried as he strode next to Naut.

As we hurried along, Hortis described his plan. “I’ll attack the Nothen troops. It means that I’ll likely attract attention, but the Clandestine Arcanist can’t curse me unless he’s nearby. Therefore, he’ll likely cook up some kind of scheme by using what he has, such as the ogurs, while he approaches me. Shravis, you’re in charge of locating and collaring him. As for Naut and Yoshu, stick with Jess and the young virgin and back my nephew up. But remember one thing: all of you must put your safety first. I’m the only one who will be reckless, and that’s how it should be.”

The mass destruction squad of the allied forces had made quite impressive progress towards the volcano. They were currently fighting at the extensive wasteland that had seemingly been created by a grand lava flow. By the time we arrived at the vicinity, rain started pouring down on us like a waterfall. Soaked to the bone, we assessed the war situation from the cover of the woods in front of the wasteland.

Within the downpour, the soldiers of the Nothen Faction wrapped in rugged metal armor clashed with the soldiers of the allied forces clad in black leather armor. We’d just made it in time to witness the great reinforcement army of our enemies rushing in. Itsune spearheaded our attack, scattering lightning everywhere while jumping around like an acrobat as she brandished her greataxe. Her physical prowess was off the charts.

The allied forces had roughly a thousand soldiers, and the enemy troops who had turned up seemed smaller at a glance. The problem was that they had ogurs. A quick estimate told me that there were at least several dozen of them, and they mowed down our soldiers with spears that looked more like logs.

Blades screeched violently against blades. Explosions whipped up mud and flesh into a grotesque mess. Dark red blood blended into the rain.

It was an appalling bloodbath that made me want to avert my gaze.

“I’m counting on you, Shravis,” Hortis said before rushing out from the shade of the trees without hesitation. He floated into the air, tossing up the countless pumice stones in his vicinity as he did. He was almost like a tornado monster. And this tornado thrust right into the diagonal rear of the Nothen troops.

Generating dozens of walnut-sized projectiles around his body, Hortis then fired them at hypersonic speed towards the ogurs. Every time he aimed, each projectile left shining trajectories, quickly followed by shrill roars of explosions. The enemy fired arrows at him, but all of them were repelled by the pumice barrier, missing their target.

The surprise assault broke the Nothen Faction’s battle formation. They began dispersing to try and escape Hortis’s attacks. Perhaps because he feared he might harm his allies with stray projectiles, Hortis took utmost caution, so his offense wasn’t to an extent that crushed our enemies completely.

“Time to move. Kento, do you have any inkling about the paths the Clandestine Arcanist might use when he needs to move?” Shravis asked.

The boar racked his brain for ideas. <That man often uses the paths between the factories, so if he’s within their vicinity, they should be the easiest ways for him to move from one place to another. If we retrace our steps, I believe that there is a high chance of us encountering our enemy, who should be attacking the allied forces from one of the factories.>

“You heard him. Pig, what do you think about that plan?” Shravis asked me.

I nodded. <<Sounds good. The elderly mage, who was busy attacking our soldiers, will likely head in our direction to take down Hortis. We’ll ambush and neutralize him before he can achieve anything.>>

That was when the black pig walked up to us and grunted at Shravis to catch his attention. <The plan is good, but one thing—if we pressed forward intending to intercept him, we wouldn't be able to respond if he was the one lying in ambush, waiting for us. We are, after all, in enemy territory. Let's consider matters from the position of a hunted prey.>

When a pig was the one making that statement, it was all the more convincing.

Sanon had overcome countless more harsh battles than me. It would be wise to be cautious right now.

We weaved between the gaps among the trees, headed to the path that connected the ogur factories, searching for a place to intercept the Clandestine Arcanist.

In less than a few minutes, we learned that Sanon had been right.

Inside the woods, a patch of the ground at a small distance from us abruptly swelled up. The next moment, an enormous shadow leaped up.

“Uuuooooaaaooouuuuaargh!”

Howling unintelligibly, a muddy ogur lunged at us. It had hidden itself inside the ground, waiting for our arrival. Inside the gloomy woods, it was so terrifying that I felt the fear of death seize me like a claw.

The moment Shravis laid his eyes on the creature, he nimbly scaled the closest tree in the blink of an eye. It was likely a countermeasure to the greatstaff that dug tunnels through the ground.

Shravis's voice resounded directly in my mind. <Its cry exposed our presence. Scatter and hide.>

Our party swiftly took cover, but Naut, who was still carrying Ceres, was left behind. The ogur's bloodshot yellow eyes captured the huntsman within its sight.

Jess and I didn't hesitate—we flocked to Naut's side and stayed there. <<Shravis, you focus on keeping an eye out for the Clandestine Arcanist. We'll

take care of the ogur.>>

Though he hadn't appeared yet, we couldn't rule out the possibility that the Clandestine Arcanist had grasped our location. The worst-case scenario was the elderly mage hunting down one member after another while Shravis was preoccupied with the ogur. That was why we'd volunteered to take on the role of Naut's guardians.

Carrying Ceres with great care, Naut looked over his shoulder at us. His voice was broken up by panting as he tried to catch his breath. "Morons, you people can't defeat a monster like that—"

Even as he spoke, the ogur pressed closer and closer. I stared at it. Skin of faded gray that reminded me of rhinoceroses or elephants. An inflated physique that looked as if someone had magnified a bodybuilder to scale by two times. Steel armor defending its vitals. A spear that was as thick as a log and thorny all over. A swollen, distorted face.

Despite its size, it evaded the trees with frightful speed and agility as it sprinted at us. As a last resort, Naut's free hand that wasn't supporting Ceres's bottom pulled out one of his twin shortswords. But of course, a single shortsword wouldn't stand a chance against that creature.

Jess and I also chose to dodge as our first move due to the ogur's inhuman speed. *I've got to watch it carefully. The slightest of openings will be enough—*

Suddenly, a low-pitched growl reached my ears. It was Sanon. The black pig produced an intimidating noise I'd never heard from him before as he charged at the beast's legs, which were protected by barbed armor.

The black pig was of a size that even a giant like the ogur couldn't make light of him. If the creature kicked, it would succeed at dealing a major injury to the black pig, but at the same time, it would also lose its balance because it was charging as well. Quailing at the black pig's fierce momentum, the monster lowered its hips and kicked its feet up higher, slowing down. The black pig dashed forward, barely scraping past the ogur's side.

<<Now!>> I exclaimed. <<Jess, let's show that thing the results of our practice.>>

<Yes!>



Under my instructions, Jess spread out her hands wide at the ogur. Like expanding bubbles, several gigantic blobs of liquid with a slimy consistency surged out of thin air. When they grew to sizes that could be carried in both arms, Jess swiftly flicked her palms downward.

The floating blobs of liquid zoomed across the air and struck the ogur fiercely. The creature was enveloped in gooey liquid from head to toe.

However, the ogur didn't even care one bit as it dashed forward—there were only a few steps between it and us. Jess didn't do anything.

I knew it.

It was time to demonstrate the fruits we'd reaped after Jess had worked me to the bone. I kicked up one of my front legs and shot off a small fireball at the sticky creature.

Normally, a tiny fireball like this would not affect an ogur. However, the fireball that struck this one's groin didn't sputter into nothing; instead, it flared up immediately and enveloped the giant from head to toe.

All of us sprinted at once to dodge the monster who, reduced to a moving ball of fire, ran past us in a straight line and continued for a while before flopping onto the ground. Bright orange flames stubbornly roasted the writhing creature even in the rain.

"You guys..." Naut's shocked eyes turned to us. "How did you...? That spell was..."

Oh, right. It's his first time witnessing Jess's maxed out magic. <<We'll explain later. Can you act as a decoy for the time being?>>

With Ceres on his back, Naut nodded. The shortsword in his free hand began glowing crimson. Inside the dark woods, it was the second most conspicuous thing after the burning ogur.

<<From this point on, do your very best to avoid hitting the ground with your flames.>> That was all I instructed before I distanced myself from Naut with Jess. The two of us began pacing around the vicinity.

Jess used her telepathy to silently communicate with me. <Mister Pig, I'm

sorry, I...>

I shook my head. <<Let's do our reflection session later on. It's not your fault that you weren't able to kill the ogur—I mean, you learned that they were made out of humans, after all. Either Naut or I will deal the last blow, so you can just focus on supplying us with fuel.>>

We'd only defeated a single ogur. The howling earlier and the flames were beacons attracting other ogurs and the most powerful fighter in our enemies' arsenal. Reinforcements shouldn't take long.

After doing one round around the trees nearby, Jess and I took cover near Naut. Not even giving us time to catch our breaths, I saw a handful of ogurs ahead of us, making a beeline in our direction.

<He's here,> Shravis's voice echoed in my mind, but right now, I really didn't have the time to respond.

Several clusters of ogurs closed in on us from three directions: our front, our right, and our left. I turned around at the sound of footsteps, and I discovered that there were even creatures approaching from behind. Our enemies had been prepared—other than the troops being mowed down by Hortis, they'd taken out the necessary personnel to deal with assassins lurking in the shadows. And now, all of them had gathered here under the howl of the one we'd just cremated.

Naut, who still had Ceres on his back as he acted as our decoy, made his single shortsword shine even brighter. The black pig was right beside him, watching the incoming enemies warily. But we were evidently the few against the many.

We were surrounded inside the woods where the heavy rain filtered in from the canopy leaves. The monsters stopped at the approximate distance where they had enough time to sidestep our attacks.

A raspy voice reached my ears. It was so faint that it sounded like it would be smothered under the sound of rain pelting tree leaves, but at the same time, it was oddly sonorous. "It seems that your curse has disappeared, brat."

The one we'd been waiting for had arrived—a tall silhouette wrapped in a leaden robe. A pallid hand, which didn't have a trace of vitality, reached out

from the fabric to hold a metal greatstaff. From underneath the lowered hood peered out two pairs of glowing gold eyes. He was a nameless, immortal man worn down by time—the Clandestine Arcanist.

“Hey, you old goat,” Naut hissed through his clenched teeth and aimed his blade, scarlet with heat, at the mage.

“I must say, it is an honor that you lot were willing to come all the way to the front lines to visit me out of concern. If it’s my soldiers that you’re after, take down as many as you wish. The only things I desire are your lives.” The elderly mage languidly raised his greatstaff.

Is he after Naut? Or...

My thoughts were interrupted by a shrill whistling sound that cut across the woods. Not a moment later, the Clandestine Arcanist’s wrist, which was holding the staff, blew up. An enchanted crossbow bolt had struck his hand. The greatstaff didn’t pierce the ground, instead falling and rolling.

“No matter how many attempts you make, it is futile,” he said objectively. “Surely you must have learned that lesson by now.” His hand had been torn off, leaving a stubby wrist. Something that looked like ashes wrapped around it, and his hand regenerated before our eyes. Like metal to a magnet, the greatstaff returned to the elderly mage’s hand. “Now then, I wonder... What will happen to all of you if the ogurs and I attack at once?”

He must have given them some kind of invisible cue because all the surrounding creatures were set in motion simultaneously. I did a quick count—there were at least ten. But their actions didn’t matter; our only job was sticking to the roles we’d decided on beforehand.

Lightning darted down from a tree and struck the Clandestine Arcanist’s shoulder, causing him to drop the staff again. *Let’s leave that mage to him. We’ll stop the ogurs.*

<<Get ready, Jess.>> I clenched my legs and activated the trap we’d set up.

At some distance from us, the roots of a tree exploded spectacularly, and one leg of a neighboring ogur was blasted away. With loud creaking, its gigantic trunk toppled over.

It reminded me of when I'd knocked over trees in a forest once upon a time. Back then, Naut had protected Jess and me. This time, it was our turn to protect him and Ceres.

I detonated one tree after another, dragging the ogurs into my deforestation and putting them out of commission.

It was a simple mechanism. When we'd walked around earlier, I'd asked Jess to soak a copious amount of fuel mixed with oxygen bubbles into the roots of the trees. With my anklets, I controlled them to create a makeshift fuse beneath the ground, then waited for the right opportunity to ignite and detonate.

Blowing up the base of trees to match the charging ogurs kind of reminded me of a rhythm game. It was finally time for my expertise as an arcade aficionado to shine. *I'll show you the true powers of an otaku—the remarkable speed we only show off during rhythm games!*

Bring it on!

A pig's wide field of vision had excellent synergy with a rhythm gamer's hand-eye coordination and sense of timing. I observed the enemy's movements and detonated Jess's fuel to the beat. Taken aback by a type of attack they'd never seen before, the beasts encircling us faltered.

<I'll add more fuel!> As Jess spread out her hands, a wall of fire erupted between the ogurs and us.

I controlled water and knocked down trees on our side so they fell towards our enemies, creating a barricade of timber and fire. None of the ogurs could climb over it.

With those creatures out of commission, the Clandestine Arcanist's scheme had been foiled. Even now, he was being attacked from the top of a tree. He had to invest all his efforts into defense and regeneration, meaning he didn't have time to use his greatstaff.

This had been our strategy from the beginning. Even the most lethal finishing move was useless if you didn't have the time to complete your channeling animation.

The elderly mage ceased all attacks and began retreating, intent on concealing himself.

A voice rang out directly in my mind. <Sorry I'm late, everyone. Good job, you guys were amazing. Let's end things once and for all.>

Not a second later, the blazing flames of the trap Jess and I had devised spread as if they had a mind of their own. They wrapped around the areas where the ogurs and Clandestine Arcanist should be, leaving no escape. They combusted the nearby trees instantaneously, transforming the entire area into a soot black clearing before they were extinguished.

The Clandestine Arcanist was left standing all alone on the scorched ground. Facing against the uncanny elderly mage was Hortis, who floated in the air as if wire-flying.

"Well, well," the Clandestine Arcanist drawled. "Your trump card has finally shown himself."

There was the sound of something slicing through the wind. The next thing I knew, about a dozen arrows drifted around Hortis. Every single one of them pointed their tips at his body, intent on stabbing him, but they were all frozen in place. It seemed there were still more troops lying in wait behind the elderly mage.

Almost like moving a magnet around a compass, all the arrows spun until they were facing the opposite direction and fired off at supersonic speed to the places they had launched from.

Hortis casually struck up a conversation with the Clandestine Arcanist, as if he were enjoying some small talk. "I read that many mages were vulnerable to surprise attacks back in your day, but that's not the case now. What a shame. No matter what kind of elaborate schemes you cook up and prepare, in the end, the side with overwhelming strength wins. My guess is that you've already used up all your assassins by now."

In response, the elderly mage, who maintained his stance of holding up the greatstaff so that he could stab it into the ground at any time, inclined his head. "Unless you are an imbecile, brat, I'm sure you must know about my immortality. With every confrontation, I will gain more and more information,

putting you people at a disadvantage.”

In a malicious tone, he continued, “Kill my soldiers as you please—for I can snatch away your people again and create soldiers until the day I’m ready to point my blade at you once more. There is only one future in store for you. For the rest of your life, you will tremble, afraid of death as you live in a country with a plummeting population.”

“Uh-huh.” Hortis hummed and nodded repeatedly as he listened before he twisted up his right palm. An orb of light glowing white-hot appeared above it, unimaginably dazzling and bright. It was almost like a miniature sun. “I get your point, but you only judged yourself as immortal based on your limited pool of knowledge, right? Or did some kind of prehistoric being assure you that your life is untouchable? There wasn’t, was there?”

