



Author:  
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:  
Asagi Tohsaka



(**4**<sup>th</sup> Bite)

# Butareba

-The **Story** of a  
**Man Turned** into a **Pig**-







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A **Pure-**  
**hearted** ♦ ♦

and **Flawless**

Beautiful Maiden

Keeps **Calling Me** a

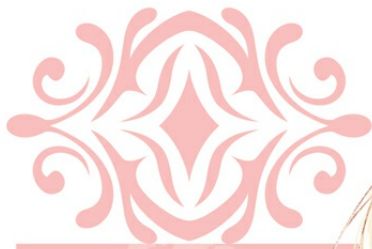
**Pig**



Butareba

—The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig—





Quote

“You mustn’t be distracted by other thoughts while on a date. That’s why you’re still a Mister Virgin.”



[NAME] 

Jess

Profile

A young mage who can read minds. She has royal blood in her veins.

Quote

“Always determining the one pair of Les Panties with the body of a farm animal and the mind of an otaku. His name is...Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin!”

[NAME] 

Pig

Profile

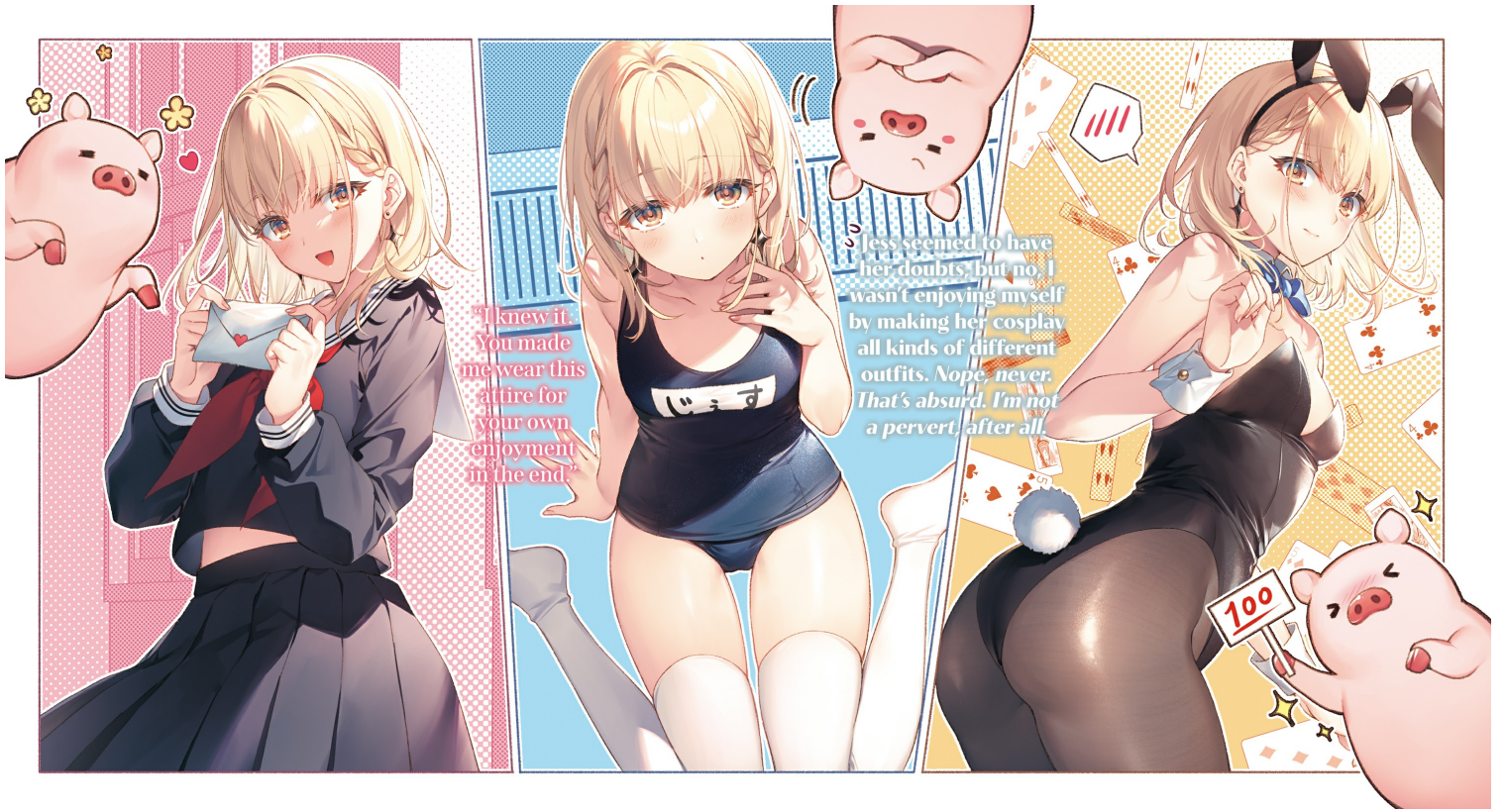
A run-of-the-mill science student otaku who teleported to Mesteria from modern-day Japan.



-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

Characters





"I knew it. You made me wear this attire for your own enjoyment in the end."

Jessy seemed to have her doubts, but no, I wasn't enjoying myself by making her cosplay all kinds of different outfits. Nope, never. That's absurd. I'm not a pervert, after all.

100



“We’re bathing  
together and  
enjoying silly  
banter...  
Mister Pig, this  
counts as a  
rome-comm,  
right?”







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# Chapter 1: Recently, Cutie-Pie Jess Is Unusual

Imitation is a fundamental building block of all civilizations. Take, for example, infants who learn speech through imitation. Even with advanced skills like martial arts, fine arts, or arcane arts, you're expected to mimic and master the techniques established by your predecessors first. No matter what it might be, you can only create your own unique style after an initial process of imitation.

You ought to copy many different things, but typically, living things are chosen as references. These organisms have undergone natural selection and evolution for billions of years, and hidden deep within their bodies is wisdom that far transcends the shallow intelligence of us *Homo sapiens*, who can boast living one hundred years at best.

A good example is the morpho butterflies—despite not having any blue pigments, their wings shine with a mesmerizing blue by masterfully using nanostructures that reflect and bend light. If we imitate this mechanism of structural color, the ideal alternative to pigments, we can create almost magical textiles with blue iridescent colors that will never fade.

Another example would be the seeds of the cocklebur plant—their surface features rows of hook-shaped spines. By clinging to the fur of passing animals, they can disperse their seeds far and wide, expanding their habitat without even budging one bit. Imitation of this mechanism gave birth to hook-and-loop fasteners (aka Velcro). One surface is lined with tiny hook-shaped protrusions, while the other is covered with fibers they can cling to. This makes it possible to temporarily fasten the two surfaces and peel them apart when necessary.

As you can see, imitating living organisms is meaningful to a certain extent. *This is why I'm proposing that Jess tries out such imitation. I swear, I didn't make this request to satisfy my private fetishes.*

The above was the respectable explanation I'd given Jess, but she stubbornly remained unconvinced. "But can I really learn something useful from putting on the ears and tail of a rabbit, on top of...wearing revealing clothes like this?"

Long black ears perched on top of her silky golden hair. A black strapless corset teddy hugged her frame tightly, only covering the bare minimum—her chest, abdomen, and bottom. A round tail sat just on top of her butt. Around her neck was a shirt collar and bow tie, and her wrists had cuffs wrapped around them. Her stunning arms and legs, which had just the right amount of volume, glistened bewitchingly under the illumination of the fireplace.

I walked in circles inside the cabin, observing Jess's outfit solemnly as I "spoke" to her by adding double angle brackets. <<But of course. You see that pantyhose you're wearing? It's a fabric you've never created before, right? We don't know where it would come in handy yet, but testing new high-tech materials like these is important.>>

"Um, do rabbits really wear the type of clothing you call *panteehose*? I can't remember seeing them in anything vaguely similar..."

*Oh, now that she mentions it, they don't. How strange.*

Beautiful eyes stared intently at me. "If this is meant to be practice on creating *panteehose* with magic, I don't see how imitating a rabbit was necessary." She folded her arms in front of her modest chest, discontent.

*Oh dear. Unfortunately, she's not a woman of culture as well. A rascal piggy like me has to be paired with a bunny girl.* <<Come on, have some faith. Your skill in imitating a rabbit will definitely be of use one day. Right now, let's focus solely on practicing.>>

Jess seemed to have her doubts, but no, I wasn't enjoying myself by making her cosplay all kinds of different outfits. *Nope, never. That's absurd. I'm not a pervert, after all.*

"I knew it. You made me wear this attire for your own enjoyment in the end." Reading the narration, Jess unfolded her arms and leaned back with a sigh. "You could have just said that from the beginning. If it's for you, Mister Pig, then I'm willing to wear anything you want me to."

She gave me a mischievous grin before standing on her tiptoes and turning like a ballerina. Dazzling white cloth manifested around her body like water gushing out of thin air and swirled as it gently wrapped around her. The bunny girl costume melted into a vortex, and by the time Jess stopped turning when



she faced me again, she was adorned in a snow-white dress. Her coquettish charm had vanished, replaced with very straightforward cuteness.

Smiling, she stated, “You have permission to shower me with praise.”

<<The rate of your improvement is incredible. You’re the best, Jess.>>

“I wasn’t quite looking for praise about my magic... I want to hear about my clothes.” She daintily pinched the hem of her dress and lifted it as she smiled at me. It was just like a mini fashion show.

<<You look great in that.>>

“Thank you!” She beamed. “Well then, how about this?” Her hand stroked her dress, and navy blue threads extended from her fingertips, almost like dye, drawing plant-themed designs on the white fabric.

I nodded. <<That makes you seem a bit more mature. I like it too.>>





Jess smiled shyly, but she was clearly overjoyed. “You’re always praising me no matter what I wear, Mister Pig.”

Recently, Jess had taken on a new hobby: experimenting with magic to create clothes. She’d started with spinning threads, but then, at an almost frightening speed, she’d figured out how to weave cloth. And now, she’d reached the point where she could mold the material as she pleased into fully-fledged clothes.

*I mean, she’s a young woman at an age where she’s starting to care more about her appearance. Her interest in fashion must be what spurs her motivation to learn.*

Merrily, Jess carefreely fiddled with her clothes. I watched her, feeling like a teacher. <<I’m glad you’re enjoying this. There’s nothing better than having fun as you learn. Looks like I made the right choice when I proposed you dive into the field of cloth creation magic.>>

“Right.” She nodded. “When I tried to learn magic to create small firearms, I barely made any progress, but the moment I made the switch, I began improving by leaps and bounds. To tell you the truth, in the beginning, I was a little suspicious that you only made the proposal because you wanted to have fun by making me do what you call ‘cospray,’ but...” She stared hard at me before her expression softened into a radiant smile. “It seems that you deduced my aptitude and advised me accordingly.”

<<How could it be anything else?>> *How can there be a man—no, a pig of a man—who deceives such an earnest and hardworking girl to satisfy his selfish greed? Ridiculous.*

*I mean, yeah, it’s fun to watch Jess as she tackles all kinds of different outfits. But that isn’t the goal, of course not. I swear, this training is purely to improve Jess’s magic proficiency, not to fulfill the hideous and defiant struggles of a man to somehow get his hands on sacred relics completely foreign to Mesterian shores, such as furry animal ears and pantyhose!*

I recalled the depraved black pig who’d grunted with delight when he’d made a loli wear those pseudo glasses—an item he’d requested a swordsmith forge. *I’m not like that pig. I can proudly declare that the difference between us is like heaven and earth.*

“I did it!”

At the sound of Jess’s voice, I turned to her. Her pure white dress was now entirely decorated with blue and pastel blue plant-themed designs—absolutely gorgeous.

She spun to look at me. “How is it? Does it look weird?”

<<Not at all. The intricate and delicate feel of that pattern is a work of art. It looks good.>>

“I’m so happy to hear that.”

Jess could’ve checked her reflection in a mirror, but she always approached me for her fashion inspections instead. *Me* of all people—a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin with black hair trimmed with a thousand-yen haircut, who’d donned only his iconic chino pants and checkered shirts after having advanced to university.

As anyone would expect, such a man could only make conventional and stereotypical comments, but Jess would smile with satisfaction every time.

“Can you tell me which parts, specifically, look good?” she asked in a bubbly voice.

I was at a loss for words. *I’m serious when I say that I’m not keen on fashion.* And so, I decided to dodge the question with a joke. <<Your face, I think.>>

Jess shook her head lightly. “You don’t have to force yourself to say that. I’m well aware that I’m not very impressive.”

*What nonsense is this beautiful maiden saying?* As usual, her self-esteem was low. <<Don’t be silly. You can’t say that when you’ve got a face that qualifies as a national treasure.>>

“I don’t, not at all!” She huffed indignantly. “You’re the only one who’s willing to say that, Mister Pig.”

Seeing her reaction made me want to tease her a bit. <<But Shravis said it too. You have the seal of approval from the prince himself, so there’s no doubt.>>

“Whaaat? Mister Shravis did...?” The naive, purehearted Jess was flustered,



her ears flushed red.

<<He also said that the fact your chest isn't overly big was a plus too.>>

Jess's expression soured. "That's a lie. Mister Shravis would never say something like that."

*He did though... Oh well.*

She continued, "In all of Mesteria, only one person speaks highly of my features and says that my chest is charming, and that's you, Mister Pig. Honestly, you don't have to force yourself to say things you don't believe in."

When I praised her clothes, she'd been delighted, but she wasn't happy when I praised her face and chest. *A woman's heart is quite a complicated maze.*

"It's not complicated." Jess lifted her index finger and leaned forward slightly to look into my eyes.

*Uh, that was narration...*

"I'm happy when you praise my clothes because I feel like you're approving of my sense of fashion and taste. And certainly, I would be lying if I said I'm not happy when you compliment my appearance, but that's a different matter."

<<Your taste, huh... I kind of get it, kind of don't.>>

"Think about it this way. You would definitely be happier if someone said you're kind rather than saying you look delicious, right?"

I gave it some thought. In my mind, I imagined Jess looking at me and commenting that I looked yummy, then adding that I was a gentle soul. <<I can't say you're wrong there. But well, hearing a beautiful maiden say that I look like a snack wouldn't be bad at all.>> I glanced at Jess as I spoke.

"I'm not a beautiful maiden, so I'm not going to say it."

<<Oh... That's unfortunate.>> My pickled and sliced mimiga ears drooped dispiritedly.

Seeing that, Jess waved her hands frantically, looking somewhat flustered. "Ah, no, you look like a snack, Mister Pig! I almost want to eat you right up!"

*Yahooink! Eat me, eat meeee!*

“No, I won’t,” Jess replied before stiffly smiling at me.

I actually felt kind of apologetic seeing that. <<Sorry for making you go along with a conversation that sounds like it came straight out of a rom-com...>>

She tilted her head quizzically. “*Rome-comm?*”

*Oh, oops, I accidentally used specialized terminology.* <<I’m referring to fun stories centered around romance. They were all the rage back in my world.>>

“Huuuh, you have interesting things in your world. ‘Fun stories centered around romance’...” Her face lit up like the sun. “That sounds wonderful! I’d like to try making a *rome-comm* too!” She clenched her hands into fists and waved them around enthusiastically in front of her shoulders.

She might be the first girl I knew who wanted to “try” a rom-com. *That said, I’m taking this from a small sample size since I’ve never known that many girls to begin with.* <<There’s one problem though. You can’t act out a rom-com if you don’t have a love interest.>>

At my words, she pouted a little. “You’re still going on about that?”

For a while, we locked gazes with each other. Then came a wave of awkwardness in my heart, and I looked away.

Jess was the one who broke the silence. “Ah... I completely lost track of time. I didn’t realize it was that late.”

I looked outside the window, and the sky was completely dark. The pointed triangular silhouettes of the nearby rows of coniferous trees leaned to one side under the powerful winter gusts.

Peeking out from between the gaps of their leaves was a single vermilion star: the North Star, *Salvia*, which glowed bewitchingly in the northern sky. It was also known as the wishing star.

Jess must have either noticed my line of sight or read the narration because she joined me in admiring the small patch of the night sky cut out by the window frame. “The wishing star looks more beautiful than usual tonight,” Jess commented. “I can see that we are steadily approaching the north.”

I’d pointed out to her countless times before that heading to the north didn’t



mean a star in the north would get closer as a result—it was likely just a coincidence. Jess, however, was rather stubborn about it.

*“The one who picks the scarlet wishing star drifting in the northernmost skies will be granted one wish, any wish.”*

According to Jess, this ancient legend was spoken of everywhere in Mesteria. We had left the royal capital and were going on a journey to search for that very wishing star. It was just the two of us.

...I was pretty sure that the legend was only an excuse Jess had tacked on. Since things had settled down for now, she wanted to go on a nice honeymoon and enjoy some alone time while I squealed like a pig—I mean, she wanted to go on a journey to broaden her horizons. At least, that was my biased deduction with limited evidence.

Jess had been born and raised in the capital, then worked as a servant in a southern town until her sixteenth birthday. Even her days after that had been hectic and turbulent, which meant that she’d never had an opportunity to tour Mesteria as she pleased.

Aiming for our destination, Salvia, we’d marched north without looking back.

Up to this point in our journey, we had been passing through a forest in northwest Mesteria and were now spending the night in a cabin we’d rented in the woods. Tomorrow, we would finally arrive at the Rach Valley, a holiday resort.

Jess seemed very eager about our next stop. It was apparently a special place she’d wanted to visit for a long time.

After changing into her nightwear, she curled up on the cramped bed. The fireplace in the cabin provided warmth, but a chill crept in from the stone walls. I lay down in front of the fireplace.

Turning over in her bed, Jess looked at me. The flames flickered brilliantly in her serene eyes.

<<Something on your mind?>> I asked.

After staring at me for a while, she gently shut her eyes. “No, ignore me.”

On some nights before she went to sleep, Jess would look at me just like this, as if she had something on her mind.

<<Having trouble getting to sleep?>>

“Not quite. It’s just that...I don’t want to fall asleep.”

I inclined my head, confused. <<You don’t want to sleep?>>

“Yes... I simply can’t wait for tomorrow to arrive. Of course, I’m sure there will also be plenty of fun things going on the day after tomorrow, then the day following that...” With her eyes still shut, she spoke softly, as if relishing a dream. “Every night, I hope that time will go faster so that the next day comes sooner. I keep thinking, if only I could skip the night altogether.”

With my gaze trained on Jess, I froze for a while. Her statement had practically come out of nowhere. When I finally collected my thoughts, I told her, <<That’s not good. Sleep is very important. Back in my country, there’s a saying that ‘children who sleep well will grow well.’ I’m sure you have something similar in this nation.>>

There was a pause. “Now, what were you looking at when you said that?”

*I’m not looking at her boobs or anything.*

Her unimpressed voice rang out. “You were looking at my boobs, hmm?”

*What?! She “saw” my line of sight even with her eyes closed!* <<I swear, I really wasn’t. In the boobs department, I’m not looking for any more growth than you already have, not to mention that I can’t even see them because they’re covered by your quilt,>> I argued.

“Ah.” Jess looked down to check on her chest, which was shrouded by her blanket.

An angelic golden ratio—that was what I called her chest size. The crystallization of beauty polished by natural science with measurements that had been perfectly calculated from every angle was framed by curves that exuded even the faintest hint of sacredness—indeed, it was *the* supreme proportion. Some people thought “the bigger the better,” but that wasn’t a one-size-fits-all principle.

Jess shut her mouth with resignation and ignored the narration. "I'm sorry. I know that, rationally, it's better for me to get some sleep." She shuffled a little in bed and faced the ceiling. "Let's get some proper rest. Just like today, there's a lot more walking to do tomorrow."

<<Yeah, that's the best plan.>>

After exchanging wishes for a good night, sleep overtook us.

The night was heartwarming and peaceful, as if someone really had taken a snippet out of a rom-com.

Just past noon on the next day, we approached a large river. Slightly muddy water flowed leisurely, carving a watery path into a gentle hill covered by naked trees. The river surface was the picture of calm beneath the azure sky, and on it were small wooden boats going back and forth, loaded with what seemed to be barrels.

The slope on the opposite shore featured orderly shrubs along its edge, framing it like a neat border. The hill curled around to surround a small town. Buildings with white walls and black triangular roofs were crammed together in rows.

Wrapped in a fluffy coat, Jess pointed at the settlement ecstatically. "I think that's the Rach Valley over there!" She slung a rather hefty-looking leather bag across her shoulders, looking all geared up and ready for a long journey.

I scanned our surroundings. <<I don't see any bridges nearby.>>

"We likely have to travel by boat from here on."

Jess soon located a small pier and began talking to a middle-aged man smoking a pipe. Based on what I could hear, he seemed to be a ferryman. Not even his leather coat could hide his brawny upper body.

We climbed onto the ferryman's boat and bobbed up and down with the currents as we crossed the river.

The man spoke up. "Gotta say, it's pretty rare to see a young lady goin' around by herself in winter. Yer not a familiar face. A traveler, by any chance?"



*Just a reminder that she has a pig with her.*

Naturally, the ferryman hadn't heard the narration. I obediently sat next to Jess.

Jess nodded to him. "Yes. I happen to be traveling north. I heard that the Rach Valley is a wonderful place, and I can't wait to get there."

"Ah, that's great." The dude smiled. "Around this time of year, we've got a lot of wine goin' around. Rach's famous for it. Ya should try some while yer there."

"Wine..." Jess trailed off, sounding hesitant.

The side of the mountain surrounding the town was unlike all its other sections—there weren't any large trees in sight. Instead, shrubs and stakes lined up systematically. Now that we were closer, I realized this entire side of the mountain was a vineyard. Judging by that, the barrels stacked up on the boats nearby were likely wine barrels.

The ferryman raised an eyebrow. "Oh, ya can't drink? How old are ya?"

"I'm sixteen," Jess replied.

His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized Jess's neck, which was encircled by the fur of her coat. He was probably wondering whether she was a Yethma. His observations seemed to have dispelled his suspicions because he regained his smile right away. "Then ya should have some. The stuff's good even when hot."

The man rowed the long oar, propelling the boat forward. He noticed how Jess seemed conscious of her neck, which he had been staring at, and flashed his yellowish teeth by widening his grin before shrugging. He continued, "I ain't anyone shady, but ya better be careful. Lately, it's gettin' more and more dangerous on the streets. A young lady like ya travelin' around by yerself might attract some unsavory folks."

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm all right. I'm not alone, after all." Jess looked at me and smiled.

The shore, paved with cobblestone, approached. As if something had suddenly come into his mind, the ferryman asked, "By the way, do ya already have an inn in mind?"

“Yes. I’m planning on spending the night in the estate on the hill. I hear it’s a magnificent place.”

He nodded, but his brows then furrowed, looking as if he was a little put on the spot. “I think it’s a good place, yeah, but there’s been a weird rumor goin’ around lately. They say that a ghost’s wanderin’ around that estate. A woman, from what I hear. Some guys even lost their valuables. Won’t hurt to be careful.”

“A ghost...?” Eyes framed by long lashes widened by a margin.

I was well aware that this reaction wasn’t out of fear—her eyes were wide with curiosity. Her beautiful honey-brown eyes shimmered under the winter sun.

<<Looks like someone’s intrigued.>>

Possibly because she was in the presence of the ferryman, Jess spoke to me with her telepathy. I was a pig, after all. <Oh, definitely. I mean, it’s a ghost!>

Her instinctive reaction to the word “ghost” wasn’t apprehension but intrigue about its identity. Once again, I felt like she should honestly sign up to be the president of a Classic Literature Club with her undying curiosity.

“I really appreciate your advice,” Jess cheerfully replied. “I will make sure to stay in that estate!”

The ferryman looked at her skeptically, as if wondering whether she’d actually heard what he’d said. But the moment we reached shore, he accepted the compensation for his time affably before kindly pointing us to the Rach Valley.

The enchanting streets of this town looked as if they’d been taken right out of a fairy tale. Rows of three-or four-story buildings vied for space as if it was a game of musical chairs, and their white walls were adorned by lattice patterns constructed with wooden framework. Flowers and other plants decorated the windows, glistening under the lazy winter sun that was already setting this early.

On the other side of the town was the gentle slope that served as a vineyard. A towering stone building with a grand, conspicuous steeple was at the summit.

That must be the estate Jess had mentioned.

“This town is so lovely... I’ve always wanted to come here with you one day,” Jess shared and beamed at me. She removed some kind of paper from her leather bag and gently tapped it with her index finger. I’d seen her make this gesture numerous times, but I still didn’t know what she was doing.

<<Seriously, what’s that piece of paper?>> I asked.

And just like every other time, she dodged the question by saying, “It’s a secret.”

She put away the paper carefully before ushering me forward, stating that it was time for us to get a move on.

It seemed that it hadn’t snowed at all for the past few days in this area—the breeze had a biting chill to it, but there was no thick snow burying the paths. Part of the reason might be that the town and the vineyard were facing south. Miniature snow mountains swept to the side of the buildings, gradually melting as they basked in the sun.

With a spring in her step, Jess walked down the cobblestone path. “First, let’s head to the estate that’s supposedly haunted by a ghost! I heard that they rent out rooms to travelers at reasonable prices.” She turned to face me but didn’t stop there—she finished a full revolution and quickened her strides, as if she couldn’t wait.

<<I hope they have vacant rooms.>>

“Same here... Ah! Look, that sign says it’s a winehouse! Maybe we can think about going there tonight.”

The passersby gave Jess strange looks as she talked enthusiastically to a pig.

I replied, <<Be careful, though. Don’t drink too much. You’re a girl here alone, you know.>>

“I’ll be fine because you’re here with me, Mister Pig.”

*Uh, I can’t say I quite agree with expecting too much from a pig... After all, Jess had a previous record of drinking until she was drunk at the encouragement of a handsome hunk. Everything had turned out all right in the*



end because that guy had been an awkward super-virgin, but at the time, I'd been locked out of the room, utterly powerless.

*Speaking of that handsome hunk, what's he doing no—*

"You mustn't be distracted by other thoughts when you're on a date. That's why you're still a Mister Virgin."

The sudden scathing comment from Jess triggered an instinctive pig squeal from me. <<Wait, this is a date?>>

"Did you think it was something else?" She puffed out her cheeks and sulked.

*This doesn't make any sense. A scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who's been single since he was in his mother's womb is on a date.*

As if that wasn't enough, the beautiful maiden he was with was even reproaching him and calling him an insensitive virgin. *Can there really be such a heaven in real life?*

"If you like being called Mister Virgin so much, I don't mind calling you that from now on."

*You serious about that?!?! <<Come on, anyone would think it's weird for a girl to call a pig "Mister Virgin." If you want to give me a nickname, call me "big brother" or something, at least. It shouldn't sound too strange if we go along with the story that you're a girl traveling with your older brother who turned into a pig.>>*

"Oh, you're...right?" She didn't sound very convinced.

In truth, I'd simply wanted her to call me "big brother," but maybe my logic had sounded too forced.

Jess sighed. "Just a reminder, I can hear all the narration in your mind. Oh well... If it makes you happy, big brother."

*Yahoooooink!*

Recently, Jess had been extremely generous with fan service. *I mean, she's always been a girl who has graciousness in her bones, but she's taken the word "devotion" to the next level now. Of course, I don't want to presume too much upon her benevolence, so I'm making sure to not say stuff like "I want to sniff*

*you all over!” or “I want to lick you all over!”*

*...Unfortunately, in my case, she still knows even if I don’t put it into words.*

A dust of scarlet settled on Jess’s ears. Not a moment later, she smacked her palm with a fist, as if she’d had an epiphany. “Ah!”

<<Something the matter?>> I asked.

She turned around. “Would this count as a *rome-comm*?”

Perhaps she’d been reminded of our conversation last night. *Now that’s a rather bizarre question. Well, it’s preferable to her hounding me about the narration, at least.* <<If you mean our exchange earlier... Yeah, maybe. It did have a tiny bit of rom-com vibes.>>

“I see... So that counted as a *rome-comm*...” she said slowly, as if relishing in her words, before the corners of her lips curled into an overjoyed smile.

During our journey, time trickled by without haste. Days where the only thing we had to worry about was whether our conversation had rom-com vibes or not were so very peaceful and cozy.

This journey was liberated from perils, schemes, and the strife of war—a journey where we headed North to chase a star. It sounded just like a fairy tale.

The Rach Valley was in north Mesteria, but I didn’t see any soldiers on the streets. Two significant events had ended the war: the alliance between the royal court and the Liberators as well as the captured Clandestine Arcanist who’d been sealed away. By the looks of it, the towns in Mesteria had regained their peaceful days to the point of almost being too quiet, including the Rach Valley we were in.

After looking over a wooden information board, Jess pointed forward and talked to me excitedly. “I think we can scale the hill if we take that path over there. Time to hike!”

We veered away from the main street with cobblestone paving and advanced up a slender, sloping road that was only covered with gravel. At a pig’s eye level, both sides of the path were obscured by grapevines with dry leaves that hadn’t been shed yet, meaning that I didn’t have a very good view. But as we

went higher up, I began catching glimpses of the small town and the tranquil river between the gaps of the withered leaves.

“It seems that they’ve already harvested all the grapes,” Jess commented.

<<If I remember correctly, you harvest grapes in autumn and ferment them to make wine. Around this time of winter, they probably have some good wine ready for indulging in.>>

“Ah, I didn’t know that. I’m getting a bit excited now. Hee hee hee.”

*Um, is she going to be okay...?*

We made our way up, taking a zigzag path between the vines. Soon, a majestic estate came into view. Maybe estate wasn’t the right word—it was more like a fortress. A sturdy stone wall circled the hill’s summit, and inside it were several stone buildings lined up next to each other. It was almost like a small town by itself. In the center was a breathtaking tower with a spire, which was the culprit responsible for giving this place the atmosphere of an old fortress.

Jess perked up. “Can you see the estate too? The ferryman said that a ghost appears around that place, right?”

<<Are you *that* excited about a ghost? Didn’t he also mention that people lost their valuables? I know that the ferryman advised this before, but just in case, keep your guard up.>>

“I know, don’t worry. I’m keeping precious items close to me so that I won’t ever lose them.” With a smile, Jess fixed the bag’s position around her shoulder. But then, she suddenly came to a stop. “Huh...?”

I turned to her. <<What’s wrong?>>

“I think I just saw a person running over there in the vineyard...” She pointed in one direction, but the pig’s eye view was obstructed by withered leaves. I couldn’t see anything.