The Clandestine Arcanist stilled—I could almost feel his tense aura prickling against my skin.

Hortis continued, “As long as I’m around, you can’t kill anyone. Furthermore, I’m capable of killing you. That’s the conclusion I arrived at after all our interactions up until now.”

A shrill whistling sound was followed by a bolt piercing the elderly mage’s face. Cracking and snapping, ice began to eat into his head. We’d managed to catch him off guard at superb timing.

At least, that was what I’d thought until I heard a hoarse voice in my head. <Why, it turned out to be a bluff after all, brat. In the end, you people are no better, relying on surprise attacks as well.>

The elderly mage’s robes began burning with an azure fire, nullifying the effects of the freezing enchantment on the bolt. His body was engulfed in blue flames, almost like a mummy on fire. I shuddered at the horrifying sight.

“You have used the same trick before,” he continued, this time aloud. “Freezing me with an enchanted bolt to render me immobile... Did you truly think I was foolish enough to not prepare a countermeasure against such underhanded means?”

Hortis snuffed out the sphere of light, thrusting out his other hand—his left

hand—at the Clandestine Arcanist. “Did you really think I was careless enough to cast only one enchantment on that bolt?” A glowing thread stretched out from Hortis’s left hand and connected with the bolt lodged in his enemy’s head. The azure flames vanished at once. In its place, thick frost enveloped the elderly mage’s entire body.

With a sharp snapping sound, the elderly man’s wrist broke off, and his greatstaff tumbled to the ground together with his hand.

“And that’s the end of that,” Hortis declared in a clipped voice. “The old coot’s body is at the minimum possible temperature. Movement of matter in this state is almost slowed to a stop, and the same delay applies to his magic.” Unhurriedly, the victorious mage landed on the ground and walked towards the Clandestine Arcanist, who was frozen like an ice statue. “We can approach him now. There aren’t any other hidden assassins around. Shravis, use the collar.”

Shravis jumped off the tree and tossed the collar at the Clandestine Arcanist’s neck like a frisbee. Steered by magic, the collar snapped into two right in front of its destination before uniting again as it coiled around the elderly mage’s neck.

The young prince marched up to the neutralized enemy. Jess and I followed his example. Possibly out of fatigue from the battle, Jess’s steps were unsteady.

<<Can we call it mission accomplished?>> I asked.

Hortis shook his head somewhat nonchalantly. “All that’s left is for a mage to touch his body directly and complete the seal.”

“In that case, uncle, I shall take up that role.” Shravis came forward.

Unexpectedly, Hortis gestured at him to stop. “Not so fast. This old coot seems to have enchanted his body with the curse in advance. With one touch, you will be afflicted with it.”

I blinked at him, bewildered.

Jess voiced my question for me. “Excuse me. Are you saying that someone needs to touch him to finish the seal, but whoever does it will be cursed as the price?”

Hortis hummed, furrowing his eyebrows. “Now this is quite the predicament. He outplayed us in one aspect at the very end.” He folded his arms, looking like his patience was quickly going down the drain. “If we keep wasting time by thinking of a solution, this old coot’s magical defenses might kick in and thaw himself. We need to find a work-around as soon as possible, but unfortunately...”

Gazing at all the people who’d gathered in front of him, including the Liberators, Hortis sighed. “There’s no other way. I’ll do it.”

“Uncle!” Shravis’s eyes widened. “Please don’t be so hasty.”

“I was the one who removed Ceres’s collar,” Hortis replied. “We ended up leaving the decision in the hands of the young Liberators, but the catalyst who caused the Contract Stake to be used for other purposes was none other than myself. I shall take responsibility for it.”

“But, uncle—”

“Shravis, time is of the essence.” He stared at his nephew solemnly. “If we let this opportunity slip by, this old coot will likely worm his way out of our clutches, and the seal will be for naught. You can pin the blame regarding the Contract Stake on me. The narrative will be this: to repent for my grave mistake, I sacrificed my life to seal this elderly mage. I’m sure my brother will be convinced by that story.”

“But we can’t do that...” Jess, distressed, raised her voice.

Hortis smiled warmly at her. “History has always been weaved with threads spun from someone’s sacrifice. I have already given up on the world once—if I can dedicate my life and death to a better future for you all, there is nothing more I can ask for.”

His hand reached out to the Clandestine Arcanist, but Jess seized it on the spur of the moment, stopping him. “No, don’t!” she cried, refusing to let go. “There must be another solution... I might be able to successfully invoke an ecdysia. Maybe—”

A ferocious holler cut her short. “Stop right there!”

I jumped in surprise. It was *Hortis*. His voice was filled with fury, sharp like a

knife's edge—I'd never seen this side of him before.

He took a deep breath to steady himself. "My apologies for shouting all of a sudden. I can't let you do that, Jess. You still have a long and bright future ahead of you. Based on what I know, you have a dream you want to realize—a future you earnestly crave. You don't want to die, right?"

Jess didn't deny it. "Still... There might be a path where everyone makes it out alive, and if it's within our grasp, I want to take that gamble..."

<<Jess,>> I interjected. <<Even if there's such a possibility, you mustn't risk your life. Let's stay out of this.>>

After glancing between the two of us, Hortis seemed to contemplate something for a moment. "No, actually...there *is* one guaranteed method." He seemed to have a flash of inspiration.

Eyes lighting up, Jess asked, "What is it?!"

"I can't deny that there are preemptive signs of ecdysia on Jess." He nodded to himself. "Let's get her to finish the seal."

The hell is he going on about? I stood in front of Jess and growled threateningly at the man. <<You are contradicting yourself. I distinctly remember you telling Jess that she mustn't risk her life. If the alternative is gambling with Jess's life, I think you should wager your own life first, sir.>>

"Now, now, don't get your panties in a bunch, young virgin," Hortis said in a placating tone. "I can delay the progression of the curse with my magic. That's why she has a high chance of success. In addition, I have a last resort up my sleeve in case push comes to shove. I can assure you that Jess will not die. Can you put a little faith in me here? Let's put an end to the war right here, right now."

He wasn't done—he added with his telepathy, <If Jess is ever on the verge of dying, I plan on shouldering the curse in her stead before time runs out.> Jess probably wasn't privy to this part of his message.

I stared at him in shock. Hortis replied with a playful wink. He continued, "Now then, Jess, can you give me a literal hand? This is a safe gamble." He gently held Jess's wrist and guided it towards the frosted Clandestine Arcanist.

Jess turned to me. “Mister Pig, do you think it’s a good idea?”

Before I could answer her question, Hortis pressed her hand against the elderly mage’s body.

My mind stuttered, unable to keep up with the situation. Time slowed and stretched infinitely like sticky toffee.

After a moment’s delay, the collar glowed white while an ominous black crept onto Jess’s hand.

“All right.” Hortis clenched his jaw and gripped Jess’s wrist firmly. The pattern of the curse spread rapidly on Jess’s fair skin, but it abruptly halted at the place Hortis was holding. “The seal is a success. Now it’s all up to Jess.”

With my heart in my throat, I stared unblinkingly at Jess’s hand, which was smothered by the black mesh. <<Do you feel an ecdysia coming on?>>

“Well...” Jess looked at me, clearly troubled. I had a bad feeling about this.

That was when a memory hit me.

“Shouldering a curse for someone else like this isn’t possible unless you wish for it from the bottom of your heart—it’s a miracle of love that transcends magic.”

According to Hortis, the spell that transferred the effects of a curse onto another was activated by an earnest wish to save someone precious. But Hortis was nothing but a stranger to Jess—he had no reason or motivation to bear the brunt of it in her stead.

My mind went blank.

When I finally snapped out of it, I stared at Hortis, stupefied. <<You... Did you just lie to me...?>>

His lips pulled into a smile. I felt as if someone had turned my heart to ice. I’d blindly put my faith in the wrong person. At this rate, Jess was going to die.

“Now, now, don’t jump to conclusions, young virgin,” Hortis said in a pacifying voice. “Deary me, it seems that this little piggy over here cares a lot about the minor details. A mage of my skills can easily shoulder a curse for another, even if I don’t have profound feelings for them.”

Hearing that, Jess's eyes widened. "Shoulder my curse...?"

Hortis nodded. "Sorry about keeping that from you. If our operation fails, the person who dies in the end won't be you. It will be me."

Looking distressed, Jess frantically squeezed words past her throat. "No, that isn't right... You can't... A royal family member mustn't sacrifice his life for someone like me..."

In response, Hortis gritted his teeth. "If you dream of a happy future for yourself, then never say 'someone like me' ever again. My owner risked his life to escort you to the royal capital. You have a fiancé. There's even a young virgin over here who's madly in love with you despite what he claims. How would they feel if they heard you put yourself down? I'm sure it's not hard to imagine."

He sounded like a responsible adult chiding her—he almost seemed like a different person compared to the pervert who'd constantly sniffed Jess's thighs up until only a little while ago.

The man then faced Jess with a stern look in his eyes. "Fight. A curse is trying to snatch away the most cherished treasure from the people who love you. Fight it with everything you have."

With an agonized expression, Jess clenched her hand. The curse, however, didn't show any signs of backing down. It felt like hours passed by—but in reality, it was only a few minutes.

For an instant, Hortis's hand was stained in a tint of black. "Looks like we're running out of time." Resignation written on his face, Hortis prepared to grip his hand tighter.

But that was when Jess collapsed. Reacting on instinct, Shravis caught her before she fell.

I raced to her side. The pattern on Jess's hand was gone.

The Recollections of a Pair of Siblings

A blameless Yethma shed uncontrollable tears as she sobbed her apologies at her family, whom she loved and cherished, from the other side of the prison bars. “I’m sorry, I... I’m so sorry...”

“Dad, nothing about this is right.” The youth with black hair looked at his father, his pleading eyes filled with utter despair.

The older man only slowly shook his head. “The law is the law. As vassals of this nation, we cannot oppose it.” Though tears shone in his eyes, his unrelenting attitude never faltered, even as he looked down at the Yethma who’d broken down crying.

“But, dad.” The one who spoke up was the youth’s older sister, who tied her black hair back in a ponytail. “Lithis... Lithis hasn’t done anything wrong. She didn’t engage in illicit intercourse—she was assaulted! Why should *she* be executed? What has she done to deserve that?” The girl’s eyes were wide open, wavering with despair.

“The law is the law,” the father repeated. “If she resists her penalty, even our lives will be at risk.”

The older daughter gritted her teeth. “So what if it’s a law?! What’s stopping you from pointing out that this is wrong?! Aren’t you supposed to be a commanding officer?!”

Hearing his daughter’s objection, the father cast his eyes to the ground and took a deep breath. “Lithis is at fault as well. The body of a Yethma is property granted by the royal court. Those who borrow it are duty bound to defend it no matter what happens until they pay us compensation money. But we failed. Therefore, the responsibility is on her and us.”

The Yethma sobbed harder. The siblings crouched down in front of the bars, and each held one of her hands.

“Don’t say that in front of Lithis!” the girl hollered. She then cursed at her

father with vocabulary she'd never used before. The younger brother ignored his father and pleaded with the warden inside the cell for mercy.

But the prayers of the siblings fell on deaf ears. The Yethma was dragged into the opposite side of the cell.

The next day, the father brought a collar and bones back home. The day after that, it was decided that the bones would be buried in the garden.

On the day of the burial, the siblings vanished, along with the bones, never to set foot in their home ever again.

Chapter 4: Protect Those You Love with Your Life

Outside the ship, it was a peaceful, quiet night. Inside the ship that gently rocked with the waves, we surrounded the Clandestine Arcanist, who'd been neutralized by Ceres's collar, and began our interrogation.

Hortis, who had a bandaged hand, called out to the other side of the cell bars. "Tell me your name."

Within the well-secured brig of the ship, an elderly man with bound hands and feet looked back at us with golden eyes. His skin that peeked out of his gray robe was lifelessly pallid, but parts of it were scorched black, looking all dry and crumbly. Calling him a mummy wouldn't be inaccurate.

"My name? I'd forgotten it long ago." I wasn't sure whether it was from fatigue or hopelessness, but there was no spirit in his voice. "There's no point in giving you my name either. You may call me whatever you wish, brat."

The defeated elderly mage docilely sat on the floor and watched us from between the gaps of his cell bars.

Shravis was standing next to me. Hortis was beside him, and further to his side were the trio of Naut, Itsune, and Yoshu. Finally, the black pig and the wild boar were behind me. As for Jess and Ceres, they were in the captain's cabin. Both of them had conquered their curses and were fast asleep.

Hortis took the initiative. "Well then, senior citizen, I'd like you to give me a concise explanation. Why do you attack the people of Mesteria and wish to overthrow the royal family?"

The elderly mage's shoulders shook with soundless laughter. "Your great ancestor you so respect and worship, Vatis, was quite a merciless mage. In the name of 'peace,' that woman massacred countless people who couldn't even put up resistance. Her pile of corpses included my mentor, who I owe a lot to, and even my close friend. I have clung tenaciously to life until this day just to settle that score."

Hortis breathed a sigh of displeasure. “Even I know that Vatis was a woman beyond all salvation. But she’s already dead. Is it that fun to kill her descendants and the innocent citizens of this country?”

“Already dead?” the elderly mage repeated in a low, baleful voice. “Her body might be dead, but her vile deeds still thrive. You people hide behind your overwhelming magic and grow up without hardship in the safety of the royal capital while collaring other mages and turning them into slaves. Vatis didn’t end the war—she only covered up the fact that there are winners and losers while continuing to win in a quiet war. I can’t stomach such a fraudulent peace. That is why I have accumulated power and resources to destroy it—to make you lot taste defeat.”

Naut cut into the conversation. “Hang on, collaring other mages?”

The elderly mage sneered. “See? Your foolish people aren’t privy to the truth, not even their representative. Allow me to enlighten you. The race you call ‘Yethma’ are mages who have been restrained in a way that makes them submissive. The royal court is leaving their cruel fate as it is because they want to distribute these convenient mages as slaves while keeping their numbers in check.”

Itsune whipped her head around and glared daggers at Hortis, who hung his head. “Hey, what the hell is he talking about?” Confusion and fury bled into her eyes. “Are all the Yethma killed heartlessly because it’s convenient for you people?”

His eyes hidden by his long, drooping hair, Hortis raised his voice. “Itsune. These scoundrels of the underground world are the people who are killing Yethma—people like this senior citizen. But I can’t refute the fact that the royal court’s government functions with that as its foundation. I believe that all of us present here are united in our goal to somehow peacefully change that rotten structure.”

With a terrifying look in his eyes I’d never seen before, Naut glared at Hortis. He didn’t even offer a single word.

After staring at Naut for a while, the Clandestine Arcanist gained a glint in his eyes as he spoke up. “You accuse us of being the ones behind the slaughter of

Yethma? Well, well, what a laughable choice of words. All we are doing is picking up the trash that the royal court created and making good use of it. Brat, think about who is responsible for producing that trash. Who are the ones forcing them to go on a journey to their deaths once they turn sixteen?" He leered meaningfully. "Who was the one who burned those Yethma to death after they refused to leave, instead secluding themselves in that convent?"

Naut's eyes grew wide. He pressed the elderly man for answers. "Don't speak in riddles. Get to the point."

Like a duck taking to water, the mage gleefully began his speech. "I happen to remember the incident with that convent you were reflecting on. You see, I have been partially intercepting the royal court's surveillance network. That is why I know a certain truth: five years ago, the convent in that small village was burned down by a mage. It was either this man or his kin."

Hortis pressed his lips tightly together, but he didn't attempt to interrupt the elderly mage.

When the Clandestine Arcanist sneered, Naut barked at him. "Go on."

"Since I knew that a mage was targeting the convent, I arranged for Yethma hunters to head there beforehand. Through them, I hunted down every single Yethma who survived that fire. Brat, the people whom you should hate aren't us; we only disposed of the trash. It should be the mages of the royal court, who treated young girls seeking out a tranquil life as nothing more than garbage."

In the blink of an eye, Naut vigorously turned his body and grabbed Hortis by the collar. "You *knew*. You came five years ago, right after the convent burned down and Eise was murdered. I remember you mentioned that you didn't like your brother's methods. You knew that I was looking for a Yethma who your brother tried to kill. That's why you approached me, isn't it?"

Hortis's mouth, which had remained stubbornly shut for a long while, finally opened as if he'd lost all his strength to keep it closed. "Yes. I'm sorry for keeping it from you. I...didn't want there to be any unnecessary resentment between us."

Silence.

Yoshu whispered, “We are the ones who will decide whether it’s unnecessary.”

The tension ballooned, threatening to snap at any time. The youth glared at Hortis with his sanpaku eyes as he continued, “Hortis, I don’t dislike you. I can tell that you’re working yourself to the bone for us. But I can’t forgive the royal court no matter what. Even if it was a slip of the tongue, I don’t want to hear you write off these feelings as unnecessary.”

The Clandestine Arcanist smiled like the cat that ate the canary. He’d been stripped of his magical powers, but he still succeeded at striking back against the royal court. By fanning the flames of hatred in the Liberators, he’d aggravated the rift between the two factions.

Despite returning from a victorious battle, the three executive officers of the Liberators shared dark expressions, as if they’d just heard that someone killed their parents. Hortis hung his head. Shravis was at a loss for words. As for the three of us beasts, there was nothing we could do in this situation.

Slowly, Hortis spoke up. “I can’t deny that the royal court was in the wrong and still is doing wrong things. But if you try to settle past scores, you’ll wind up just like that pitiful senior citizen over here. The past is important, yes, but the future is even more precious. I’m begging you, don’t lose your rationality.” A single stream of tears trickled down from his eye. “The only thing I can do is plead, but please don’t forget this: what saves a country is always kindness.”

Jess and Ceres ended up waking up at approximately the same time. It just happened to be when mainland Mesteria began to peek out from above the horizon. Meanwhile, the horizon on the opposite side began lighting up with the red tint of dawn.

A crowd had gathered inside the captain’s cabin where the two maidens slept. I was next to Jess watching over her while Naut and Sanon looked after Ceres. Shravis was also present but looking out the window on his lonesome. Through the small window cut into the wooden wall, I could see the calm ocean surface that was illuminated by the faint light of daybreak.

I was watching the half asleep Jess mumbling unintelligibly to herself when

Naut's shout tore into the silence. "Ceres!" It seemed that the younger girl had woken up too.

"Meow?!" Jess let out a delirious sound, sitting up with a start. The moment she grasped the situation, her face turned as red as an apple.

<<Are you awake?>> From next to her, I peered into her face. Looking mortified, Jess covered her mouth with her hands and nodded.

I turned my attention to Ceres and Naut. Ceres slowly sat up in front of the huntsman. "Huh? I'm...alive...?"

Without a moment's delay, Naut threw his arms around her. Taken aback by the sudden events, Ceres blinked in confusion, her chin resting on Naut's shoulder.

"Mister Naut... Um... How am I...?" Ceres stammered.

"Why did you try to throw your life away on my behalf? How can you be such a moron?"

"I'm so sorry I made the decision without asking you first..."

Naut released his hold on the bewildered Ceres. He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You chose the wrong person to fall in love with. A scumbag like me isn't worth it."

The black pig next to him nodded as if to say, "Exactly." *Hey!*

Conversely, Ceres frantically shook her head, denying it with all her might. "What I think is worthy and valuable is my choice." No longer collared, Ceres looked back into his eyes boldly. "Um... I don't regret what I did. I came all the way here hoping that I could be useful to you one day. Plus, it was my dream to dedicate my first time to you, Mister Naut."

It felt as if the air itself froze for a moment. *It's okay, false alarm, everyone knows she doesn't mean it in that way.*

On a whim, I looked beside me. Jess was staring at the pair with a hint of admiration and longing. Perhaps she noticed the narration because she hurriedly cast her gaze down.

The mood in the captain's cabin had been completely dominated by the love

story of the pair. Awkwardly, Naut averted his gaze from Ceres and looked at me. “In any case, I’m glad that both Ceres and Jess are safe and sound. I think we can say we’ve made it out of the trenches...for now.”

I nodded, and Naut looked between Shravis and me. He continued, “There’s one thing I want to ask. Can I?”

Through Jess, I replied, <<What is it?>>

“You guys knew that Yethma are mages but kept that secret from us. Why?”

Shravis was the first to speak up. “I’m sure you know about the history of mages. If the true identity of Yethma became public knowledge, it would instill fear and hostility in the people, and it’s not hard to imagine how they would treat Yethma afterwards. Mesteria would fall into a mayhem that no one wishes for.”

Naut scrutinized the prince. “So you didn’t do it because you had an interest in protecting the system of collaring mages and turning them into slaves?”

<<Absolutely not,>> I declared. <<We protected the royal court’s secrets purely to preserve the peace of Mesteria. I have no motivation to protect the Yethma system. I can say the same for Sanon.>>

The black pig nodded. <I promised Mister Lolip that I would keep the secrets of the royal court. Nattie, even if you and the others learned the truth, it wouldn’t have benefited you in any way, so I chose to stay silent as well.>

“I see,” Naut muttered with a grave expression.

<<Hey, Naut...>> Worried by his reaction, I asked, <<You’ve learned the truth, but you’ll still aim for a peaceful world with us, right?>>

“...Good question. Who knows? It might depend on the attitude of the great and noble mages.”

Under Naut’s glowering, Shravis corrected his sitting posture and straightened his spine. “When I become king, I promise you that I *will* change the ways of this world. So please, don’t cause any more conflict than there already is. The ones who bear the brunt of war are always those without power.” His gaze turned to Ceres.

Naut also looked at Ceres. As for the girl at the center of attention, she looked around restlessly with a perplexed face.

“I get it,” the huntsman commented before looking at Shravis with piercing eyes. “I can trust you, yeah?”

The prince nodded sincerely. “It’s a promise.”

The two virgins exchanged heated glances.

Naut let out a big sigh. “Got it. I’ll continue our alliance with the royal court. As long as you people don’t betray us, that is.”

There was a loud thump, signaling the docking of the ship at the pier. We’d finally returned to the harbor in Nearbell.

Nearbell, which faced east, was shrouded by the thin mist of dawn. The warm morning light showered on it, creating an enchanting atmosphere.

After we disembarked from the ship, we came face-to-face with a certain man on the pier, who was standing in an imposing stance inside the mist. Almost immediately, the expressions of the three executive offices of the Liberators shifted dramatically.

“Why didn’t you contact me, Hortis? Don’t tell me that you messed up.”

King Marquis had come all the way to the harbor to receive us in person. He’d slicked back all his hair impeccably, accoutered in an opulent outfit with a dark violet theme.

“My brother...” Hortis, who’d likely stayed up all night to keep watch on the Clandestine Arcanist, wearily faced the king. “As I promised, we decimated the Nothen troops on Send-Off Island. I haven’t blundered.”

“What about the Clandestine Arcanist?”

Silence stretched on.

Finally, Hortis replied, “We have captured him.”

“*Captured?*” Marquis narrowed his eyes. “You owe me an explanation.”

Hortis lifted his hand, and a cuboid cage slowly drifted over from the ship. He

adjusted his hand little by little, guiding the cage until it was next to Marquis. Lying down inside it was a sleeping elderly man with a blackened silver collar.

“We lost the Contract Stake,” Hortis replied. “We were out of options, so I sealed him away with a Yethma collar instead. I finished interrogating him about all the information we required, so I have temporarily put him to sleep by making him inhale poison.”

I wasn’t sure whether a gust of wind or something else was responsible, but the surrounding mist instantly cleared away. The look in Marquis’s eyes was nothing short of stormy, and an unbearable pressure filled the air. “Why isn’t he dead? What happened to the Contract Stake?”

Batt chose this untimely moment to leave the ship. He noticed us standing still on the pier and came to a stop as well.

Marquis’s cold eyes turned to Batt. His gaze moved on to Naut, then Ceres.

There was a pause.

“Allow me to summarize.” Marquis’s low-pitched voice was filled with rage, almost like rumbling thunder. “Despite taking the Contract Stake with you to kill the Clandestine Arcanist, you wasted that supreme treasure on an insignificant little girl, which is why your crucial target, the elderly mage, is sleeping here instead of dead. Am I correct?”

“An *insignificant* little girl?” Naut hissed, placing his hands on his twin shortswords and taking a step forward.

“You fool. I will kill those who point their blades at me without even giving them a chance to say their excuses.” Marquis’s ashen eyes blazed as they basked in the morning glow. He glowered at Naut as he continued, “You broke your promise. You were unsuccessful in your mission. In that case, you must take responsibility for your failure.”

Hortis stepped in. “My brother, all the responsibility is mi—”

The king didn’t even spare a glance in his direction. “Your decision to remove a Yethma’s collar is a separate matter.”

Marquis swiftly thrust his right hand forward. Batt and Ceres floated into the

air as if someone had grabbed them by the scuff of the neck and were carried in front of Marquis by an invisible force. The vulnerable boy and girl were tossed to the ground roughly, landing hard on their backsides.

It had happened too quickly. The rest of us hadn't been able to react at all.

"So this boy stabbed this Yethma with the stake," Marquis slowly said. "I shall give them a formal execution."

"Father!" Shravis stepped forward, putting himself between the king and the pair. "What will you achieve by executing them? This is ridicul—"

Marquis seized Shravis's neck and forced him to shut up. "Ridiculous? They were the cause for a pivotal weapon in our war—no, even worse, the last supreme treasure of its kind in Mesteria—to be wasted for their own selfish needs, making it impossible to kill the Clandestine Arcanist. Are you telling me to overlook such a heinous crime?"

In front of the king, who had given a long, passionate speech with a ferocity that could kill, Shravis's profile rapidly grew congested with blood that couldn't flow. His neck was being strangled. Completely shaken by this unforeseen turn of events, Hortis stood frozen in place.

<<My king, Shravis hasn't done anything—>> I tried to communicate with the man, but a powerful impact struck my flank, sending me flying.

"Mister Pig!" Jess charged, stretching out her limbs to catch me. But her frail frame wasn't able to support the weight of a pig, and both of us fell into the ocean.

I writhed around in the water. Then, Jess gathered me into her arms steadily before rising to the surface. Our faces poked out of the sea right away.

"Mister Pig, are you injured anywhere?" Jess asked worriedly.

If I remembered correctly, I'd felt several bones breaking, but for some reason, there wasn't any pain now. <<I'm fine. How about you?>>

"Oh, that's a relief... I'm completely all right." She smiled at me with her drenched face.

Under the support of the buoyancy of the sea and magic, everything above

our necks was floating above the water. The pier was slightly higher than us, and we couldn't see anything from our spot.

There was the sound of a human body dropping to the ground, then Shravis's coughing fit.

I frowned. <<Ceres and Batt are in danger. We need to hurry up and get—>>

I was interrupted by Shravis, who crawled to the edge of the pier and poked his face out to look at us. <Don't come. It's not safe right now.> His face contorted with pain, Shravis held his neck as he climbed to his feet. Now, I could only see his butt.

Naut's voice resounded from the top of the pier. "Ceres was cursed because she tried to save me. Batt snatched the Contract Stake from me to save her. The one who provided the cause for the Contract Stake to be wasted and the one who couldn't fulfill his duty to protect it were both me. If you have to kill someone to satisfy your tantrum, kill me."

"Oh?" Marquis replied. The conversation between the pair continued.

Jess and I traded glances. She looked worried and uneasy. *For now, it's probably best if we obey Shravis's advice and stay out of the limelight.*

Hortis's desperate plea reached my ears. "Please reconsider. I was the one who removed Ceres's collar. I made that decision knowing this would be the outcome. Let me make up for our loss."

"Make up for it? Well then, can you kill the Clandestine Arcanist?"

"Yes. I can."

Though I could only judge the situation by their voices, I could tell that the mood shifted instantly. While Jess pushed her chest against me underwater, I held my breath and strained my ears.

"How?"

"The Destruction Spear. I'll retrieve it, so can you spare Naut?"

There was a lull in the conversation, enough for someone to think in silence.

"So you were the one who took out the Destruction Spear."

I tilted my head quizzically at Marquis's remark. *No, he shouldn't— Never mind. I should trust that Hortis knows what he's doing.*

"Indeed. You asked Shravis to try, but he couldn't take anything out, right? That's only natural—I was a step ahead of him, and I stored it somewhere else."

"Where?"

"I left it in a safe place inside the capital. I'll offer you the Destruction Spear, so please turn a blind eye to this incident. If you're still displeased, I will shoulder all the punishment you deem fit. How about that? You wouldn't lose anything, right?"

"Tell me where it is," Marquis demanded, ruthless.

Hortis didn't reply.

His patience running out, Marquis pressed, "Where is it? I'm ordering you to tell me its hiding place."

"...I can't."

The suffocating aura Marquis exuded was so heavy that even the sea seemed to be treading lightly, keeping its waves as quiet as possible. "Why?"

"Because I cast a spell on it so that only I can retrieve it. If you are willing to pardon Naut, I swear that I will deliver the Destruction Spear to you with my own hands."

After a short pause, Marquis drawled, "We'll make it a transaction. Come to the Golden Cathedral before noon today with the Destruction Spear. If you do, I'll return the swordsman alive. If you don't make it in time, I'll execute him."

Shravis used his magic to haul Jess and me onto the pier. Marquis had left with the Clandestine Arcanist and Naut. As for the others, they were walking back to the ship. Only the three of us were left here.

I shook my body ferociously, flinging off all the seawater. Jess was also busy wringing her hair.

"Being dragged into that disaster must have been miserable. My apologies for father's violent temper." As he spoke, Shravis looked away from us with a dust

of pink on his cheeks.

Wondering why, I looked at Jess and saw that her drenched clothes were clinging to her skin and hugging her curves, revealing her modest figure for everyone to see.

“Oh!” Bashfully, she covered her chest with her arms, but it wasn’t effective at all. The fabric of her white blouse, which was now translucent with water, sparkled under the morning sun and playfully revealed patches of her skin tone. As for her skirt, it emphasized the curves from her waist to her thighs, and was especially flattering about her botto—

“You’re always carefree. Must be nice.” Shravis, appalled, kept his gaze fixed on the ship. “Let’s head back to the ship and have a strategy meeting. Uncle will soon depart for the capital. He mentioned that he wants you two to help him.”

And then he strutted off without waiting for us. Jess also began making her way to the ship, and I hurriedly chased after her.

The sleeve of her left hand, which usually concealed her forearm, was translucent enough to reveal a light green cloth. I chose to pretend I never saw it.

We found a crowd waiting for us inside the captain’s cabin: the trio of Hortis, Itsune, and Yoshu; the pair of Ceres and the black pig; and finally, the pair of Nourris and the wild boar.

The moment he saw us, Hortis smiled and spread his arms. “Sorry about my brother. You must feel awful with all the sticky seawater.”