<<What did they look like?>>

“She...seemed to be a blonde woman wearing white clothes.”

<<Was she alone?>>



“Yes... Well, maybe we’ve found the ghost right off the bat!”

<<I think it’s probably just a normal person, though.>>

That was my opinion as someone who didn’t believe in ghosts, but then again, I was in Mesteria, a nation of swords and magic. Maybe it wasn’t too outlandish for there to be ghosts in this world.

We followed the path, went through an elegant door that seemed to serve as a fortress gate, and entered the grounds of the grand estate. The trail then led us through a courtyard surrounded by buildings, ending at a large structure with a signboard.

Inside it was a small, stylish hall, lined with light gray stone and illuminated by the warm light of lantern flames. At a table, a lithe, middle-aged man with bushy brown hair was writing some kind of document. He wore a black tailcoat that reminded me of a butler.

“My, welcome. Are you a traveler, perhaps?” The man stood and smiled at Jess.

“I am,” Jess answered politely. “I heard that I could rent a room here.”

“I see, I see. That is correct, we are also an inn.”

Jess pressed her hands together with delight. “I was wondering whether I could stay one night in this mansion if it’s not too much trouble... Do you have any rooms available right now?”

The seemingly good-natured man smoothed down his bushy hair and shrugged casually. “Why, of course we do. Other than you, we only have an elderly couple staying in the mansion, and most of our rooms are vacant. Sadly, the current state of our society makes it rather difficult for businesses to be successful.”

“Well then, I would like to rent a room, please.”

The man’s gaze briefly wandered around Jess’s vicinity. “Will you be renting one room alone, young miss?”

“Yes, I would like a room for one person.” After saying that, Jess then gave me a small smile.

The man looked somewhat perplexed after looking in my direction, but I continued pretending to be nothing more than an ordinary pig. If he remained oblivious about my status as a human on the inside, I could probably get away with staying free of charge.

“I understand. Well then, since it is available, I suppose I shall prepare a special room tucked away in the deepest part of the mansion with a marvelous view. The floor is covered with the highest grade carpet, so I would be very grateful if you clean off the dirt from your shoes before entering.”

Jess frantically waved her hands. “Oh, um, you really don’t have to! I am honestly not looking for a luxurious room!”

“No, that won’t do.” The man shook his head as he turned back to face Jess. “Under normal circumstances, I would request ten times our standard rent for such a room, but we’ll likely only have two groups of guests tonight including you, so it would be a waste for such a room to just gather dust. Ah, of course, we will only charge you our standard fee.”

“R-Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course. But I’m afraid we only have two such special rooms, which means you’d be staying next to the couple’s room. If you’re all right with that, we can go right ahead.”

“Thank you very much!”

Jess paid the rent and accepted the key. The man then indicated with his hand the corridor leading deeper into the mansion. “I am the manager of this mansion, Dion. Please allow me to lead you to your room.”

“Wow, this is incredible!” Jess beamed at me ecstatically. It was hard to believe that she’d been living in the royal palace for a good while. “There’s one more room over here!”

The room—more like a suite—we’d been guided to consisted of three main rooms: bedroom, lounge, and study. There was even a separate bathroom on top of that. Subdued-colored furnishings garnished the suite lavishly and elegantly. A deep crimson carpet lined the floor, while stone walls surrounded it.

Thanks to the manager lighting up the fireplace, the room was gradually warming up. According to him, a red rista stored in the back of the fireplace would keep the flames going for an entire night. Jess had put in her two cents, theorizing that the manager's household running this establishment must be considerably affluent because they were willing to use ristae in guest rooms.

We basked in the warmth of the fireplace for a while before I turned my head and took another look at the area. There was evidence supporting her theory—without exception, all the furniture looked exquisite and expensive. The chairs with tall backrests, the table with legs that curled into swirls at the ends, and even the full-length mirror—which was flipped the other way for some reason—had detailed designs carved into them as decoration. This applied to all the wooden furniture in the suite.

There were windows in the lounge and the study, offering a panoramic view of Rach Valley. Jess was kind enough to move a chair over, and I climbed on it to peer outside. My vision was filled with the westering sun, which had begun wearing different orange hues, sprinkling its shimmering light onto the town's triangular roofs and the river's surface.

Next to me, Jess gasped with delight. "The scenery looks just like a painting!" She reached out and attempted to open the window. However, she made a confused noise as she struggled with it. "Huh...? Is it locked, perhaps?"

I observed the window. <<Maybe you're supposed to lift that handle upward as you push it open.>>

"Oh, you're right."

The window swiveled outward with a clank. Jess leaned through it, poking her head outside. A chilly winter breeze rushed in, brushing against Jess's silky golden hair, which had grown out a little, with a rustle. The beautiful maiden's pleasant fragrance wafted to my snout.

Jess glanced at my twitching muzzle. "I'm not a beautiful maiden, and I'm afraid I don't have any sort of pleasant fragrance around me..." she said, sounding appalled.

*Hey, a beautiful maiden is a beautiful maiden. Furthermore, how can a beautiful maiden's hair be without its wonderful fragrance? Downright*

*preposterous.*

Looking shy, Jess distanced herself from the window. The force of the wind pushed the window closed with a thud and caused the handle to turn back down as well.

“The wind is rather strong here,” she observed.

<<Well, that’s the price we pay for having a good view. Nothing is obstructing our vision or the wind on the summit of this hill.>>

“It’s probably rather cool and refreshing in the summertime.” As she spoke, Jess sank into the sofa with a poof. Perhaps she’d only wanted to test how cozy it was because she stood up almost instantly and gazed at me. “Though I would love to lounge around and relax, since we’re here, how about we go see the wine cellar Mister Dion mentioned?”

I nodded. Apparently, the underground area of this estate had been developed into a cellar for storing and fermenting the wine that was their pride and joy. The manager had highly recommended that we take a look while we were here.

We locked the door to our room and returned to the hall from before. Just like when we first arrived, Dion was looking at a piece of paper and writing something down. Our footsteps might have tipped him off, for he turned around to look at us and smiled warmly.

“Why, hello again, young miss,” he greeted. “Are you looking for the wine cellar, perhaps?”

Jess nodded. “Yes. I was thinking about having a quick look before heading out for dinner.”

“Please do. I hope you enjoy yourself.” Dion then turned and called out to the back of the hall. “Come over, Neu! Give her a tour, please.”

A short while later, a slender boy who heavily resembled Dion walked out languidly. He wore a white shirt, black pants, as well as a leather coat. In terms of age, he seemed to be a few years younger than Jess, if I wasn’t mistaken. He had long brown hair that was just as bushy as Dion’s.



“What’s this? Where do you want me to go?” the boy—Neu—asked casually. Judging by his tone when speaking to Dion, he was likely the manager’s son.

“The wine cellar,” Dion repeated patiently. “Please show her to the area and unlock it for her.”

“If you say so, I guess.” Letting out a sigh that sounded intentional, the boy turned to face Jess and abruptly froze on the spot. When Jess smiled at him, his ears turned bright scarlet, and he quickly averted his gaze.

*Hey, don’t be so quick to lose your heart, young man. Are you one of those otaku who falls hopelessly in love at first sight without any sense of self-discipline?*

I snorted loudly to make a point, but it appeared that an insignificant pig like me was beneath Neu’s attention—he approached Jess and talked to her with his eyes still fixed elsewhere. “I’m heading there now, so follow me.” Pretending to be cool and brusque, Neu promptly marched off.

Looking flustered, Dion bowed slightly at Jess. “That’s my son, Neu. My apologies for his standoffish conduct. After our Yethma left some time ago, I’ve been asking him to take over the work at the mansion, but sadly, it doesn’t seem to be his cup of tea.”

“No, I should be the one thanking the two of you for going out of your way to give me a tour,” Jess replied before practically running after Neu so she wouldn’t lose sight of him. I followed.

As we made our way to the cellar, Jess commented, “Mister Dion seems busy. From what I could see, he was calculating the total wine sales.”

<<Ah, I was wondering what he was doing all that writing for. That makes sense. It’s peak season, after all.>>

Neu then disappeared down a flight of stairs, and we descended it after him. The shy boy was waiting for us at the very bottom. The stairs led to a dim passage blocked in by a low ceiling and gray stone walls.

Neu still refused to meet Jess’s eyes as he asked, “You sounded like you were talking. Is someone with you?”

“Ah, no, I was just...talking to myself a little.” Jess smiled, evading the question as she looked at me.

Following her example, Neu also looked in my direction, but he only tilted his head quizzically before advancing. *I mean, the person she’s conversing with is a pig, after all. I’m sure this boy could never deduce that I’m a thinking pig, not even in his wildest dreams.*

For no apparent reason, I felt just a tad out of place next to Jess.

There was the soft tapping of shoes and the sharper clicking of heels. The sound of the pair’s footsteps echoed inside the chamber.

Neu walked down the dark passage with a lantern in hand. “You’re a woman, but you came all the way to a place like this by yourself, huh?”

“Yes. I am stopping here for now, but I’m on a journey north,” Jess answered politely.

“You seem pretty young. Isn’t that risky?”

Judging by his tone, he was asking the question innocuously. He didn’t seem like a particularly bad guy.

“I might not look like it, but I am very strong,” Jess assured him.

<<That’s true. You can probably raze a mansion like this one to the ground all by yourself with an explosion.>>

In response to my quip that the boy couldn’t hear, Jess let out a short chuckle.

As for the boy, who was completely oblivious to Jess’s magical abilities, he seemed rather curious about the strength Jess alluded to. “Just wondering, are there any secrets to making it through a journey safely?”

*Huh. This boy asks some strange questions.*

“Well...” Jess paused to think. “The most important thing is having a heartening companion by your side.”

Neu turned over his shoulder to look skeptically at Jess, as if to say, “But you don’t have one.”

With a small shrug, he muttered, “Oh well, whatever. Here’s the wine cellar

you were looking for. Once you're done, give me a shout, and I'll lock the door." He promptly fished out a jingling bunch of keys from the fanny pack around his waist and opened the arched wooden doors blocking our way. "You can drink from the barrels with taps, but don't go overboard. If you collapse from drinking too much, I won't come to save you."

He handed the lantern to Jess and briskly returned the way we'd come.

I observed the wine cellar entrance in the stone wall. Above the door seemed to be some kind of proverb written in Mesterian.

"If you wish to quench your thirst and cling to life, water is the only thing you need..." Jess read it aloud and frowned. "What does that mean?"

<<Maybe you could try using the law of contraposition.>>

She blinked. "Con... What is that?"

<<Contraposition. A statement that says 'If P, then Q,' can be inverted and flipped into 'If not Q, then not P.' Let's take this statement, for example. 'If she's Jess, then she has a flat chest.' Assuming that the statement is correct, you can also say, 'If someone doesn't have a flat chest, she isn't Jess.'>>

"If you continue, I can't promise what will happen to you." Her voice was flat and icy. The flames of the lantern in her hands flared up.

<<Please don't literally roast me... It was only an example.>>

"Ah, right, you *did* say that... I'm so sorry. You went out of your way to explain it clearly to me, but I reacted irrationally..."

*No, I was completely the one to blame just now. I don't think Jess owes me any apologies. But moving on for now.* <<Let's get back on track. What's the contrapositive of this slogan?>>

Jess raised her line of sight once more. "I only have to invert the meaning and swap the order, right? In that case... 'If you drink something other than water, you aren't simply quenching your thirst and clinging to life...' There is wine inside here. Is this slogan trying to say that we are more than beings who only need to quench their thirst?"

*She catches on quickly.* <<That's my guess, at least. It's probably trying to say

something along the lines of the wine culture being proof that humans are avaricious, privileged creatures who won't be satisfied with appeasing our thirst alone.>>

"I see... Well then, that would mean that you, Mister Pig, who constantly brings up the topic of chest size, are an avaricious, privileged creature who won't be satisfied with boobs alone."

*Uh, hang on, how did you make that kind of outlandish connection?* <<Let's head in and take a look,>> I hurriedly proposed.

Jess nodded with a wide grin.

The wine cellar was an underground chamber made of stone. Along the left and right walls of the dim space were tidy rows of large barrels. The rich aroma of fruit and the earthy scent of oak that made up the barrels blended into a pleasant mix.

Jess closed the door, placed the lantern on the ground, and gently waved her right hand. In succession, several spheres of light flew out from her palm and floated until they were near the ceiling, illuminating the entire cellar. It appeared to stretch on for dozens of meters beyond the point where we were standing.

Jess whispered something terrifying as she advanced with immense curiosity, "There are a lot of barrels here. I wonder how many years it would take for one person to drink it all up..." She observed, "It looks like the barrels in this area are wine from this year. They have '129' written on them."

Royal Year 129—the year when the prayers of a single maiden escalated to an upheaval that involved all of Mesteria, which had concluded with the death of the maiden's father...

During her investigation, Jess discovered a barrel with a tap and joyfully cheered. The next moment, she manifested a giant glass mug that looked like it had the capacity of at least two liters.

<<Wha... Surely you're not going to drink with that mug, right?>> I asked, my voice quivering.



She glanced at me with impish eyes. “Oh, it’s just a joke.” Before my very eyes, her mug shrank until it was the size of a small drinking glass. While I breathed a sigh of relief, she poured in vivid red liquid from the barrel and giggled to herself. “Hee hee hee hee hee...”

*She hasn’t even drunk yet, but she’s already in a precarious state... Is she really going to be okay?*

“It’s soooo nice and waaaarm! It’s almost like it’s not winterrr!” Jess exclaimed as she skipped down the vineyard painted in the colors of dusk. Ten out of ten people would agree that she didn’t seem okay at all.

The wind had a chilly bite to it, but she’d changed from her fluffy coat to a plain jacket. Under her jacket was the white dress she’d worn last night. The alcohol in her system was likely dilating her blood vessels and warming her body up. Perhaps the vapors from the liquor hanging in the air back in the cellar must have gotten the better of me as well because I felt as if I was dreamily walking on clouds.

“Ah!!! I see our room over therre~!”

I felt that the exclamation marks and the tilde at the end of her sentence were a tad excessive, but I shouldn’t be too picky about the minor details. I craned my neck to see where Jess was pointing, and quite high up on the precipitous mansion walls was a window decorated with potted white flowers. It must be our guest room.

Four such windows sat next to each other—one pair belonging to the lounge and study of our suite, then the other pair belonging to the lounge and study of the suite next door where the elderly couple were staying.

I turned back to face Jess and realized that she’d already started walking off without me at some point. *Oh, drunkards are such a handful.*

Wasting no time, I chased the maiden who’d had her fill of three types of wine—this year’s, last year’s, and the year’s before that—and ran downhill as well. Jess’s new favorite outfit, the white dress adorned with blue and pastel blue patterns, waltzed exquisitely with the wind as the striking evening dyed the white fabric a tint of scarlet.

Roughly two hours later, after enjoying dinner and even more wine at the winehouse that had caught her eye, Jess scaled the hill with a spring in her step and me as her companion. By now, the sky had grown completely dark, and moonlight traced the rims of the grapevines' dry leaves with fine, white lines.

But what shone even more brilliantly was Jess in her white dress. The snow-white fabric, which had blended into the dry crimson-colored leaves in the early evening, now stood out in stark contrast against the darkness, as if it had captured the pale moonlight itself.

"Ahhhh!!!" Jess suddenly exclaimed with a generous dose of punctuation.

Startled, I came to a stop. <<What happened?>>

Jess pointed at something ahead of us and replied in a hushed voice, "Over there! Look!!!"

Inside the vineyard, something white was moving toward the estate. Before, I hadn't been able to see much from a pig's point of view, but thanks to the moon, I could make it out clearly this time. The white "something" had a humanoid shape. At a speed that would align perfectly with a running human, it vanished behind the fortress walls.

"Let's chase after her!"

Though she could have chosen to let the matter drop altogether, Jess instead broke into a run, determined to chase down the mysterious white silhouette.

<<It's dark right now, so watch your feet,>> I warned.

But not a second later, Jess ran into something. She staggered fiercely and almost toppled over, but she somehow regained her balance. "My apologies!" It seemed that she'd knocked over someone who'd rushed out from elsewhere.

A familiar, lethargic voice reached my ears. "Don't run in the middle of the night like that. It's dangerous." It was the manager's son, Neu.

"I'm so sorry... I saw a ghost and started running without thinking," Jess explained.

Neu tilted his head as he stood up. "A ghost?"

"Yes, it was a woman wearing white clothes. She ran in that direction." Jess

stretched out her arm and pointed directly at the back of the estate.

“No way. Ghosts don’t exist.” Neu didn’t even look in that direction before shaking his head, exasperated.

The next words out of Jess’s mouth took me completely by surprise. “May I ask who ‘Lydnis’ is?”

An uncomfortable silence ensued.

I inclined my head in confusion as well. <<Jess, what are you talking about?>> I gazed at Neu, whose face was so pale that he looked as if he’d truly seen a ghost.

“Wha...” he stammered. “Are you...a Yethma?”

“No, I’m not. I can read the minds of others though.” Jess leaned forward slightly, peering into Neu’s eyes as if searching for something.

The shaken boy quickly averted his gaze. “‘Alcohol will tell you everything in the world but the truth.’ That’s what my old man says all the time. I don’t know what nonsense you’re mumbling while half asleep, but for your own good, you shouldn’t drink too much.”

As if declaring that this was the end of the conversation, Neu left us with those words before sprinting back to the estate.

Jess continued looking around the area. Maybe she was still intrigued by the ghost.

After a moment of hesitation, I spoke up. <<Hey, where did this ‘Lydnis’ person come from?>>

“It’s a word that briefly flashed through Mister Neu’s mind. I believe it’s a name, but I’m not quite sure...” Her mage status meant that Jess wasn’t just capable of reading a pig’s mind; she could even hear the thoughts of other humans.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<Is it *that* strange? I mean, sometimes a random name can pop up in your head even if you don’t mean to think about them.>> *I want to rest my head on cutie-pie Ceres’s lap.*

“Hmph.” Having read the narration, Jess puffed out her cheeks, looking as

sour as a lemon. “That may be the case for you, a piggy with no restraint, but I don’t think it applies to Mister Neu. There’s a slim chance that the ghost is actually called Miss Lydnis.”

<<Well, true, you make a good point.>>

My intoxicated and addled brain couldn’t work up much of an interest. The knowledge of the ghost’s name probably wouldn’t benefit us in any way.

Unlike my apathy, however, Jess was still staring hard at the vineyard. “Hmm, we’ve lost sight of the ghost, sadly... But you saw her without a doubt, right?”

<<Yeah, there was definitely someone wearing white clothes just now. I dunno whether she’s a ghost though.>>

“Do you think she’s still nearby?” Jess was so pumped up that she looked as if she was about to launch a thorough investigation of the entire hill.

I shook my head. <<It’s not good to walk around on a winter night after drinking alcohol. You might feel all warm right now, but it’s only because your vessels are widening. If you let your guard down, your body will get chilly real fast. We were lucky enough to get a fancy suite, so how about we do our search from the windows above?>>

After a moment of pondering, Jess nodded. “Right, that’s a great option. Let’s head back.”

Jess was someone who had a burning curiosity about anything and everything, but at the same time, she knew where to draw the line and what her priorities were. We climbed the hill, entered the fortress gate, and returned to the grand mansion.

When we arrived at the entrance hall, we stumbled into a ruckus.

“I shaid that zis chair’s ze most comfortable of zem all!” An elderly male voice slurred with a slight accent.

“Dear, I’m repeating myself, but this is the entrance hall, not our room. Are you going to sleep here tonight?”

“I *shaid* I’ll shleep on zis chair. Why should I chake even a shingle step from ’ere?”



An elderly man with gray hair and patches of red on his face was slouching slovenly on a chair, while an elderly woman dressed up beautifully stood in front of him with a hand on her hip, telling him off. When the elderly woman noticed Jess, she dipped her head in greeting.

It was simple to deduce that the elderly man was drunk and unreasonable, causing trouble for his wife.

“Excuse me... Is there anything I can help with?” Jess asked politely.

The elderly woman, who looked resigned, shook her head. “Please don’t mind us, this happens all the time. He will become all meek and quiet right away.”

The elderly man protested, “Who’re you callin’ ‘meek,’ huh? Just sho you know, zey used to call me ze Lion of ze Ocean back in ze day, and I’ve even gotta medal ta show—”

“Yes, yes, I know all about that, dear. If you’re a lion, you should sit with a more dignified posture.”

Turning to us, the elderly woman looking after her husband ushered us along, telling us to “go ahead.” And so, we left the area behind us and returned to our suite.

The moment we entered our room, Jess surveyed outside the window.

<<See anything that catches your interest?>>

Jess took a few steps backward with disappointment and sank into the leather sofa. “No, I couldn’t find the ghost...”

<<Maybe she was just an ordinary passerby after all.>>

“Someone passing by on a vineyard hill like this?” She didn’t sound convinced. “That couple and the two of us are the only guests here, from what I remember.”

Indeed, it was quite an enigma. I worked my hazy brain to look for a theory that might make sense, but Jess spoke up before I could find an answer.

“Frankly, I was a little jealous of that couple,” she whispered.

I glanced at her. Jess was pursing her lips and fiddling with her dress. <<So... You wanted to get as wasted as that guy?>>

“That’s not it!” She paused. “I’m sure you could feel it too, but I could tell the two of them have stayed by each other’s side for a long time. They understand each other completely.”

<<Welp, they’re an elderly couple. I’m not surprised.>>

“I just thought, ‘Ah, that must be nice.’”

Jess was more talkative and loose-lipped than usual—perhaps it was the wine’s influence. She gently waved her hand above the spot next to the sofa, so I walked over and curled up as instructed.

I’d assumed that she would stroke me, but instead, she continued facing the window and fiddling with her dress. *I might’ve messed up majorly when I recalled Ceres. I’m missing out on a lap pillow too...*

On the other side of the glass, wispy clouds glided past the moon as the winter wind blew them away.

I absentmindedly recalled the elderly couple. I kind of understood what Jess had been getting at. They had been a perfect match. It felt as if it was only natural for them to be together, and the couple in question appeared to be aware of it. Just like Jess, I’d admired them with some wistfulness. I’d been a little jealous too.

A lengthy silence stretched between us.

Until suddenly, Jess let out an “Ah!”

<<Something wrong?>>

“Oh no, my dress is dirty...”

I climbed to my trotters and scrutinized it. The part of Jess’s white dress around her thighs was stained black by mud. It was her favorite dress, and it looked like this stain was one of those tenacious ones.

<<Do you think you can get rid of it?>> I gazed up at her worriedly.

“Yes, it’s no problem at all.” She hovered her hand on top of the sullied area. The fabric’s fibers softly came loose and spread out before returning to their original form in a complex motion. Only the dirt component, which had created the stain, was left hanging in the air. With a wave of her hand, the dirt

dissipated, as if it'd been blown away by the wind.

I marveled at it. <<Magic is so convenient.>>

This was when the sound of an argument in the corridor filtered into our room. It was the elderly couple.

"You *still* want to drink more?! At this rate, you won't be able to see the light of day tomorrow."

"Naw, you're bein' shilly. If I can'ch drink, I'd rather be pushin' up the daisies." The hoarse voice of the elderly man sounded a tad more peaceful than earlier.

"You're the one who should stop speaking nonsense. How are you supposed to drink if you're dead?"

Their voices paused when they were at a slight distance from us. After hearing the sound of a door opening and shutting, they became even more faint. But their squabble was still leaking into our room through the wall in the study, which was adjacent to their suite. Both of them seemed to be masterful speechmakers—though their tones were calm, their retorts were ceaseless.

I tuned into the elderly couple's quarrel with amusement for a while until I realized that their voices began to grow heated again. Eventually, their volume rose to a point where we could hear them clearly even in our suite, and at long last, we heard one of them rush out into the corridor and run off.

Dumbfounded, I stood there in a daze. Soon, I heard returning footsteps. But it didn't belong to one single person. It sounded like there were several people—likely three in total. There were rattling sounds, as if they were pulling out drawers.

Jess and I shared a look. By the sound of that, it was no longer just a simple argument.

We were on pins and needles after the sudden turn of events. Unable to sit still, the two of us walked out into the corridor. The door to the neighboring suite was left ajar, and the light of the lounge splashed out into the gloomy corridor.

"Excuse me, but has something happened?" Jess called out.

The manager, Dion, walked out from inside. “My deepest apologies about the noise. It seems that the madam has lost her ring...”

“It’s a ring my husband gave me on our anniversary!” the elderly woman exclaimed. “I wasn’t quite fond of it because the big ruby seemed tacky, but I can’t afford to lose it on my trip!”

A major investigation was being undertaken inside the room, and even Neu was on the case. Possibly because another spell of drunkenness had hit him again in the short span of time, the elderly man was zoning out on a chair. It looked as if he might nod off at any moment in the warm and cozy suite.

When asked about the details, the elderly woman revealed that until a short while ago, they’d been in the estate’s wine cellar, enjoying some wine. After that, she’d tried to reason with her husband at the entrance hall. Somewhere down the line during these events, the ring she’d left in her room had apparently vanished without a trace. According to her, she’d made sure to lock the door.

“I left it on the table! It can’t disappear into thin air!” the elderly woman raised her voice.

Looking troubled, Dion asked, “Just for confirmation, are you confident about that?”

“Yes, of course. Unlike my husband, I’m not that much of a drinker.”

“Could it have possibly ended up elsewhere on you or in your luggage?”

“It hasn’t,” the elderly woman declared. “I distinctly remember unfolding my handkerchief and leaving the ring on top of it. Do you really think I would leave my handkerchief behind and only take my ring with me?”

“But I am afraid you mentioned that your room was locked, so I can’t think of anything else...”

*Oh boy. If this commotion keeps going, it’s going to ruin the peaceful night.*

Having stepped a little inside the room, Jess and I stood there awkwardly as the conversation went on.

Suddenly, the elderly woman let out a gasp. “No wonder I thought the breeze



was so chilly..." The window was slightly open. She hurried over and shut it with a thud. The handle dropped down with a clank and locked the window. I took note of that detail.

"Oh dear." The elderly woman seemed to have noticed something and turned around to face Dion. "I locked the door, yes, but it seems that the window was still unlocked."

"That might be the case, but it's a tall, perpendicular wall to the ground outside." Dion walked up to the elderly woman's side and opened the window again. "Take a look for yourself." He indicated the area below as his bushy hair fluttered in the night wind. "Hmm...?"

Dion appeared to have noticed something as well.

"Have you found something?" Jess walked forward. I followed her.

Something outside the window seemed to have caught Dion's attention, but I couldn't spot it from a pig's-eye level. Thankfully, Dion reached out and took the item in question into the room.

It was a rectangular flowerpot. White flowers were planted inside it, but it looked like it'd been tipped over—half of the soil had spilled out, and the flowers in that half were gone.

An ominous premonition rang alarm bells in my mind. And to my chagrin, it was right on the mark, for Dion furrowed his brows and gazed at Jess. "The wall is vertical with no footholds, so it would be unthinkable to climb up, but...it would be possible to reach it from the adjacent room."

A stolen ring. An ajar window. A ruined potted plant. The circumstantial evidence was clearly framing the occupants of the room next door, us. Furthermore, a pig couldn't maneuver along the windowsills.

"Huuuh?!" Jess exclaimed in a panic. "Please wait! I would never steal!"

Dion placed the potted plant on the floor and bowed awkwardly. "My apologies, it is inexcusable for us to suspect our guests... I only intended to propose a possibility..."

But if there were no other theories, it would mean that Jess was the culprit.

The elderly woman studied Jess with scrutiny. “I have to ask, why are you staying the night in a place like this all by yourself to begin with?”

Helpless and flustered, Jess looked at me. I sensed everyone’s puzzled gaze shifting in my direction. No matter how you looked at it, I was clearly sticking out like a sore thumb. The fact that Jess’s only traveling companion was a pig most certainly multiplied their doubts about her.

Self-consciousness crawled all over my skin like an irresistible itch, and I felt as if I took one wrong step, my trotters would tread on someone’s toes.

<Mister Pig, what do we do?> Jess asked anxiously.

<<It’s under control. Don’t worry, I’m fully aware that you’re not the one to blame. Every truth comes with indisputable evidence to back it up. Let’s do everything we can to prove your innocence.>>

That said, a pig making a testimony would be downright bizarre. Plus, if they said that we were accomplices, they wouldn’t trust a word out of my mind.

Silence.

Panicking, Jess searched for words to defend herself.

But someone else spoke up first. “Hey, if the soil in the pot fell out,” Neu began in an even voice while looking down, “how about you check her clothes? If they’re dirty with soil, it’s evidence that she was the thief.”

As Jess stood there in a daze, the elderly woman opened her eyes wide like saucers and inspected the beautiful maiden’s white dress. However, there was no hint of filth or dirt. “It seems to be clean.”

*Of course it’s clean. Jess just got rid of some dirt with her magic, after all.*

I gazed at the boy. It had only been for an instant, but I’d detected astonishment in his mannerisms. As for Jess, her mind was completely blank, and she didn’t even have it in her to make any objections.

The drunk elderly man who’d been sitting still suddenly hollered, “Zen just make her shtrip!”

*...What the hell did he just say?*

“If that girl shtole it, she’s gotta have it on her now,” he slurred. “If she didn’t shtear it, she wouldn’t have it. You can just check every nook and chranny of her body. You find no ring, you let her go back.”

“Wha... You can’t...” The pitiful Jess took a step back in fear.

*Make her strip? Check every nook and cranny of her body? You think I’ll let you?!*

*I’m the only one who can see her naked. No one else.*

*My blood was boiling. I’ll show them. I’ll prove Jess’s innocence by any means necessary. I already have an idea about the culprit. It’s a simple case. All that’s left to do is to convince them with logic and take them through the events step-by-step. To do that...*

<<Jess, say exactly what I tell you to.>>

<Mister Pig...>

I didn’t even need a stun gun wristwatch or a voice-changing bow tie. All I needed to do was make the deduction on Jess’s behalf and ask her to speak in my stead.

<<Listen up, first, you start with—>> I gave her a concise rundown of the plan.

Jess gulped before opening her mouth. “Please give me a moment of your time. I shall explain what happened tonight.”

Faced with Jess’s rebuttal, which was likely more assertive than they’d expected, everyone’s eyes were glued to her. Inside the room where all the people involved were assembled, Detective Jess chose her words carefully as she began her deduction show.