The chill on the surface of my skin was wiped away—he’d cleansed the seawater from me with magic. Jess’s clothes were also restored to their former glory. *That’s a shame.*

“Oops, my bad.” Hortis grinned. “Looks like our young virgin prefers a see-through outfit.”

I shook my head solemnly. <<This really isn’t the time to joke around. I am not *that* much of a pervert.>> The frigid gazes of Jess and Shravis stabbed into me. <<More importantly, are you truly confident about your plans?>>

Hortis approached us and shut the door of the captain's cabin. "You mean the Destruction Spear, I assume."

With her arms crossed, Itsune stared at Hortis. "Don't tell me that it was a bluff. No way, right?"

"It wasn't. I have access to the Destruction Spear. That much is true."

Or is it? I voiced the question that had been bothering me. <<But, Mister Hortis, if that is the case, why did you choose to use the Contract Stake instead? >>

There was no reply.

I continued, <<If you had the Destruction Spear from the beginning, I don't see why you had to go out of your way to search for the Contract Stake. You could have just used the Destruction Spear as your bargaining chip and killed the Clandestine Arcanist with it.>>

Yoshu also looked at Hortis with doubt. "He's right. Tell us why. And remember that the life of one of our comrades is at stake."

Hortis, who looked exhausted, placed a hand against his forehead. "It's complicated. My situation is a lot more convoluted than you can imagine. I know the way to obtain the Destruction Spear, that much is true. But it involves entering the royal capital and going through several procedures. Depending on how things turn out, I might even need to negotiate with my brother."

Scowling with irritation, Itsune asked, "Will that bastard really agree to sit down and listen? Is there any guarantee that giving him this Destruction Spear thing is enough to save Naut's life?"

"Of course he will. He might give you a different impression, but he's a guy who will come around as long as you take the time to talk with him. In the old days, he was truly a responsible and outstanding man."

Hearing that, Shravis looked at Hortis with a noncommittal expression.

Hortis took a deep breath. "My brother has changed. A powerful magic that allows him to settle everything by force and the relentless duties of a prince have completely ruined him beyond recognition. He only thinks about the

quickest ways to solve a problem, which causes him to lose his heart in the process. But that doesn't mean he went down the route of irrationality. If we propose a better solution, he will certainly comply."

Steadying himself, the man then looked at me. "Shravis and I will head off to negotiate with him. Jess, young virgin, are you two willing to come along?"

"Yes, definitely!" Jess replied immediately. Hearing that, I nodded as well.

"Not so fast. What about us?" Yoshu cut into our exchange. He folded his arms with displeasure, knitting his brows together behind his curtain of black bangs. "Sis and I have a duty to protect our leader. As long as we have a prince's permission, we can enter the royal court's territory, right? Hortis, I sincerely hope you weren't planning on leaving us behind in a place like this."

"Your bro said that he's going to kill Naut. We're going too," Itsune declared.

Hortis looked at the pair and hummed in thought. "I see... Right, I can't leave you guys behind."

"Excuse me, if they're going, may I join as well?" Ceres took a step forward. "If Mister Naut gets injured, I will heal him. Also, having Mister Sanon around might be helpful; he can split off and take care of other tasks. Could you please give me permission to go with you?"

The man nodded. "Yeah, you can come along, Ceres. That goes for Sanon as well. Well then, Lithis—no, Nourris, what are you and Kento going to do?"

"No, she can't go," Itsune interrupted without hesitation. "I don't want to put Lith—Nourris in danger. Plus, if we become too big of a crowd, it'll be inconvenient, right? We siblings and Ceres are more than enough to take care of this."

Nourris nodded. "I don't think I would be very useful... I will wait here for everyone."

Kento looked at Hortis with his small black boar eyes. <In that case, I shall remain with Nourris.>

"All right, gotcha," Hortis replied. "Well then, other than Nourris and Kento, the rest of us must hurry to the capital. It's time to rescue Naut."

Hortis guided our party onto one of the small boats we'd used to land on the shore of Send-Off Island. According to him, he would use magic to fly this thing all the way to the capital.

After we'd all climbed in, the vehicle gently drifted into the air. It began accelerating bit by bit, eventually reaching a ferocious speed that rivaled a jet ski as it soared above the trees.

"Apologies in advance for the fact that I can't tell you all the details of my plan," Hortis said, his long hair fluttering in the cold morning breeze. "I can't predict what will happen in the capital. Jess, young virgin, I'm relying on you two."

"On...us?" Jess whispered nervously.

Hortis nodded. "We must retrieve the Destruction Spear secretly. To achieve that, your help is indispensable as a pair that my brother isn't keeping tabs on. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Naut's fate rests on your shoulders."

Jess gulped.

Indeed, these are grave circumstances. Putting Jess to one side for now, the question is, how can a mere pig contribute?

"Let's do a little thought experiment." Perhaps he'd read the narration because Hortis gazed at me as he spoke. "If I didn't look like a dog, do you think I would have ended up as Naut's buddy?"

What's he getting at? I thought, but before I could analyze it, Hortis shook his head and continued, "The answer is a firm no." He paused. "Young virgin, you were able to make it inside the core of the royal court *because* you're a pig. The same can be said for Sanon—he was entrusted with important decisions by the executive officers of the Liberators *because* he's a pig. Even Kento avoided a gruesome end at the Clandestine Arcanist's hands *because* he took on the appearance of a boar. Our innocuous appearances cause others to slight us, which is why we managed to participate in critical events like these."

He looked right into my eyes as he continued, enunciating every word carefully. "Remember this: the ones who can change history in the true sense of

the word are always the people whom history doesn't even take notice of."

When we reached the Needle Woods, the small boat lowered its attitude until it was just above the ground. It came to a stop before the precipitous cliffs that surrounded the capital.

"We'll walk from here on out." Shravis thrust his palm at the cliff. With a loud rattling, boulders tumbled down, creating an opening that served as the entrance.

It was a rather nostalgic scene, and subconsciously, Jess and I looked at each other.

"Seeing it reminds me of that night." Jess beamed at me.

I recalled the memory of her washing my body. *"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?"*

"N-No!" Jess blushed a bright red. "That's not what I meant!"

<<My bad, the memory just popped out by itself...>>

I knew what Jess was actually referring to. She was, naturally, talking about how the two of us had carved a path for ourselves to the royal capital on the brink of death before we'd walked inside this cliff, just like we were doing now. Back then, I'd believed that we could find happiness together. We'd entered the royal capital to save ourselves and realize a blissful future.

But this time, the circumstances were different. We were going to enter the capital to save Naut and deliver a blissful future to the Liberators.

We climbed the dim stairs surrounded by rock walls. Yoshu and Itsune were taciturn as they wore impassive faces. Ceres looked around nervously as she walked behind Jess and me with the black pig by her side.

Hortis, who led the charge, spoke slowly, as if he was choosing his words carefully. "Our destination is the Golden Cathedral. I will talk with my brother. As for all the Liberators, please watch over the proceedings. Shravis, you stick with me. The young virgin"—he sent a meaningful glance in my direction—"you

make sure to stay by Jess's side at all times and do what you think is right."

What does he mean by that? He's talking in riddles even at a time like this? But, well, I guess my brain is the reason I'm here. I suppose I'll accept a small challenge like that. <<Understood. I assume you made that request for a reason.>>

"...Yes, of course. May you use your intellect to uncover the greatest secret of Mesteria's royal family. My deepest apologies for the extra trouble, but I don't have the right to speak of it."

The greatest secret of Mesteria's royal family...? I raised an imaginary eyebrow.

That seemed to be all he was willing to share with me as Hortis pressed forward in brisk strides.

The uphill path that led to the heart of the capital was complex like an ant colony. As we climbed the tunnels that twisted and turned, I admired the outside scenery through the small windows from time to time. We passed through many enigmatic rooms and walked past countless timeworn doors before we finally arrived at the entrance to the Golden Cathedral.

Dark clouds smothered the sky, and flashes of lightning were followed by the rumbling of thunder. Though there wasn't any rain yet, an icy wind swept across the environment. It looked as if a storm were about to manifest at any time.

I looked at the towering cathedral, which was mostly made of stone materials with a black theme. Intricate gilded ornaments lavishly decorated the entire structure, announcing the significance and dignity of this building. This was where all the past kings of Mesteria slumbered, and it was also the venue for important audiences and rites. It was also the place where I'd returned to Japan with Eavis's power.

The grand, bulky bronze doors were tightly shut. Hortis quietly signaled us to wait with a hand sign before gradually opening the door.

A magnificent golden throne sat right across the entrance on the floor of

geometric patterns. Marquis was sitting on it, awaiting our arrival. There wasn't even a hint of disarray in his dignified attire.

"You are early," Marquis said in an aloof manner. "There are still three horae before noon."

Hortis gently pushed Jess's back, allowing her to enter the cathedral first. I was hot on her heels. The air inside was suffocating and chilly.

Naut was sitting on the ground next to Marquis. His twin shortswords were still at his hips, but his hands and feet were bound. He looked in our direction with a poker face.

Hortis and Shravis stepped into the cathedral hall, then the Liberators walked in after them.

Marquis didn't waste any time. "Where is the Destruction Spear?"

Hortis whimsically replied with a question of his own. "Just wondering, where did the Clandestine Arcanist go? I sure hope you have locked him up in a secure place."

The tip of Marquis's shoe tapped on the ground irately. "He has been confined in a room deep underground where no one can invade. Answer my question. Where is the Destruction Spear?"

"I can't give it to you yet. You have to wait until we come to an agreement."

The tyrant's torso puffed up with fury. "Agreement? There is no room for negotiation. Hurry up and take out the spear. Otherwise, I will kill this rebel."

Naut's body was violently hoisted into the air, and his restrained hands and feet dangled helplessly.

Ceres lifted her foot, about to take a step forward, but she caught herself and stopped.

"Now calm down, brother of mine," Hortis said in a placating tone. "Everyone present shares the same vision. I just want to talk. We still have time before noon. Let's head out for a moment. I think it's a good idea to cool our heads and tackle this with a rational mind."

There was a harsh clicking of one's tongue that almost sounded as if someone

had shot an arrow. “Head out? Spare me the trouble. If you are that insistent on talking, speak here.”

Naut was still hanging in the air. I saw that he was clenching his teeth.

“Now, now, let’s head outside. The two of us and Shravis can enjoy a breath of fresh air while we have our discussion.”

I narrowed my eyes. *Why is Hortis so insistent on going outside? Is there something he doesn’t want us to overhear?*

One moment, I was analyzing the situation before me. The next, everything went to hell.

Lightning flashed outside. Simultaneously, Itsune pulled out the greataxe on her back and swung it in one fluid motion. Her movement had been instantaneous, free of all hesitation.

Electricity sliced across the air, as if the lightning bolt from the heavens had barged into the cathedral. I reflexively closed my eyes. Within the deafening roar that followed, my ears picked up a faint sound that reminded me of a flute. The sound was familiar—it belonged to Yoshu’s bolts.

When I opened my eyes, Yoshu had notched a new bolt and pointed his crossbow straight at Marquis’s face. Itsune, who’d leaped high into the air during her first strike, swiftly slammed her greataxe at Marquis’s head for a second strike. Naut pulled out his twin shortswords—it seemed that Yoshu’s first bolt had cut the rope around his hands—and used the backlash of his flame arcs to slide his body across the floor and approach Marquis’s feet. The next bolt was fired from Yoshu’s crossbow.

Everything happened within the minuscule span of time I took to fully open my closed eyes. Other than the trio that had been suddenly set in motion, no one had any hope of reacting at all. They couldn’t even reach out their hands to deter the spiraling events.

Something sharp sliced through the wind. Furious lightning boomed. An inferno blazed up, sharp like a javelin. All the bloodlust present—no, the gargantuan embodiment of resentment, which had been transformed by Yethma bones into lethal magic—was targeting the throne.

Even if you were the mage with the most raw power in these lands, you couldn't survive such an onslaught. By the time that thought crossed my mind, the trio had already finished their attacks.

It was over. Our situation was so far beyond repair that it was almost spectacular.

"Have you already forgotten? I said that I will kill those who point their blades at me without even giving them a chance to say their excuses."

The bolt swerved and turned before falling to the ground. The edge of the greataxe cracked and chipped. One shortsword's blade was bent from its base. But Marquis sat there, unscathed, as if he had steel skin.

"My brother, no!" Hortis cried, but it fell on deaf ears as the earsplitting roaring of an explosion resounded in the cathedral.

Fanned by the blast, Jess and I were nearly sent flying, but we managed to get down onto the ground in time.

The peaceful cathedral hall was engulfed by clouds of dust in the blink of an eye. I could even hear the whistling of the wind that blew in.

<<Jess, are you hurt anywhere?>> I asked immediately.

"I'm all right. What about you?"

Dusty all over, the two of us looked at each other. Neither of us were injured.

Jess looked around us nervously. "Is everyone else safe...?"

For a moment, I didn't know how to reply.

I took a deep breath. <<Let's head over and check on the situation.>>

When the wind finally cleared the dust, we were presented with a shocking scene: the wall in front of us, where we'd walked in from, had vanished without a trace. Nothing was left—not the solid stonework, not the dignified doors, and not the magnificent stained glass. The only thing within sight was the overcast sky that began to rain.

A huge chunk of the ground had been gouged out, exposing the rough rock foundation beneath, and Marquis unhurriedly strode across it.

I heard a low grunt and turned to look at my side. Ceres and the black pig were dusty all over, just like us.

<My deepest apologies,> Sanon apologized, sounding remorseful from the bottom of his heart. <I should have predicted that the young ones would go to such extremes...>

Next to him, Ceres's expression was contorted with distress. "Mister Naut... Mister Naut just..."

<<It's not like you saw his corpse. Pull yourself together,>> I advised her before I looked at the black pig. <<We should save the talk for later. Let's approach them and check on the state of affairs.>>

After overcoming the obstacle course of rubble, we finally managed to leave the bounds of the cathedral. The plaza outside—or at least, what used to be the plaza—was now a field of freshly excavated holes. The falling rain quickly slicked the exposed dry ground.

Marquis, whose outfit was impeccable and free from all dust, stood there and gazed down at another plaza roughly ten meters below him. Hortis stood at the other end of his sight. Behind Hortis was Shravis, who stood in front of the battered and bruised trio like a shield, facing towards his father and uncle.

"Mister Naut!" Ceres raised her voice with relieved delight, but even as she spoke, the king, stewing in his silent rage, was taking one solemn step after another.

"Are you going to bite back at your father and defend criminals, Shravis?" Marquis asked in an overbearing voice that was just as dreadful as the rumbling thunder above.

Shravis replied, "Whether you be a great king or my father whom I adore and respect, I will not endorse mistakes."

Hearing Shravis's signature deadpan response, the king's temple twitched abruptly. Marquis held up his right hand and extended it towards Shravis.

Immediately, Hortis spread his hands. A white light flared up in front of Shravis's neck before dissipating in the blink of an eye. Hortis had intercepted a strangulation spell and nipped it in the bud. "Stop venting your anger on your

son, my brother. This is ridiculous. You'll upset Wyss."

Marquis scoffed. "Some *son* he is. Those rebels are nothing more than criminals who were ludicrous enough to make an attempt on their king's life, and yet, he tries to protect them. I cannot tolerate anyone who stands up for sinners, including you."

Countless orbs of blinding light manifested around Marquis. They almost looked like the Drums of Raijin, a ring of drums behind the Japanese thunder god's back.