“I would like to start with a question. There is something I wish to clarify.”

Seeing her determination to make a stand, the elderly man’s face twisted with a scowl. “What’s zis? A little girl runnin’ her mouth like a know-it-all?”

Though Jess flinched a little, she boldly looked in Neu’s direction. “You are the one who opened the window, weren’t you, Mister Neu? The window wasn’t open at the very beginning. You opened it earlier when you were looking for the ring.”

Her unexpected argument made the very air freeze over.

“Why me?” Neu retorted with a surly face. Sweat formed a sheen on his forehead.

“This room is warm, yes? That is natural because it has a fireplace. But let’s say that the window was left open during the entire time this couple went to indulge in wine. If the window had been ajar, an extremely cold wind would have blown in from outside. The temperature of the room would have dropped. Since this room is warm, it means that the window must have been shut.”

It was a contraposition.

The elderly woman searched her memories. “Yes, you’re correct. When I returned to the suite, I remember feeling warm and snug. Right, dear?”

“Yah...” the elderly man mumbled ambiguously.

Neu’s face was deathly pale. His lips quivered, unable to form words.

Just like I’d instructed her to, Jess cornered the boy with logic. “Mister Neu, you have the key to this room, don’t you? When you opened the wine cellar for me, I saw you taking out a bunch of keys. Mister Dion mentioned that he is leaving part of the management of this mansion in your hands, so I assume that the keys to the individual rooms are included in that bunch. Am I wrong?”

Our deduction appeared to be on point because Dion looked at his son, horrified. “It can’t be. Neu, did you...?!”

“But Mister Neu isn’t the criminal,” Jess declared firmly.

Everyone in the room, including Neu, looked as if they couldn’t decipher her words. If the window had been closed during the couple’s absence, then Neu, the boy with the key, should be our top suspect.

Contrary to their expectations, however, Jess developed our argument all according to the plan I’d cooked up. “The reason for that is because Mister Neu doesn’t have a motive. He is the heir of such a grand estate, and I’m certain that he isn’t so short on money that he would resort to stealing. Furthermore, he would be the one inconvenienced in the end if the theft tarnished the estate’s reputation. Since he has the keys, there is a great chance he would become a

suspect, and I highly doubt that he would go out of his way to steal a guest's possession in his own estate."

"If you are correct, then who did it?" the elderly woman asked.

With a completely serious face, Jess revealed the culprit. "The ghost."

Everyone gaped at her.

She continued, "A ghost is haunting this mansion. She is a mischievous phantom who likes stealing things. I believe the ghost caught Mister Neu off guard tonight and stole the keys from him."

Of course, that could never happen. It was a bald-faced lie. Jess looked at Neu and communicated with him telepathically. <I know the truth. I will help you resolve the situation. Please nod right now.>

With his back against the wall, Neu didn't have any options. He nodded.

"A *ghost*, you say? How could anyone buy such a ridiculous story?" The elderly woman's face turned bright red with indignation, looking affronted.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise behind her. Almost like a mischievous joke of the universe, the lamp on the table chose this time to topple over by itself. The next moment, the door to the suite creaked open. There was no one standing near the door.

As planned, the color drained from the faces of the elderly couple and Dion.

"Mister Neu, please be honest. You were the one who unlocked the window, weren't you?" Jess pressed on. "But you didn't do that to pin the blame on me. You did it because, for a moment, you thought you saw the ghost."

<Please nod.>

As instructed, Neu nodded dutifully. Everything was going according to plan. I'd predicted everyone's reactions, using them to create utter chaos before seizing the initiative and manipulating people to act as I wished. It was the same method used back when I'd snatched Naut away from Ceres once upon a time.

The manager, Dion, held his bushy head in his hands, looking utterly shaken. "A-A ghost...? That is simply unbelievable... But what else can explain what just happened...?"

A lamp had fallen over by itself, and the door had opened even though no one had touched it. Of course, it was all the work of Jess's magic. It wasn't a ghost, but an illusion created by Jess and me.

Jess concluded, "Because Mister Neu only unlocked the window just now, that would mean I didn't enter this room through the window. I have been cleared of suspicion. Please give me some time. I promise that Mister Neu and I will retrieve the ring from the ghost without fail."

Hearing her tone brimming with confidence, Dion and the elderly couple seemed convinced and nodded readily.

She turned around to face the boy. "Mister Neu, we should leave. There is something I want your help with." She held his pale hand and advanced into the corridor. I followed her.

<<You're quite the actress,>> I praised.

Jess turned over her shoulder and winked at me.

We walked down the corridor and distanced ourselves from the elderly couple's suite. Then, we entered the nearest vacant room we could find while bringing Neu with us.

<<Now then, let's reveal the truth and make it short,>> I announced.

The room was chilly and dim—our surroundings were only illuminated by the faint moonlight. Jess gestured for Neu to sit on a sofa before taking a seat next to him. As for me, I plopped down on the carpet and told Jess what to say.

"You are the culprit who stole the ring, Mister Neu," Jess declared. "It was easy for you to access the suite since you had the key. But you must have thought that you would become the suspect if you didn't take any precautions—that's why you opened the window and tipped over the potted plant to divert the suspicion to me."

For accuracy's sake, I asked her to add this: "You ended up having to open the window during the search earlier, and my guess is that after you left it open during your theft, the strong wind blew it closed."

This mansion's windows opened outward—they would close on their own if



there were a gale. The window handle, which served as a lock, would clamp down automatically when the window was closed, making it impossible to open from the outside. Assuming this had happened, it would mean one fewer piece of circumstantial evidence pinning the blame on Jess. He would have to devise an explanation to back up the lie that the elderly couple had carelessly left the window open.

Neu didn't make any objections.

Jess continued, "Your statement that my clothes might be sullied solidified you as the culprit in my mind. You avoided bringing up the truth in your thoughts, but you couldn't fully conceal your shock when you learned my clothes were clean. But that's only natural—after all, you distinctly remembered soiling my clothes with mud when you bumped into me in the vineyard."

This was likely the sequence of events.

After guiding the elderly couple to the wine cellar, Neu had stolen the ring with the spare key. He'd then planted misleading evidence pointing to the neighboring guest—Jess—around the suite by opening the windows and tipping over the potted plant. After that, he'd probably waited to ambush Jess in the vineyard to reinforce his narrative.

Instead, his fastidiousness had dug his own grave. But this wasn't Neu's blunder—after all, how could he have ever predicted that Jess could instantly cleanse mud from her clothes with magic?

There was a choked noise in Neu's throat. He was crying. "I'm sorry..."

Neu had attempted to frame Jess for the crime. Yet, Jess gently placed a hand on his shoulder. The tearstained face of a young boy turned to her.

In a kind, angelic voice, Jess whispered, "Let's return the stolen ring to that couple. I will help you so it doesn't escalate into a major incident. Could you please give me the ring?"

Neu replied in a nasally voice, "It's...outside."

"All right. Can you fetch it for me?"

“Okay.” With his eyes fixed on the ground, Neu left the room.

There was pin-drop silence inside the darkness.

After a while, I mused, <<He’d get in a lot of trouble if he had the ring on him in the unlikely event that other people found him suspicious. I’m guessing that’s why he hid it outside.>>

Jess smiled at me. “You can see through everything, Mister Pig.”

<<I can’t see through everything, only what can be seen through,>> I corrected, trying to sound cool, like the stereotypical chairman of a school committee.

Jess let out a long sigh of relief. “I’m so glad to hear that.”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<Hmm? Do I smell a secret?>>

“Ah, no, I was just thinking I would be at a loss if you could see through my clothes...”

*Always determining the one pair of Les Panties with the body of a livestock and the mind of an otaku. His name is...Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin!*

<<Well, I won’t hound you about that. Let’s take this time to go through our plan.>>

<All right,> Jess replied telepathically so we would be prepared for whenever Neu returned.

<<After we obtain the ring, we’ll put on a performance. We’ll act as if we’re chasing a ghost and leap into the elderly couple’s suite. Use magic as you see fit to pretend that a ghost is around. We’ll make it seem like the ghost bumped into that drunkard old man,>> I explained. <<At that moment, we’ll drop the ring, which we’ll float near the ceiling in advance, on his lap. Now, this is important—I need you to kick up a big fuss throughout this process. Make sure everyone’s attention is fixed on you, and don’t let them look up to see the floating ring no matter what.>>

We were basically misdirecting the watchers’ gazes, a classic technique used in magic tricks.

Jess nodded with determination.

Not too long after, Neu returned to the room with an ashen face, looking as if he were attending a wake. His shaking hand held out a ring with a large ruby at Jess.

“You mustn’t rob anyone of things they treasure, okay?” Jess requested as she accepted the ring before softly patting Neu’s head.

Everything went according to plan right to the very end. Though the culprit was extremely unconventional—a ghost—when the evidence was thrust right before their eyes, everyone’s only choice was to accept it as the truth. After Jess announced like an exorcist that “No ghost will ever appear in this mansion again,” all the people present looked like a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

We’d succeeded at shifting the crime that had been pinned on us onto a “ghost.” Through this, we’d protected the future of a pitiful boy who’d mistakenly committed a theft. *And yes, as you can tell from my wording, there is room for sympathy for the young boy.*

Once everything was over and done with, we returned to our suite. Jess looked like she’d left any lingering intoxication behind her. She sat on the bed and looked at me as I curled up on the floor. I could almost imagine the cartoon question mark floating above her head.

“Excuse me, Mister Pig.”

<<Yeah?>>

“There are still a few things that bother me...”

*Oh yeah. That reminds me, there was something I hadn’t told her yet.*

She continued, “Just like what you said to me and what I passed on to everyone else, money is not an issue for Mister Neu—he has no motive to steal the ring. In that case, why was he willing to go as far as to frame someone else to obtain it?”

<<He did it for the ghost.>>

Hearing my response, Jess puffed out her cheeks, irked. “This is a serious matter, you know.”

<<I’m being dead serious.>>

She looked skeptically at me. “Really?”

<<Of course,>> I promised. <<You saw her too, didn’t you? The ghost, I mean.>> I thought back to the “ghost” we’d witnessed in the vineyard: a blonde girl wearing white clothes. <<Her true identity is a Yethma called Lydnis.>>

“Miss Lydnis... Oh!” Her eyes widened with realization.

It all stemmed from Jess’s conversation with Neu when she’d bumped into him on her quest to chase the ghost.

*“A ghost?”*

*“Yes, it was a woman wearing white clothes. She ran in that direction.”*

*“No way, ghosts don’t exist.”*

*“May I ask who ‘Lydnis’ is?”*

*“Wha... Are you...a Yethma?”*

<<When you got onto the topic of the ghost, a person called Lydnis came to Neu’s mind. The reason for that is simple: just like you suspected, the so-called ghost is actually Lydnis.>>

“So that’s why...” Then, Jess frowned. “But how did you know that Miss Lydnis is a Yethma?”

<<I did a thought experiment. I asked myself, “What kind of circumstances would cause a person to live in hiding near this mansion?” That’s when I recalled the manager’s words.>>

*“That’s my son, Neu. My apologies for his standoffish conduct. After our Yethma left some time ago, I’ve been asking him to take over the work at the mansion, but sadly, it doesn’t seem to be his cup of tea.”*

The keywords were “after our Yethma left some time ago.”

Jess seemed to have figured it out as well. “Miss Lydnis recently turned sixteen and was duty bound to leave this household... But she didn’t want to leave, instead staying behind in the area... Do I have that right?”

<<Yeah. That’s my guess.>>

With this, the conversation Jess had had with Neu on their way to the wine cellar also added up.

*“You’re a woman, but you came all the way to a place like this by yourself, huh?”*

*“Yes. I am stopping here for now, but I’m on a journey to the north.”*

*“You seem pretty young. Isn’t that risky?”*

*“I might not look like it, but I am very strong.”*

*“Just wondering, are there any secrets to making it through a journey safely?”*

<<Neu must have known that Lydnis chose to stay. There’s even a chance that he’s the one who sheltered her. Lydnis has to depart one day and needs funds for her journey. He doesn’t want anyone to know she’s still around, so he has to make money behind closed doors.>>

“I see...”

<<So now, we have the full story behind the rumor that ferryman dude told us about a ghost thief haunting the estate. There’s a Yethma in hiding on the premises, and there’s a young boy who’s stealing for her. Their secrets combined to produce the illusion of a ghost.>>

It was a heartbreaking story.

“I...I had no idea... I was so thoughtless, mindlessly looking forward to seeing a ghost...” Jess’s shoulders drooped despondently. Melancholy filled her eyes.

It was a melancholy that originated from the self-reproach of a kind maiden

who poured her heart out for other people.

<<Humans are creatures who develop their brains before anything else. Wanting to know the truth behind a curious phenomenon is no different from a pig wanting to see their owner's *Les Panties*. It's a perfectly normal desire. There's nothing wrong with the wish itself.>>

Jess didn't seem convinced by my speech, so I added, <<Structurally, both the truth and *Les Panties* are things you can catch a glimpse of if you look at the right angle. It's not the viewer's fault that they'll see it, intentionally or otherwise. If you think it's a truth that shouldn't be brought out into the open, you can just quietly lock the secret away inside the deepest compartment of your heart.>>

She rocked her head ambiguously. "After you taught me that learning and discovering are wonderful things, Mister Pig, I became a person who's curious about everything. Even *I* have things I don't want other people to find out, but I insensitively march forward when it's about other people's secrets..."

*Oh. She has some secrets she doesn't want to be exposed?* <<Jess, the one truth doesn't belong to anyone. Wanting to find it isn't morally wrong at all, and the same can be said when you reach the truth based on what you can observe. That remains true even if the truth happens to be inconvenient for someone else...or if it's something terrifying, like a monster.>>

"A monster..." Jess repeated slowly, as if digesting the word.

<<As long as you have the resolve to confront that monster, anyone has the right to seek out the truth. In fact, I actually think it's more dangerous to turn your eyes away from the presence of a monster.>>

The expression on her face was somewhere between understanding and disagreement. I looked right into her eyes and said, <<Your curiosity is your weapon, Jess. It's nothing to be ashamed of. If anything, you should be proud.>>

After a period of silence, a warm smile softened Jess's features. "Thank you."

The room grew dark. The clouds must have smothered the moon outside the closed curtains. An orange flame swayed and flickered in the fireplace.



“Sorry...” Jess whispered apologetically. “I made the mood all gloomy with that topic even though it’s supposed to be a fun journey.”

<<No, it’s totally fine. We don’t have all that many chances to talk about heavier topics like this.>>

Jess breathed out, and this time, her smile was much more carefree, as if all the tension had been dispelled from her features. “Ah, right! We are lucky enough to stay in a nice suite, and I feel it’s kind of a waste for us to sleep right away. Let’s do something fun!”

I blinked. <<Something fun?>>

“Yes. For now, we’ve driven the monster away, so we should celebrate. Fun and enjoyment are a vital part of any journey!” She seemed to have a flash of inspiration as she stood from her seated position on the bed. “There’s a rich selection of furnishings in this suite. How about this? I’ll wear exactly what you tell me to and do the poses you instruct me to do.”

<<Whoa. You’re spoiling me rotten tonight.>> *She’s almost like the heroine of a rom-com.*

“It’s my token of gratitude for clearing me of suspicion. I’ll wear anything for you.”

*Did she just say she’ll wear anything...?*

But I quickly shook my head to dispel the inappropriate thoughts. *No, stop right there. She’s a purehearted sixteen-year-old maiden. It’s my responsibility to make only wholesome and gentlemanly requests as I think about how to create happy memories with Jess.*

*So now, the question is, what’s the definition of a “wholesome outfit.” For example, would a miniskirt police uniform count? Police officers uphold public order as a profession—naturally, it would count as wholesome. Oh, I want her to arrest me!*

*What about a nurse’s uniform? Nurses assist with the medical treatment of the sick and the injured as an occupation—it’s obviously wholesome. I want her to jab me while saying, “You’ll feel a bit of a sting, but you can do this.”*

*Oh, shrine maiden attire would be a wonderful option as well. They do sacred work; therefore, they are wholesome. It might be nice if I got her to drive away my piglike worldly desires.*

*Hold on, I could even change things up a bit and go with a wedding dress. It has to be the off-the-shoulder type, no objections allowed. How about I ask her to make the expression of a bride sealing her vows with a kiss? No, scratch that, out of the question. It won't work because there's no one she can kiss. I'm a pig, so it'll be a challenge to see her from a groom's perspective...*

Jess smiled from ear to ear as she waited through my lengthy, animalistic contemplation.

<<I've got it,>> I finally announced.

She placed a hand over her chest, bracing herself for my preposterously indecent instructions.

Giving me a guarded look, she muttered, "So you have chosen something outrageously crude..."

<<Never! When have I ever asked you to do anything of the sort?>>

Frowning, she murmured, "But what about last night?"

*That reminds me, did I dream of a bunny girl...? <<Relax. I'm not asking anything on the indecent spectrum.>>*

"I see..." she slowly responded.

<<This outfit shouldn't be too difficult for you with your current skills. I'll describe it, so lend me an ear.>>

I gave her an explanation in a clear and detailed manner. Whenever she had questions, I would answer. Following a thorough process of trial and error, our efforts bore fruit at last. I stayed behind in the lounge while Jess moved to the study alone to change into her new outfit. Of course, I'd made sure to specify her pose beforehand.

When I heard her say, "I'm ready now," I made my way into the study. The lounge remained dark, but the warm light of a lamp spilled out from the study area.

I walked in.

Right before my eyes was a *high school girl*.

A black, knee-length skirt. A white blouse with long sleeves and a large black flap collar. Indeed, it was a sailor uniform. Like a cherry on top of the cake, a blue neckerchief added a touch of flair to the uniform's neat and crisp charm.

This blonde high school girl meekly sat on a chair by the window, engrossed in her book. Hearing my entry, she turned around. "You're late, *shenpai*," she said, tripping over the foreign "senpai" adorably.

She was my cute junior who worked as a student library assistant. We shared the same taste in books, and she constantly took the initiative to strike up conversations with me. Today, like any other day, she delved into a mind-boggling pure literature book while waiting for me at her usual seat in the library after school.

*It's the dead of night outside the window...but we don't talk about that!*

I suddenly felt a wave of tears prick at my eyes. I'd gone to all boys' schools for middle and high school, missing out on the heights of youth that other boys had experienced during my age. But now, I was making up for lost time—I was experiencing a heart-racing moment that I should have had no opportunities to reclaim now that I was nineteen.



I stood at the study's entrance, my trotters glued to the floor.

There was soft chuckling. "Is this outfit *that* impressive?"

<<Out of a hundred points, I'd give you ten billion.>>

"W-Wow!" Her eyes widened. "I'm so happy to hear that!" High schooler Jess stood from the chair and walked up to me. As she approached, her black socks that reached just below her knees and her uwabaki—Japanese indoor slippers worn at school—entered my vision.

*It's a real high school girl. A beautiful high school maiden is standing right in front of me,* I thought in a daze.

"High school girl..." She hummed thoughtfully. "If I remember correctly, you were thinking about something along those lines when we first met each other... So, you like high school girls, *shenpai*."

Every single word uttered with her sonorous voice cut into my brain mercilessly like daggers. *By the heavens! Why?! Why did I do something foolish like go to an all boys' school?! What was I even hoping to achieve by turning my back on such an epitome of youth...?!*

*Actually... Now that I think about it rationally, even if I'd entered a coed school, it's obvious what would've happened. The girls wouldn't have even spared a single glance in my direction all the way until and after graduation...*

My junior crouched in front of me and stared into my eyes. "I don't think that's the case at all. You're a very charming person, *shenpai*."

Voice shaking with emotion, I said, <<Thanks... Nothing makes me happier than being blessed with a kindhearted younger schoolmate like you...>>

Hearing it from a beautiful blonde high school girl nearly made me reflexively swallow it as the truth. *But no, it's not. No matter how hard I try and struggle, I'm a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin. I'm far from someone worthy of the attention of such a heavenly high school girl like her, much less her affection.*

Looking a little mystified, Jess peered into my eyes. "Mister Pig...is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

*Hmm, I'm not sure. If I have to pick something, I kind of have the urge for her*

*to step on me while calling me a pig...*

Having read the narration, Jess rejected my response in advance. “A request like that is a big no.”

*Aw. That’s a shame.*

She sighed. “I’m afraid I could never bear to step on you...”

My sliced and pickled mimiga ears drooped dejectedly. Seeing that, she hurriedly added, “Oh, how about this, then?!”

Jess stood and cleared her throat before clasping her hands together in front of her chest. And then...

*“Shenpai... I’ve liked you for the longest time... Please be my boyfriend!”*

*Wowoink! I squealed internally. I looove devoted kohai characters!*

Next, Jess placed a hand on her hip and turned away with a huff. Her cheeks flushed red. And then...

*“D-Don’t get the wrong idea! I only think of you as someone lesser than swine shenpai!”*

*Oink oink! The tsundere trope is supreme!*

I didn’t know how she did it, but the blush was gone from her cheeks in an instant. She slightly opened her eyes and looked in my direction with a face wiped of all expression. And then...

*“Hey, shenpai...”* she whispered in a low and ominous voice. “Who was that woman you were just talking to...?”

*Oink means yes! Yandere is nice stuff too! I want her to be possessive and controlling of me for my entire life!*

Though she was the one who’d taken the initiative to act out these roles, Jess’s feet fidgeted bashfully. “Um... How did I do? Was I just like the ‘high school girl’ you were imagining?”

My day-to-day coaching had borne fruit. Overwhelmed with contentment over a full-course meal of all the classic kohai archetypes, I had trouble forming coherent words, but I somehow managed to find my voice. <<Yeah. You’re the



best.>>

Jess's face lit up like the sun. "Yay!"

Possibly because she was in high spirits from being on a journey, Jess would take every opportunity to go along with my fetishes and bring me joy. Whenever I was happy, she also seemed like she was over the moon.

I *did* feel that her hospitality was so thorough that it almost seemed unnatural, but perhaps this was a piece of cake for a flawless, beautiful maiden like Jess. *It's already past the time for dessert by now, but you know what I mean.*

I could tell—Jess had tried to revitalize the mood that had grown cold after we'd confronted the monster called 'truth,' and my heart swelled.

After my fetish exhibition settled down, Jess sat on a sofa. She hesitantly asked, "Mister Pig, does this count as a *rome-comm*?" She had certainly taken a liking to the concept.

There was an obvious answer to her question—how could it be anything other than a rom-com when a beautiful maiden tried to make a virgin happy by cosplaying? <<I'm pretty sure it is. You've nailed the vibes super well.>>

"You think so?" Jess looked out at the misty night sky and whispered keenly, "*Rome-comms* are very fun."

The night was no longer young. I made one last request before we retired to bed. Jess slept on the bed while I curled up on the floor. Right beside me was the sailor uniform, which I'd requested she throw on the ground.

Tonight, I would slumber in peace, enveloped by the scent of a casually cast-off sailor uniform.

Morning came around. Dion invited Jess to stay a little longer and enjoy herself, but we declined and left Rach Valley behind us. Just before her departure, Jess tracked down Neu and handed over a large package wrapped in hemp cloth.

"Open it," she encouraged.

Following her instructions, Neu unwrapped the package. Within it were gorgeous clothes folded up neatly. It wasn't just one article of clothing—there were three items in total. Each of them had masterful, painstaking embroidery decorating the cloth.

“Even if it wouldn't fetch as much as that ring, I'm sure you will earn a good sum by selling these clothes,” Jess explained. “You need money, don't you? Please go ahead and put these to good use.”

Eyes filled with surprise met Jess's gaze. “Why're you so nice to me? I...I tried to frame you for the theft, you know...”

“Remember what I said? I might not look like it, but I am very strong.” She flexed her arms and grinned. Indeed, she looked like nothing in the world could stop her. “Now then, I'll be off to the north.”

“You're already going to leave? And you're heading north? Why...?”

“It's a secret.” Giving him a mischievous smile, Jess playfully tapped on the boy's nose. No virgin in any universe could avoid falling head over heels after such a gesture. I clearly saw the boy's ears gain a crimson tint. “Farewell.”

We walked out the gates and went down the vineyard. A refreshing winter morning welcomed us. Under the morning sun, the dried leaves of the grapevines sparkled.

Once again, we set off on our quest to find the wishing star in the north. Jess mentioned that our next stop was a hot spring resort, and I felt my pork heart kebab flutter with anticipation.

## Chapter 2: ButaAi: As Long as There's Love, It Doesn't Matter If He Is a Pig, Right?

**“Big brother, I never knew you were a pervert who loves making his little sister wear salacious outfits!!!”**

**<<“Don't be silly!!! Where in the world would you find a man who'd lust over a girl as flat as a washboard?! There's no one else I can ask, so that's why I asked you to try it on for reference's sake!!!”>>**

There was no reply to my line, and I looked up. My little sister's—no, Jess's expression was clouded and stormy.

“Hmph...” she shot me a glare.

I blinked. *Huh?*

“Well, *sorry* for being a washboard. I'm going to stand my ground. I'm not going to wear something obscene like this *shwimsuit* you're talking about.”

Only a moment earlier, her voice had been in such high spirits that she'd even bolded her speech. But now, it had dropped back to her standard pitch. If anything, she'd even gone past standard and reached icy cold levels. I'd made her angry, and I could hear it.

<<Sorry, that was my bad... But surely you know I didn't mean it. It's only a part of our sibling rom-com make-believe. All I'm doing is acting the part of an older brother who doesn't want to admit that he has the hots for his younger sister. And so, he ends up bad-mouthing her body with words he doesn't believe. He's trying to dodge the issue.>>

Her eyes widened. “Huh? Oh, so that's what happened... *Rome-comms* are quite challenging. It was just a little too sophisticated, and I completely missed the point...”

*It would be a rather clichéd series of events featured in doujin, especially the indecent ones... Sadly, it appears that Mesteria's level of culture hasn't reached*

*the same heights as our Japanese culture, my brethren.*

<<Still, I owe you an apology. Even if I meant it to be a joke, I shouldn't have called you a washboard. I'm pretty sure I've said this many times, but I don't think you're at a level that counts as unflattering. In fact, I'm certain that there's a great number of otaku who think your size is the best of them all.>>

"I wonder about that..."

Wrapped in a fluffy coat like she was now, Jess's "ornaments" were so unobtrusive that you had to wonder whether she even had any, but I'd already verified that they were relatively sizable. Therefore, I'd gone ahead and proposed she bathe in a swimsuit, a common option for people in a public hot spring. Without a doubt, she'd look amazing in one.

However, perhaps my way of describing it as "pieces of fabric that cover the minimum area of skin on one's chest and below the abdomen" had been poor, for Jess appeared to have misunderstood the definition of a swimsuit. *As for why we were acting out a sibling-themed rom-com, don't sweat the details.*

<<Jess,>> I argued, <<in my world, swimsuits are commonplace near the waterside. The outfits themselves aren't anything obscene.>>

"Really?" As she walked down a street encircled by farms dyed in the color of withered grass, Jess looked at me, eyes full of doubt.

We were en route to Broperver, a hot spring destination. According to Jess, we were close enough that we should arrive around midday.

*A beautiful maiden, plus a hot spring. That's an equation for paradise.*

Jess continued, "I suspect you might be lying to me because you want me to wear suggestive clothes."

<<Do I look like that kind of pig?>>

Silence.

*Uh... Please don't go quiet...* <<But I'm telling the truth when I say that swimsuits are everyday outfits. If you go to swimming beaches in the summertime, they're everywhere.>>

She pressed her lips together. "When you say that, my only choice is to trust

your words... After all, the only method of verifying that claim is to visit your world.”

I pictured it in my mind. The setting would be a tropical beach under the blazing sun. Under a parasol, I’d be stretching myself out on a beach chair with a pair of sunglasses on my face. On the side table would be a glass of pineapple juice with a tiny paper parasol. Along the water’s edge, Jess and Ceres, both geared up in swimsuits, would be having a good time with a beach ball. Without a doubt, Jess would be wearing a bikini while Ceres would be clad in a one-piece swimsuit. The splashing water droplets would sparkle under the everlasting summer sun, and Jess would glance at me, as if to say, “Join us, Mister Pig!”

*That kind of ended up like a summary you’d give when you commission an illustration... Anyway, as you can see, there is no indecent component within the entire scene at all! It’s a wholesome picture that would make for a fitting tapestry hanging on your bedroom wall!*

Wait. Hold on... <<Jess, you think that covering the bare minimum of skin counts as indecent. Do I have that right?>> I asked.

She gave it some thought. “Um... Yes.”

<<Then, it should be acceptable as long as it isn’t the bare minimum.>> I nodded to myself. <<Like all types of clothes, there are many categories of swimsuits, and some cover a much larger surface area. They’re also subdued in color and totally suitable for all ages.>>

*To be more specific, they’re called “school swimsuits.”*

“Oh, I see!” She clapped her hands together. “I don’t mind trying that out.”

And so, I managed to persuade a beautiful blonde maiden into agreeing to bathe in a Japanese-style school swimsuit.

Even from afar, I could make out Broperver. Conspicuous pillars of steam rose from the entire town, climbing onto the wintry sky where wispy clouds hung. What stood out more than anything else was a gigantic, dazzling golden cathedral near the foot of a hill.

When we entered the town, what hit me first was the faint smell of hydrogen

sulfide that permeated the townscape of black stone buildings. Just like during our previous stop, only a few pedestrians were out and about.

“Oh, it smells like eggs!” Jess exclaimed ecstatically. “It must be the brimstone gas you would find coming out from volcanoes.”

We made our way to the main street paved with cobblestone, which was moist from the steam. Looking delighted, Jess rushed over to a water fountain. Just like the buildings around us, it was made of black stone. Dense steam rose from the water in it. The fountain must use water from the thermal springs.

I peered into it. The hot water within was white and cloudy. They must have sulfur springs. The hydrogen sulfide vapors were producing the smell of rotten eggs. Based on what I’d just heard from Jess, hydrogen sulfide was called “brimstone gas” in Mesteria.

“This is incredible. There’s steam coming out from all kinds of places. It’s so nice and warm,” Jess said with awe.

Indeed, the steam wasn’t just rising from this water fountain. All the visible water within the town—whether it be the springs decorated with sculptures that were scattered across the town or the sewage flowing down the gutters—was cloudy, hot water from the natural hot springs. They produced warm steam, and thanks to that, the town wasn’t cold at all despite the winter season.