"Run!" Hortis yelled sharply. Behind him, Shravis withdrew from the plaza while protecting the three Liberators. His uncle, meanwhile, went in the opposite direction—he lunged forward fiercely at his brother, whose wrath had yet to die down.

At the same time, Marquis shot off his orbs of light. Hortis's response was a swing of his left hand, which summoned a multitude of enormous metal clumps that surged out of thin air. All the bullets of light crashed into the cluster of metal clumps and were snuffed out without exception.

"It's our first sibling quarrel in ages," Hortis playfully commented. "I'd be very grateful if you went easy on me."

Instead of replying, Marquis responded with dazzling, explosive flames. Hortis surrounded himself with a veil of water and withstood the attack. Over in the spectator corner, we were almost dragged into the aftermath, so we retreated, taking cover behind the rubble.

<<We should meet up with Shravis and the others,>> I said to Jess, Ceres, and Sanon. <<The most important thing right now is to help those three get away.>>

We dashed across the cemetery next to the cathedral and ran down the narrow stairs, aiming for the direction where the others had disappeared.

At last, we found the quartet in a small circular plaza with a dried-up water fountain; they were huddling under the eaves to avoid the rain. Shravis was propping up Naut by his shoulder while Yoshu supported his sister by her shoulder. The three Liberators had managed to cling to their lives thanks to the protection of some kind of spell, but it seemed that they'd been hit by the brunt

of the blast, and blood oozed out of every part of their bodies.

“Mister Naut!” Ceres exclaimed as she ran to the huntsman as fast as her legs could carry her. Not even the attention of the peanut gallery deterred her from throwing her arms around his chest.

Looking somewhat awkward, Shravis distanced himself from Naut. Jess, Sanon, and I soon caught up with Ceres.

<<Are you guys okay?>> I asked with a concerned frown.

There was no reply from the three Liberators.

The black pig snorted irately. <Now you have gone and done it. That tyrannical king might be unreasonable about a lot of things, but this time, he isn't wrong. Those who make an attempt on the lives of others must brace themselves for the possibility of their own deaths should their target turn the tables on them. The coup d'état you initiated earlier was possibly worse than the shortsighted tantrum of a child.>

Naut scowled and glared at the black pig heatedly. “I’ve long prepared myself for the day I cast my life away. I’m sure you’ve come to the same conclusion as us, Sanon. As long as that king lives on, there will never be a happy future for Yethma. If we, whose most cherished people were stolen from us, don’t put our lives on the line, who will?”

“Mister Naut, you can’t do this... I don’t want you to die...” Ceres desperately clung to him.

But he only pushed her lightly by the shoulder, slowly widening the distance between her body and his own. “Sorry, but this is the path I’ve chosen.” He gave her a small smile. “If I had another chance at life, I would have wished to spend it with you.”

All his wounds had vanished, leaving nothing but unblemished skin. Naut lifted his hand and hesitantly stroked the head of the pitiful young girl who’d healed him, though he pulled away almost immediately. He then drew his one shortsword that hadn’t been bent and stepped forward into the rain.

Blinding flashes and thunderous booming burst out violently nearby. The ferocious exchange was so close that it might catch up to us at any time.

With a cool head, Shravis tapped Naut's shoulder. "Stop, Naut. Right now, the only thing we can do is wait until this frenzy calms down. When war and battles are the first things on my father's mind, no one can stop him unless you have a miraculous weapon like the Destruction Spear. We should focus on getting to safety. I'm sure you don't have any objections to that."

Even as he spoke, a fireball around the size of a basketball, which Hortis had likely failed to block, crashed down from above and struck the water fountain at the heart of the plaza. The stone sculpture was reduced to dust. It was such a surreal sight that I struggled to process it.

Naut wasn't fazed in the least. He guarded his face with his sleeve. "Our royal prince is right. Let's get out of here for now."

Showered by the rain, we navigated the narrow alleys and looked for a hiding place. Since Yoshu was injured, Shravis took his place and supported Itsune's shoulder.

As we fled, Itsune asked, "How can you be so nice to me? I tried to kill your father, you know. Or do you want me to do some *special* favors for you, hmm?"

Her ample chest was pressing against Shravis's flank, so the prince cautiously twisted his body to give her some personal space. "I could never have any ulterior motives. I'm pretty sure I've said this to you before: I truly wish from the bottom of my heart to make Mesteria a better place together with people like you, who have your own opinions instead of just accepting the status quo."

"Would be nice if it becomes a better place," Yoshu muttered, sounding like he was implying that was nothing but an unobtainable dream as he pressed down on his bleeding arm.

As we advanced down the path Shravis had chosen, Jess and I were at the rear, cautiously watching what was going on behind us. The capital was practically an enormous stone labyrinth carved into a steep slope—I had no clue where we were heading.

The black pig, who was walking next to Ceres, turned to face me. <Mister Lolip, the Destruction Spear is absolutely necessary for negotiations. Have you figured out the greatest secret of Mesteria's royal family that Mister Hortis mentioned?>

I shook my head. <<No, I'm afraid I don't have any leads... From my perspective, his manner of speech seemed to imply that he wanted Jess and me to acquire the supreme treasure somehow.>>

<Indeed, that was my interpretation as well.>

I looked up at Jess, but it didn't seem like she had any flashes of inspiration either. Frowning, she said, "If it's no longer in Lady Vatis's sarcophagus, where would it be?"

I racked my brain for ideas.

"It's complicated. My situation is a lot more convoluted than you can imagine. I know the way to obtain the Destruction Spear, that much is true. But it involves entering the royal capital and going through several procedures."

Despite saying he knew how to obtain the Spear, he hadn't revealed the exact method and had even tried to rely on us to find it. *What in the world is he trying to do? How does this have anything to do with the royal family's greatest secret?*

In the present situation, I feel like there's only one method to turn the tides of this nightmare, and that's to deliver the spear to Marquis and pray that it's enough to quell his anger. There's a chance that the fate of Mesteria rests on the tiny brains of a pig. Think.

<<Say...>> I began, projecting my thoughts to Jess. <<What if the Destruction Spear is still in the Golden Cathedral? Hortis knew the method to retrieve the spear. But Marquis was present. That's why he tried to guide his brother outside at the beginning—he wanted to take out the spear during his absence. This theory would explain Hortis's actions earlier.>>

"But the presence of King Marquis shouldn't matter, right? Mister Hortis could have just taken it out while the king was still there. If your theory is correct, then why did he have to be so secretive about it?"

I get it now. That's where the greatest secret of the royal family comes in. As I contemplated, I noticed that the black pig was looking at me, as if he were trying to gauge something in my mind. <<May I help you?>>

His ears flapped in response. <Please persevere and obtain the spear. It is the

only path to a peaceful future.>

The inconceivable sound of mass destruction resounded from an area that wasn't too far away. Judging by it, one part of the royal capital had suffered a landslide. White clouds of soil and dust billowed up into the gloomy sky.

"Uncle..." Shravis turned around worriedly.

That was when a feminine voice called out to him from the direction we were heading. "Shravis! What in the world is going on?" It was Wyss.

I focused on our surroundings and spotted an elegant white palace right beside us—it was the building with Wyss's office. Shravis had come to seek his mother's aid.

"Mother..." He began in an anguished tone. "Father is overtaken with fury and is fighting uncle. The scale of their battle isn't something outsiders can easily intervene in. I was wondering whether there was any way we could put a stop to it somehow..."

Wyss's speed was just short of running as she rushed across the plaza paved with white cobblestone. "And who might these young ones be?" Her gaze shifted to the three Liberators, whose tattered clothes were soaked thoroughly by the rain.

"They incurred father's wrath, and he is out for their lives. Could you please hide them somewhere safe?"

After a moment of thought, Wyss nodded. "There's no other way. In the back of this palace is a large cave. It was created during Lady Vatis's era, and it's under the protection of powerful magic. It should be safe for the time being. Please evacuate there." Her hand indicated the path that ran along the side of the palace.

"Sorry for the trouble," Naut said before the Liberators followed her directions. Ceres and Sanon trailed after them.

Only four people were left in front of the palace: Wyss, Shravis, Jess, and I.

Having no regard for the rain that drenched her clothes, Wyss turned to us with fatigued eyes. "Has the alliance between the Liberators and the royal court

gone awry?”

Water dripped down from Shravis’s curly hair that framed his tormented expression. “I cannot apologize enough, mother. It was all because I wasn’t enough...”

“No, both you and Mister Pig strove impressively hard. Just being able to cause such tumultuous change is a magnificent feat. From here on, let’s think of a way to resolve our situation as peacefully as possible.”

At the exact moment Wyss spoke those words, almost like a cruel joke of the universe, something crashed onto the cobblestone of the plaza. It was a middle-aged man wearing a white toga—Hortis.

The force of that impact would have turned any normal human into an octopus rice cracker, but Hortis tried to sit up painfully, almost as if he’d only fallen out of bed. However, an almost infinite number of black arms sprouted from the white cobblestone, pinning his hands and feet down. Some black hands even coiled around his neck and began wringing it.

Ever so slowly, Marquis descended from the heavens. “Well, well. Is our sibling quarrel already at its end? As I expected, you are a weakling.”

Hortis was restrained by countless black hands, fixed in a spread-eagle pose. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Even if I can’t move my hands, I can still cast spells.”

Looking annoyed, Marquis thrust his hand at the palace. The glass panes of the windows shattered as a metal hoop came flying through—a Yethma collar. He then faced his palm at his younger brother, and the collar whipped around Hortis’s neck like a shark that had found its prey, closing with a click.

The king then walked forward until he was next to his brother and stomped hard on Hortis’s chest. The collar glowed white, and Hortis coughed up saliva mixed with blood.

“With this, you can’t use magic.” His foot still trampling on his brother, Marquis turned to his son. “Have you changed your mind, Shravis? You are free to rebel against me from here, but the only thing you will achieve is to end up like him.”

Possibly because he'd been robbed of his magic, under the strangling of the black hands, Hortis opened and closed his mouth repeatedly like an asphyxiating, stranded fish. Shravis leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees with vexation. Wyss seemed intimidated as well, unable to find her voice.

"Where are the criminals? Speak, Shravis," Marquis barked.

Shravis's response was nothing but silence. Marquis's ruthless eyes turned to Jess and me. *We're done for*, I thought numbly.

But that was when a raspy voice echoed out. "Gis...en..." Honestly, it was more of a croak, which was being produced by the strangled Hortis.

In my mind, Hortis's voice rang out. <Listen to what I have to say. I'm begging you.>

The king's gaze slid to the man beneath his feet. "Talk."

<Please don't...rob those children of their lives. The royal court killed their precious friend...their cherished beloved. That resentment is what led to their foolish act earlier. If you...apologize from the bottom of your heart and forgive them, it's not too late... Everything should come to a peaceful conclusion.>

Looking as if he'd heard something beyond his comprehension, Marquis furrowed his brows. "How ludicrous. Why should I be the one to apologize? They are the ones who ought to offer their apologies and plead for their lives. That includes you, Hortis."

His chilly voice made my chest clench. I looked at Hortis's face, which was growing bluer by the second. Marquis was serious—he was truly trying to kill his own blood and flesh. Shravis trembled like a leaf, completely helpless against his father.

<You can go ahead and kill me if that's what you want. But I beg you, please...forgive them.>

Marquis tilted his head. "Why are you willing to go that far to protect mere peasants? Why is that swordsman so significant to you?"

I didn't miss the quick glance that Hortis's red and congested eyes stole in our direction. <Because...he's the man who loved my dead daughter

unconditionally.>

I felt as if time had slowed to a stop. Instantly, the dots connected. Every single mystery was solved.

All the black hands that had pinned Hortis down melted away into nothing. “You... You had a child...?” Shock sounded much more prominent in Marquis’s voice than anger. “There mustn’t be any branch families on our divine family tree. You should have known that such an act is enough to earn your execution.”

That was when the air and the ground began shaking with dreadful indignation.

<<Jess, let’s go,>> I called out hurriedly to her, who seemed like she hadn’t finished sorting out her chaotic thoughts. <<We need to get out of here *now*.>>

Jess nodded, and the two of us broke into a run. Almost at the same time, Marquis tried to perform a rear naked choke on Hortis with his own hands while his wife attempted to hold him back.

Fortunately, Marquis didn’t pay any particular attention to us. We successfully ran down the stone steps and began retracing our path.

“Mister Pig, where are we going?”

With my hooves on the verge of slipping several times during my sprint, I looked at Jess, who was drenched from head to toe. <<There’s only one destination: the Golden Cathedral. We’ve got to hurry there and take out the Destruction Spear.>>

“But... How?”

The truth had been so sudden, so outrageous, that Jess must still be confused.

I took a moment to choose my words carefully before announcing the greatest secret of Mesteria’s royal family to her. <<Hortis is your *father*, Jess. You are his illegitimate child.>>

Jess was struck speechless.

The answer was plain and simple. In hindsight, all the mysteries we’d faced even seemed to stem from this secret.

<<You heard what Hortis said earlier. The girl Naut admired, Eise, was actually Hortis's daughter. This is probably what happened: because Marquis burned down that convent, his daughter, Eise, died. He even lost his wife after she learned of that brutal truth, which is why he abandoned the royal court. Then, he took on the guise of a dog and stayed by Naut's side for five years. The name of your mother's husband carved into her grave was Hortis's alias.>>

"Huh? But... How can that be...?" Jess placed a hand on her chest and looked at me.

<<The Destruction Spear is still sealed within Vatis's sarcophagus. Shravis simply wasn't able to release the seal. Why is that? The reason is simple: Shravis isn't the *youngest* royalty of Vatis's bloodline. The legitimate successor of the royal court is *you*, Jess.>>

That explained a lot of things. Her magic talent, which she'd been oblivious about, that even made a mage like Eavis declare she had the potential to become the most powerful mage since Vatis. The rapid pace of her ecdysias, which even surpassed the prince. Above all else, her prayers, which had managed to bend the ways of this world to summon a bespectacled otaku from another world.

It had all been a boon of Vatis's lineage—her divine blood, as the royal court called it.

"I'm...a member of the royal family..." she whispered in a daze.

I continued my explanation as I ran. <<Hortis didn't want to make that truth public. He was prohibited from having children. There was a chance that you might have been killed so that the royal court could snuff out all likelihood of a branch family. That's why he didn't retrieve the Destruction Spear, which has the risk of revealing you as royalty, instead choosing to go after the Contract Stake.>>

"But...that doesn't make sense. Mister Hortis, well... He was sniffing my legs... How could he do something like that to his blood daughter...?"

It actually showed how shrewd that man was. <<Hortis was only pretending to be that kind of clown. No one would ever think that there would be a father out there who'd get excited over sniffing his daughter's bare legs. He decided to

use common sense against everyone for his deception and made it a habit. It was all a part of his calculations.>>

If this were an anime, Jess's eyes would be swirling with visible confusion. "Wait... If that's true, then are you possibly...my older brother, Mister Pig?"

<<No, in my case, I was simply getting all excited about your bare legs.>>

"Oh, I see... I'm so relieved."

Uh, you really shouldn't be relieved after hearing that, but this isn't the right time. <<This is probably the sequence of events Hortis had in mind: I deduce your secret, and you retrieve the Destruction Spear after he leads Marquis away from the Golden Cathedral. Indeed, if the assassination by those three never happened, I would have probably realized Hortis's intentions the moment the two of us were left behind in the cathedral.>>

"And now, we're heading off to enact Hortis's script, right?"

<<That's right. We'll get our hands on the Destruction Spear, compensate for the Contract Stake, then do what we can to tie everything up amicably. I'm sure that once Marquis regains a method to kill the Clandestine Arcanist and cools his head, he won't try to follow through on murdering his own brother.>>

"Got it!"

Together with Jess, I dashed through the rainy royal capital. The gusts were cold, but my heart was thumping hard in my chest, and hot, pumping blood heated my liver. It was up to the two of us to save this nation.

Soon, we arrived at the ruins of the Golden Cathedral. Jess and I crossed the plaza, which had been reduced to a giant crater, and stepped into the gaping cathedral hall. Deep in the direction we were facing was the altar dedicated to Vatis. At its bottom was an enormous sarcophagus. Though our feet nearly slipped on the marble, we made our way there with determination.

When we reached the altar, Jess tried to catch her breath as she stared up at Vatis's statue. The woman placed her left hand on her chest and raised her right hand high into the air. I'd seen her countless times in the past, but now, she seemed completely different to me. This woman...was Jess's ancestor from not

that long ago.

<<If I remember correctly, you wish for the Destruction Spear while touching the lid of the sarcophagus, right?>> I prompted her.

“I think so, yes. We must hurry.”

After bowing reverently to the statue, Jess took a deep breath before touching the lid.

There was a faint and clipped creak—the lid shook. It was followed by a second, then a third, then one final long creak before the vibration abruptly stopped. Something welled up from the surface of the lid. It floated up silently, and I would describe the motion as chocolatey smooth.

The object in question was a black, rod-shaped weapon embellished with magnificent decorations: the Destruction Spear.

Jess gingerly picked up the item from the lid. I observed it. Its handle was mainly black, laced with gold and silver ornaments. The point end was rather complex; it coiled like a corkscrew. The center of the spearhead was tightly fitted with something that looked similar to the Contract Stake—actually, the crystal in the shape of a triangle pyramid seemed like it was none other than a Contract Stake. It was as if someone had hidden a transparent pistil inside a spiral flower bud.

“Is that...a Contract Stake inside it?” Jess held up the Destruction Spear closer to her eyes and tilted her head quizzically.

<<It certainly seems like it. When you thrust the spear, the Contract Stake would stab into your target. That’s probably how it works.>>

“But why is—”

A lone, helpless silhouette ran over to us from the gaping hole that had replaced the entrance, interrupting our conversation. “Miss Jess! Mister Super-Virgin... Please help me...” Her voice was trembling, but you could hear her admirable bravery. It was Ceres.

“Miss Ceres!” Jess exclaimed, and we rushed over to the girl. “What happened?”

Ceres seemed like she had used up the last of her strength—she collapsed with a thud.

Where did Sanon go? Why isn't Naut here?!

Something must have happened—something bad. Sensing it was an emergency, I made a beeline for the young girl.

When we approached her, Jess hugged Ceres's shoulders and helped her up. I sniffed Ceres's legs. *She's the real deal.*

"Is something wrong, Miss Ceres?" Jess asked frantically. "Get a grip...!"

Ceres trembled pitifully, soaked to the bone. Her eyes were drenched with tears. "I'm so sorry..." She fished out a small metallic item around the size of an acorn—a spherical object with a sharp needle like a hornet's abdomen—and stabbed it into the back of *Jess's hand*.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I froze.

"Sorry about this." A voice called out from behind us. It was Naut.

The huntsman turned over his coat with a muffled flutter before snatching the Destruction Spear from Jess's hand. Realization hit me right away. The Liberators weren't going to use the Destruction Spear as a peaceful solution to the war—they were going to use it to *end* the war with a victory. Naut was going to kill Marquis with the supreme treasure.

<<No, stop, Naut!>> I charged forward, trying to block his way, but a large black body rammed into me from my side and violently shoved me away. My head banged against something, and I saw white stars and sparks run across my vision. <<Mister...Sanon...?>>

When I tried to climb to my feet, the black pig bared his fangs and clamped his teeth hard around my neck. Lightning pierced my spine, and my body trembled. I looked up at the black pig from the floor.

<My apologies, but please allow me to take over from here. If we don't carry through a coup d'état to the end, everything will be for naught. Since Nattie and the others have already taken action, the only way to save them is to kill the tyrannical king.>

Sanon didn't even wait for a reply before he turned and left the cathedral after Naut.

I forced my numb body to move despite its protests and staggered over to Jess. It seemed that the paralysis didn't last long. <<Jess, you okay?>>

"Yes... I can deal with this." After saying that, she pulled out the metallic device piercing her hand. Blood gushed profusely from her fair skin.

<<Hold on, you're bleeding though!>>

"I'm deliberately letting it flow. You see, I'm manipulating my blood flow so that the paralyzing poison won't spread to the rest of my body."

Ceres's shoulders heaved with loud sobs. "I'm shorry... Mish Jesh... I..." Breaking down with tears, Ceres almost pushed her own head against the ground, but Jess gently held her back with a hug. Jess's bleeding hand slowly stroked the younger girl's petite head.

"They told you that Mister Naut would be killed if you didn't do this. I understand," Jess said softly. "I understand. I would have done the same thing as you if Mister Pig was at risk."

Ceres clung to Jess and bawled hard, her whole body convulsing as she wept.

Who was the one who'd deceived Ceres, telling her that Naut would die if they didn't have the Destruction Spear? *I know this doesn't sound nice, but I don't think Naut has that kind of cunning, scheming bone in his body. It must be Sanon. Sanon led Ceres on and forced her to be an accomplice in snatching the Destruction Spear from us.*

He betrayed us.

In that case, the fact that we're stalled here, looking after Ceres, is probably all according to that black pig's plans as well.

I took a deep breath. <<Jess, we need to hurry and stop Naut.>>

"Right." Jess stood up and lent her shoulder to Ceres as support. "Would you like to come with us?"

Hiccupping as she cried, Ceres nodded.

Once again, Jess and I retraced our path and sprinted to the palace. Ceres was hot on our heels.

I wondered what was happening on the other side. *Did Hortis manage to gain his brother's forgiveness? What about Shravis? What's Marquis doing? How much time do we have before Naut reaches the scene?*

The drenched royal capital was completely painted in hues of gray, and patches of the stonework here and there had collapsed. I didn't know whether the citizens of the capital were avoiding the rain or had sensed that all was not well in their city, but absolutely none of them walked on the streets.

<<Do you have enough energy to keep running, Jess?>>

Continuing to face forward, Jess pumped one of her fists. "I do. What about you?"

<<Of course. Who do you think I am?>>

With a smile curling her lips, Jess stole a quick glance at me. "You're a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin, right?"

<<Exactly.>>

We rushed up the stairs and arrived at the plaza in front of the palace. King Marquis was still standing unscathed. The collared Hortis prostrated on the ground and looked like he was trying to appeal to his brother. Next to the pair, Shravis and Wyss were watching over the scene. Naut hadn't reached here yet. We still had the chance to prevent the assassination ahead of time.

"Mister Shravis! Please stop Mister Naut!" Jess yelled.

Almost at the exact moment when Shravis reacted to her voice, Naut appeared in the plaza from another stairwell. The prince dashed at a speed that reminded me of a carnivorous predator and aimed a lightning bolt at Naut's chest.

Naut's remaining shortsword glowed crimson and parried the lightning.

It was already too late by the time I grasped the situation. Naut didn't have the Destruction Spear on him—he was a diversion. Right on the opposite side of him was the palace, and Yoshu was hidden within its shadow while holding his

crossbow at the ready. In place of a bolt, a spear with a black luster was notched somewhat clumsily. *No way, is he—*

Without a moment's delay, there was a clicking sound, and the Destruction Spear vanished from the crossbow. The power of a rista had accelerated it to an unthinkable speed that transcended the laws of physics.

Marquis remained standing. I strained my eyes. The Destruction Spear was suspended in midair, and the only thing it was doing was spinning continuously around its horizontal axis.

"Did you really think that a surprise attack from frail humans like you people could defeat the mage with the most raw power in Mesteria?" Marquis stretched out his hand at the spear, which kept spinning several dozen meters away from him. Nothing happened, however. In fact, the spear seemed to be edging forward little by little. "Hmm...?"

Black lightning crackled and flashed around the spear as it gradually began accelerating.

"That's the Destruction Spear, my brother!" Hortis screamed.

It was a spear that could take any life. Some kind of special enchantment must have been on it because it was resisting Marquis's magic and pressing on.

Marquis dodged to the side. The spear rotated like a compass needle and aimed its pointed end at him. Even Yoshu, who'd shot the spear, looked shocked. The spear steadily sped up. Marquis gave up on evading and faced the spear, his expression twisted with disgruntlement as he thrust both hands in its direction.

The air vibrated, and bright flashes were followed by loud crackling. The entire chunk of cobblestone between Marquis and the spear split apart and was flung in all directions. Countless thin lightning bolts darted across the black clouds above as if someone had urged the heavens to be less lenient, and an ominous roar boomed without a pause.

The spear grew sluggish—but it turned out to only be temporary because it began accelerating once again while releasing black lightning. Marquis's face was contorted to a point I'd never seen on him before—I could tell he was

amassing all his power to fight back against the spear's enchantment as the weapon began spinning rapidly in the air.

However, there was a clear winner between the two. With unhindered acceleration, the spear flew through the air at Marquis's chest.

There was a loud slam, and a towering metal wall at least one meter thick sprouted out of the ground vigorously, standing defiantly in front of the spear. Despite its valiant efforts, the spear easily melted the metal and shot out of the other side.

The Destruction Spear drew nearer and nearer to Marquis by the second, and everyone else in the area could only watch it in a daze, as if time had frozen.

Only several meters to go. White light and black lightning clashed violently without rest, almost like the grand finale of a fireworks show. Tension kept rising and plummeting in the atmosphere, threatening to crack the air itself with stress. During every emotional roller-coaster plunge, my pork flesh would seize up with horror.

At long last, the spear was right next to its target—it was going to stab into Marquis's chest. All the spectators could predict what would happen next.

That is, until white cloth fluttered in the wind and leaped in front of Marquis's torso.

It was Hortis. He was reaching out his lean but muscular right arm and presenting it before his brother's chest.

The spear pierced Hortis's arm.

Almost immediately, the explosions of light died down, as if someone had sucked it all up.

"Hortis..." The king's voice was barely a whisper.

"Hey, you're a guy who'll make a mark in history as one of its most terrible tyrants—I can't believe the option to use your family as meat shields never crossed your mind." Hortis pushed his brother aside with a toothy grin.

With a horrifying splat, Hortis's forearm was torn to shreds. The Destruction Spear fell onto the ground with his right hand, but its core, the crystal that

resembled the Contract Stake, was nowhere to be found.

“It’s so shabby. Hard to imagine it’s an enchantment from prehistoric times,” Hortis scoffed as he looked at his right arm. A light in the shape of a triangular pyramid had split his arms and was steadily progressing to the center of his chest. Wherever the light journeyed, his flesh was transformed into a sludge that seemed like a mixture of blood and pieces of meat before it splattered on the white cobble. “Destruction Spear? What a fraud.”

At a slight distance, Marquis gazed at his crumbling brother. His expression was as stiff as stone. “...Why did you protect me?”

“Isn’t that obvious? If you die, there won’t be anyone left who can release the Yethma.” Hortis swung his head, and his movements shook his collar. During his motion, the dazzling light smashed his elbow and aimed directly at his heart as it progressed.

“Listen up, all of you.” Even while his arm was slowly corroding and crumbling, Hortis stood tall and proud with his chest puffed up. Water dripped from his long hair that clung to his face as he raised his voice. “There’s one very important lesson you must never forget.”

Hortis’s eyes took turns to look at every one of us present in the plaza. Our eyes met as well. There was a smile on his face. When his eyes moved on to Jess next to me, I had the feeling that this eye contact lasted a little longer than everyone else.

“Protect those you love with your life. But don’t try to rob anyone else of those they love.” Hortis finally turned to face Marquis, who was standing closest to him. “My dear brother, I’m afraid this is farewell.”

Even a composed and confident man like Marquis had lost his spirit after the unexpected turn of events. He could only stare at his crumbling brother in silence.

The blinding light shattered Hortis’s shoulder. His bones exploded with a crunch, and fresh red blood moistened his face.

Suddenly, Hortis breathed out, as if all the tension had left his body. It was replaced by a warm smile on his face. “I love each and every one of you here,

and that won't change for all of eternity."



Finally, the pointed light reached Hortis's chest. In the blink of an eye, his entire body was ruthlessly scattered into nothing. The smile that had been there only seconds ago could no longer be found anywhere in this world.

Only the impartial sound of rain resounded in the plaza. The grotesque mass of blood and flesh at Marquis's feet was gradually washed away.

No one spoke. Jess placed a hand on my back. She was crying.

"Hortis..." Marquis whispered before falling to his knees as if his body had crumpled beneath its own weight.

On the ground were the remnants of a younger brother who'd wagered his life to save his older brother—a vast marsh of soulless blood, bone, and flesh. With trembling hands, Marquis tried to scoop it up. But his hands shook so severely and violently that the only thing he succeeded at was submerging his sleeves in blood.

His hair, once slicked back and tidy, had been reduced to a mess by the rain. His clothes were miserably drenched with rain and blood. The tyrannical king had vanished without a trace.

The person who knelt in the pool of blood was a lonely, powerless man who'd lost someone willing to love him unconditionally.

The Recollections of a Certain Middle-Aged Man

The system of the royal capital, which had been reinforced for over a century, turned out to be much more robust than he imagined.

Even this man, who was the self-professed mage with the most technical skills in Mesteria, wasn't able to slip past the king's surveillance and overwrite the necessary information. His second daughter wasn't spared from the same fate as his eldest daughter, who had been taken away to the "underground." They couldn't even gain the privileges of working professionals in the royal capital—just like the daughters of the capital citizens, they had to live their lives as Yethma, the world completely oblivious to the royal blood they inherited.

"There's nothing you have to apologize for," the man's wife said resolutely. She was a beautiful woman with serene, honey-brown eyes. "I've long braced myself for this day. We only ended up with the same outcome as everyone else."

Most children born in the royal capital were separated from their parents at birth, becoming the royal court's property. Their parents were only granted two rights: to name their children and to be informed when they died. All other interference was prohibited by law. Those who broke it and everyone else involved would be punished with death.

"They are *your* children, after all," she spoke softly. "I'm sure that Eise and Jess will make the best of their situation somehow. Let's have faith and wait for them."

"You're right. They're your daughters too. I'm sure they'll grow up beautiful and loved by everyone."

His wife nodded with tears staining her cheeks.

Eleven years later, their first daughter left the world of the living. The prince had burned down the convent she'd taken refuge in. Their daughter, who'd managed to escape with her life from the fire, was murdered by Yethma

hunters.

The prince was also the man's older brother.

There was an inquiry into the house of the man's wife; the royal court wished to investigate her relationship with the convent. They found her innocent, and though she'd succeeded in hiding her husband's secret, despair and fear had backed her into a corner.

What if they discover our lies, and the worst befalls Jess because of us? That question haunted her mind.

And then, beneath the breathtaking starry sky, the woman the man loved unconditionally threw herself off a cliff and breathed her last.

This series of events arranged by fate was so brutal and heartless that the man lost himself to desolation. He assumed the appearance of a dog, soaked his paws in the fountain that represented many memories to him, and finished the seal on his bangle, then left the royal capital without telling a single soul.