“Ah!” Jess gasped and abruptly broke into a run. “Mister Pig, look at that!” I chased after her, and she soon stopped in front of an especially grand spring.

On the other side of it was a stone statue. The rough carving shaped the black stone to depict a naked muscular man and an equally unclothed slim woman tangling their bodies around each other as they embraced and kissed. The man’s hand, which was wound around the woman’s back, gripped a golden pendant in the shape of an upright cross. Perhaps they’d reproduced the item with real gold. Milky-white water gushed forth from beneath the pair’s feet, soaking the black rock surface as it flowed into the spring.

I was outspoken about my honest opinion. <<It’s pretty smutty.>>

Jess gave me an impish grin. “They’re siblings, by the way.”



<<Huh?!>>

She pointed at the gilded lettering engraved beneath the statues' feet. The Mesterian text there was written in an elegant font, but its content felt extremely mismatched.

*ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?*

The phrasing rang a bell. I soon realized it was the title of an erotica I'd located in the library with Jess. From what I remember, it was a story about an older brother and a younger sister entering a taboo relationship. Since the title was engraved here, the man and woman depicted must be characters from the novel.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<Why in the world is a sculpture of *ImoMachi* in a place like this?>> Since the title was rather long, I shortened it in a way appropriate to the light novel culture.

"It's because the setting of *ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall*—no, *ImoMachi*, is this town, Broerver," Jess explained. "Apparently, it's also the author's hometown."

*So it's something like a holy site of the work, huh? If it gets an anime, I'm sure it would be flooded by Mesterian otaku going on anime pilgrimages.*

<<Interesting... That book was famous enough for people to make sculptures in honor of it,>> I commented.

Jess almost responded in one breath. "Right. The book was written long before I was born, but despite its controversial content that thoroughly explores sibling romance, which was seen as indisputably taboo, its faithful depiction of the subtle emotions and grief of youths in love gained it readers far and wide across the nation, and I hear it boasted an unprecedented sales number for erotica."

<<You've got to admit, it's pretty impressive for an indecent book to attract readers from all over the country.>>

"I completely agree. Its fast-paced narrative that constantly pulls the reader

forward is certainly one of its magnificent charms, but above all, it paints a very sensitive and delicate picture of the conflicted emotions churning in the protagonists' hearts—it is so impactful and potent that it's hard to believe it's fiction. I can honestly see why it grew so popular."

My eyes widened. *Hmm...?*

"Oh!" Not a moment later, Jess's face turned as red as an apple.

<<This is just a guess, but did you read that book, Jess?>>

"N-N-N-Never!" she stammered. "Um, I mean... I have technically perused it, yes, but it wasn't like I was looking forward to *the* portrayal of *that* kind of content. I was just intrigued by the story itself, that's all... The riddle in the library caught my interest, and I just, you know..."

*Oh really...?* <<But you never read it in front of me, I'm pretty sure of that. So that means you read it secretly by yourself.>>

Jess averted her gaze and seemed to be searching for the right words to defend herself. "I-I just thought that if you knew...you'd get the wrong idea and think that I'm a debauched woman..."

*I wouldn't mind at all if she's on the indecent spectrum though.* <<In any case, it's a common occurrence in my world for people to read obscene stories out of academic interest. It's nothing to be ashamed about.>>

"Academic interest... Yes, that's it, I was reading it for pure research!" She echoed my words as if to convince herself before she immediately continued, "Speaking of academic interest, I noticed that statue isn't made out of the white marble typically used for sculptures. Instead, it's made of black rock, which seems hard and difficult to carve. I'm curious about the reason! I have to know!"

I could tell that she was trying to change the subject. Lady Undying Curiosity was hounding me with the classic phrase "I have to know!" which meant that I had to dedicate my brain resources to the question.

<<Hmm. I wonder what the hot spring water tastes like.>>

She blinked, clearly in a daze. "T-Taste...?" Jess lightly dipped her finger into

the hot water of a fountain within reach and licked it a little with the tip of her tongue. “Nngh...!” As I’d predicted, shock overtook her expression.

<<Sour, right?>>

“Yes.” She marveled at me. “How did you know, Mister Pig?”

<<It’s a simple deduction. Marble is mainly composed of calcium carbonate—the same main component as seashells and dripstones.>>

“*Calsh*... Is it the same thing as bones?”

<<In the case of human and pork bones, they contain calcium phosphate, which is kind of different... Well, in this case, you can treat them as similar things,>> I told her. <<Moving on, both calcium carbonate and calcium phosphate will corrode when they touch something highly acidic. The hot springs around this area are acidic and would dissolve marble, which is likely why they’re using other types of stone.>>

“Interesting... Now that you mention it, there seems to be a lot of black stone around this town.”

<<Since they have hot, acidic water flowing through the streets, they can only use stone that won’t react to acid. As for why the majority of the stone seems to be the same black type, it might be because there’s a convenient mining site nearby.>>

“That would make sense.”

Jess seemed satisfied with my explanation and theory. With that, we made our way from the *ImoMachi* spring to the heart of the town: the cathedral. As we traversed the straight paths that intersected at right angles—it seemed that the entire hot spring town had been organized meticulously and was divided into blocks—Jess gave me a lecture on what she knew about *ImoMachi*.

Apparently, *Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?* was written by a woman called Lacaune roughly fifty years ago. I’d been surprised by this information, having assumed that the author was a man.

The story was centered around two main characters: a playboy older brother

and a devoted younger sister. As a hot spring town where undressed men and women would bathe in the same area, Broperver used to be a place with a liberal atmosphere compared to other settlements at the time.

The older brother, the eldest son of an influential family in these lands, had dedicated his life to fooling around with countless women like a—*Jess probably chose this expression here to make a small dig at me*—pig who knew no restraint. In a candid writing style, the beginning of the tale depicted this older brother steadily growing addicted to women and lust while the purehearted younger sister worried about her brother, who'd been reduced to a mere shadow of his former self.

The story reached its turning point when the sister learned of her brother's secret—there was a reason he couldn't quit his womanizing behavior. In an attempt to distract himself from his despair that he couldn't be with his beloved sister in a romantic sense, her brother had sought out love from other women.

However, as one would expect, such artificial love didn't last, and as a result, he'd ended up going from one woman to another. After a wicked woman encouraged the brother to get drunk, the sister learned of her brother's love for her when she eavesdropped on their conversation. And so, she went up to her brother and confessed the emotions burning in her chest: that she loved her brother as more than family and was willing to embrace her brother's feelings wholeheartedly.

Thus began the pair's clandestine relationship, but sadly, it was difficult for a secret to stay secret in a small town like Broperver. Eventually, their family and the town's citizens learned of their taboo, incestuous love, and everyone turned on the siblings. They were torn apart, forced to fall into the darkest pits that life had to offer, and were finally banished from their household. Having eloped, they ran from place to place, eventually arriving at a legendary hot spring that was said to be enchanted by sorcery. There, they were united at last in body and soul before reaching a climax and ascending to the heavens.

<<It's pretty erotic.>>

Hearing my outspoken opinion, Jess pursed her lips with displeasure. "Good

for you, I guess. You said you wanted to know the story, so I told you while fighting my shame.”

<<Ah, sorry... Thanks for all your perseverance.>>

She harrumphed and turned away from me.

Something had piqued my interest during her storytelling session, and I decided to bring it up as she pouted. <<Just wondering, is the author Lacaune still here in Broperver?>>

Her characteristic smile returned to her face before she turned back to face me. “To tell you the truth, after *ImoMachi* was published and made public, Miss Lacaune disappeared from this town together with her blood-related older brother. Since her book became popular, her name gained just as much fame. Furthermore, the subject she explored was rather controversial, and everything combined led to endless peculiar rumors about her.”

*The circumstantial evidence is certainly suspicious, yes, but it’s not good to make undue connections between an author and the main character of their work.* <<We can’t rule out the possibility that she got embarrassed by the erotica she wrote getting so popular and wanted to get away.>>

“That’s true... I heard Miss Lacaune earned a handsome sum thanks to *ImoMachi*, so perhaps she’s leading a happy and quiet life somewhere out there.”

<<I certainly hope so.>>

As we walked, Jess said in a bubbly voice, “This is my opinion. I don’t think *ImoMachi* received critical acclaim because many people thought sibling love affairs are appealing but because a significant number of people are drawn to the concept of a forbidden romance.”

*Wait a hot second, sibling love affairs are appealing?! <<You have a point there. Forbidden love is a classic theme in stories.>> Romeo and Juliet would be a good example.*

“Right. The sound of a forbidden romance somehow makes your heart race, don’t you agree?”

<<Sorry, but a virgin like me doesn't really get it...>>

It was at this point in our conversation that we reached the cathedral.

I could tell with one look that this was the heart of the city. As if carrying the slightly elevated hill—from where steam rose—in the backdrop on its back, a towering cathedral sat imposingly in front of us, adorned with spires of various sizes climbing into the sky. Its sturdy walls were made of black and red stone. A shiny golden roof perched on the very top. Dignified sculptures and carvings embellished the entire structure. Pure white steam flowed up from between the gaps of the spires, oozing an otherworldly atmosphere.

There was a circular plaza in front of the cathedral that was just as grand. This was our current location. At the center of the plaza was a water fountain from which hot water spurted out like a geyser.

The front entrance was open for public access, so we decided to walk in and take a look.

“I can see a lot of gold used in this building,” Jess noted. “In fact, it’s a little blinding with how shiny it is.”

After we walked through the doors plated all over with gold, we entered a spacious circular hall with a domed roof. It was rather deserted—I didn’t pick up the presence of anyone else. The wall was decorated with mosaic art made out of tiles of a myriad of colors, while the ceiling was saturated with so much gold that it almost went beyond lavish and into wasteful territory.

“They say that each generation, the governor of Broperver has ownership over this cathedral,” Jess explained. “The governor who built such a dazzling gold building must have been extremely affluent.”

<<Yeah, I think you’re on the right track. But there might be one more reason for their choice.>>

She tilted her head. “What is it?”

<<The steam and natural gases of the hot spring permeate the entire town all year round. Steam and hydrogen sulfide eat into all kinds of materials. That may be the reason they chose to coat it in gold.>>

“By that, do you mean gold doesn’t corrode?”

<<Yep. Unless there are extremely specific circumstances, gold doesn’t rust or dissolve.>>

Jess seemed to be curious about what the “extremely specific circumstances” were, but I’d be a self-indulgent, inconsiderate nerd if I started talking about aqua regia and iodine solutions—I didn’t want to bore her with overly technical stuff.

At that very moment, a striking sculpture captured Jess’s attention, leaving no room in her mind for further questioning on the subject either way. “Wow, look at that! It’s scary...”

In the center of the hall was some kind of relief sculpture with a black luster. After I approached it and took a better look, I realized it depicted a bloodcurdling scene. Countless skeletons had been carved out from obsidian, which had a glassy texture. They flocked together near a group of several men and women, who were about to enter a natural hot spring tub made of rocks. The skeletons were attempting to drown the humans by dragging them into the depths.

Just like the *ImoMachi* siblings’ statues, a golden inscription was beneath it.

*As alluring as the hot spring may be, it is the underworld’s blessing by heavenly decree.*

Looking down at the ground, Jess whispered, “There’s a poem written in tiny characters. It seems to be a legend passed down in Broperver.”

I looked down. The ground around the sculpture was made of the same lustrous black stone, and golden characters were inscribed on it. The text was tedious to decipher due to its pretentious writing style, but it appeared to be a sinister cautionary tale.

“It looks like a story about people doing wicked things and being whisked away to the underworld by the hot spring’s magic,” Jess commented. “Actually, there are several such stories. Huuuh... Actions like digging up hot springs

without permission count as taboo as well...”

In summary, it was a collection of legends about a diverse selection of evildoers being whisked underground by the spirits of the hot spring. Some examples were as follows: those who have taken a life; those who have stolen money; those who have inflicted violence upon another; those who have engaged in deception; those who have violated public morals; and finally, those who have secretly enjoyed a hot spring behind the governor’s back.

<<Hot springs gush out from hot, stinky places full of steam, making them feel just like the world of the dead. Though a hot spring usually brings you blessings, it won’t show any mercy to the wicked. So, humans should all act like good boys and girls. That’s probably the moral of the story.>>

Jess admired the sculpture of skeletons creeping out from the bath, ready to pounce. “The water is white and cloudy, which prevents you from seeing all the way down to the bottom of the baths. That might have been useful for inciting feelings of dread.”

<<Nice observation.>>

The governor’s endeavor to raise the moral standard of their people through hot springs was rather intriguing.

Jess then dedicated some time to appreciating the verses written on the floor. But it became more than “some time” when she grew immersed in the narrative, finally crouching to read it carefully. Whenever she found something interesting, she’d sum it up and narrate it to me.

“According to this, not only is incest seen as taboo, but a romantic relationship between fellow men also falls under the same category... I see, so that also counts as forbidden romance...”

Since she was on the same wavelength as me, I’d always had the vague inkling that Jess had some aptitude to be an otaku. But never in my wildest dreams had I ever predicted that she would start showing interest in *that* particular field. Just as I thought about a way to change the topic somehow, Jess abruptly stilled.

“Strange...”



<<What's wrong?>>

I thought that maybe she'd come across unusual writing, but I turned out to be wrong. She pressed her palm flat against the floor before turning to me. "The ground is very warm."

*Oh, now that she mentions it...* Gentle heat was rising from the floor and steadily barbecuing my spareribs. <<The plumbing for the hot spring might be under the ground here. That's probably what's heating this cathedral hall.>>

"I think so too." Then, she tilted her head quizzically. "But what would happen in summer? Wouldn't it be uncomfortably hot?"

*True.* <<Maybe they can redirect the water's stream so it won't flow under the pipes here during the summer.>>

"That must mean such a mechanism is somewhere within this building, right?!" She stood eagerly, itching to go explore.

I hummed thoughtfully. <<There was a lot of steam coming from the hill behind this cathedral, if I remember right. The hot water must be drawn from that hill. If so, we might find pipes that pump the water by searching the part of the building close to the hill.>>

We attempted to move from the entrance hall to the main hall closer to the hill. But we couldn't get that far because the end of the corridor that led to it was sealed off by robust metal bars.

I peered through the bars to get a glimpse of the interior. The main hall had a different atmosphere from the shiny entrance hall.

"It...kind of looks like a cemetery," Jess whispered.

Her description was remarkably accurate.

The main hall was a rectangular chamber that was just as spacious as the entrance hall. Its only light source was the natural light filtering in from a small window near the ceiling, making the room mostly dim.

What created the somber atmosphere within this lighting were the uncanny "ornaments" placed within. Along the left and right walls were neat rows of giant wooden statues—antique objects modeled after standing humans in an

assortment of outfits. Sitting in front of each statue were stone objects shaped like large mortars without pestles, similar to the type you used in Japan to pound rice.

<<It feels like a sinister, otherworldly place,>> I commented.

Jess strained her eyes to observe the room. “There are words written above the statues’ heads. ‘Tusak, Lukas, Buppe’... Ah, I think ‘Buppe’ was inscribed on the water fountain we passed by on our way here. Are they possibly district names of this town?”

*That would make sense.* I strained my eyes even more to scrutinize the other side of the main hall. A great altar was there, accompanied by several protruding objects shaped like stone mortars. Upon further inspection, every stone mortar had yellow ristae tightly fitted into their sides.

<<Yellow ristae are used to provide things like light, electricity, and motion, right?>>

“Yes. I’m curious about what they’re used for here.”

<<Those ristae probably provide power to move the stone devices. With them, the operator of this place can close or open pipes, choosing to pump water or cut off the supply to specific districts. That’s my guess, at least.>>

I’d said the first thing on my mind, and upon further consideration, I felt like my guess was right.

<<Maybe the governor here has control over the distribution of the hot spring water, and through it, they acquire wealth and influence. In the verses you just read, you mentioned a story about someone who was dragged into the underworld because they dug up a hot spring without permission, right? The governor likely deliberately created such a cautionary tale because they wanted to monopolize the hot spring,>> I commented.

It wasn’t unheard of—those with authority would monopolize the gifts of nature and earn a fortune by monetizing it. This wealth would then be used to preserve their authority.

“One of the tales also said something along the lines of the cathedral purifying the hot spring water. Those indulging in the hot springs that aren’t

treated by the cathedral will be cursed. It might be an excuse to monopolize the hot spring as well.”

*At this point, it's almost a cult. <<You bet.>>*

“Does that mean the shiny, lavish cathedral was built on the riches the governors amassed from the hot spring? If they have the technology to turn the floor’s heat on or off, they would also have the ability to freely decide how to distribute the town’s hot water.”

<<There’s probably a device that can control the heating of the cathedral floor somewhere in this main hall. The strong bars block it off so that people can’t enter and change the water distribution as they please while also showing off to the onlookers that “Look, we have total control of the hot springs in Broperver. Don’t mess with us.”>>

Jess suddenly giggled.

<<Uh, did something happen?>> I asked warily. An ominous premonition crept up in my heart, just like when we’d been in that wine cellar.

But luckily, I’d been worried for nothing. “Oh, I just had the thought that it’s fun theorizing about stuff like this. One after another, we’re resolving the small questions that pop up in our heads. You must be enjoying this too, right?”

*Well, I'm a virgin who's always sweating the details, after all. <<Yeah, I think it's my jam.>> But you know, if I ever did this on a date with a girl, she'd get annoyed at me for sure...*

Jess whipped her head around and glared at me. “So that means you’ve been on a date with a girl before, and you annoyed her?”

I hurriedly came to my own defense. <<No, back in my world, I’ve never even gone on an outing all alone with a girl.>>

“That makes sense. You *did* mention you were a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who has been single since he was in his mother’s womb.” For some reason, she looked delighted as she spoke. “Well then, Mister Pig, will you indulge my tiny curiosity just a little while longer?”

<<Of course.>> *It's not like I have anything better to do.*

“Thank you. There’s actually one more thing about *ImoMachi* that I’m eager to explore...”

<<Go on.>>

She lifted her index finger. “Apparently, there’s a rumor that the enchanted hot spring the protagonist siblings reached at the end of the story isn’t fiction.”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<Oh, the hot spring where they were united in body and soul before climaxing into heaven?>>

A dust of pink settled over Jess’s cheeks. “Y-Yes... That’s the one.”

<<And you want to search for that enchanted hot spring, I assume?>>

“Um... Am I being unreasonable?”

I shook my head. <<Not at all. The only problem is, even if it *does* exist, it’s going to be almost impossible to find without a lead.>>

Her face lit up almost immediately. “There’s actually a hint in *ImoMachi*.” She paused dramatically. “It’s described as a hot spring that can change colors.”

I waited for a while, but she didn’t seem to have any intention of saying more. <<Is that the *only* hint?>>

She paused. “Other than that...the book implies it’s a natural hot spring tub made of rocks, and small enough that two people would be pressed against each other if they bathed together.”

*Hey, it’s the same as how people get into an obscene mood in bathtubs at home! I learned that from doujin!*

She tilted her head. “Doujin?”

<<No, ignore me. Don’t worry about the narration.>>

My thoughts went rampant. *If I end up bathing with Jess in such a small tub, it’s obvious we’ll...!*

But my head cooled immediately. *Nah. I tried imagining it, but when it’s a maiden and a pig, the scene would only have a heartwarming atmosphere.*

*Now then, onto business. Is it possible to uncover the location of the secret hot spring from those three hints alone? <<That enchanted color-changing hot*

spring is supposed to be near or within Broperver, right?>>

“Yes, it should be. The text wrote that it was in a certain spot in Broperver.”

<<I see, I see... In that case, I think I might have an idea or two that can help narrow it down.>>

“Really?!” Her eyes lit up, bright like a starry night. “Let’s go on a quest for the enchanted hot spring together!”

I gave her a nod before ushering her outside.

Once we were out of the building, we walked around it until we came to the side facing the hill. It should be the area behind the altar in the creepy main hall we’d seen earlier. No other buildings were in sight, only a meadow of withered grass beneath our feet.

“What are we looking for here?” Jess asked.

<<There should be a path that leads to the likely location of the enchanted hot spring.>>

Jess tilted her head quizzically. “A path?”

<<Yep, you heard that right.>> And I just so happened to have already found it. <<Jess, just for confirmation, we’re looking for a hot spring that changes color, yeah?>>

“Yes.”

<<What color was the water inside the town?>>

“Umm... It was white. Milky white.”

<<And we know that Broperver’s governor monopolizes the white spring water. It’s prohibited to dig up new hot springs without permission, and from what we saw in the streets, there weren’t any actual hot springs in town, only water pumped from elsewhere. The question then becomes: where is the source of all this water?>>

I pointed my snout at the hill, and Jess also gazed at it. I announced, <<Our prime suspect is the hill behind the cathedral where a giant pillar of steam is

rising from.>> There seemed to be an opening somewhere on top of the hill from where the aforementioned spectacular tower of sweltering steam rose.

“I see it! They must be pumping the water from there.”

<<This cathedral is right at the center of Broperver. All the water pumped from the mountain will have to pass through here first before it’s distributed throughout the town. This is the system the governor uses to monopolize the hot spring. Based on that, we can conclude that all the water inside the town is milky white without exception—not matching the description of “a hot spring that changes color.”>>

Realization dawned on her. “Oh! That’s why you brought me here. We’ll follow the pipes that pump the water to this cathedral and look for the water source of Broperver so that we can search for a hot spring that isn’t white!”

<<Exactly.>>

But then, Jess looked as if something didn’t click in her mind. “But, Mister Pig, if the water that reaches here is white, wouldn’t all the hot springs at the source be milky white as well?”

She posed a good question. <<Jess, do you know why the water in Broperver is white?>>

“Umm... Well... Because it’s naturally white?”

*Ah, that’s fair. The reason things are a certain color isn’t something you can really understand just by thinking about it. You need the right knowledge.*

<<That’s true, yeah, but I was thinking about another answer. It’s white because very fine matter that scatters light is suspended inside the liquid. Back in my country, we call such matter “hot spring flowers” in my language, the mineral deposits inside hot springs.>>

Jess smiled. “Hot spring flowers... That’s a beautiful name.”

*Huh, I’ve never thought about it in that way. But it’s a fitting description coming from Jess, considering how she can see the beauty in everything.*

<<Hot spring flowers are formed when dissolved minerals inside the hot spring cool as they reach the surface from underground, or when they come

into contact with oxygen—ah, you call it oxygium in this world—correction, when they touch oxygium.>>

I continued, <<In other words, the water should be almost transparent just as it gushes out from underground. The water at the source might be still at this transparent stage, and depending on the cooling conditions underground, there might be a spring outlet with water that doesn't turn white even if it's cold enough for humans to bathe in.>>

“And this outlet might be the color-changing hot spring in the story. That's what you're getting at, right?”

*She always catches on quickly, which saves me a lot of effort.* <<Yep. Which is why I think our best course of action right now is to locate the source of the hot springs.>>

Jess nodded before restlessly turning her head here and there, looking for the “path” I'd found. “Wait... A large patch of the ground is bulging... Is it a water pipe?”

There was a rising mass on the ground connecting the cathedral to the hill, almost like a rampart low to the ground. It must be pumping an incredible amount of untreated spring water at once. We couldn't see it since it was covered by soil, but judging by the shape of the bulge, the pipe underneath the ground might be wide enough to serve as a tunnel for humans.

<<It must be. All we have to do is follow this bulging line.>>

Jess's expression lit up. “Let's head off and see where it leads!”

I was going to trot around and uncover the mystery of an enchanted hot spring with cutie-pie Jess while grunting like a pig. It was time for our episode of *MythosBusters: Going Ham* to kick off.

After we made some progress, we ended up on a mountain trail. Fortunately, most of the grass had withered, making it convenient for Jess to navigate. She slung a bulky bag across her shoulders, but her footsteps were nimble. I'd said countless times that I should carry the bag in her stead, but maybe she had some sort of indecent book inside that she didn't want me to see because she'd

stubbornly refused.

Whenever Jess came across a bush blocking her path, she'd cut it down mercilessly with magic and blow it out of the way as she advanced down the trail. With gratefulness in my heart, I trotted down the path she conveniently developed.

"We've come pretty far," Jess said.

Hearing that, I turned around and saw the magnificent cathedral from between the gaps of the cluster of trees. There was a fairly great altitude difference between us and the structure, making it look tiny.

<<I think they've added insulation measures to the piping, but even if that's the case, the water should become cold if they try to pump it over a long distance. We shouldn't be too far away from the source now.>>

Jess nodded, looking a little merry. "This is getting exciting. I've always wanted to experience an adventure like this with you, Mister Pig."

<<Really? I'm glad your wish came true.>>

She chuckled. Then, as if she'd suddenly remembered something, she fetched a piece of paper from her bag. It was the paper with the mysterious contents that she kept secret from me, which she took out from time to time during her journey. I couldn't tell what, but she would do something with it each time.

Even though I knew I wouldn't get an answer, I asked, <<What are you looking at?>>

She pulled her petal-pink lips into a mischievous grin. "Guess."

<<But I'll really figure it out,>> I warned.

"I'll deal with that when it happens."

For the very first time, she gave me permission to dig further into the matter.

I gave it some thought. Jess would take out this piece of paper during seemingly random moments while we were traveling. She'd always looked as if it had abruptly come to her mind before she took it out and tapped her fingertip lightly on it. Then, she would fold it up immediately and put it away in her bag again.



<<It's not a map,>> I deduced. <<If it were, you would rotate it while looking around.>>

"It might not be a map, but it also might be."

*Hey, there's a thing called the law of the excluded middle, you know. Guess it's time to use that.* <<Supposing that it isn't a map, what we know is that it's still something you take out during a journey...>>

I carefully observed Jess's eyes. She took a glance at me before her eyes returned to the paper. Her line of sight shifted slightly, as if searching for something, before she lightly tapped somewhere along the left edge of the paper.

Then, I recalled what had happened a while back—when Queen Wyss had marked a map when we'd visited the Oath Chamber. *I've got it! This is the unmistakable gesture of her magically writing something on the paper. She folds it almost immediately after touching it, so it shouldn't be anything complicated like a passage. Something you'd write on the left side of a piece of paper...*

<<I've got it now. It's a list. You're leaving marks on a list. To be more specific, it's something along the lines of a checklist,>> I declared.

Jess grinned rightly and nodded. "Congratulations."

<<But what is it a list of?>>

"Now that's a secret."

She was a considerably fearsome opponent. Unfortunately for her, it was a bad habit of mine to become invested whenever I heard the word "secret."

I started pondering. *We're practically in the middle of nowhere. Is there anything you would check off in a place like this? The last time she looked at the paper was when we arrived in Rach Valley. Back then, we weren't doing anything special either...*

I pulled up my memories of the other times she'd taken out the mystery paper: when we'd sat around a campfire on a meadow; when we'd leisurely gazed at a shooting star; and when we'd gotten lost. *Hmm... Nothing seems to stand out about any of those instances...*

But that was when realization struck me. When we'd reached Rach Valley, I remembered Jess saying something like "I've always wanted to come here." Just now, she'd also said, "I've always wanted to experience an adventure like this." There was one evident conclusion.

<<It's a list of things you want to do, isn't it?>>

She closed her eyes briefly before giving me a wide smile. "Yes. That's mostly right."

*Mostly...?*

She continued, "I just thought that it would be nice to have something like this when we're on a long journey."

Jess didn't sound like she was all that convinced by what she was saying, but I had to agree that it was a good idea.

That was when Jess pointed at somewhere ahead of us and let out a delighted gasp, bringing an end to that subject. "Oh, Mister Pig! I found where the steam is puffing up from!"

I followed her line of sight to see a barren depression in the ground that didn't even have withered trees to boast about. Inky black rock was exposed to the elements, and dense steam was billowing up from the rocky stretch. The pipe that had been connected all the way from the cathedral abruptly came to an end there. A breeze whimsically darted across the area, and the pungent odor of volcanic gas attacked the olfactory epithelium in my nasal cavity with fervor.

"This scent is intense..." Jess took a step back. "The water in the town can't even compare."

<<This gas is poisonous, so don't breathe in too much of it. People can even die from it.>>

Hearing the word "die," Jess's eyes widened with shock. "I didn't know that... There aren't any trees or even grass nearby. Is this gas the reason behind that?"

<<Yep. This poisonous gas is heavier than air, so take care to avoid places where it would build up.>>

“I will be careful.” She nodded solemnly. “Even if I do go, I’ll make sure to ventilate it properly first.” Thrusting her palms forward, she summoned a powerful gale blowing in from behind us. The direction of the rising steam changed before our very eyes.

<<Ah, now that I think about it, you mentioned you could manipulate wind too.>>

She puffed out her chest in pride. “I worked very hard to study it.” Then, she lifted her bulky bag just a little. Judging from that, unlike my initial guess, it didn’t have indecent books. Instead, it was crammed with reference books for her studies.

Thinking back, I’d seen Jess reading through a book with a crimson cover night after night with a look of concentration on her face. She’d always read it propped up on the table where my pig eyes couldn’t reach, so I hadn’t a clue about its contents.

Jess ventilated the area with her magic as we took a tour around the depression. The creators seemed to have made the pipe by drilling a hole through a giant slab of rock. But there was quite a significant distance between the source and the cathedral—it would be absurd of them to manually cut out enough rock to create this type of pipe connecting the two areas. Jess hypothesized that it might be the legacy of a mage from before Lady Vatis’s time.

Taking utmost caution so that I wouldn’t become pork hot pot, I walked up to the outlet where the hot water was gushing out from and inspected it.

“Wow, you were right! The water here’s clear.” With her hair fluttering in the breeze that she’d stirred up herself, Jess also peered into the spring.

Hot water gushed forth from a crevice in the rocks with a loud roar, bubbling and boiling incessantly as it spewed out steam as white as snow. The amount of water in the reservoir was almost abundant, and it was perfectly colorless and clear. I felt like I would turn into a steamed pork dish if I let my guard down for even one second, but thankfully, Jess’s wind drove away the steam and heat waves without rest. It even came with the bonus of granting us better visibility.

<<That heat is intense. You can feel the overwhelming force of Mother

Nature.>>

“Right...”

We spent some time scouting around the depression but didn't spot anything that looked remotely similar to a hot spring tub that changed color. *But I should have expected this. The water surging out here is literally boiling. I'd actually be surprised if we could find anywhere at a pleasant temperature for human bathing.*

I hummed in thought. <<Looks like the enchanted hot spring should be a little farther away. I hope we can find something that will give us a clue.>>

“Same here.”