That was when he had a fateful encounter with a young boy.

Five years after this encounter, that young boy accompanied a certain girl and her companion pig on their journey.

Chapter 5: The World Is Changing Step-by-Step

Not only did the royal family attend Hortis's funeral, but Naut, the leader of the Liberators, was present as well.

The person responsible for destroying the Golden Cathedral had also been the one who had repaired it. The beautiful light of the westering sun filtered in from the stained glass, decorated by patches of vibrant colors.

Naut and Marquis were both inside the hall, which was permeated with the fumes of a mellow fragrance. Though they didn't share a smile or anything to that extent, never once did they exchange glares.

Hortis's gut-wrenching death had influenced Mesteria's government like never before. King Marquis forgave the executive officers of the Liberators, who forgave him in kind. An alliance between the royal court and the Liberators had been realized—this time, in the true sense of the word. Shravis had been elected as the go-between among the two factions. He was in charge of advancing the reforms in the government, and though it was slow, this nation was steadily transforming.

As the first step forward, a new law had been announced to the entire nation: Yethma must not be murdered.

This reform wasn't a solution to the root of the problem, and in my opinion, it would take a long time to truly abolish the unreasonable system that had been around since the dawn of history. That said, simply establishing something that should have been around in the first place, despite being delayed, was clearly a giant leap for Mesteria.

That night, after an extravagant banquet, Jess and I had each other to ourselves. War was no longer terrorizing this world. The Clandestine Arcanist had been neutralized and was sealed away in the deepest part of the capital for now. We could finally stop to catch our breath.

The two of us walked down the stone corridor illuminated by torches and headed to Jess's room. The maiden in question let out a yawn and stretched before smiling at me. "I think I might have been a little too much of a glutton."

Even though the recent events had been devastating, she seemed relatively energetic, which was a relief. *Having a hearty appetite is a good thing. I certainly hope she'll keep it up and grow bigger.*

"Now, which part of my body are you referring to exactly?" After reading the narration, Jess looked miffed as she covered her chest with her arms.

I hurriedly revised my statement. <<You've got the wrong idea, I meant your whole body. I don't think your boobs will get any bigger than this unless you use some kind of magic. I'm not so perverted that I'd talk about chest sizes out in the open, not to mention that if I had to choose, I prefer more modest ones...>>

With a huff, Jess faced forward before speaking up in a cold and blunt voice. "Apologies in advance, but I'm afraid I don't have the techniques necessary to change my chest size according to your taste, and I have no intentions of studying such obscene spells either."

My pickled pig ears drooped despondently.

In a whisper, she added slowly, "If possible, I would prefer you grow to like my chest as it is, please."

"Oink!" I couldn't hold back an instinctive pig squeal. <<You really don't have to force yourself to sound like a tsundere...>>

She blinked. "*Tsun...de rais?*"

<<Nah, ignore me.>>

As we exchanged mundane banter, we reached an intersection. The left branch led to her bedroom, while the right led to her bathroom.

"Mister Pig, it's been a while since our last time... How about we take a bath together?"

Jess's sudden invitation reduced me, the resident virgin, into a bumbling fool. <<Wha? Uh, that's not really, I mean, how do I put this... You know...>>

"Well then, I shall wrap a towel around myself. I'm sure that will take care of

the problem. Please come with me, Mister *Super-Virgin*.” Placing unnecessary emphasis on the last words of her declaration, Jess then made a right turn.

Huh. She’s basically spoiling me rotten today with her fan service.

Inside the cute changing room with pastel-colored wallpaper, Jess got undressed. To prevent all possibilities of accidentally catching a glimpse of anything I shouldn’t, I turned my tail to Jess and closed my eyes, but I could still hear the rustling of fabric.

When she said, “I’m ready,” I opened my eyes. In the corner of my vision was Jess, who’d wrapped a thin linen towel around the area where the bottom of her sternum should be.

<<By “ready,” do you mean you’re okay with me looking at you now?>> With my back still turned to her, I asked for confirmation.

In my wide pig vision, I saw her head bob up and down. “Yes. You may even stare long and hard at me all you want. I made sure to wrap the towel tightly.”

Hearing her response, I finally looked at Jess. Her towel, which didn’t have a raised fuzzy surface, drooped as if gently caressing the delicate lines of her silhouette. Just like I’d thought, it was a danger to my heart.

<<Just checking, but that towel’s the type that still does its job after getting wet, right?>>

Jess gave me an impish grin in reply. “Well, let’s experiment inside and find out.” She walked into the bathroom. I trailed after her into the warm space, doing my very best to avoid looking at her bottom.

In the center of the spacious bathroom with blue tiles was a large, circular bathtub that served as a continuous supply of steam. Normally, that would mean the lowest visibility possible due to my meager unaided vision or the obstruction of misted lenses. But the eyes of this pig, which had been optimized by Jess’s magic, were granted the ability to see everything without an issue. *Uh-oh.*

I followed Jess, who beckoned me forward. She eventually settled down on a small stool and scooped up some hot water from the bathtub with a bucket.

Then, she poured it over me. I relaxed, feeling as if I were getting the full pork hot pot experience.

“Mister Pig, can we talk about something serious?”

Under the gaze of her enchanting, honey-brown eyes, I nodded.

She inhaled. “I’m considering calling off my betrothal.”

Silence.

A short while later, Jess poured hot water over me once again before carefully scrubbing my back with a brush. “He isn’t aware of it, but Mister Shravis is my blood-related cousin. Cousins can’t get married.”

I resisted the tempting comfort of my brushing session and commented, <<In the country I’m from, marriage between first cousins is permitted by the law. Don’t you think the sound of cousin marriage sounds pretty exciting and fascinating?>>

The hand that had been moving the brush stilled. “Please remember that this is a serious conversation.” Eyes dark with sorrow turned to me. “Are you *that* insistent on marrying me off to Mister Shravis, no matter the circumstances?”

I nodded without hesitation. <<The royal bloodline of Mesteria is only meaningful when it’s passed down in one direct line. At the moment, only the two of us are in the know, but eventually, someone will discover the secret of your birth for sure. There’s a high chance of Marquis having a change of heart, and he might consider you to be a thorn in his side. But if you marry Shravis, you’re safe.>>

The royal family’s greatest secret was that Hortis, the younger brother of the reigning king, had one more child other than his dead daughter: Jess, Prince Shravis’s fiancée. Jess and I had known before the big reveal that she was Eise’s sister, which was why we were the only ones who’d arrived at that truth.

However, that secret was destined to be discovered. There were the records of the royal family, the names written on the gravestone of Jess’s mother, as well as a certain mystery that would rouse suspicion: how did the two of us retrieve the Destruction Spear in the first place?

If Jess called off her betrothal, she would end up as the daughter of a branch family, which wasn't allowed to exist on the royal family's pedigree. To the royals, whose authority was supported by their identity as the lone and most powerful lineage who'd inherited divine blood, she was nothing but a source of trouble. However, as long as she married into the main family, that wouldn't be a problem.

"You say that such a marriage will solve all the problems. But must my marriage be something founded on calculations and convenience?" Jess scrubbed my back with more force than usual. "What I mentioned about cousins earlier was only an excuse. Please listen to me. Don't try to run away this time."

Her gaze bore right into my eyes.

"You are the only one for me, Mister Pig."

My mind stuttered.

<<...Hey, Jess. I'm a pig, you know.>>

"Yes, I know."

<<I look like a hideous beast. Are you saying that you're still willing to love me despite that?>>

With a thud, the brush fell onto the floor. Jess placed a hand on my back. "Of course." Her tone grew firm.

I had to keep it together and harden my heart. <<Well then, what would you do if I actually turned out to be a girl?>>

"Whaaat?! You're a girl...?" Jess tried to peer beneath my abdomen.

Uh, I'm not. You've got the wrong idea, ma'am. <<It's not true, I'm only giving you an example. What if I were a woman? What if I weren't actually a human, just a pig that's just as smart as one? What if I were a completely different species? Will you still love me even then, Jess?>>

She seemed deep in thought for a moment, possibly imagining those scenarios in her mind. Then, she nodded. "Yes, always."

That answer was exactly what I'd been waiting for. <<See? It's not that you

particularly want to marry me or anything. In this situation, where your union with another member of the opposite sex has proved itself to be significant, you don't need to go out of your way to choose me as your spouse. Even if we don't seal our relationship with something like a wedding, we're definitely friends, and no one can deny that. Surely that's enough, don't you think?>>

Facing a young maiden who far surpassed all my ideals in a partner, I voiced my rejection of a proposal I'd never received before.

Jess froze. She looked as if she was about to burst into tears at any moment.

<<What I can say for certain, at least, is that I'm not someone who can pledge a lifetime to a noble princess.>>

With her mouth still closed, tears streamed down from the corners of Jess's eyes and splashed on the floor.

<<You'd be doing me a great favor if you gave up.>>

Jess shook her head. It started small but gradually grew more fervent. "I refuse."

<<Why—>>

"Because I don't want to."

I desperately restrained my grilled pork heart, which threatened to tear itself apart, and feigned indifference.

Jess reached out for my braised pork cheeks and squeezed them. "Mister Pig...do you...not like me anymore?"

Her face was practically the picture of despair, and seeing it, I denied that possibility without thinking. <<Never. Even now, I lik...li... I mean, je t'aime...>> I forced my defiant mind to think and move my mouth to convey my feelings for her.

But Jess didn't seem like she believed me. "If so, please kiss me."

Her response was so outrageous that I reflexively asked in a stupor, <<...What?>>

"If you like me, kiss me to prove it." The look in her eyes was dead serious. I

couldn't even work up the motivation to joke around or tease her.

I took a deep breath. <<Okay. Hold out your hand.>>

"A kiss on the hand isn't good enough."

<<Will one on the cheek work, then?>>

She shook her head profusely. "On the lips, please."

I was speechless for a moment. When I finally found my voice, I croaked, <<Hang on, kissing a pig is, like, clearly wrong.>>

"I'm the one who will decide what's wrong and right." She paused. "Of course, if you say you don't want to do it, I won't force you."

For a while, only the noisy splashing of hot water resounded in the bathroom.

Hold on. Pause. I'm a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin. How do I describe it... I'm kinda not used to such advances? My experience level in this field is a big fat zero in the first place? Just... Please give me a moment.

Before all else, having a beautiful maiden wearing only a towel right before my very eyes is a situation that counts as a state of emergency. It deserves an alert of the highest threat level. I mean, yeah, of course, having my first kiss taken away by such a wonderful girl would be a dream come true. But normally, aren't you supposed to save such things for after you enter a relationship? No, silly brain, how could you forget she's a princess? The main issue isn't something simple and trivial like taking things step-by-step, far from it. How can mere livestock like me disgrace the gem of the royal fam—

Jess abruptly leaned forward, and her honey-brown eyes were almost right against my face. My head couldn't evade her—both of her hands held me firmly in place.

"You're not against it, right?"

Seeing the tears that slid down her cheeks, all I could do was nod.

"This is a ritual to confirm your feelings, Mister Pig. Once it's over, please forget about it."



Jess's divine face drew even nearer until she was at an unimaginable distance. Without thinking, I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a feeling of something delicate gently pressing against my lips. *Wait, I'm not joking about this... I'm really a pig, you know?*

My mind completely blank, I froze in place. The next moment, my teeth were wedged open slightly. *No way, is that—*

Thinking that I mustn't bite down at all costs, I opened my mouth. And then, something soft captured the pork tongue and—

Jess made a noise I'd never heard from her before. "Nnn..."

Shocked, I blinked open my eyes. Beyond my snout, I could see Jess with her eyes closed. The towel she'd wrapped around her frame had begun to unravel, and beneath it were two...

<<Hang on! Hold your horses! Time-out!>> I pulled away and put some distance between us.

Still in her immodest state of undress, Jess slowly opened her eyes. "Mister Pig... I knew it. You don't like me anymore..."

My heart would give out if I stared at the scenery in front of me any longer. I averted my gaze. <<No, that's not what I mean... You only gave me a shock because it was a bit too intense...>>

"Huh...?" She sounded utterly confused, as if she'd never expected that response.

Seriously, she's such a natural airhead at times, I thought. With my gaze still fixed on the tiled floor, I did my best to explain it to her, despite my virgin status dragging me down. <<Normally, you don't start with some passionate tongue tangling right off the bat... You read *way* too many indecent books.>>

For a while, neither of us spoke. Even though I could only see her from the corner of my vision, I could tell that her face was flushed cherry red.

She hurriedly fixed her towel, wrapping it around herself again. "Y-You're the worst, Mister Pig! Do whatever makes you happy, I guess, because I don't care anymore!"

Immediately following her statement, the hot water in the bathtub raised its head like a giant serpent and hosed me down—it was no different from a raging stream.

With her ears still red and her cheeks puffed out in anger, Jess returned to her bedroom, barely exchanging words with me. She closed the door, turned off the lights, and immediately buried herself under her blanket.

I felt completely lost and curled up on the floor. From the gaps between the curtains, I caught a glimpse of the starry sky. In this room, we couldn't even hear the sound of the hot water. It was a quiet night.

A tiny voice rang out, making my sliced and pickled mimiga ears prick up. "...You're not going to come over?"

<<Huh...?>>

"I'm asking you whether you're willing to keep me company tonight."

I could hear the sorrow in her voice. I stood up. *Just like Jess said, I'll pluck out my memories from earlier and let bygones be bygones—oh, actually, I'll flush it down the drain with one bathtub's worth of hot water.*

Growing a little worried, I stopped in my tracks. <<You...aren't going to do anything indecent to me, right?>>

"I-I would never...!" She sounded scandalized.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

There was a small stool that Jess had permanently stationed next to the bed for my sake, and I used it as a foothold to climb onto her mattress with a grunt of effort. I discovered that Jess had left room for me by her side.

<<You sure about this?>> I asked her cautiously.

There was the muffled rustle of cloth—she'd likely nodded. "Yes, it's fine. I washed you clean with a copious amount of water, after all."

Uh, I don't really think that's the problem...

Hesitantly, I trudged to her side, bent my legs, and lay down. Jess spread out

her blanket and pulled it over me. The airy, highest-quality down quilt was fluffy and comfortable. On top of that, the pleasant aroma of a beautiful blonde maiden assaulted my nasal cavity from all sides—it didn't just waft from Jess; it was also coming from the pillows and the blanket that enveloped me. I felt a faint warmth radiate from the side Jess was on.

There was the sound of the sheets rustling with movement. Jess's arm wound around my back. Her other arm slid between the sheets and my neck as she whispered, "I know that it's going to be difficult. I really do." She took a deep breath. "But I feel that this world is changing for the better little by little, and it's all thanks to you. Until the day you appeared in my life, I never imagined that such change would happen to me and even all of Mesteria."

<<Yeah. Your earnest prayers changed the world, Jess.>>

Something hard pressed against my pork shoulder. Jess was rubbing her forehead against me. "The one who changed it was you and your piggy companions. I learned from all of you that every wish in this world is worthy of striving for—that there is truly no wish you ought to give up on."

<<That's a relief to hear... Looks like all my hard work paid off.>>

She nodded. "That's why I won't give up." Her hand clasped tightly on my back fat.

<<...On Mesteria?>>

"No... Ah, I mean, of course I won't give up on Mesteria either, but..." She lowered her voice, but her declaration was forceful and determined. "What I won't give up on is you, Mister Pig."