Jess proceeded to enthusiastically search the area. There was only one pipe that pumped out water from the hot spring. Since this place was the source of Broperver's hot spring water, the governor who owned the cathedral must have a total monopoly over the water in the town, just like we'd theorized.

As I looked around from a pig's perspective, I suddenly noticed something. <<Huh? Wait, that's... Jess, I found a triangular rock structure on the ground.>>

Jess crouched next to me and hugged her knees.

The isosceles triangle rock structure embossed into the rocky ground was large enough for a single person to stand on. It was flat like a pancake.

“It could be a sign telling us to go there.” Jess followed the isosceles triangle's peak and pointed in that direction.

<<Could be worth checking out. Wanna go?>>

“Yes, of course!”

Without hesitation, we marched off at once. After some walking, we spotted yet another isosceles triangle on the rocky ground. It was tilted slightly to the left compared to the one we'd found earlier. The two of us shared a look and traded nods.

We turned slightly to the left, following the direction it pointed at once again. The hill's surface, where volcanic gas drifted about, remained barren. With no grass to obstruct our vision, we easily located the next triangular rock structure.

The moment we came across it, we adjusted our course again. *You know, I feel like this is a little too easy...*

At the end of our journey, we arrived at a gaping hole in a black rock wall—the entrance of a tunnel. We’d gotten far enough that the odor of the volcanic gases wasn’t that intense anymore.

“It’s a tunnel!” Jess exclaimed. “Do you think this leads to the enchanted hot spring?”

<<Let’s head in and find out.>>

I sniffed, twitching my snout as I walked inside the tunnel. It wasn’t a natural cave system. Well, it might have started off as a natural tunnel, but the ground was even, and there were marks left by someone carving out the ceiling to make it easier for human travel. The path seemed to be a gentle slope heading downward. It didn’t smell like any humans had walked through recently.

Jess manifested several orbs of light around her body, illuminating the slick black rocks with a white glow.

We trudged on in silence for a while, relishing in the thrill of exploration.

“Ah, I see light on the other side! Look!”

The orbs of light, which had flitted about like fireflies, dissipated without a sound. I could spot light splashing onto the ground ahead of us. Its luminosity implied that it was environmental light from the outside. Jess’s pace quickened, as if she couldn’t wait any longer, and she soon left me in the dust.

“Mister Pig! I see a hot spring! There’s a hot spring!”

As I caught up to her, my vision abruptly opened up at the end of the tunnel. It was a dead end surrounded by chunky, rugged rock walls. But there was a round hole in the dark cavern’s ceiling. From there, I could see the white, cloudy sky, and right underneath the “window” was the hot spring Jess was so excited about.

It was a natural tub that was just cramped enough for two adults to squeeze in while feeling awkward about the lack of personal space. Faint wisps of steam slowly drifted over to me, bringing along with them the acrid smell of sulfur

compounds. New water was probably constantly gushing up from below because the spring surface constantly rose and dipped, causing copious amounts of hot water to splash and overflow onto the surroundings.

<<The size even matches the description in *ImoMachi*,>> I observed.

The water was almost completely clear and transparent; at most, there was just a hint of white and cloudiness within it. Perhaps it had been slowly cooled underground before rising. In any case, it seemed to have somewhat different circumstances from the hot spring water supplied to Broperver from the outlet we'd found earlier. There weren't that many mineral deposits. *Well, to be more accurate, there aren't many mineral deposits yet.*

We'd found a place that fit the description of the mystical hot spring within the work, but oddly, Jess didn't seem very happy about our discovery. "The color isn't changing though..."

As someone who'd lived in Japan, one of the countries most famous for its thriving hot spring culture, I'd heard about a few different kinds of hot springs that fit such a description. <<You can't really expect anything else. It's not going to change color on its own. We need to tweak a few variables.>>

"Variables?" She placed her hand on her chin and looked at me attentively.

<<Yeah. I can think of two variables off the top of my head. The first is changing the state of the water itself. The second is to change how we look at the water.>>

Jess furrowed her eyebrows. "The state of the water itself... The only thing that comes to my mind is changing its temperature..."

<<This is a hot spring where the water constantly and vigorously surges up from below. It's going to be extremely difficult for a normal person to change its temperature.>>

"Then...what can we change? Hmm..."

Her science nerd spirit had been kindled. It would be a waste to tell her the answer immediately. <<Other than temperature, what else do you think you can affect? You can actually find a hint in our recent conversations.>>

“Whaaat?! Really?!”

<<I’m sure you’ll figure it out, Jess.>>

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I’m not sure...” She paused. “Let’s see...” When she pondered over something ardently, she was so adorable that I almost suspected she’d calculated how to maximize her killer cuteness.

“I’m not cute... Hmm, what else, what else... Let me think.”

Her contemplation was significantly lengthy. *Is it about time I tell her the answer?*

“Please give me some more time!” Jess paced left and right as she responded to my narration. “I’ve already gotten this far, so I want to hang on until the end!”

Soon, she appeared to have run out of ideas as she looked aimlessly around her. Then, when she laid her eyes upon the overcast sky through the hole in the ceiling, she had a flash of inspiration. “Oh, I know! Oxygium!”

Indeed, oxygium—otherwise oxygen—was one of the variables I’d thought of.

She looked at me eagerly. “You mentioned that ‘hot spring flowers’ appear in the transparent water after reacting with the oxygium in the air, right?! I’m supposed to stir the water up so that more of it touches the air!”

<<Got it in one. The hot spring’s water comes up from below. Knowing that, we can make an assumption: it has never come into contact with air even once between its journey from deep underground, where it was heated up, and this natural bathing tub.>>

“Got it. That means it’s just like you, Mister Pig.”

I blinked with confusion. <<Huh...?>> Was there some kind of common denominator between me and a hot spring?

The corners of Jess’s eyes were narrowed as mischievous mirth danced within her honey-brown orbs. “You mentioned that you’ve never gone on a date with a woman until you met me, didn’t you?”

*Yes. That is very correct, ma’am.* <<I suppose you have a point there. In other words, this hot spring is a virgin.>>

She nodded to herself. “And I just have to guide this virgin through his precious first time.”

My mind stuttered.

*What in the world is that unthinkable metaphor? Sheesh, you’ve got to wonder who she learned that from. I’d love to meet who raised her and see what kind of people were responsible for being such a bad influence.*

The smile of a middle-aged man in his birthday suit crawled into the back of my mind, and I shook it out of my brain with everything I had. <<Okay, should we do the experiment?>>

“Of course!” Jess thrust out her right hand and furrowed her eyebrows as she looked at the surface of the hot spring. With a movement of her hand, a colossal, invisible hand started stirring up the water.

A white color gradually spread throughout the once clear and colorless hot spring. But the white didn’t grow all that vivid. Little by little, it began to be tinged with a pale yellow that reminded me of a lemon.

“That’s amazing!” Jess exclaimed. “The color really *did* change! And not just into white but also yellow!”

<<The water in this hot spring was cooled before it arrived on the surface and touched the air, so it undergoes a slightly different reaction than the water flowing throughout Broperver. I’m pretty sure the yellow color is a sulfur compound.>>

With a thrilled look on her face, Jess turned to face me. “Mister Pig, you mentioned that there’s one more method for it to change color. You said that I could try changing the way I look at it.”

<<Can you figure out what exactly I meant?>>

I quizzed her once again on the fly, and being the earnest person she was, Jess fell silent for a while to mull over the question. *She’s an excellent student.*

“If it’s referring to changing something on my end, the only thing I can think of is shifting the angle I look at it from...” She did all kinds of experiments: crouching down, standing up, and even swinging her body left and right. “I can’t



pick up much of a difference though... In that case..."

I gave her a small hint. <<What's necessary when you want to look at something?>>

The shrewd Jess smacked her fist against her palm with realization. "Light! I'm supposed to change the light hitting it, right?!"

<<Yep, exactly. The only problem is...>> I looked up at the sky from the hole in the ceiling. The sun was hiding behind the clouds. <<With this weather, it's going to be a bit of a challenge to make sunlight flow in directly.>>

Jess grinned at me. "Do you want me to try?"

<<Wha...?>> *Is she going to clear up the sky? Like, now?*

Jess took a step closer to the hot spring and craned her neck to stare at the gaping hole above. After doing some stretches, she thrust out both hands toward the sun. Instantly, a giant blob of liquid manifested outside the cavern. Within it, I spotted fine bubbles. The pungent smell of gasoline stung my nostrils. *Wait, is she—*

With a dull bang, the watery mass flew in the direction of the sun. Seconds later, a terrific explosion blossomed in the upper air. Blazing flames so bright that they could be mistaken for the sun itself burst out, and after a short delay, thunderous roaring shook my eardrums as if a cannon had been fired.

All by herself, without any outside help whatsoever, Jess had punctured a massive hole in the clouds. The direct sunlight burned my eyes.

I gaped, unable to pick up my jaw off the ground.

Jess let out an "Ah," as if she'd belatedly realized something. But when she saw my shocked face, she gave me a toothy grin and said a certain line just like a wise man's granddaughter. "Huh? Have I done it again?"

<<I so *know* you're saying that on purpose...>> I huffed. Even if it was an iconic line of an oblivious, overpowered isekai protagonist, it sounded cute coming out of Jess's mouth.

"But I'm not cute..."

*Aw, don't sweat the details.* Anyway, the clouds had parted thanks to Jess's

magic, allowing the sunlight to pour down on the hot spring. Now, as for the color of the water...

Jess lowered her gaze. "It's blue!" she exclaimed, astonished. "Mister Pig, the water is glowing with a bluish light!"

I'd gotten the anticipated results. The area around the patch of water under direct sunlight was glistening with a blue iridescent light like an opal.

<<You can tell by looking at rainbows, but the sun's light is a combination of lights in all kinds of colors. The fine grains drifting in the hot spring scatter blue light more than the others and reflect it into our eyes. That's why it looks blue. The same principle applies to our sky, giving it its blue color.>> *Back in my world, we call this phenomenon Rayleigh scattering.*

"That's so interesting... So it works the same way as the sky..."

I glanced at the hot spring. <<Looks like the water in the tub has mostly changed to a new batch. If you mix in air once again, the reaction we saw earlier will happen and create new colors this time.>>

"Really?!" Eagerly, Jess stirred up the tub once again with her magic.

Lo and behold, this time, the water looked like it was glowing a bluish light green. It was the gorgeous color of a crystal clear and slightly shallow lake.

Jess gasped. "Wow, this is unbelievable! The yellow color we saw earlier is mixing with the blue of the sunlight, creating this green, right?!"

<<Yep. The results are much more stunning than I expected.>>

Her eyes were practically sparkling with joy as she admired the wondrous color-changing hot spring. "In conclusion, the change in variables such as direct exposure to sunlight, the presence of humans inside, and mixing air into the water will cause the color to change. Do I have that right?" She summed it up like an honors student.

<<Correct. With this, we've solved the mystery of the hot spring that changes colors. It isn't sorcery, but science.>>

Jess nodded with delight. Spellbound, she gazed at the hot spring, which shimmered light green. The next moment, her eyes widened. "Hm? There's

something at the bottom...”

Crouching down, she leaned her face closer to the water and abruptly started coughing. She must have breathed in volcanic gas. The acrid odor was also wafting into my snout. <<You okay?>>

“Y-Yes...” She coughed. “The smell is just...a bit too much...” Getting to her feet, she made a fanning motion with her hand, summoning cool and fresh air from the ceiling hole. “Oh, right. You mentioned that the poisonous gases tend to build up in low places. I should have realized when I saw that the tunnel was a downward slope... Sorry, I was too careless.”

<<It’s not your fault. It slipped my mind completely too because I was so immersed in figuring out the color mechanism of the hot spring.>> I frowned. <<I have to say, this tub is a risky one. If you enjoy a nice long bath, you might accidentally die from poisoning by breathing in too much volcanic gas.>>

“Right, since your head would end up lower than even a pig’s height, it would be dangerous.”

<<Maybe we should think twice about bathing here.>>

“Yeah...”

*That aside...* <<Jess, did you find something earlier?>>

“Oh, I did. Something was shining at the bottom of the hot spring.” Still standing, she looked into the depths and stretched out her free left hand.

The item she’d mentioned was in a blind spot from a pig’s viewpoint at first, but before long, I spotted a gleaming gold object gradually rising to the surface of the water. Jess moved it with her magic until it was in front of her chest before picking it up and inspecting it.

“Wait, is this...?” She crouched and showed it to me.

It was a golden pendant shaped in an upright cross. I recognized it—it was identical to the pendant the *ImoMachi* brother statue had held back in Broperver.

Jess must have read the narration because she nodded and said, “In *ImoMachi*, there’s a scene where the little sister gifts a cross pendant to her

older brother. It's made of gold."

Just after her statement, the sunlight that had poured in suddenly dimmed. The wind must've blown the clouds to block out the sun once again. Possibly because Jess had stopped ventilating this place with magic, the pungent smell of volcanic gases reached my nose.

*Oh*, I thought numbly. *So this is the truth behind that story.* <<We've solved the mystery of the hot spring that changes color. Let's head back to town and look for an inn.>>

Noticing my sharp drop in energy, Jess sensed that something was off. She gently left the pendant next to the hot spring and nodded. "Yes, that's a good idea."

As we retraced our steps, Jess asked, "Why was there a cross pendant in that spring?"

<<...Do you really want to know the answer?>> Recalling her regret in Rach Valley, I asked her just in case.

There was another question hidden within it: did she have the mental fortitude to face the truth?

Danger always lurked behind every attempt to unearth a secret. After all, the truth you dig up might be a hideous and dreadful monster.

After a lengthy period of hesitation, Jess nodded. "If you have noticed something, please share it with me. I know that I might not like what I hear. But what I dislike even more is staying ignorant. I will look the truth in the eye."

I nodded. <<That's Jess for you. The truth might be terrifying, but it's not a good idea to avert your gaze from it. You've made an admirable choice.>>

"Thank you."

Feeling her solemn gaze on me, I chose my words carefully. <<If we want to figure out why the pendant was left there, we have to shed light on another mystery first: why is there a secret hot spring in a place like that?>>

Jess inclined her head. "Because water flows up from underground there... Is

that not a good enough reason?"

*In summary, it's just there "because it's there," huh? She speaks like a certain mountaineer.* <<Maybe I should put it this way. This is the territory of a governor who's obsessed with monopolizing the hot springs. Why is such a candid, law-evading hot spring left alone without security measures? There were even signs helpfully pointing out the path to get there.>>

Jess looked down near her feet. We happened to be walking past one of the embossed isosceles triangle structures. "You're right... Engraved on the cathedral floor was a story about how someone who tried to dig up a hot spring without permission was dragged into the underworld. 'As alluring as the hot spring may be, it is the underworld's blessing by heavenly decree.' Since it's a hot spring that doesn't pass through the cathedral first, it would be kind of strange for the governor to leave it alone after discovering it."

<<Indeed. I highly doubt that the governor, who maintains absolute authority within Broperver through monopolizing the hot spring, would turn a blind eye to people enjoying themselves in a bath that's outside their jurisdiction.>>

The breeze that brushed against my cheek was frosty. I missed the steam of the thermal springs.

"Maybe the governor doesn't know about that secret hot spring?"

I shook my head at the scenario Jess proposed. <<How's that possible when there are triangular rock signs telling people exactly where to go? Remember, the owner of the water source is the governor himself. We, people new to this area, were able to find that secret tub in one day. It's absurd for the governor to be ignorant of it.>>

She frowned. "I see... Hmm... Sorry, but I'm a bit stumped."

Perhaps it was difficult for the kindhearted Jess to pinpoint the reason. I doubted she could ever imagine that such malicious intent could exist in this world.

<<Well then, let's recall what we know about that secluded hot spring. What would happen to the people who bathe in it?>>

"They can have fun in a hot spring that changes color."

<<Is that all?>>

She must have noticed the grim expression on my face. After taking a moment to mull over the situation, she gasped and covered her mouth with horror. “Poisonous gases were constantly coming out from the water. Those gases are heavier than air, so if the wind stops, the entire cavern would be filled with it.”

<<Yeah. They’ll die. All those who try to enjoy a secret bath behind the governor’s back will pay the price with their life.>> Of course, the story would be different if they could ventilate the area with magic. <<This is just my theory, but that governor likely left that color-changing hot spring untouched on purpose. Maybe they were even responsible for those triangular signs. And there’s only one reason they’d do that: to murder the despicable miscreants who attempt to usurp the governor’s greatest asset.>>

As for how this conclusion was related to the mystery of the cross pendant, judging by Jess’s reaction, she’d likely put two and two together. She chewed on her bottom lip and cast her eyes down. “Then, the book’s ending was... In the ending of *ImoMachi*, the siblings were united in body and soul before reaching a climax and ascending to the heavens... That actually meant...”

<<The author knew that the color-changing enchanted hot spring was nothing but a fatal mechanism for exterminating criminals. The “climax” and “ascending to the heavens” weren’t used in a smutty sense. It was another way of saying that the siblings committed double suicide in that hot spring.>>

A gust of winter wind struck us, and Jess shrunk into herself.

Silence.

“If that’s true, then the author and her brother who went missing must have...” Her voice tapered off.

It would be cruel to make her say the conclusion out loud. I took over from her and finished her sentence. <<Their ending must be the same as the siblings in her work. They committed double suicide in that hot spring. They bathed in it and breathed their last breath together.>>

But their corpses weren’t left behind. Why was that?

The answer was simple to deduce once you took the properties of Broperver's hot springs into consideration.

I sucked in a deep breath. <<The acidic water of the hot spring disintegrated their corpses over time and even dissolved their bones. Their clothes and shoes were worn down by the surging spring water and were eventually swept away. The only thing left behind was what acid can't corrode and what currents can't snatch—that golden pendant.>>

Pulling ourselves together, we entered a hot spring inn near the cathedral. Despite my phrasing, it wasn't the kind of vintage wooden structure you'd find deep in the mountains—it was a stylish inn built of black, glassy volcanic stone.

According to the staff, it had an annexed public bathhouse, which we headed to after resting our sore feet for a while. The area had a grand, pristine bath with a black theme and a lofty ceiling. A magnificent chandelier—which Jess said ran on ristae—hung from the dome roof, showering warm orange light on the shadowy interior.

Directly below the chandelier was a circular bathtub that could probably fit dozens of people at once. It was filled with hot, milky white water. The ventilation must have been well designed as the odor of the hot spring gases was faint. I wasn't sure whether it was because of the time slot we'd chosen or because they didn't have that many guests right now to begin with, but we didn't see any other people around. It seemed to be a mixed-gender bath, so I appreciated having it all to ourselves.

"There isn't anyone else present, so wouldn't a towel suffice?" Jess asked.

<<No, it's not enough. What if a man barges in while you're bathing?>>

I obstinately refused to make any concessions about Jess's bathing attire. After all, I couldn't exactly let the foreshadowing come to nothing.

My negotiations were worth it because Jess smiled, slightly exasperated, before she verbally agreed. She exhaled before getting onto her tiptoes and doing a turn. The clothes she'd been wearing slipped off her frame like silky strands melting into the air before automatically folding up neatly on a stand.

Jess wasn't naked after undressing—she looked exactly like what I'd

imagined: a girl in a school swimsuit.

A black elastic fabric woven from fine fibers covered the area from Jess's shoulders to her lower abdomen. It was a very wholesome sight. Though the swimsuit hugged the contours of her body, making her figure fully visible, it couldn't be anything other than wholesome since cloth was covering most of her torso. The tension of the elastic fabric squashed her modest chest, which was another convincing piece of evidence showing how chaste this outfit was. A V-shaped cloth firmly guarded the skin between her thighs, making it even more innocuous. The socks that remained on her for some reason only added a bunch more wholesome points.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Have I met your expectations?"

<<Y-Yeah,>> I stammered. <<It's extremely wholesome. I think it's good.>>

My one blunder: I'd forgotten to tell her about swimsuit pads. In both middle and high school, I'd gone to all boys' schools, and I didn't have any female siblings. Therefore, I had no way of gaining the relevant knowledge. But now, faced with the real thing in front of me, it was clear that a padding-type structure was necessary on the inner side of the fabric around the chest. Of course, it didn't change the fact that her outfit was the exact definition of wholesome.

"Padding...?" Jess inclined her head quizzically.

*Oh, she doesn't get it... But it would be kind of cruel to her to explain it explicitly... In that case—* A genius flash of inspiration struck my mind. <<It completely slipped my mind. A school swimsuit needs a name tag.>>

Using my front trotter, I wrote down Japanese hiragana characters in the air as a demonstration. Then, I requested Jess to manifest a rectangular piece of white fabric with such script written on it. She stuck it onto her chest area, finishing off the school swimsuit masterpiece. The white name tag with the black hiragana characters for her name now concealed her chest.

*Now, it's perfect. The picture of wholesome. I won't have to rely on the mysterious censorship power of steam anymore.* <<Nice, very nice. It looks good on you,>> I said, satisfied.



Jess looked down in my direction and beamed. “This is a onetime thing, so please make sure to sear it into your memory.” She then turned her back to me before tugging on the fabric clinging to her bottom and stretching it out. Her fingers released it and pulled away. With a faint snap, the fabric of the school swimsuit flicked Jess’s supple buttocks.

My eyes widened. *This maiden is a fearsome opponent! She knows exactly what makes a man’s heart race. In fact, I should call her a femme fatale. Her clothes are still wholesome though.*

Then, Jess took off her socks and immersed herself in the water while wearing her chaste outfit. “It feels wonderful... The water is nice and silky.”

Under her encouragement, I nervously submerged myself in the water next to Jess. If I stood on one step shallower than the bottom, it was just the right level for my head to peek out of the water. I could feel the hot spring gently warming up my body. Just like Jess had said, the water was silky smooth—actually, it was to the point where I didn’t feel any water resistance at all. *Hmm?*

Suddenly, Jess turned around to face me and smiled sweetly. To my shock, she began tugging down the shoulder straps of her school swimsuit.



<<Hang on, don't be so hasty! What in the world are you doing?!>>

Jess flashed a mischievous, toothy grin at the panicking virgin. "I'm stripping. The water is white, so you won't see anything inappropriate even if I'm naked."

While I questioned in my mind why she was undressing manually when she could use her magic instead, Jess went out of her way to walk in front of me before pulling out her arm from the shoulder strap. In front of my very eyes was an undressing young maiden. Reviewing my hot spring experience was the last thing on my mind now. Such stimulus was overwhelming for a virgin.

"Ah, I've taken everything off now."

The milky water was just barely high enough to hide Jess's chest, but it was skating on thin ice. This wasn't wholesome at all. <<Wh-Why did you undress again?>>

"Because I thought you might squeal in your mind and rejoice, Mister Pig."

*Yahoooink!!!* I squealed in my mind. <<Thanks, but really, you don't have to force yourself to do anything...>>

"I'm not forcing myself." She looked blissful as her eyes fluttered closed. Reaching out a cupped hand, she then splashed some water onto her shoulders. The water surface swayed with her motion, blurring the boundary of what's considered "appropriate for publication." I furtively averted my gaze.

"Now, now, please don't secretly look away."

*She read the narration!*

Puffing out her cheeks sullenly, Jess sank into the water until it reached her jaw. "If you don't want to see me, just tell me directly."

<<It's not that I don't want to see you or anything, but, you know... There are some things you shouldn't look at even if you want to.>>

"Is that so...?" She watched me with narrowed eyes. "Weren't you the one who taught me that it's bad to turn your eyes away?"

<<But I was talking about the truth back then. The truth and boobs are two completely different things.>>

Jess pursed her lips. “I distinctly remember you saying one thing back in Rach Valley, Mister Pig. You said that my curiosity about the truth is no different from you wanting to see my underwear—they are both perfectly normal desires.”

My first instinct was to debate about the difference between boobs and *Les Panties*, but I felt like no matter what I argued, I was fighting a losing battle. And so, I decided to play dumb. <<Oh, did I say something like that?>>

“So you’re going to turn a blind eye to truths that are inconvenient for you?”

*I mean, that’s how the human brain naturally functions. I’m a pig though.*  
<<My bad. It’s not a good thing to be inconsistent about my beliefs.>> I sighed.  
<<I looked away out of consideration due to a logical assumption. Any girl would be put off by a pig like me ogling their boobs.>>

Jess puffed out her cheeks even more, evolving from the “miffed” stage to the “fuming mad” stage. “I won’t be unhappy at all. Mister Pig, you, and you alone, can see every nook and cranny of my body. I don’t mind.”

*Hang on, when it’s a matter like this, you should mind...*

She advanced until she was directly in front of me. Stunning honey-brown eyes locked with mine. “Look at me. Look at me even more. Don’t turn away from me.”

It was rare for Jess to be so insistent. Buckling under her pressure, I relented.  
<<I’ll do what I can.>>

In the background, the freshly removed school swimsuit floated gently on the milky water.

I was all alone in a small bedroom with Jess. Curled up on the floor, I felt a pleasant drowsiness take over my nice and warm head from the bath as I listened to Jess’s cute protests.

“Whaaat?! But I don’t want to sleep yet! Let’s have a chat, pretty pleeease?”

Jess was lying on the bed, hugging the quilt as if it were a body pillow, and squirming around like a caterpillar. The hem of her pajama top was pulled up by her movements, and I realized that her well proportioned and flawlessly curved

waist had been exposed. I quietly turned away.

“Hey! You’re looking away again, Mister Pig!” The adorable caterpillar flopped over to face me. “You used to stare at me all the time in the beginning, but you won’t even glance at me now...”

<<It’s getting late. I think it’s about time to retire for the night. Aren’t we supposed to have an early start tomorrow morning?>>

“You’re avoiding the topic too...”

With my wide pig’s field of vision, I spotted her displeased eyes staring in my direction.

For a while, there was only silence. Jess’s eyes drooped with drowsiness. I wasn’t much better. After ten minutes or so, both of us would likely be off in dreamland. The aftereffect of the hot spring was simply irresistible.

It was then that I heard Jess’s whisper. Her voice was soft but firm. “You know, I like you because you never turn a blind eye to anything, Mister Pig. Whether it be the truth, reality, or your destiny, you always look them in the eye to the very end.”

Silence. The only illumination in the room was the lamp hanging on the wall. Jess’s eyes reflected the light and glimmered.

I was speechless. I didn’t know how to respond.

“Of course, I didn’t mean to imply that you’re not like that anymore. Please don’t misunderstand.”

Her statement was accurate. I wasn’t the type of person who would look away from something or avoid it because it was unpleasant. *You’ll have to count out things that are too blinding like the sun, naturally, but you know what I mean.*

Even without a response from me, Jess’s voice trickled on, almost like a soliloquy. “I know that you are a person who will arrive at the truth eventually, no matter what stands in your way.” There was a hint of what seemed to be desolation in her tone. “Even if you dig up some kind of earth-shattering secret and end up confronting a monstrous truth, Mister Pig, you’re not someone who

would turn away or flee... At least, that's what I want to believe."

As she spoke, her eyes were still fixed on me. But this time, she was giving me a desperate, imploring look.

*An earth-shattering secret... What is she talking about? Is it something specific?* I hadn't a clue, but I nodded. <<Don't worry, you can keep believing that. I won't ever turn my eyes away from the truth.>>

"Really?"

<<I promise.>>

Despite me giving her my word, she still seemed frightened of something. "Then... What would you do if I were actually a very bad girl? If I were a very obscene person? Would you still stay by my side?"

<<Are you a big pervert?>> I raised an imaginary eyebrow.

"I don't know. I think I'm average."

*The problem is that I don't know the definition of "average" in Mesteria.*

I was so warm and cozy after the bath that I felt as if my dreams might whisk me away at any moment if I let my guard down. However, I must give her my answer. <<...I won't run. No matter what kind of hidden side you may have, you're still the Jess I know—the most precious person in my life.>> *Ack, did I go a bit too far trying to sound cool?*

With a soft thump, Jess buried her face into her pillow. I heard her muffled voice. "You mustn't ever disappear from your most precious person's side, okay?"

Her voice was so fragile that I couldn't work up a response.

After a moment of stillness, she muttered, "Sorry. I was being weird."

<<No, not at all...>>

She turned over in bed and looked at the ceiling. "We'll leave this place around sunrise tomorrow. Let's get some proper sleep tonight and make sure we're rested and ready."

<<I think I'll sleep like a log thanks to the hot spring.>>

“Yeah...” her voice softened into a murmur.

Jess seemed like she still wanted to keep chatting, but I could distinctly hear the onslaught of sleepiness in her voice. I was sleepy too.

So out of it that I’d forgotten when we’d said good night to each other, the two of us drifted off.

## Chapter 3: Saedoutei: How to Raise a Boring Virgin Hero

The clapping of hooves droned on rhythmically in the background. Whenever the wheel ran over a pebble, I felt the vehicle jolt. The axle was creaking, and beneath my trotters, the floor rocked.

The horse-drawn carriage we were riding in raced noisily to the North.

Jess opened the front window and called out to the coachman. “Excuse me! Is Fairy Creek nearby?”

Mingling with the sound of the boisterous wind was the hoarse, accented voice of the coachman. “Fairy Creek? Yeh, that’s around here.”

“If it’s not too much to ask, is it all right to change our destination?”

“Ya wanna go ta Fairy Creek?” Though the coachman was still facing forward, I could hear the disbelief in his tone. “Lass, weren’tcha headin’ ta the Alte Plains? I mean, sure, I can go ta Fairy Creek if ya like, but there’s seriously nuthin’ around there.”

“I don’t mind. Could we please stop at Fairy Creek, sir?”

“Sure thing!”

After repeatedly thanking him, Jess shut the window. Her gaze then shifted to the opposite window—the rear window. Her honey-brown orbs moved around restlessly with a hint of anxiety. I couldn’t tell what she was looking at from a pig’s point of view.

<<What’s wrong? You’re paying an awful amount of attention to what’s behind us. Is there something following us?>>

Jess gasped, eyes widening as she looked at me on the ground. “No, it’s nothing.”

When Jess made a statement like this, it usually meant something major was



going on.

Her hands, which she'd rested on her knees, were now clenching her skirt, causing the hem to rise just a little in my peripheral vision. "Sorry, um... Everything's all right, so please forget about it."

*Hang on, does that mean...?* A certain possibility popped up in my mind, and I turned around to find stunning scenery before my eyes.

The carriage was small, meaning that my only choice had been to curl up next to Jess's feet. Accordingly, her fit legs with the perfect volume and shape filled my vision. Long white socks covered her fair skin all the way up to just above her knees. Farther up was her absolute territory—an area that all men have a special appreciation for—which rested at the ready with supple curves, carefully surrounding and guarding her secret garden that peered out shyly.

"...I'd like to go to the Secret Garden."

Hearing her voice, I turned away from her pristine white *Les Panties*. <<Come again?>>

"It's another name for Fairy Creek," she explained. "Rarely do people ever go there, but I hear that every year during spring, beautiful white flowers bloom profusely across the entire landscape."

<<But it's winter right now...>> I reminded her.

"There should be things we can look forward to even in this season." She didn't go into detail, instead giving me a secretive smile.

Possibly because the path was more rugged, the jolting of the carriage bumped up one level in intensity.

I decided to focus on keeping watch over Jess's fluttering skirt that daintily danced in the air. There might be some kind of unscrupulous scoundrel out there aiming to steal a glance at her *Les Panties*, and I had to be on guard to prevent such an atrocious incident.

The carriage pulled to a stop inside a mundane forest that didn't seem to be anything special. I climbed out. Since we were in a deciduous broad-leaved

forest, all the trees were stripped barren of their leafy coats, allowing light to pour in generously and grant us high visibility. A frosty breeze darted between the trees beneath the white, overcast sky.

“That narrow path’s what yer lookin’ for. Follow it, and ya’ll find Fairy Creek.” The middle-aged, good-natured coachman with bronze skin remained sitting on the driver’s seat as he accepted Jess’s payment with his wrinkly hands. “Just ta be sure, ya really wanna get off here?”

“Yes, this is my stop.”

The coachman raised a bushy eyebrow that had grown long enough to almost cover his eyes. “I know I’m bein’ nosy and all, but lass... Ya were chattin’ ta someone in the carriage, werent’cha?”

With a start, Jess looked at me. The coachman leaned forward and turned in my direction.

“Um, no, I wasn’t talking to anyone in particular...” Jess said in a small voice.

It was somewhat saddening to hear her deny it, but I couldn’t press her into giving the coachman a troublesome explanation about how a pig could understand the human language just to make myself feel better.

Not looking very convinced, the coachman leaned back into his original seated pose. *I’d actually be surprised if he was convinced. Anyone would find it weird that a beautiful maiden’s traveling companion is a pig, of all things. It’s one of the most ill-matched pairs you could think of.*

Once again, an indescribable sense of self-consciousness crawled all over my skin like an irresistible itch, as if I were standing in a minefield without anywhere to go.

“Be careful,” the coachman advised. “I’ve heard more than a few unsettlin’ stories in recent days. Yer a lone girl. Ya never know when someone might think yer an easy target. See ya.”

With a snap of his riding crop, the carriage gradually moved away from us. For some time, Jess saw the carriage off while bowing politely. *Maybe it’s a habit from her servant days.*

Once she straightened her back, Jess grinned at me excitedly like a primary school student just before a field trip. “Well then, Mister Pig, let’s begin our adventure in Fairy Creek!”

For roughly thirty minutes, we leisurely trekked down a narrow path that couldn’t even fit a carriage. We were deep in the forest with no signs of any other human presence. Soon, the path came to an end, and the trees gave way to clear up our vision.

That was when Jess raised her voice. “We’re here!”

At a glance, the area looked like an orchard. To be more precise, it was an apple orchard. Evenly spaced rows of short trees stretched out their slender limbs. They’d shed most of their leaves, allowing us a panoramic view of the extensive plantation. As for how I’d recognized it as an apple orchard, there was one distant section of the orchard with red fruit hanging from the trees. The winter wind carried over the homely scent of earth and dry leaves.

I recalled what Jess had told me. <<You mentioned that our original destination, the Alte Plains, is one of the most renowned and largest apple-producing regions, right? Does that apply to this place too?>>

She nodded. “Yes. The white flowers that bloom profusely as far as the eye can see are apple blossoms. This place, Fairy Creek, is on the outskirts of the Alte Plains.” Eagerly beckoning me forward, Jess began making her way to the section with fruits. “Come on, let’s take a look.”

<<So when you said that there were things to look forward to, you meant apples, huh?>>

“Yep. But not just those.” She lowered her voice theatrically. “There’s a certain rumor about Fairy Creek.”

*Rumors, rumors, once again. A literal phantom thief, an enchanted color-changing hot spring, and now, she’s adding one more to the list. For the past few days, we’d been going around and verifying the reality behind these rumors before stumbling upon shocking truths we’d never imagined. Are we following that trend again?*

<<What kind of rumor is it?>>

Jess began talking ecstatically. “There’s a rumor that just like the name ‘Fairy Creek’ implies, there is an actual fairy living in this place!”

*Oh? <<Fairies exist in this world?>>* Mesteria was a nation of swords and sorcery. We hadn’t witnessed any real ghosts back in Rach Valley, but I wouldn’t be surprised if a race like fairies were around.

“No... Um, correction, they might exist, but no one has proved it yet if they do.”

*Huh. She’s started to adapt the speech patterns of a fastidious science nerd. Makes me wonder who rubbed off on her.*

She hesitated before continuing, “For species or races that are established as more than myth, they have specified names. In Mesteria, we refer to beings that are beyond our knowledge with vague terms like ‘ghost’ or ‘fairy.’”

Her detailed supplementary explanation was very helpful. <<I learned something new today. In that case, the rumor implies that a being beyond our knowledge is lurking within this apple orchard—in other words, there are inexplicable phenomena observed here, right?>>

“You got it!” She clapped her hands together. “You’re the best, Mister Pig!”

*There it is, her iconic “praise the pig” moment. Thank you, thank you.*

Smiling sweetly, Jess came to a stop. Right before her eyes was a large apple. It was a gorgeous red, possibly because we’d made it just in time for the harvest.

“I hear that no one maintains the place, but it produces many apples every year. There must be some kind of secret behind the orchard’s harvest. Aren’t you curious about what’s going on behind the scenes as well?”

*Curiosity isn’t exactly my first reaction... <<It wouldn’t make sense if no one’s maintaining it.>>*

Jess tilted her head quizzically at my firm declaration. “Huh?”

<<The way apples work is that, usually, there are clusters of five or six buds that grow into apple blossoms. If all of them are pollinated successfully, they

will bear five or six small fruit. Through a process called “thinning out fruit,” you carefully leave behind one from these clusters, and only then will you receive respectable apples like the ones you see in front of you.>>

“Oho!” Letting out a strange noise, Jess placed a hand on her chin.

<<Furthermore, look at how red these apples are. Leaving the apple trees as they are wouldn’t produce such a vivid, beautiful red. After all, if there are patches of shade where the leaves block out the sun, the apple would have a more greenish color. If you don’t go through the effort of removing the leaves above the apples, they can never become bright red.>>

“I never knew...” She paused, surveying the orchard. “It sounds like a tremendous amount of work to go around every tree and pick out the best fruits or prune away the leaves. And considering how extensive this apple orchard is...”

<<Yeah, it’s going to require an incredible amount of labor. There must be a “fairy” who has way too much spare time on their hands around here.>>

In conclusion, the question wasn’t why the trees were mysteriously bearing fruit—the question was *who* was helping the trees bear fruit without anyone’s knowledge.

Jess mulled it over for a while. Her eyes then lit up and began observing the vicinity. “Well then, who would do that, and why?”

I could already imagine what she was about to say next: *I have to—*

“We have time until the early evening. Why don’t we think about it together?”

My prediction fell completely flat. *I was so convinced that she’d pull the “I have to know” shenanigans again. Oh well.* <<Sure thing. I’ve got a pig’s snout in my arsenal. It might be surprisingly simple to identify the culprit.>>

“Thank you very much!” Looking delighted, Jess clenched her hands into fists in front of her chest.

As we walked around the orchard, I explained, <<For me to follow a scent, I

need to find that specific scent first. Let's start by thinking about the best place to search for one.>> The mild breeze carried the faint aroma of apples to my nostrils.

"Assuming that someone is maintaining the orchard, the best place to look would be somewhere they've likely stopped by recently."

There was one place that came to mind. <<Jess, right now, there are barely any fruit left in this orchard, yeah? The ones we saw earlier are most likely of the late-ripening variety. Most of the apples in the orchard should be ripe for the picking during autumn.>>

At that, Jess inspected the orchard. Almost all the trees in the other sections of the orchard were either close to naked or only had a few yellow leaves left hanging on. Only two sections had red fruits left on the trees, including the one we were in.

"I got it!" Jess exclaimed. "If they don't harvest the apples, they'll fall onto the ground and rot, right?"

<<Yep. And as we can see, this orchard isn't overflowing with rotten apples. Therefore, someone should've picked them at an appropriate time before transporting them elsewhere.>>

Now, if only these apples were being sold on the market. Then the rumor about a fairy wouldn't exist in the first place. It was natural to deduce that the combination of several unknown variables had caused the harvested apples to secretly disappear elsewhere.

Next to me, Jess hummed thoughtfully. "In that case, we might find a clue or two if we scout out the areas that have been recently harvested."

<<I think so too. Our best bet might be the places where they are in the middle of harvesting. Look at the apple tree over there.>> I indicated where to go with my snout. Apples were hanging from the tree I pointed out, but only on the right half. The left half didn't have any fruit left.

"That tree... Have they only picked half of the apples? Let's head over there!"

We rushed up to the tree. When we checked the ground near its roots, we discovered wheel marks left by some sort of cart.

<<The harvested apples were loaded onto a cart before being transported elsewhere,>> I concluded. <<They likely stopped midway through this tree because the cart was full.>>

Jess's eyes widened. "Then, if we follow this trail..."

I nodded. <<We should discover where the apples are disappearing to and the exact location of our mystery harvester. I'm sure we'll figure out why there are rumors of a fairy taking care of the orchard if we have a productive conversation with that person.>>

"Agreed!"

Our investigation had gone so quickly and smoothly that I almost felt dissatisfied because this mystery was too easy. <<See? It was simple, right? There are always logical reasons behind rumors in the end, whether they be about ghosts or fairies.>>

There was no response. Jess's eyes were already glued to the other end of the wheel track.

<<Do you want to know where it leads?>>

She nodded. "Yes, I have to know."

*Ah, I prompted her to say the line.* <<There's no time like the present. Let's go.>>

Sniffing the ground, I began following the track. Jess was right by my side. Her legs were works of art no matter how many times I looked at them. They might have seemed well proportioned and slender, but her calves were also full and plump with muscle. Their contours were gently smoothed out by supple subcutaneous fat, creating miraculous curves that were to die for.

"Do you smell anything?"

Hearing that, I sniffed Jess's calves. <<I can pick up the fragrance of a gorgeous blonde maiden who even makes flowers pale before her beauty.>>

"Why in the world did you think I was asking about my legs...?" With a dust of pink on her cheeks that was likely due to either the chill or bashfulness, Jess looked appalled.

<<My bad, I happened to be thinking about your legs...>>

“Please focus on apples, and apples alone, right now.” She slowed her gait, retreating one step behind my field of vision. *Aw, that’s a shame.* “You can look at my legs all you want at night, okay?”

*Wait, you sure about that?*

Once again, I sniffed the ground. <<It goes without saying that I can smell apples. Then, there’s the rusty odor of the iron that the wheels are probably made of. Next, I can smell some leather products and... Hmm, what’s this? The scent kind of reminds me of charcoal or soot.>>

“I think we should follow that scent trail!”

Feeling as if I’d transformed into a police dog, I followed the track and sniffed the soil carefully with every step. In places where the ground was carpeted by withered grass, retaining none of the wheel track, my snout came to the rescue.

Eventually, the trail ended at a flowing body of water. It seemed to be at least twenty meters wide. Scattered about at the bottom of the chilly and limpid creek were round rocks. The creek didn’t seem that deep, but it was just daunting enough for me to feel rather reluctant about swimming across it.

Along the creek bank was where the wheel track had stopped heading forward. Above the soil at the end of the track stood a large white stone slab shaped like a square. *Is it a monument of some sort?* In height, it was roughly level with Jess’s chest. I walked in a circle to inspect it. It was a cuboid stone slab with the width being a tad shorter than its other measurements. Possibly because it had borne the brunt of the elements for many years, its corners were round, having been whittled down.

“What in the world is this stone?” Jess wondered out loud as she keenly inspected the item.

<<The smell of apples is stronger in this area,>> I commented before thoroughly sniffing the nearby ground.

The sweet aroma abruptly grew potent at one point along the waterside. There was a patch of soil with an intense aroma that was a cut above the rest, and this specific spot was sitting right at the boundary between the water and



the bank. An apple or apples must have made direct contact with the ground.

<<They must have unloaded the apples from the cart here.>>

“Would that mean...they transferred the apples onto a boat?”

I shook my head. <<I’m not so sure about that. There aren’t any traces left behind by a mooring boat. More than anything, at least along this side of the bank, the creek is shallow. It would be difficult for a boat to approach.>>

“You make a good point there, but if that’s true... Where did the apples disappear off to?”

If the apples hadn’t been transferred onto a boat, what had happened to them? This mystery must have a direct correlation with the reason that the fairy rumors had begun—to put it another way, it must be directly related to the reason why no one knew a mysterious entity was secretly transferring apples from this orchard.

<<Let’s consider a few possibilities. Scenario number one: they threw the apples onto the opposite shore.>>

Jess knitted her brows together. “...Is it really possible to throw not just one, but *all* the apples?”

*Welp, I highly doubt they’re practicing for baseball, so nah.* <<Scenario number two: they tossed all the apples into the creek, and the currents carried the fruits away.>>

“That’s so wasteful...”

*They went through all the effort of cultivating them, so I don’t see why they’d do that.* <<Scenario number three: they ate all the apples here.>>

“They seem to be quite the glutton.”

*Actually, wouldn’t they be classified as a monster with such a gigantic appetite?* <<Unfortunately, we’ve got too little evidence to go off of.>> I sighed. <<How about we investigate this area a bit more?>>

Jess nodded with a bright smile before crouching in front of the white stone monument. Her bare thighs, exposed to the wind, looked cold. *Is she going to be all right?*

“Excuse me, but please don’t look at my thighs. Look for clues instead.”  
Pouting with displeasure, she pulled over her skirt to conceal her thighs.

<<Hey, you can’t rule out the possibility that there may be clues hidden on your thighs.>>

She retaliated brilliantly. “Well then, you can’t rule out the possibility of hidden clues inside your flesh.”

<<Sorry, my bad... Please don’t eat me, ma’am.>>

Jess bent her fingers like claws and approached me while playfully saying, “Grrr!” I hurriedly distanced myself from her.

In the back of my mind, I thought that I was wholeheartedly willing for Jess to eat me, but that was a secret.

Back to business, I found several wheel tracks, hinting that the cart was making trips here every day. Every track made a U-turn after reaching the creek bank and returned to the orchard. Meanwhile, the soot-like scent trail didn’t end here—it also branched off in a new direction. With its help, I discovered another group of wheel tracks. However, I didn’t pick up much of the apple smell from this route. *They must have dealt with the apples at the creek. But if they can’t load the fruits onto a boat... Hmm...*

That was when Jess called out to me. “Mister Pig! Look here!”

I returned to the white stone monument. <<Did you find something?>>

“The surface has eroded, so it’s difficult to make out, but words are engraved into the stone. There’s one set of characters over here, then another over here...” She indicated with her finger. “Is it a name, perhaps? I can decipher one of them. It says ‘Pommy.’”

*Interesting...* <<It’s likely a gravestone then.>>

“I feel the same way...”

A stone monument with only a name carved into it—a gravestone was the lone possibility I could think of. I felt an ominous premonition creep up my spine. It was as if my hunch was telling me that we were drawing nearer to a cave where a monster lurked.

I hesitated. <<On my end, I found a new group of wheel tracks leading in another direction instead of returning to the orchard. If we follow it, we should find our next clue.>>

Jess's inquisitive spirit remained strong and persistent. "That sounds like a plan. Shall we?"

I nodded. <<This way.>>

We followed the course of the creek and headed upstream. Possibly because someone had pushed a cart repeatedly across this stretch, the soil was hard and firm, creating a convenient footpath. The wheel tracks seemed somewhat shallower than earlier—the cart must have been emptied of apples when the mystery person pushed it across this route. No matter what they did with the apples at the creek—whether it be throwing them across, tossing them into the water, or consuming them—they would always travel down this path afterward. That was my deduction.

"Since they placed the gravestone around the creek...would it mean that the person it's dedicated to passed away by drowning?" Jess muttered, downcast.

<<What do you mean by that?>>

"That part of the creek was shallow, and the currents were slow." She hesitated. "There is a chance that the deceased's corpse was washed ashore there."

*I see now. She's a sharp one.* <<That's a very convincing theory. Usually, you wouldn't choose such a place to establish a grave since you would want to avoid flooding and erosion... If they picked it for a specific reason, the most natural one would be because it's where the body was found.>>

"Furthermore, a mysterious someone is carrying harvested apples to that place time and time again..."

I recalled the ghost in Rach Valley and the siblings that had disappeared in Broperver—the mysteries that had been transformed into rumors by people who'd found entertainment in it. But once you dug up the truth, these mysteries were actually fragile illusions created by the earnest, heartbreaking sentiments of real people. Perhaps the apples ripening in Fairy Creek were one

such illusion as well.

As we walked on, our vision abruptly opened up. Someone had cut down the forest trees to create a clearing, and in the middle of it was an enchanting, solitary log house like one you'd find in a fairy tale. Its exterior was tidy—a clear sign that its owner was diligently maintaining it. Ashen smoke rolled up from the metal chimney. A gigantic pile of firewood protected by a crude roof sat in front of the building.

Here was the most important part: a lone cart was stationed in front of this firewood pile.

Jess whispered into my ear, “There seems to be someone living inside.”

<<It would be rude of us to pry even more into their personal affairs. I think it's about time we go back.>>

She replied, deflated, “Yes... You're right.”

We were only ten meters away from the truth—a distance that a few steps could cross. However, after seeing that grave, I didn't have it in me to march forward while knowing there was likely a skeleton in the closet.

I turned to meet her eyes and to give her the silent cue to leave, but the next moment, there was a loud rattle.

The log house door had opened.

An elderly man's face peered out from inside. He was a lithe man adorned in a refined attire with neatly arranged snow-white hair. “My, you came all the way to the middle of nowhere like this! Did you perhaps come to see the apple orchard? Oh, you must be freezing. Please, feel free to come in.” He flashed a warm smile in our direction.

Telepathically, Jess asked, <What should I do? Do you think it's safe to head in?>

<<He doesn't seem like a bad guy. Plus, you've got magic as a backup in case anything happens. I'll be on the lookout too. I think it's fine to have a chat with him and learn his story if you want answers to our questions.>>

She gulped audibly. <Right. We've already come this far. I'd like to know the

full story.>

Jess took a step forward. I was right by her side. This time, she spoke out loud. “Sorry for the intrusion! My name is Jess. I heard the rumor that a fairy is making apple trees bear fruit, and I couldn’t help but get a little curious...”

The good-natured elderly man lifted a single white brow. “Why, so that’s what happened, I see. I have certainly heard of such a rumor myself. If you’d like, I can explain the circumstances that led to such a phenomenon.”

“Really?!” Jess’s gait quickened. She made a beeline for the log house.

The elderly man widened his smile. “I’m afraid my house might be a little cramped, but please, make yourself at home.”

I peered inside from the open door. Bright, warm light splashed onto the wooden walls. The description “a sophisticated and high-quality life” was fitting for the interior—I could see the care the owner had invested into every part of it, whether it be the lace curtains, the woodcraft ornaments, the tapestry in unobtrusive colors, or even the smallest of articles. All the furniture was wooden. I also discovered the source of the soot scent trail—it seemed to be the fireplace burning bright crimson in the inner recesses of the house.

“Thank you for your graciousness.” The blonde maiden with her pig companion bowed as she walked in.

*From a bystander’s perspective, this scene might look as if it were taken right out of a fairy tale,* I thought.

After welcoming us inside, the elderly man called out to the other side of the house in an accented voice. “Ferrin, we’ve got guests!”

Under his encouragement, Jess settled down on a stylish wooden chair. I sat on the floor beside her.

The elderly man said, “I’ll make some tea. Please wait here for a moment.” He withdrew into the depths of the house. After a while, he returned with a porcelain plate and a tea set. “My apologies for my late introduction. I’m Arle. She is my wife, Ferrin.”

“Huh?” Jess let out an astounded noise.

I couldn't blame her for her reaction—the woman with black hair standing quietly behind the elderly man was in her forties at most even if I was being generous. She was so young that it was almost inconceivable for her to be such an elderly man's wife.

<<Wow, his wife looks like she could even be his daughter,>> I communicated to Jess with angle brackets, but she didn't reply. She only fixed her bewildered eyes on the elderly man. <<Jess?>>

<Oh, is something wrong?>

Just as I was about to reply to her, Arle spoke up first as he placed the plate and teaware onto the table. "Here you go, help yourself to some apple pie and tea." I couldn't see the food from my pig's eye level, but the delectable aroma of well-baked pie crust and the sweet smell of apples gently filled the room.

Arle sat down across Jess while Ferrin took a seat in front of me on a slightly distant chair by the window. The woman didn't say anything—she only smiled quietly while looking straight in my direction.

Feeling as if she'd called for me, I quietly walked over to Ferrin's feet. She crouched a little and stroked me gently. It'd been a long time since I'd last gotten a head pat. I swished my tail as I lifted my head. Up close, I noticed that the outer corners of her eyes were creased with kindness and compassion. She must always smile warmly, just like she was doing now. My impression of her was a graceful woman who was well matched with Arle.

My wide pig's field of vision dutifully clued me in on a sharp gaze stabbing into me from the rear. It belonged to Jess. Even if Ferrin was from an older generation, Jess probably wasn't happy about another woman stroking me. Hurriedly, I stepped back and returned to her side.

<<Sorry. I thought she was calling me over and went without thinking.>>

<No, I'm not upset or anything...>

She seemed to be sulking as she gave me the cold shoulder. At the same time, Jess kept stealing glances in the woman's direction. She appeared to be paying excessive attention to Ferrin, possibly because she held a tiny grudge against the older woman for stroking me.

Jess spoke out loud. “Excuse me, Mister Arle. Your wife is...um...”

“Oh.” Arle, who’d been pouring tea, turned around to face Jess. “Please allow me to apologize on her behalf for the lack of greetings. She used to be a talkative person, but she’s become rather taciturn nowadays. It’s all due to that accident...” As he spoke, Arle pushed a cup of tea forward, offering it to Jess.

Jess bowed slightly and accepted it. The steam, which had the aroma of apples, wafted over to me.

Something must be bothering Jess for she only held the cup—she didn’t make any attempts to drink the tea.

I reassured her. <<I don’t smell any poison inside. It should be safe.>>

<I see... Thanks for checking.>

She brought the cup to her lips and took a sip. “Wow! It’s amazing.”

“I’m very honored to hear that.” Smiling, Arle nodded at Jess before turning to his side and grinning at Ferrin too. Lips curling up into a sunny smile, Ferrin gazed at Jess, who was cutely warming both of her hands by holding the cup.

Jess gave Arle a somewhat conflicted look. “Um... You mentioned an accident... May I ask what happened...?”

“Ah, please, help yourself to some apple pie too. It’s fresh out of the oven.”

“I shall. Thank you for your graciousness.” Jess took a big bite of the pie, puffing her cheeks like a hamster. The crunchy sounds of apples baked to perfection were prominent enough that even I could hear them.

Immediately, Jess’s expression lit up. “Mmm! This tastes incredible as well. The apples are just the right balance of sweet and sour.”

“Right? They were harvested from the orchard nearby.” Arle looked at Jess with overflowing compassion, as if she were his own granddaughter. But after a while, he sighed and explained in a subdued voice, “We lost our daughter quite a while ago. Her name was Pommy. The boat she rode on for recreation capsized, and she drowned... Ever since then, my wife and I have been leading a quiet life alone in this place.”

“Oh... So that’s what happened...”

There was the clink of tableware. Jess must have put down her plate or cup.

Her deduction had been accurate. That grave had been dedicated in the memory of a child who drowned.

“As for your question, I believe I can answer that right now.” Arle took a sip of his tea. “In my opinion, there are two main reasons why there are rumors about me being a fairy or other kinds of wondrous creatures. The first one is simple: I work in the orchard around daybreak and return to this cabin just as the sun begins to climb high into the sky. It’s rather inconvenient to access this area through any form of transport. Unless someone stays a night in the forest nearby or intentionally travels here from the nearest settlement in the middle of the night, it’s highly unlikely anyone will come across me working in the orchard.”

*Ah, the reason’s that straightforward, huh?* Jess nodded—she seemed convinced too.

Arle continued, “As for the second, it’s somewhat complex. I’m sure you’ve seen the orchard’s size. If I were to sell my harvest on the market, I’m sure no one would mistake me for a fairy. But I haven’t shipped any of my apples to other settlements, not even once, and the public must have been unaware that a caretaker is present.”

“You don’t sell your apples...” Jess muttered. In all likelihood, the reason behind his decision was probably the answer to the mystery of the missing apples at the creek.

“I don’t. I put all the apples into the creek and let the water carry them away. They are for Pommy, who drowned there. Apples were one of her favorite things.” Arle’s eyes became bleary, as if relishing in nostalgia.

I spotted Jess clenching her hands into fists. “I understand now. You’re taking care of such a vast orchard all for your late daughter... You must love her so very much.”

Arle nodded profoundly. “In addition, living a peaceful life in a quiet place while rearing fruits was Ferrin’s dearest wish as well. Since we were able to realize it, I’m happy too.” The elderly man smiled at his wife by the window. Ferrin answered with a warm smile of her own.



A couple who overcame the crushing death of their daughter was now leading a blissful life deep in the forest while operating an apple orchard. Since they finished all their manual work in the early morning and tossed the fruits into the creek for their daughter, everyone had been oblivious to their presence. This must be the truth behind the mysterious fairy—no, fairies who caused the trees to bear fruit.

A crimson flame blazed in the fireplace, and the insulating wooden walls firmly blocked out the chilly winter winds. I'd started bracing myself for the worst when we discovered that grave, but I breathed a sigh of relief that we'd reached a heartwarming and cozy house in the end.

My intuition felt that a couple of things were bothering me a little, but it must have been my paranoia speaking.

Time flew by, and the sun was now midway through its climb down the sky. After Arle reminded Jess that it would get dark by the time she reached the next town if she didn't leave soon, the two of us decided to depart from Fairy Creek. Our next stop was a town along the large river that flowed across the Alte Plains. Tomorrow, we would take a ship from there and head farther north toward where the wishing star hung in the sky.

As we made our way down a small path along the creek, I spoke up. <<I'm so glad the real story wasn't as tragic as we thought it might be.>>

"Oh... Um, yes, I think so too."

*Hmm?* <<You sound a bit unsure. Did I miss something?>>

Jess shook her head vigorously. "No, that's not it. I just had the thought that I was so obsessed with the mystery of the fairy that I completely forgot to offer some apples to you. I ended up being the only one who enjoyed a nice treat..."

*True that.* <<Don't worry about it. I'm not hungry at all. Plus, I'm planning on getting you to feed me your apples later on.>>

Jess immediately guarded her chest with her hands. "What do you mean by that?"

*Hey, it's not that I wanna lay my tongue on her petite fruits or anything like*

that.

She narrowed her eyes. "So that was your intention after all."

<<Oh, this can't be happening. What would ever give you that idea?>>

Reading the narration without permission was Jess's bad habit. *I mean, it's not like she can turn off her literal sixth sense, so I guess it's not her fault, but anyway.* I changed the topic. <<That aside, remember his wife? Ferrin, was it? She looked really young. They must be a couple with an impressive age gap.>> *A relationship with someone younger than you sounds sooo nice. He's got it good.*

"...Oh. So that's why..."

<<Hmm? Come again?>>

I tilted my head quizzically. Jess broke eye contact with me and looked away. For quite a while now, our conversation somehow had this awkward feel to it. *Is there something else on her mind?*

"No, um... I just never realized that you liked the younger ones, Mister Pig."

*Ah, I get it now. She meant it as in "So that's why you're so hung up about their age difference," or something along those lines. Hey, don't react to the narration, thanks.* <<Anything wrong with that?>>

Jess stiffly smiled at me. "No, not particularly. I'm younger than you, after all."

Struck by her candid affection, my instinctive reaction wasn't to rejoice but to feel flustered. <<You know, you don't have to force yourself to speak like the heroine of a rom-com.>>

The next moment, Jess beamed merrily. "Interesting! So this counts as a *rome-comm*?"

<<Yeah, I guess you could say that...>> *She's an odd one for her inexplicable and excessive fixation with rom-coms,* I noted.

I looked up. By now, the sky was stark scarlet. After roughly half an hour, our surroundings should be pitch-black. <<The sun will be setting soon. How about you craft a torch with magic before it gets dark?>>

Jess looked puzzled. "Why not use magical lights?" She immediately

summoned bright white orbs of light around her body.

<<That's fine if they're commonplace in Mesteria, but...isn't it more beneficial to hide your status as a mage?>>

Hurriedly, she snuffed out the lights. "Oh, how could I have forgotten?" She hesitated. "By the way, may I ask how torches are made?"

<<It's easy. Wrap some kind of fabric around a wooden pole and soak it with fuel. It's best if you choose a fuel that isn't too volatile. We want the fire to last.>>

Jess picked up a wooden branch from the ground and manifested a piece of white cloth before wrapping it around one end. As the finishing touch, she soaked the cloth slowly with fuel before igniting it. An orange fire that seemed even brighter than the evening sun shone brilliantly near Jess's hand.

"I did it!" she exclaimed. Her cheeks were reddened by the evening glow while her honey-brown eyes glimmered as they reflected the flickering flame. "But...I have to say that it's rather strange when I give it some thought. Why doesn't this cloth burn up?" The cloth engulfed by fire remained white.

<<What's on fire is the evaporated gaseous oil. The liquid oil doesn't burn, and this liquid protects the cloth. There's a limit to how hot the liquid oil can get, so as long as there's enough liquid oil seeped in, the cloth won't combust.>>

"I understand now. The liquid oil doesn't burn... So that's why the more volatile an oil is, the more quickly it combusts. Since it vaporizes readily, the fire can burn through more fuel at once."

<<Precisely.>>

"Thank you for teaching me something new."