I fell silent.

"Mesteria is slowly but surely becoming a peaceful place. I'll study hard and learn a lot of things from now on. I'm sure that the answer to how the two of us can stay together forever is out there somewhere. I just know it."

<<...Yeah, maybe.>>

The petite maiden—no, the maiden who had mighty blood running in her veins, pressed her entire body against me. "So please, Mister Pig. Let's work it

out together in the days to come.”

Though Jess had embraced me tight in the beginning, by the time midnight came around, she lay sprawled out on her bed and slept soundly. I gazed at her sleeping face for a while before stealthily sneaking out of the room.

There was something I had to check. There was one unanswered question left: why had Hortis made us solve those vulgar riddles? I’d come up with a hypothesis, and I was planning on heading off to verify it.

The capital was desolate at this hour of night, and the autumn night breeze was chilly, even to a pig. Relying on my memories, I navigated the labyrinth city with one place in mind: the fountain on the cliff where we’d fetched the water, per Hortis’s instructions.

I went through the Flower Plaza where colorless flowers stood tall in full bloom and headed to the cliff. If my theory was correct, I should find something there.

The towering cliff was an ostentatious landmark I couldn’t miss. I strutted as I liked through the sleepy city, and when I reached the cliff in question, instead of heading up, I went straight to its base.

There, I found a small plaza with a woman’s statue right at the center. She was a stunning beauty who gazed up at the starry sky with both hands pressed against her chest. The statue wasn’t as realistic as the others in the city, but her petite nose felt vaguely familiar.

A single word was etched near her feet: *Yelise*.

It was the name of Jess’s mother. *I knew it.*

Making this deduction hadn’t been a challenge. It had all started from a single question: why had Hortis gone through the trouble of making us go on a detour to fetch the fountain water? It meant that we hadn’t taken the shortest path available, which was a waste of time. I highly doubted that he’d simply wanted us to do a boob pilgrimage around the city. In that case, why?

Because he hadn’t wanted us to take the *shortest path available*.

The most straightforward path to the top of the cliff would involve passing through this plaza, which was directly under the cliff. However, Hortis had wanted us to avoid taking this route so we wouldn't discover Yelise's statue.

From the very beginning, we'd gone to fetch the fountain water to release the seal on Hortis's bangle, which restrained his magic. With that in mind, why had Hortis deliberately chosen a fountain on top of a cliff—a place that was troublesome to access—as his key? The answer was simple: this cliff held special significance to Hortis. And why was that?

It was easy to deduce after you considered Yelise's statue.

This was the cliff where Yelise had jumped off to end her life. It was the reason Hortis had sealed his magic with the fountain on top of that very cliff and had made up his mind to leave the royal capital.

If we'd come across this statue on our quest, we might have discovered the relationship between the statue under the cliff and the fountain on top of the cliff. Hortis had wanted to avoid that possibility at all costs. In an attempt to hide Jess's status as his daughter, he'd made us take a detour by giving us a vulgar riddle.

Whether it be sniffing Jess's legs or pulling the wool over our eyes with a vulgar riddle, he had done everything to protect a single secret—to protect his beloved daughter, the secret princess, from one relentless ruler of the royal court.

It seemed that I couldn't hold a candle to the man—not even close. For the longest time, we'd unknowingly played right into the hands of that sage who'd disguised himself as a pervert.

I ascended the steep stairs and headed for the clifftop. I recalled how I'd walked up the stairs on the other side with Jess by my side, and I felt the sudden and desperate urge to turn back. *But I must go on.*

My brethren. Whether you like it or not, everything that has a beginning has an ending. You must draw the line at some point.

Just like Jess had said, Mesteria was slowly but surely changing for the better. The puppeteer pulling the strings of the Nothen Faction, the Clandestine

Arcanist, had been sealed on top of being robbed of his magic. He hadn't croaked yet, but for now, he wasn't a threat anymore.

Hortis's death had reconciled the grievances between the royal court and the Liberators. The treatment of Yethma had also begun to improve steadily. Once it was Jess and Shravis's reign, I was fully confident that this nation would enjoy true peace.

The history of the Mesterian royal court had arrived at a turning point. It was the start of a new era.

I recalled the words of Mesteria's unparalleled mage, Eavis, who had the powers of foresight.

"The connection between the world you came from and Mesteria is unstable and transient, just like sea-foam. If the pig before me dies, likely, you will not have another chance. Furthermore, if you stay for too long, the two worlds will part from each other, and there will only be one future for you—dying as a pig in this world."

"Courageous young man, cherish your life until a meaningful moment. And then, return to your world during that meaningful moment."

This was that "meaningful moment."

This was where I was fated to part ways with the princess, who would decide the fate of Mesteria, and return to where I'd come from.

The memories of the days I spent with Jess came rushing into my mind on their own, surfacing one after another.

In the manor of House Kiltyrin, I'd preached pompously to Jess, whom I'd only just met. After the festival, we'd reunited on that farm with a gorgeous view of the stars. In the Dark Woodland, I'd given her a ride on my back. When Jess had been kind enough to let Naut hug her on a certain night, I'd felt jealousy rearing its ugly head. In the Needle Woods, the two of us had frantically tried to run from the Yethma hunters. And then, at the summit of the royal capital...I'd heard her heartfelt confession.

I'd thought that would be the end of our story, but no, I had met Jess once again, though she hadn't remembered a thing about me. In that cave along the coast, Jess had detonated her fuel with a grand explosion. Later on, in that mountain fortress, she'd shouldered a deadly curse in my stead. After she'd regained her memories, I'd inserted a key into a small chest per her request. She'd then given me a show, demonstrating the magic she'd learned in that lab.

In the library, we'd looked through an indecent bookshelf together. Lying in her bed, we'd investigated the history text as a pair. When we were on our way to the Oath Chamber, Jess had refused to speak to me because she'd been upset. There, we'd discovered the Contract Stake. At Send-Off Island, we'd crushed a large army of ogurs like an overpowered hero in an isekai novel. During a critical moment, we'd obtained the Destruction Spear in the collapsing Golden Cathedral. ...I'd been kissed for the very first time in my life.

Looking back, those days were more hectic than I could ever describe, but nothing could beat the happiness I felt whenever I was with Jess. It was the first time in my life that I had received such great kindness and unconditional love.

I wasn't the one who'd saved Jess; she was the one who'd saved a lonely human from the darkness of his life.

Here, I would like to confess something. Remember the raw pig liver that had kick-started everything?

I knew that my horrible friends hadn't touched a single bit of that dish. I also realized that my study friends had been trying to torment me on purpose—I was the only one among us who'd passed the university entrance exams. To them, I was nothing but an eyesore.

Even if the rational part of my mind understood why people who were supposed to be my friends suddenly turned me into their target of malice, my heart didn't. Overtaken by despair, I just suddenly felt like nothing in the world mattered anymore. That was why I had been foolish enough to eat raw pig liver in the heat of the moment.

I'd been a lonely human for all my life. Frankly, at one point, I lost sight of why I should live on.

That was when my princess appeared out of thin air, swept me off my feet,

and saved me.

For the past few months, Jess was my everything. I wanted to deliver happiness to the girl who gave me love, so I devoted myself to all kinds of things to realize that wish. Living while giving my all to something meaningful was fun.

But that had to end here.

Jess wasn't a powerless girl anymore. She could live on with her head held high without me around. In fact, if I was present, she wouldn't be able to choose other paths of happiness. And I wasn't a human who was worthy enough for her to make that sacrifice. *I mean, I'm not even a human, but you get my point.*

I mustn't run from reality—I must find a way to become happy in my original world. If I remained in Mesteria, I would also cause a lot of trouble for PhiloponMeth, who'd cooperated with our teleportation by deceiving her family.

Every story has an ending. I needed to go back. *That's how it's supposed to be.*

At long last, I finished climbing the stairs. The fountain water trickled, sounding oddly melancholic. The grass beneath my trotters was cold.

My brethren. As they say, the third time's the charm. I'll repeat myself over and over again until I drill this into your head.

Cook your pig liver first.

If I cooked my pig liver properly, I never would have learned of such a beautiful world. Nor would I have encountered such a girl as wonderful as Jess in my life too.

A crisp wind blew across the royal capital, whistling in my ears. I—no, a single pig—stood on the edge of a fateful cliff. This story began from the moment Jess's mother took her life in this very place. And now, I was going to end this story right here, right now.

Praying that this world would be enveloped with happiness forever and ever, I looked up at the night sky.

But the tears that blurred my vision snuffed out all the stars in sight.

Afterword (Third Bite)

Once upon a time, there lived three Mister Virgins.

The first was a hot-blooded, zealous Mister Virgin who single-mindedly dedicated his entire life to doing what he wanted to. He was an excellent warrior with admirable courage who was popular with everyone. But he didn't have a girlfriend.

The second was a responsible Mister Virgin who solemnly dedicated his entire life to doing what he ought to do. Though he possessed a mysterious power, he was a humble man who earned everyone's respect and acknowledgment. But he didn't have a girlfriend.

The third was an earnest Mister Virgin who dedicated his entire life to doing what was within his power to the best of his ability. He wasn't especially good at fighting, nor did he possess any mysterious powers, but that was why he made full use of his wits and knowledge in his everyday life. But he didn't escape the same fate of not having a girlfriend. In fact, he never had a girlfriend even once in his life.

These virgins didn't get along with each other, and there was never a day without the sound of their quarrels. That was because what one wanted to do, what one ought to do, and what was within one's power to do rarely ever overlapped.

One day, the princess of the kingdom was kidnapped by a monster. It was a very powerful monster indeed—a dreadful abomination that caused trouble for this kingdom time and time again. The monster took the princess hostage and showed up, demanding the king hand over his throne. The king, who'd heard about the virgins' reputation, asked them for advice.

The zealous Mister Virgin advised, "It's all the monster's fault, isn't it? Let's find that thing and beat it to death."

The responsible Mister Virgin had a different opinion. "We mustn't put the

princess in danger. Our top priority is saving her.”

Then the earnest Mister Virgin proposed, “We can’t kill that dreadful monster in our situation, and we don’t have a way to save the princess without mishap. We might as well hand over the throne to that monster.”

After a heated debate, the king decided to surrender the castle to the monster. And so the monster waltzed into the majestic castle as if it owned the place before declaring that it would take the princess as its wife.

On the night of the wedding, the monster tried to kiss the struggling princess.

But that was when a deafening sound echoed throughout the castle. The building collapsed as if it were made of toy blocks and flattened the negligent monster. For you see, the king and the virgins had prepared a trap in advance.

However, the dreadful monster didn’t die. Though it was seriously wounded, it frantically dug up the rubble, searching for the princess. Taking advantage of that opening, the Mister Virgin who was an excellent warrior lopped off the monster’s head.

Meanwhile, the princess was safe and sound. The Mister Virgin with a mysterious power protected her from the falling rubble. So, the princess safely returned to the king’s side.

The one who’d seen through the monster’s personality and concocted this plan was the Mister Virgin who made full use of his wits and knowledge. He squeezed his brain dry, desperately focusing solely on what was within their power before persuading the king and the other Mister Virgins.

The king praised the three virgins highly and said he shall grant one of them the privilege to marry the princess.

However, none of them attempted to make the princess his own. That was because they were all awkward virgins.

“I’m not interested in this woman. Ask someone else,” said the first virgin.

“The princess should marry the person she wishes to. Being treated as a prize would be disregarding your original intentions and her will,” said the second virgin.

“I’m not a great man who deserves the princess. Sorry, but I’ll have to decline,” said the third virgin.

The king and the princess took a great liking to these Mister Virgins, especially after hearing their responses. The three virgins were appointed as the princess’s aides, and they went on to resolve numerous challenges.

The princess told them, “When all of you are working towards the same goal, you can achieve truly amazing things. The passion to do what you want to do; the morals to do what you ought to do; and the rational thinking to do what’s within your power... The moment all of you align, I can almost hear you performing a most enchanting symphony.”

All the virgins disagreed unanimously: “Not at all.”

A lot of things happened after that as well, but for a long time, the princess’s kingdom was said to be a place overflowing with happiness thanks to the great efforts of the three Mister Virgins.

And they all lived happily ever after.

(What on earth am I writing...?)

Ahem, putting all that aside... It’s been a while. I’m Takuma Sakai. I know it’s been my bad habit since volume 1, but once again, my deepest apologies for making you wait so long after ending on a cliff-hanger. It’s been four months since the release of volume 2, and I’m elated that I was able to deliver volume 3 to you without incident.

I would like to start with some news. After the release of volume 2, the manga adaptation of *Butareba* started serializing on *Dengeki Maoh*! Minami-sensei is the artist responsible for the manga. Have all of you already read it, perhaps? The art is seriously adorable, and I have no doubt that it will make any reader squeal like a pig.

I mean, think about it: with every page you turn, you will have the honor of seeing cutie-pie Jess’s noble visage!

As for those who haven’t tried it yet, I would be delighted if you searched it up with the keywords “*Butareba* manga” or something along those lines.

Well then, usually, I would go on about my thoughts and feelings during the writing process in the afterword, but in the case of volume 3, a certain pervert who will easily top the charts of “most perverted characters in *Butareba*” has already said most of what I want to say. (Just a note, but the author isn’t a pervert or anything like that. I would be very grateful if you kept that fact in mind. However, I will admit that I’m someone who likes little sister tropes.)

To close things out—and I know, I repeat this every single time—please allow me to voice my thanks to everyone: my editor Anan-sama, who always indulges me and energetically comes up with plot points together; my artist Tohsaka-sama, who always responds to my requests—honestly, I feel guilty that half of it is my personal taste—with splendid insert art; the manga artist, Minami-sama, who makes me thrilled every month with their fantastic manga adaptation; and many, many others who were involved in *Butareba*. Above all else, thank you, my wonderful readers, who are willing to follow me this far. It wouldn’t have been possible without all of you.

Thanks to your support, I was able to enjoy my time writing volume 3 as well. I would be really happy if you continued to follow this story for a while longer.

Takuma Sakai—November 2020

(3rd Bite)

Author:
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka

Butareba

-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-



Author: Takuma Sakai

Illustrator: Asagi Tohsaka

(5rd Bite)



Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

[NAME]

Kento

profile

A male high school student in modern-day Japan. For the second time, he teleported to Mesteria, along with two other pigs.

[NAME]

Marquis

profile

The reigning king of Mesteria who succeeded the throne after Eavis. He's also hailed as the mage with the most raw power.

.....

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

.....

.....

Characters

.....

[NAME]

Hortis

profile

Marquis's blood-related younger brother. He left the royal capital years ago. His current whereabouts are unknown.

[NAME]

Lithis

profile

A Yethma that the Liberators took under their wing. Lithis isn't her original name.



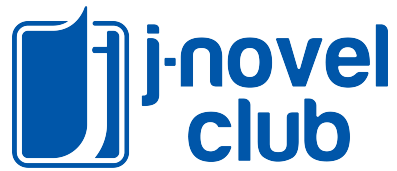
“Wow!
Mister Pig, look!
The view is
marvelous!”

She looked content
from her sense of
accomplishment, and the
evening sun only enhanced
her beauty. Delayed
realization struck me—I was
with a beautiful maiden in a
secret place where no one
else would visit, and I had
her all to myself. *If I weren't
a pig right now, I...*

“Please don't
fall.”

<<Nope, I won't.
I don't want to
turn into minced
meat.>>





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Takuma Sakai 2020

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

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