As we conversed, I recalled back when Jess had only just started dabbling in fire magic. She'd created a fuel that had been much more volatile than necessary, and I'd come *this* close to becoming roast pork. *But look at her now...*

"Look at this, Mister Pig! See that?! The flames are green now!"

*...she can even tinker with the fuel on the torch for fun.*

<<What did you add?>>

“Boron. The green and orange are mixing together. It’s fascinating.”

The orange color of the burning oil mingled with the pea green added by boron, and there were even flecks of yellow fire here and there as they fused. The flame’s silhouette danced and waved as if it were alive, and its color transformed without pausing to rest. Fire had a kind of charm to it that couldn’t be explained by words. Reflexively, I found my eyes fixed on the flame. Jess seemed to be in the same boat because she also stared at the tip of the torch in silence for a long time. The dazzling allure of fire even attempted to scorch the gazes it attracted.

A while later, I realized something. Before I’d comprehended it, I’d taken my eyes off the fire, instead admiring Jess’s profile.

I shifted my gaze onto the scenery ahead.

Unbeknownst to us, our surroundings had gone dark. The only sounds were the murmuring of the creek and the rustling of branches in the wind. It seemed that we were advancing north at the moment—my retinas that were burned by the fire gradually picked up the twinkling, bewitching red glow of the wishing star, and my brain converted the signals into images.

Based on what I could see, we had a long way to go before we’d arrive at the nearest town. *Jess seems like she has a sense of direction, but the question is, will we be able to reach our destination at a sensible time of night?*

Suddenly, the clopping of hooves cut into my thoughts. Next to me, Jess halted her steps. I trotted closer to her. With my ears, I could distinguish two horses—no, three horses approaching our direction.

<<Jess, put out the fire—>>

I was too late.

A man’s rough voice pierced the night. “What’re you doing in a place like this, missy?” It was too dark to make out his features, but I picked up the sinister sound of friction against metal. Along with it was the glint of a silvery blade. Still

on horseback, he unsheathed the sword from his hip.

What followed was an unpleasantly shrill voice behind the first man. “I’ve gotta say, you’re in an unusual place!” This second man hadn’t assumed a stance with it yet, but I could tell he possessed a bow and arrows from his outline. There was one more person behind him.

A man who’d pull out his sword after an encounter with a girl and a pig passing by wasn’t anyone respectable in most scenarios. The swordsman commanded the horse to take a step closer to us. “Well, well. You’ve got a cute face. A maturing young girl, hmm?”

“She hasn’t got a collar. Doesn’t seem to be a Yethma. You still wanna go?”

“It doesn’t matter who she is or where she’s from. In these times, we can even have our way with employed Yethma without a care, remember?”

Jess tightly pressed her lips together and glared at the men. There was no fluster, no panic—she didn’t even give me an imploring look about what she should do. She held the torch at the ready like a sword and pointed it directly at the trio.

With her telepathy, she asked, <I don’t wish to cause them any harm. I also want to avoid them discovering I’m a mage. Is there any peaceful way to resolve this situation?>

<<Peaceful?>> I scowled. <<But these people want to...>> Actually, I didn’t even want to imagine what they wanted to do to Jess.

The swordsman spoke up. “How about this, missy? If you follow us without a fight, we won’t use these scary things. We’re not gonna kill you, no worries. What do you think? C’mon, throw away your torch and come over.”

Possibly as a response to these words, the man at the very back of the line jumped down from his horse with a thud. Under the illumination of Jess’s torch, I spotted a rope in his hand. His shadow flickered minutely.

I turned to look at Jess. Despite her gallant expression, her slender arms were trembling. Her knees were holding her firmly in place, but even they were so tense that they might buckle at any moment. <<Everything’s okay, Jess. I’m here with you.>>

<Thank you.>

*Think, pig. Okay, so we need a way to chase these men off with magic while hiding her identity... <<We'll make a monster give them hell. Listen to my instructions.>>*

Jess maintained her stance, holding up the torch. But then, a piece of inconspicuous black cloth began slithering out from beneath her feet like a Japanese cloth spirit—more specifically, an ittan-momen. The men, who were busy appraising Jess's face and body, remained oblivious.

Abruptly, Jess let out a sharp yell. "Ah!"

Roaring flames—so furious that they threatened to burn down the entire gloomy forest—rose up behind the man.

A towering bird of fire took to the skies. A blinding inferno formed its entire body. Its head was grand enough to swallow a human whole. Its wings, which were so big that they could wrap a house within their folds, flapped unhurriedly. Whenever its feathers pushed down in the night air, torrid winds interspersed with sparks were blown in our direction.

"Boss, what do we do?!" one man cried.

"The hell's that thing?! Get on your horse right now!"

Spooked by the phoenix, the men neglected Jess and fled for their dear lives.

After some time had passed, with a wave of Jess's right hand, the monster dissipated into sparks and vanished without a trace.

It had been a simple contraption. We'd made use of the torch mechanism that I'd taught Jess moments ago. After soaking the black cloth with oil, she'd shaped it like a bird with magic before igniting it. The gaseous fuel had combusted instead of the cloth, giving birth to a monster covered with fire from head to toe. The steps had consisted of creating cloth, producing fuel, ignition, and physically manipulating the cloth—in other words, this technique was possible with just the types of magic Jess excelled at.

<<Are you okay?>>

The moment she heard my question, Jess sank onto the ground, landing on

her bottom. The torch tumbled down. Its flames were bright enough to make the streaks of tears on Jess's cheeks glisten.

"I was so scared..." Her voice was tiny, as if she'd barely wrung it out of her throat. "Mister Pig...I was so scared..."

<<You were very brave just now,>> I spoke gently. <<Don't worry, you're safe now.>> I trotted up to her, but I couldn't stroke her head to comfort her. I was a pig, after all. <<I'm sorry I couldn't protect you at all. I ended up leaving everything up to you.>>

Ever so slowly, Jess shook her head. "That's all right. Just having you by my side gave me all the reassurance I needed."

<<Your knees will get muddy. Can you stand by yourself?>>

"Yes..." Climbing onto her feet sluggishly, Jess picked up the torch from the ground.

Her eyes were red, puffy, and moist with tears. I could sense her paralyzing fear, her bitterness. It was hard to believe that only a few minutes ago, the same eyes had been shining with excitement as they'd admired color-changing fire.

Even now, the tiniest hint of green was visible in the torch's flame.

As I watched Jess chew on her bottom lip, I felt as if all my internal organs were boiling over. Jess hadn't done anything wrong. She'd only been walking alone, minding her own business, but that was enough for a bunch of savage men to attempt to kidnap her. All because she was a woman. All because she was a young adult. All because she was weak.

What would have happened if I hadn't been by her side—if she hadn't been a mage? There might have been a world where her eyes, shining bright and innocent, would never light up with happiness ever again.

I was powerless against such a horrifying injustice. Frustration and anger at myself boiled over my heart.

Jess softly whispered, "It's very painful to be all alone in such a relentless world."

There was no sign, no communication, no nothing. But the two of us gradually began walking forward together.

“For my entire life, I prayed for something. Even now, I’m wishing in my heart. I want there to be someone who will always be with me and take my side no matter what happens.” Her teary eyes focused on me. “And you are the one who granted my wish, Mister Pig.”

I briefly shut my eyes. I was happy, but at the same time, I felt that her expectations of me were too high. <<It’s a shame that your wish granter is a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin pig.>>

“I’m not disappointed at all. I’m glad that it was you, Mister Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin Pig.”

<<If you say so.>>

“I’m sure of it.”

I gazed at the sky where the wishing star sparkled as I continued to tread the silent night path. Now that I thought about it, my situation was a little similar to hers.

For a whole nineteen years, I’d chugged along in life without being important or necessary to anyone. Despite hoping in my heart that I’d become someone wanted by others, before I’d known it, I’d already gotten used to my place in solitude. That was when Jess had appeared in my life. She was the only one who’d ever needed *me*.

Jess was the only one who’d ever said that she loved me.

But there was one difference between us. In my case, my wish granter was a beautiful, purehearted blonde maiden with magical powers and a modest chest. She was the definition of ideal as a heroine rescuing me from my loneliness. But in contrast, I was a pig. Even if I ignored my pig status, I was still a pervert, a gloomy introvert, and an awkward super-virgin. I was far from qualified as a hero who’d save a wonderful maiden like Jess from her plight. We were literally and metaphorically worlds apart.

Misery washed over me. Jess seemed to be trying her best to find arguments against it, but her lips were too heavy for her to form words at this moment. I



changed the topic. Something happened to be on my mind anyway.

<<Jess, you were really bothered by the scenery behind us in the carriage today. You even made an abrupt change of course. By some chance, are there lowlifes like the ones earlier pursuing you?>>

I wasn't sure what she thought, but she reacted by shaking her head profusely. "Not at all! I'm not worried about people like *them* chasing me."

*I see. It was worth being a bit mean and giving her a trick question.* <<Then that means there really *is* someone on your tail.>>

Jess sucked in a sharp breath. "Um... That's not really true..."

Just like I'd thought, Jess had been acting a tad odd recently—she was hiding something.

Looking dispirited, she hung her head. I never wanted to see such an expression on her face. <<If something's troubling you, I'll help you in every way I can. Whenever you feel like opening up about it, I'm always here to lend an ear.>>

Hearing that, the tension in Jess's cheeks gently melted away. "Thank you."

The lights of a human settlement began brightening up a part of the scenery. I observed our surroundings, and the creek that had accompanied us on our travels the entire time would convene with a great river some distance ahead of us.

The path that ran alongside the great river was paved with cobblestone. Warm light spilled out from the house windows, allowing us to see the ground beneath our feet. Below the inky black sky, the light of human life was also scattered sparsely on the other side of the river that was at least a few hundred meters wide. Jess had mentioned that the northbound ship would travel via this river tomorrow.

After walking for a while, we found ourselves at a large-scale harbor. Many wooden ships big enough to fit dozens of people were attached to piers, and there was the squeaking of wood as they rocked with the waves. I spotted a bustling pub nearby. It seemed to serve as an inn too. Jess arranged a room

here for the night.

I'd assumed she'd head straight to bed from exhaustion, but instead, Jess brought me along to the pub. She explained that after hearing the establishment had a varied collection of brandy, she was eager to try it out.

The pub was small, with tables and chairs cramming it to the brim. It was also warm with the liveliness and heat of people. The lamps in the color of flames were bright, generously casting light on the stacked grainy gray stone slabs that made up the walls. Perhaps most of the guests were men who worked on boats and ships for a living since their complexion was healthy and sun-kissed despite the winter season.

After ordering amber-colored brandy, Jess settled down at a table along the wall. I sat down next to her feet and decided to keep an eye on her legs.

By her third glass, Jess's face was tinged red, and her tongue began tripping over words from time to time. "This is so inchresching! I never knew that the taste would be so differench depending on the period the alcohol spent in the barrels."

<<The components of the oak barrel dissolve into the liquid little by little, and some of the alcohol evaporates over time too.>> I frowned. <<By the way, maybe you should start thinking about stopping here. This stuff is several times more potent than wine.>>

Maybe the alcohol hanging in the air of the pub was getting to me too because I felt my consciousness starting to drift away. Before we both ended up drunk and wasted, I had to stop this maiden's rampage.

Jess shook her head like a protesting child. "Zhis ish brandy made with grapes! I came all the way to zhe Alte Plains, and I have to know the taste of apple branry too!"

*What in the world is "branry"...?* <<Okay, then. But make sure to stop after your next one.>>

"Whaaat? Whyyy?! You're sho stingy, Mischer Pig!" She placed a hand on her hip and puffed out her cheeks like a hamster, evidently making an "I'm mad!" expression.

*Yep. She's drunk for sure. I mean, she's cute like this too, but I'd rather avoid her becoming completely out of it by drinking too much.*

"Ah, you just thought I'm cute, didn't you? Am I zhat cute? Couldn't take your eyes off me?"

*Oh, please don't hassle me like a cute but also exasperating kohai character... <<Watch your volume. People will think you're someone with a screw loose who's chatting to a pig.>>*

"People are talking to the wall, sho I'm fine."

That much was true—the entire pub was practically a nest infested with drunkards. That said, a middle-aged dude with bronze skin talking to the wall was a completely different matter from a cute girl talking to herself.

"Here you go, some apple brandy." There was a clank—someone placed a glass on Jess's table. Fancy leather shoes with a pointed toe box came *this* close to kicking me. I hurriedly backed away.

I looked up and saw a man roughly in his twenties with pretentious long hair. He was in the middle of taking a seat across from Jess. His attire was black from head to toe, and his collar was flipped up needlessly high. He was almost like an otaku who thought of himself as a pioneer of fashion but was actually embarrassing to look at. Silvery chains jingled as they dangled from his neck and waist.

"Um... Th-Thank you...?" Jess's voice grew smaller.

"I heard you saying that you wanted some. It's my treat."

"No, um, I'll pay you back." There was the sound of coins being placed on the table.

"Okay, I guess I'll have it then. Cheers."

There was the clinking of glass against glass. The sycophant who flaunted himself like a peacock tilted his own glass.

Meanwhile, Jess, who looked bewildered, only held on to the glass she'd received. "Excush me, but may I help you with something...?"

<<He's trying to hit on you. Don't give him any attention. This guy's—>>

The peacock man interrupted me. “Aw, I only came over for a little chat. I just got dumped by a girl, you see. Drinking by myself sounds kind of miserable, and that’s when I saw that you’re alone here too. I figured, why not?”

*Well yeah. Of course you’ll get dumped if you dress up like an otaku with no self-awareness...*

“Oh, I shee...”

It appeared that the good-natured Jess didn’t know how to turn anyone down. The fact that she hadn’t denied being alone was already giving this man an opening to exploit. Sure enough, the peacock man must have sensed it was a good opportunity because he propped up his elbow on the table and gave Jess a sidelong glance.

He asked, “Since you’re all alone here, are you on a journey, perhaps? Where did you go today?”

“Um...”

“I was born and raised around here. I think I could share a few interesting stories with you. So hey, tell me.”

Jess lightly sniffed her apple brandy before placing it on the table. “I, um, went to Fairy Creek...”

The peacock man struck an exaggerated pose of horror like a drama queen. “You went to a place like that?! It must’ve been the most boring place you’ve ever gone to. There’s only a loony old geezer living around there, right? He keeps tossing his excess apples into the creek, and sometimes, they wash up rotten here. He’s a big nuisance. Seriously, I don’t know what’s going on in his head. Ha ha ha!”

He laughed in a way that got on my nerves. Jess appeared to be a little offended, but she immediately resumed her customer service smile. “Ah. I never knew.”

The peacock man leaned across the table. Jess leaned back slightly. “You’re really cute. Since we were lucky enough to meet each other, let’s drink together. Come on.” He must be encouraging her to drink the brandy.

*How about I chomp on your legs, huh?!* I thought, livid. But I didn't have to take action because Jess moved her chair backward.

"I'm sorry. My heart already belongs to someone."

She'd fumbled her words spectacularly, but she still managed to stand up quickly and leave the pub. The man must have given up since he didn't leave the pub to come after her. Perhaps I owed the peacock man gratitude in the sense that he'd allowed Jess to leave the place before she'd gotten wasted.

Declaring that she wanted to sober up, Jess decided to make a detour outside before returning to her room.

The frosty night wind swept across the surface of the river. Jess allowed the hem of her skirt to frolic with the breeze as she walked with a spring in her step.

Though I hadn't drunk at all, I felt like my gait was somewhat unsteady as well. <<We're lucky he was an otaku who gave up readily. But you've got to turn them down earlier next time.>>

Hearing that, Jess gave me a broad smile. "I was planning on turning him down from the very start. Even though he said he wanted to chat, he only had indecent thoughts in his head."

<<That guy's seriously outrageous. I can't believe people like him exist.>>

Jess stared hard at me. "I like you because you don't lie or put on an act about that part of you, Mister Pig."

For some time, we followed the riverside path. The flowing water looked as if someone had dissolved the darkness into it. Jess was silent as she walked, her eyes trained on the river.

Abruptly, she spoke up. "We'll board a ship, follow the river, and make our way to a canal. Eventually, we'll arrive at a town called Mousskir. It's the northmost town of Mesteria."

This meant that our northbound journey to search for the wishing star was reaching the end of the line. Less than a few days later, we would likely witness the glowing red Salvia that still hung high in the sky and learn that human hands

could never reach the stars.

“It was faster than I expected. Our fun journey was over in no time at all.” Jess faced forward and wiped her face with her sleeve. I could only see the back of her head from my position. “You’re a sharp person, Mister Pig, so you might have already realized a lot of things. But please. Please pretend you never discovered anything until we arrive at Mousskir. Once we reach the northmost point of Mesteria, I promise I’ll take the initiative to tell you everything.”

I wasn’t as shrewd as she made me sound. Actually, my brain was sluggish and refusing to work right now. *Why’s that?* I instinctively felt that several facts could connect to form a clear picture, and that memories that I should never forget but had somehow lost were about to claw out from oblivion at any time now. But for some reason, my thoughts were like the ripples along the riverbank—they came and went restlessly, refusing to stay in one place.

“It’s going to be the end of the year very soon. By the time we reach Mousskir, we should make it just in time for the New Year’s Festival.”

<<New Year’s Festival, huh...? That sounds fun.>>

“Yes. I’m very excited about it too...”

One question after another sprouted in my head. Who was chasing us? Why were the two of us in a place like this all by ourselves? Above all, why had we decided to go on a journey to the northmost point of Mesteria while knowing that our hands could never reach the wishing star? What had happened?

But just as quickly as they’d come, the questions burst like bubbles and disappeared.

“Maybe we should head back to our room.”

Hearing that, I nodded.

Jess had tucked herself into her blankets and was rolling left and right—the alcohol must have gotten to her. She let out an incomprehensible sound.

“Mishter Prig I rub yew sho muuuch...”

I was nestled on the floor, nodding off and just as out of it. The mirror placed

in front of my eyes didn't serve its purpose, for the glass was white and cloudy. I felt like my vision was swaying somewhat, but I wasn't bothered enough to go out of my way to confirm it. *Will I be able to wake up on time tomorrow at this rate?* I thought, somewhat concerned.

As if she hadn't got her fill, Jess continued saying "rub yew" this and "rub yew" that, but her odd mumbling transformed into choked sobbing before I knew it. There was a nasally "Nnngh." A subdued cough. Sniffing sounds. Perhaps she was a maudlin drinker. I didn't know what made her so sad that she had to cry.

"Mishcher Pwiiiig, donch weave me beehind..."





Her muttering was so incoherent that I couldn't even guess what she was saying, but she was clearly drowning in her sorrow. *Whoever caused Jess this much heartbreak is a heinous criminal*, I thought indignantly.

The next moment, drowsiness took over. *I'm so sleepy.*

Jess must feel the same way. I wasn't sure whether she'd exhausted herself through crying or if it was due to her inebriated state, but by now, she was only muttering nonsense under her breath like she was sleep talking. Just like earlier, she sounded as if she was imploring someone or something, but it was a tough ask for me to decipher it with my sleep-addled brain.

However, right before the moment my consciousness fizzled away, I felt as if I'd heard a single sentence. Just one. I might have imagined it. It might have been a dream.

But if—*if*—my mind hadn't been playing tricks on me, she'd said this in a faint, tapering voice: "Please don't disappear from my life again."

## Chapter 4: Kachikoi: Love Is Hard for Livestock

The morning gusts were vicious. Jess was geared up in her usual fluffy coat with a leather bag slung around her shoulder as she quietly walked down the cobblestone path. I trailed after her.

The scenery gave off a startlingly different impression under the sun. Withered trees covered the hills along the river, shining in a melancholic earthen color as they bathed in the sunlight. The water was a dark blue as it reflected the clear sky. The houses, which had been bright and lively at night, were now unobtrusively melting into the background.

We boarded a large wooden ship that had been painted white. She was structured like a steamship with paddle wheels on her starship and port sides. The ship had two vast and flat levels with a small triangular red flag perched quietly on the very top as an ornament. Judging by her size, she could probably fit around a hundred people, but the passengers were scarce.

Jess and I decided to camp out in the indoor seats of the second level where we could admire the view while avoiding the gusts. Modest wooden benches with backrests were lined up in the area facing the direction the ship was traveling in. I settled next to the window while Jess sat by my side. If I sat on the bench and stretched out my neck, I could see the scenery even in a pig's body.

The loud honk of a steam whistle rang out.

Slowly, the ship was set in motion. There was rhythmical splashing that reminded me of paddles moving against the water like a waterwheel. The ship gradually pulled out onto the wide river as the sun poured down on her starboard.

Jess whispered, "I think it's powered by ristae. It looks like our voyage will be quite pleasant."

<<Just looking at the scenery is already great fun,>> I commented.

"I agree. Oh, look at all the magnificent mansions lined up over there."

I wasn't sure whether she was trying to put last night behind her or whether she didn't have any memory of it, but Jess had regained her cheery demeanor. When I looked in the direction she was pointing, I saw luxurious residences lining up in a spiral, coiling around a small hill. It must have been built along a path going round and round as it went up the hill. On the summit was a spire that stood tall and proud, likely offering a fantastic view if one were to enter it. One part of me started getting curious. *Why're there so many mansions lined up on that hill?*

Reluctantly, Jess gazed at the hill that steadily flowed to the rear side of the ship. "That seems like an interesting place. It didn't seem that far away. I kind of wish we'd stopped by since we're already here."

<<Well, now you've got a reason to come here a second time.>>

Eyes widening, Jess looked at me, a little surprised. "Yes." She nodded. "Let's visit this place together again. Next time, I hope we can come during apple blossom season."

Jess admired the scenery outside the window for a while with me, but then, she suddenly remembered something and took a piece of paper out of her bag. She skimmed through the writing on it before marking one place with her finger.

<<Is that the list of stuff you want to do?>>

She smiled. "Yes."

<<What was it this time?>>

"I wanted to go on a voyage."

<<Uh, wouldn't our journey to the Send-Off Island count as a voyage too?>>

"I must say that you are quite a fussy virgin." Jess huffed. "Back then, our goal was to fight, not travel, remember?"

<<Well, I guess you have a point there.>>

"I do," Jess declared before tucking away her list in her bag.

When she opened the bag, I caught a fleeting glimpse of the crimson cover of a bulky book inside. So far, I hadn't had many opportunities to sit in places

where I could peer into her bag. Now that I had a better look, I even spotted a small piece of carefully folded cloth next to the crimson book. It was stained a reddish-brown and—

“Sheesh, Mister Pig!” A lifted index finger was thrust before my eyes. “It’s not very nice to peek into a girl’s bag without permission! Bad piggy!”

I averted my gaze with a <<Sorry.>>

The weather was smiling upon us today, and our voyage was going smoothly. Making stops at harbors here and there, the ship calmly carried us north. All the sceneries that went by were fascinating in their own right: an old fortress along a riverside cliff; a compact and cozy town of red roofs; and finally, a church that was leaning over by a margin. Each of them must have their own little mysteries, stories, and wonders hidden within.

*I can’t imagine how fun it would be to go around places like these forever and ever with Jess...*

“Sure,” Jess said, beaming. “Let’s go on another journey together one day—a journey that will go on forever and ever.”

We switched ships in the evening. She was one size down in comparison and came with modest compartments where we could nap on cushioned chairs. As the sun set, the ship’s interior grew darker, and it was quiet enough to almost seem desolate. *I suppose this is the ship version of a night train, huh?*

The vessel veered off from the great river and sailed into a narrow canal surrounded by flatland. I could spot the boundless starry sky from the small window. In the direction we were advancing toward, there was a glowing bright star in the sky that was remarkably larger than the others: Salvia, the wishing star that could supposedly grant any wish of the one who plucked it from the sky. We should be arriving in the northernmost town of Mesteria at around sunrise, but the wishing star obstinately remained far out of reach.

Quietly, the night trickled by. Jess clutched her bag carefully against her chest as she slept.

A steam whistle roused me. I could hear the boisterous voices of seabirds as

they squawked and squeaked.

“Mister Pig, we’re here! Mousskir is just around the corner!” Jess exclaimed merrily and marched out of the ship. I followed.

Spectacular scenery filled my vision—Mousskir was a large port town where numerous white sails huddled tightly together. Sturdy brick buildings lined up in rows along the coast. The area around the port was flat, but I observed that the land had a gradual upward incline toward the outskirts of the port.

“We’ve finally arrived at the northernmost settlement of Mesteria...” Jess whispered. As she spoke, a thought seemed to have occurred to her, and she took something out of her bag. She held it in a way to hide it from my vision. Her eyes widened by a margin as she stared at the mystery item. Then, she sighed.

<<What are you looking at?>>

She only shook her head and ambiguously said, “No, it’s nothing,” before immediately storing the item in her bag.

With my keen eye, however, I’d managed to deduce the item’s true nature. It was a glass sphere around the size of a golf ball with golden ornaments encircling it. There was no mistaking it, even though I’d only caught a brief glimpse of its edge: it was a unique magical artifact that contained a human eyeball.

Indeed, it was Ruta’s Eye, the artifact that indicated the location of the Contract Stakes.

Jess led me farther north from the port. We walked over an uphill cobblestone path that was off-white. I gazed at the townscape. The walls of the houses were painted white, and on their roofs were long crimson flag-like cloths that swam in the wind. These blood-colored, patternless pieces of cloth were on every single roof within sight, collectively waving in the same direction. It was admittedly a slightly uncanny sight.

<<Hey, Jess, what are those?>> I indicated the cloth with my snout.

With a bright smile, Jess explained, “It’s their local custom during the New

Year's Festival. At the end of the year, they adorn their rooftops with red cloth."

<<Is there any special meaning to them?>>

"I wouldn't quite say they have a special meaning... I've heard of their origin story though," Jess explained. "The end of the year is a period when families unite. They have quality time and do festive activities such as exchanging gifts while they receive the deceased who had close ties to them as guests in their houses. So that the deceased could tell where to go through scent, they used to hang up pieces of cloth dyed with the family head's blood on the rooftops. That eventually transformed into this custom of decorating their roofs with red cloths."

*Huh. So it's not just a blend of the Japanese Obon Festival—where the ancestral spirits come back for a visit—and New Year's. It's even got Christmas thrown into the mix.* She'd mentioned blood, so I sniffed the wind, but I didn't pick up any particularly metallic or pungent scents.

Jess must've read the narration because she kindly added, "Nowadays, I hear that most of them are colored with dyes such as madder root powder. The Dark Ages were already dangerous enough—you didn't know whether you would live to see another day. So when someone came up with the idea of substituting blood with madder root powder, this new method spread in the blink of an eye."

<<Wouldn't the spirits of the dead get lost, then? There's no blood scent trail for them to follow anymore.>>

"Well, yes. Apparently, people still use the family head's blood in some conservative villages, but the risks involved led to most areas only maintaining the bare bones of the initial custom. I hear that some places use the blood of livestock, which is kind of pointless since it smells different from human blood."

Hearing "the blood of livestock," I reflexively shrunk into myself.

Jess smiled. "You can rest assured. I will protect you, Mister Pig."

<<You're a lifesaver.>> A thought struck me. <<By the way, why are you so knowledgeable about the customs of the New Year's Festival?>>

"Well, that's because I'm a 'nerd,' like you."

I sighed. <<Looks like I ended up teaching you some eccentric slang...>>

“To answer your question properly, I read an old book on folklore studies that I found in the royal palace’s library.”

We continued our chitchat as we ascended the slope and eventually ended up at a vast grassland. Trimmed, flat turf was spread out as far as the eye could see, almost like a golf course. There was a single path paved with white gravel that arched gently across the grassland, and at the very end of it sat a majestic building that reminded me of a palace.

“That’s the place we’re staying at tonight!” Jess exclaimed, pointing at the palatial residence merrily.

Anyone would agree that it seemed like a mismatched accommodation for a young maiden with a piggy companion. The enormous residence, which practically oozed extravagance, was so impressive that it might even make the actual royal palace pale in comparison on a good day. If appearances weren’t being deceiving, a night at this hotel would likely cost a fortune or more.

<<It looks really luxurious and fancy...>> I hesitated. <<It’s not an, uh, indecent inn or something like that, right? Back in my world, ostentatious appearances can sometimes imply it’s *that* type of hotel...>>

“What in the world do you mean by that?” Jess huffed. “I heard it’s the most extravagant accommodation in this area. I made sure to do research beforehand, you know.”

*I guess she wants to wrap up our journey to the North by indulging in the highest-class luxury available, huh?*

We approached an iron gate that was at least three times taller than Jess. It was guarded by a gatekeeper dressed in crimson attire. After Jess communicated that she’d come here to stay the night, he opened the gate with a key. On the other side of the gate was a path surrounded by a diverse selection of garden trees. After just over a minute of walking, we finally arrived at the entrance of the lodging.

Grand stone statues of lions guarded the bronze door on both sides like lion-dog statues at Shinto shrines. The door opened to reveal a spacious hall with

marble walls and floor as well as a chandelier gently casting light upon it all.

A staff member wearing a handsome black jacket seemed to be explaining something to Jess. “—because of that, I’m afraid the only rooms we have available are for two guests and above.”

“Is there no room for one person?” Jess asked.

“Unfortunately, we rarely ever come across guests that stay alone...”

*Yep, that’s the classic woe of traveling alone. I suppose it’s a slightly different case for her right now because she’s accompanied by a pet.*

Jess looked down at me with a troubled face. Perhaps things would have gone differently if I’d looked like a human.

The staff member stared in my direction with a puzzled expression. It was one of those skeptical gazes again—as if he was questioning, no, suspicious of me, wondering why in the world someone like me was here.

Every time someone had stared at me with such eyes, I’d felt like I had a bone in my throat, as if I should be anywhere but here. *I know. A pig doesn’t suit a fancy accommodation. A pig doesn’t suit a beautiful maiden.*

*I mean, of course, even if I were to return to my scrawny four-eyed super-virgin form, I wouldn’t be someone who suits such a place, or even Jess...*

In the end, Jess paid the room charge for two people and checked in as one person (plus one animal).

<<Staying in a high-end hotel as a loner at the end of the year, huh?>> I jokingly teased her on our way to our room. <<I kind of pity you, Jess.>>

She chewed on her bottom lip and puffed out her cheeks. “That’s not true at all. I’m staying here with my special person.” Acting like a prickly porcupine, she marched off ahead of me.

It took me a while before the meaning of her words sank in.

The room she was assigned to came with an elegant white-and-silver-themed interior. A gigantic canopy bed sat right in the middle of the room. It was a king-sized bed—six Jesses could easily sleep on it with room to spare.



Jess pulled aside the lace curtain and called out to me from the balcony.  
“Over here, Mister Pig! Look!”

Our room was on the second floor. The balcony, fenced in by a white railing, faced the ocean. But unlike what I’d expected, what I could see from our angle wasn’t a calm beach. Instead, on the other side of the lawn was the aquamarine ocean billowing bleakly far below a precipitous cliff.

<<Huh. So this hotel was built on a cliff.>>

“Yes. We were going uphill the whole time earlier, remember? This is the cape on the northernmost tip of Mesteria, Cape Mouss. The cliffs rising perpendicularly from the bottom are the Mouss Cliffs.”

I peered at the northern sea from between the gaps of the railing. The horizon was perfectly level. I wondered what lay beyond it. *Who knows, maybe I might find Japan there? If Mesteria is in a place where I can travel to and from Japan as long as I have a ship, then—*

“Ah, Mister Pig! I see an island over there!”

I looked up. Jess was pointing straight toward the ocean. Straining my eyes, I traced the horizon from left to right with my gaze. *Hmm? There’s something in the center...* <<Oh, you mean that weird rectangular thing?>>

“Yes, that! It’s the Terminus Island.”

Within the white haze, a small gray rectangle abruptly protruded from the black horizon line. I’d never seen an island in that shape before—it was as if someone had gone out of their way to use a triangle ruler to straighten out its silhouette and give it perpendicular lines.

<<If my memory’s accurate, there are only two islands in Mesteria, right? One’s the Terminus Island, and the other is where we went to attack the Clandestine Arcanist.>>

“The Send-Off Island, yes. You’re right, only these two islands exist. Lady Vatis submerged all the rest.” She made that terrifying statement with a smile.

Vatis was the royal court’s founder who’d successfully collected the Contract Stakes and gained unparalleled power. So that she could enslave or slaughter

every last mage, she'd evidently submerged nearly all the isolated islands since they could serve as good hiding places.

Only two islands had been spared: the Send-Off Island and the Terminus Island, both places with somewhat complicated circumstances. Legend said that something dreadful lurked on these remaining islands.

For a while, Jess admired the Terminus Island, but eventually, she suggested we return to the room since it was cold outside.

With a soft puff, Jess sat down on the edge of the magnificent bed. She removed her shoes and swayed her legs absentmindedly as she looked down at me. "In Mousskir, there's an ancient fable that dates back to a time before the Dark Ages. It's a story centered around two women, Miss Aneera and Miss Marta— Sheesh, Mister Pig, I only just took off my shoes, so please don't sniff me! Bad piggy!"

The second half of her speech turned into a scolding directed at me, who'd quietly approached her feet with a twitching nose. She changed her sitting posture on the bed, hugging her knees close to her chest. But due to her actions, the flawless and full curve of the part that seamlessly connected her thighs and buttocks peeked out from the gaps between her calves. If I moved a little to the side, I would catch a glimpse of what was between her legs: a piece of pristine white—

"Excuse me..." Looking a bit awkward, Jess pulled up the part of her skirt she was sitting on and hugged it against the back of her thighs.

<<Sorry about that. You mentioned a story focused on two women, Aneera and Marta, right?>>

"Yes. For now, please don't be invested in my underwear. Be invested in the story."

*Can't I be invested in both?* <<Of course. I'm all ears.>>

Jess narrowed her eyes with suspicion, likely at the narration she was overhearing, before she nodded. "This story goes all the way back to a time when mages lived in peace." Inside the quiet room, where the only background sound was the low humming of the waves, Jess began narrating the tale. "Once

upon a time, two very good friends, Aneera and Marta, lived in Mousskir. They had practically treated each other as sisters since they were children, and even after turning sixteen, they never left each other's side."

<<Oh?>> I wriggled an imaginary eyebrow. <<Is this yuri?>>

"Yew...reed?" She frowned and looked back at me with innocent eyes. "May I ask how they are related to this topic?"

*Uh. She thinks I'm talking about plants.* I shook my head. <<No, ignore me. Go on.>>

"Okay," she said before continuing, "But one winter day, an illness began spreading tenaciously in Mousskir. It seemed just like a ruthless curse—the sick suffered high fevers while flowers of blood bloomed all over their body. And in a cruel twist of fate, Marta was one of the victims that collapsed from it."

Jess was a talented storyteller. Her erudite narration was gentle and eloquent, and I was completely immersed in the story.

"The Mouss Cliffs offered a vivid view of the stars. On clear days, Aneera prayed every single night. She would sleep in the morning, wake up at noon, and begin her prayers in the evening when the stars started to shine, only stopping at daybreak when their light faded away. Time passed, and on a night close to the end of that year, Marta had nearly reached her limit. Her life was so fragile that it might be snuffed out at any moment."

Jess's eyelids with long lashes slowly blinked. "It was a beautifully clear night. Among all the stars that sparkled in the sky, only one didn't appear that night—the star that Aneera wished to almost every single night. Aneera, who had an ominous premonition, hurried to Marta's side. On her way there, she found a glowing star that had fallen by the wayside."

<<A star fell?>>

I considered having a debate with her about the size of stars in the astronomical sense, but she lifted her index finger in a chiding manner. "Bad piggy. That's the kind of story it is, so please listen to the very end."

After a pause, she delved back into the tale. "The star that Aneera picked up was the very star she'd wished on. With that star in hand, Aneera raced to

Marta's side. By then, all of Marta's skin was concealed by scarlet flowers of blood—it looked as if all her skin had peeled off. Aneera prayed for her recovery and placed the star on Marta's chest. But nothing happened. Marta had already breathed her last.”

<<It's a tragic story.>>

“Yes... But it doesn't end here. There's more.”

The low rumbling of the waves resounded from afar.

“Aneera decided to take the star with her and consult her mage friend. The star shone so brightly that Aneera had to hide it. She purchased one of the scarlet cloths on sale for the New Year's Festival and wrapped the star within it. The moment the mage unraveled the package, they said with shock, ‘Life magic dwells within this star. Using it will likely bless you with protection from every curse and calamity in the world, and eternal life will be within your grasp.’”

<<That means Aneera's prayers for Marta's recovery were answered by the star, huh?>>

“I think so too. However, Aneera didn't attempt to use the star. She kept it wrapped in the scarlet cloth and tossed it at the sky before throwing herself off a cliff to end her own life. ‘What is the meaning of eternal life if Marta isn't there?’ Or so she thought. Ever since, Salvia, the wishing star, shines brightly with its crimson glow in the northern sky of Mesteria.”

I waited for a while, but she didn't say anything else. It seemed that it wasn't the kind of story that ended with a “and they all lived happily ever after.”

<<That was pretty sad...>>

It *did* sort of count as a yuri story in my books, but it didn't have the type of yuri trope I'd anticipated. In essence, it was a fable that attempted to explain why the wishing star in the northern sky was red, and it was a story special to this town at Mesteria's northernmost tip.

“I agree. But, Mister Pig... There's an extremely intriguing legend passed down about this story.” The lifted index finger she'd used to chide me moved next to Jess's cheek. “This is a legend you can only find in Mousskir. It's completely different from the legend of the wishing star told in other regions.

They say that the wishing star depicted in this story—a treasure that can grant you eternal life—actually exists in Mousskir. The star remains wrapped in the scarlet cloth near one of the cliffs where Aneera jumped, waiting for someone to find it.”

<<Interesting. *Very* interesting.>>

Jess swallowed audibly before looking straight into my eyes. “Mister Pig, are you willing to join me in solving our last mystery? I want to hunt for the treasure with this legend as our lead.”

Silence.

<<...I mean, I don’t mind trying, of course, but are you sure you just gave me an accurate account of the story? I’m not telling you to get every single word right, but if you can’t guarantee that you’ve remained faithful to all your sources, the facts you’ve given me won’t serve as clues.>>

She nodded. “You can trust me. I repeatedly perused credible books published by trustworthy sources stored in the palace library.”

<<Are they truly reliable?>> I asked once again, just in case.

“Yes. Who do you think I am?”

*A blonde modest-chested sweet angel virg—*

She flatly cut me off. “Never mind. Please don’t say it.” She stood up from the bed. “Let’s get a move on. I want to look at the Mouss Cliffs in person and start gleaning information from there.”

<<Sure. Since you’ve got a plan in mind, let’s go.>>

I began walking toward the door. Jess called out to me from behind. “Mister Pig, you’re always willing to indulge me when I’m being willful, and...I love that part of you.”

Waves noisily roared as they crashed against stone. The Mouss Cliffs, as it turned out, were made of startlingly white rock. We traced the very edge of them as we walked. The cliffs seemed at least roughly a hundred meters high—about as tall as Big Ben. Great white boulders were carelessly scattered below

us, and chilly dark blue water splashed against them, tossing pale blue water droplets all over. It seemed like a place where a criminal would be cornered in a police TV drama.

When I stood along the edge of the cliff, an odd chill rose up my body, and my pig legs shuddered. I felt on the verge of remembering something important, but my thoughts kept running into pure white walls, blocking those memories away.

The first place we headed to was a small, isolated church painted in white that had been constructed near the cliff. It was apparently called the “Maidens Church.” We walked in.

Past its doors was a tranquil hall where the calm song of the waves, softened by the walls, echoed. There were no humans in sight. Wooden benches for worship were lined up one after another, and at the altar facing the entrance was the statue of a young woman. Her left hand was on her chest, and her right hand was raised straight at the heavens—it was Vatis, the founder of the royal court.

“According to my research, Lady Vatis erected this building in honor of Miss Aneera and Miss Marta. Take a look for yourself.” Jess pointed at the white wall decorated with colorful wall paintings. “The wall paintings faithfully depict the two women’s story. The painting here is likely depicting when Miss Marta passed away. Next to it is when Miss Aneera sought out one of the cloths during the New Year’s Festival while hiding the wishing star...”

There was even a painting of Aneera throwing the star from a cliff, but it didn’t seem to be distinctive enough to give us clues to find where the wishing star—or, well, treasure—was hidden just by itself. Sadly, I couldn’t spot anything defining landmarks that could help us to narrow down the location. The scenery seemed mundane enough that it could be just about anywhere in the vicinity.

<<Hmm. There’s even a church dedicated to them that has the royal court’s seal of approval. The tale of Aneera and Marta should be relatively renowned among the people of Mesteria.>>

“It is. I hear that, even now, many travelers seeking eternal life visit this land.”

In a small voice, she added that none of them had seemingly yielded results.

<<So you want eternal life too?>> Our journey was an expedition to the North to find the wishing star—or at least, that was what Jess had claimed. Perhaps she'd had her sights set on this place because she learned of the two women's tale, just like all those other travelers.

"Um... That's...not really the case..." she muttered, reluctant to tell me the real reason.

I couldn't find the motivation to probe further into the topic after seeing her reaction, so I changed the subject. As I trotted along, I observed the wall paintings and voiced my cynical thoughts that ruined all hopes and dreams. <<If finding the treasure were as simple as searching every nook and cranny of the cliffs from one end to another, someone would have found it long ago. No one can resist the temptation of eternal life, after all.>>

"Yes... I think so too."

That said, it would be a waste to jump to conclusions this quickly. <<But since we're already here, how about we head down and see what's at the bottom of the cliffs? It's going to be a long walk though.>>

Jess nodded enthusiastically. "I can handle anything! Bring it on!"

We left the church and looked for a way down the cliffs. After following the edge of the cliffs for a while, we eventually reached a downward slope. One part of the cliffs sank into a valley, and we followed a slender path that twisted and turned before it finally led us to the coast.

We'd reached sea level much faster than I'd thought. Innumerable fist-sized rocks piled up at the foot of the cliffs like an off-white carpet.

It really felt like what you'd expect from the northern extremity of a nation. The only things to see were the navy waters and white cliffs. The ocean looked frosty and lonesome.

I noticed something. <<Hey, look at the rocky outcrop—I mean, the stone of the cliffs.>>

Jess was slightly flushed as she panted. "Is there a lead?"

<<You could say that.>> Together, we inspected the white rock surface. <<Try touching it a bit.>>

Dutifully, Jess felt the white cliff with her hand. The moment her hand made contact with the stone, fine white fragments crumbled down one after another. When Jess grabbed a lump of protruding rock, the entire white mass broke off easily.

<<This is the chalk variety—I mean, a type of brittle limestone. The sea can easily whittle it down, which is why it can create precipitous cliffs like these.>>

“Oho!”

*Looks like she’s gained an eccentric verbal tic...* <<Now then, let’s take a look at the ocean. You can see Terminus Island in the distance. Can you tell me what the silhouette is shaped like?>>

Jess knitted her eyebrows together and narrowed her eyes. On the other end of her gaze was a most peculiar silhouette, as if someone had placed a block of tofu on the horizon. “It looks rectangular.”

<<Exactly. That island’s encircled by perpendicular cliffs as well. It’s likely made of some kind of brittle stone, just like the ones here. Even still, don’t you think that shape is weird? I’ve never seen such an island before in my entire life.>>

“You...think so?” She sounded unsure.

Realization suddenly hit me. Since Vatis had submerged most islands during the Dark Ages, only two were left in Mesteria. Since there was no concept of what a normal island should look like, the citizens of Mesteria had no way of noticing that the island’s shape was unusual.

<<Yeah, I’m sure. Since it’s an island on the open sea, it’s exposed to the elements. If it’s made of soft rock, the corners should be gradually chipped away by the wind and rain, making it look round.>>

She hummed thoughtfully. “Oh, you’re right.”

<<But from what we can see, that’s not the case. Its summit is too flat—as if that place, and that place alone, is under some kind of protection.>>



That was all I told her for now—I was going to keep the conclusion to myself at the moment. I stared at the white rocks below my trotters as I continued, <<Well then, let's say that there are indeed hints alluding to the treasure's location in the story you told me. But before everything else, I have to address something: there's one clear lie in the story of Aneera and Marta that actually existed even before the Dark Ages.>>

Jess blinked in surprise. "Huh? What might it be?"

<<I'm sure you can figure it out too, Jess. Here's a hint: what color is Salvia?>>

"It's red."

<<And why is that?>> *Just to be clear, I'm not talking about the surface temperature of stars as astronomical objects.*

"Um... It's because it was wrapped in a crimson cloth when she threw it at the sky."

<<Now, where did that crimson cloth come from?>>

"Aneera bought fabric available on the market for the New Year's Festival—Wait..."

<<Looks like you got it. I expected nothing less from a blonde modest—I mean, my owner.>>

Eyes widening, Jess spoke rapidly with excitement. "The story should date back to a time before the Dark Ages when mages lived in peace. It doesn't make sense for her to buy red cloth if that's the case."

<<Precisely. They only started dying fabric with madder root powder in the middle of the Dark Ages. Before that, they used the blood of the family heads. Since each family dyed their cloth with their own blood, there couldn't possibly be scarlet fabric sold on the market before the Dark Ages. In conclusion, the story of Aneera and Marta was created after the Dark Ages, or it was at least altered in some way.>>

If this were a deduction scene in a game, my last line would definitely be highlighted in some way in the dialog box.

<<Considering the fact that a different legend—the story that whoever

obtains the wishing star would be granted one wish, any wish—is circulating throughout the whole nation, I’m more inclined toward the possibility that someone came up with a new tale after the Dark Ages rather than the possibility that an ancient tale was modified in some way. I doubt that two contradicting stories about the wishing star would survive in tandem for so long in the same region.>>

Jess seemed to have noticed something because she cast down her gaze. It was about time we faced the truth—the truth hidden in the northernmost end of this nation that might be as hideous as a monster.

<<We have an island under some kind of mysterious protection. Then there’s a story that was fabricated after the Dark Ages. By adding a certain clue to the mix, I can make an educated guess about the treasure’s location.>>

“O-Oh, I see...” Her eyes were awkwardly glued to the ground. One of her hands was clenched into a fist, and she placed it against her chest. It was her habit when she was anxious about something.

I recalled her words. *“Mister Pig, are you willing to join me in solving our last mystery? I want to hunt for the treasure with this legend as our lead.”*

This was a mystery. And since I’d accepted her challenge, I was duty bound to unravel it properly. <<Let’s think about the mystery of Terminus Island first. Why has an island made of fragile rock preserved its unnatural square corners? As for how it managed to do that, the answer’s simple. Only magic’s capable of protecting such a big island. The Terminus Island is under the magical protection of either a mage before Vatis’s time or Vatis herself.>>

Jess nodded but looked conflicted. No one could have probably ever predicted that the island’s mystery would be uncovered by the input of a person from another world who had the knowledge to recognize it wasn’t a normal shape.

<<This conclusion then helps shed light on *why* they did it. There is or was something on that island that a mage wanted to dedicate an outstanding amount of power to protect,>> I continued. <<That’s the reason Vatis didn’t submerge the Terminus Island even though she got rid of almost all of the other ones. Or, the island was already under some kind of protection, and she wasn’t

capable of sinking it.>>

Jess gazed at the rectangular silhouette on the horizon with a faraway look in her eyes. It almost seemed like an artificial structure.

<<The next question: what's on the island? I think it's a relatively straightforward conclusion considering the way our conversation has gone, but since we're solving a mystery, let's go through our leads one by one like a detective. This is where the lie in the story of Aneera and Marta comes in.>>

"You mean the lie you pointed out earlier, yes? The story implies that a treasure that can grant eternal life is left behind in Mousskir, but it makes no sense for it to be from prehistoric times. So, the tale must have been created after the Dark Ages."

*She's a great help for summarizing it clearly and succinctly.* <<Indeed. Naturally, you would start getting curious about who did such a thing. I can't give you a confident answer, but I have a good guess. It's likely the person who built the church that imparted Aneera and Marta's story of lies to the future generations—someone who ended the Dark Ages and has written the true history of this world for her own convenience.>>

"...Lady Vatis, right?"

<<Yep. Despite systematically destroying one island after another, Vatis didn't sink the Terminus Island. This shows that she *definitely* knew something was there. Then, she likely cooked up such a story. These two facts combined hint at one of two possibilities.>>

Seeing Jess's encouraging nod, I declared, <<Theory one: Vatis knew there was a treasure on Terminus Island and created the story as a hint for others. What a kind lady. Theory two: Despite appropriating the treasure for herself, Vatis deliberately created a story suggesting it's there to give treasure seekers a false trail. In this scenario, she's a rather mean person.>>

"Which one do you think it is, Mister Pig?" Jess asked carefully. At the same time, her question also sounded like confirmation of the answer.

<<The last piece of evidence that will literally point us in the right direction is inside your bag.>> She jerked suddenly in reaction. <<You've got Ruta's Eye that

Hortis gave you, don't you?>>

“Oh, you can see through everything, Mister Pig...” As she spoke, Jess took out a sphere from her bag. It was a glass sphere with gold ornaments filled with a clear liquid. The eyeball was suspended within and aimed unflinchingly in one direction. Even when Jess moved her hand, the pupil and iris remained staring toward one spot like a compass.

On the other end of its gaze was the northern ocean—or more precisely, the rectangular shadow floating on it.

<<When you got off the ship, you checked Ruta's Eye, didn't you? But you put it away immediately. From my pig's eye level, I wasn't able to see the eyeball itself, but I could easily deduce what it was doing back then.>>

“You could...?”

<<Yep. When you were checking it, you didn't turn to look at any specific direction in your environment. Normally, it's an instinctive reaction to check the direction the eye is indicating. But you didn't. Why's that?>>

Jess swallowed audibly.

<<It's because it was pointing in the exact direction you were expecting it to. Well then, what was the direction you were anticipating? You went out of your way to check it after our long northbound journey, so of course, it has to be north. Ruta's Eye was indicating farther north of Mesteria's northernmost point. From the very beginning, you must have traveled while expecting there to be a treasure at the end of your journey.>>

She nodded quietly.

<<You didn't begin your travels to search for the wishing star that you could never reach like you claimed—your actual goal is that treasure, isn't it?>>

For a moment, there was only silence between us.

Eventually, she spoke up in a frail whisper. “I didn't exactly make my journey just to find the treasure... But yes, that's correct. One of the goals of my journey is to obtain this legendary treasure.”

Our northbound voyage hadn't been a simple tourist trip or a fairy tale about

a maiden and a pig chasing after a star. All along, it had been a mission to find a specific treasure hidden in the northernmost tip of Mesteria. And I had an idea about what it was.

I could feel that I was approaching the heart of the matter one step at a time. <<In conclusion, that must mean Vatis's treasure is still here in the north—on Terminus Island. Therefore, the first theory I proposed is correct. Vatis created the story as a hint to tell others about the treasure hidden on the Terminus Island.>>

After a moment of hesitation, Jess said, "In that case, do you think that Miss Aneera's wishing star, which grants eternal life, is still on the island?"

*No, not quite.* <<The wishing star is only a metaphor. If you pause to consider what Ruta's Eye does, you can easily find the answer. The treasure hidden on Terminus Island is one of the supreme treasures of Mesteria—the Salvation Chalice. Am I wrong?>>

Jess looked stunned. She placed a hand against her small chest. "You've...even deduced *that*...?"

Witnessing Ruta's Eye had been a crucial hint that had helped me realize the identity of the treasure. It wasn't the wishing star; it was something only similar on the surface but different at its core—a treasure that we already knew about.

<<Ruta's Eye, if I remember correctly, is a tool that indicates the location of the Contract Stakes dispersed across Mesteria. Vatis used it to amass the stakes and obtain an indomitable power, didn't she?>>

"Yes."

<<However, we used the last stake in Mesteria to lift Ceres's curse during our campaign to capture Send-Off Island. So why is this thing pointing north? It's because there's still one more supreme treasure made with a Contract Stake left in this world—the Salvation Chalice.>>

Her silence was the most deafening "yes" I could get.

<<There're supposed to be three supreme treasures in Mesteria, right? The Contract Stake that can grant miraculous powers to any life-form. The Destruction Spear that can take any life. And finally, the Salvation Chalice that

can save any life.>>

I recalled how I'd analyzed the history text with Jess. Both of us had been enthralled.

<<But as it turned out, these three aren't items of equal rank. There isn't just one Contract Stake—there were originally many of them hidden across the land. The Destruction Spear that killed Hortis was made with one such Contract Stake as its core. It's reasonable to assume that the remaining Salvation Chalice is the same as the Destruction Spear—it was made with a Contract Stake.>>

Jess gazed at the uncanny eyeball pointing obstinately toward the north. "Yes... You're right, Mister Pig. After Mister Hortis—after my father passed away, I realized that Ruta's Eye, which he'd given me, was still indicating a specific place. It pointed straight to the north."

*Why hadn't she come to me for advice at that precise moment?*

"There weren't supposed to be any Contract Stakes left, so why was it pointing north? When I thought about it, the Destruction Spear came to mind, just like how you made the connection. According to Mister Shravis's analysis, the Destruction Spear was a lethal weapon that used the Contract Stake's extensive mana reserves as its power source. He said that the evidence suggested its creator wasn't someone from prehistoric times but Lady Vatis herself."

I recalled what Hortis, Jess's father, had said: *"It's so shabby. Hard to imagine it's an enchantment from prehistoric times."*

*So that's what he meant back then. While his body was broken down by the Destruction Spear, that pervert instantaneously analyzed the enchantment and figured out it wasn't something left behind from prehistoric times but a relatively new relic made by Vatis.*

"I wasn't just aware of the popular wishing star legend—I also knew the Mousskir version," Jess explained. "I realized the overlap between it and the unobtained Salvation Chalice. A treasure that grants eternal life and a treasure that can save any life—I thought that perhaps they referred to the same thing."

<<Looks like you were quite the detective.>>

“It...seems so, yes.” Her speech was hesitant, almost as if something was intimidating her.

I summed things up. <<So the answers to the mysteries presented are as follows. The story of Aneera and Marta is said to be from before the Dark Ages, and that’s a big fat lie. In truth, it was a story cooked up by Vatis that is supposed to hint at the location of the Salvation Chalice, which she also created. Its hiding place isn’t the Mouss Cliffs—it’s the island Vatis didn’t submerge that’s floating on the faraway horizon: the Terminus Island.>>

With a face of what seemed to be resignation, Jess smiled. “You figured it all out in the blink of an eye. To think that you were truly able to pinpoint the location of a treasure just by using an old tale as your guide... You never fail to leave me in awe, Mister Pig.”

*I mustn’t be misled by her high praises.* <<Then, Jess, can I ask you one thing?>> She must have expected this because she looked at me with unease. I continued, <<Why are you trying to find the Salvation Chalice by yourself to begin with? Why did you keep it a secret from me? Why aren’t you with Shravis or one of our other comrades?>>

She cast her eyes downward. “I...I will tell you tomorrow morning. Um, can we go back to our hotel?”

<<Why—>>

“I’m sure there must be a delightful dinner waiting for us. It’s the last night of our journey... Let’s have fun and enjoy it, okay?”

She’d cut me off. And that was when I realized something: Jess was smiling, however, she looked as if she was about to burst into tears any moment now. I couldn’t read her at all. What was she thinking? What kind of burden was she enduring and refusing to share?

“...Please,” she whispered. “Once tomorrow arrives, I promise I’ll face the monster. So could you wait just a little while longer? I still want to relish in my *rome-comm* a tiny bit more.”

A large wave crashed onto the shore nearby. Water was scattered into the air with a roar.

*Welp, it's not like I'm in any sort of rush. I'm sure it won't be too late to confront the monster called truth after making proper preparations. <<That sounds like a plan. Let's head back before we get cold.>>*

Daytime in winter was brief. As we walked back up onto the cliffs, our environment rapidly grew darker. By the time we'd finished climbing all the way up while huffing and puffing, the sun had already shied below the horizon, leaving only a dim glow in the western sky. The clouds offered no view of the moon or the stars.

The incident happened when we were walking along the edge of the cliffs.

"Oh."

It sounded like Jess made a noise of realization reflexively, and I looked at her. A crimson glow colored her cheek. My eyes widened.

Something was burning brightly on the other side of the thicket near her. It was a big, solitary animal. Fire engulfed it from head to toe, and it writhed around in agony. At first, I thought it was a deer, but it wasn't. Its neck was eerily long, and its legs were much longer and more slender than a deer's as well.

It was a beast I'd only ever seen in Mesteria: a heckripon.

The big, peculiar mammal struggled desperately with its four long legs as it slowly burned to death. Its elongated neck squirmed around like an earthworm. Eventually, it collapsed and stopped moving.

The pungent smell of scorched flesh hit my nostrils. Under the illumination of the embers, I saw Jess chewing on her bottom lip remorsefully.

<<Did you... Did you do that, Jess?>> My voice was shaky.

Ever so slowly, Jess slightly nodded at me.

<<That was a heckripon, wasn't it? It's one of the surveillance tools of the royal court. Why did you—>>

"I will explain everything tomorrow."

That was all she said before she began advancing in the direction of our hotel



with hurried steps.



Jess had her dinner in a grand hall with a lofty ceiling. All alone at a table in the very corner of the room, she dined while listening to the merry clinking of tableware. Everywhere else, guests in groups of two or more enjoyed their quiet and peaceful conversations.

Each and every one of the dishes carried over on white plates was extravagant, but Jess didn't look like she was having much fun with her shoulders slumped and eyebrows slightly furrowed. Perhaps she felt awkward with a secret in her heart because her mental conversation with me kept growing cold even when we tried to liven it up. I also honestly wasn't in the mood to rattle off jokes.

*If only I were at least in the form of a human at a time like this... If I were someone who could sit across the table from her, eat as I pleased without any difficulties, and maybe even spur on a lively conversation with her like the other people around us, then...*

This hopeful wish had filled the cavity in my barbecued pork ribs countless times in the past. But recently, even imagining that fantasy filled with longing left a bitter taste in my mouth.

*I mean, try picturing it, my brethren. Sitting across from a beautiful, flawless maiden at a fancy table in an elegant restaurant is me. Me. A bland and lackluster virgin. Ten out of ten people would agree that we look mismatched—like the punch line in a comedy.*

*I'm not a hero with mastery over martial arts nor a royal prince. At the end of the day, I'm only a stupid scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who ate pig liver without proper preparation.*

*Maybe I'm exactly where I belong—lying on my stomach on the floor like this.*

I looked up at Jess, who seemed to have her head in the clouds as she helped herself to a white fish that had been cut into small pieces. I didn't know what to say to her.

In the end, Jess impassively finished her food before returning to her room. Just like before, the humming of the waves resounded inside the spacious

room.

After taking off her shoes and socks, Jess plopped down on the gigantic bed and began staring at me.

<<Can I help you?>>

She began swinging her bare legs. “Today marks the end of Royal Year 129.”

*Oh, right.* The last day of our journey also happened to be the conclusion of a long, long year. <<Huh. It’s been roughly six months since your departure from the countryside in summer, hasn’t it? Must have been a very tumultuous year for you.>>

“I have to agree. Back when I was just a servant, I never could have imagined that my life would change so much after half a year.”

<<Can’t blame you...>>

I steadily and furtively shuffled closer to her bare legs. And that was when she abruptly stopped swinging them. “During the New Year’s Festival, it’s tradition to spend the end of the year with your most precious people and to exchange presents.” The corners of her lips pulled up into a bright smile. “How about we exchange presents too?”

*Does she mean...?* <<Uh, I’d love to, yeah, but there’s nothing I can offer you right now. The only thing I could do is literally cut out my flesh and give you my body...>>

After all, I was a scrawny four-eyes who’d turned into a pig in another world—I had nothing. If I *had* to come up with something that I currently possessed, it was probably only my virgin status, which I had defended with great care over nineteen years.

Jess seemed to be contemplating for a while, but soon, her mouth broke into an impish grin. “Then please give me your virginity, Mister Pig.”

My mind stuttered.

The ensuing silence stretched on, and Jess began to lose her cool. “Ah, um, of course, I’m not talking about now!”

*Seriously, what in the world are you going on about, good madam?!*

I wrung my distressed brain tissue for a different topic. <<What will you give me, Jess?>>

To my surprise, Jess replied immediately. “On the eventual day when you give me your present, Mister Pig, I shall offer you the same thing.”

I could feel my brain bluescreening, refusing to process the given information. <<You will?>>

“I will.”

<<My personal suggestion is to think twice about that.>>

“I won’t.”

Silence. Jess’s expression was dead serious, and I couldn’t find it in me to joke or make light of it.

Jess slowly exhaled. “This agreement should count as us enjoying the New Year’s Festival to the fullest!” A thought occurred to her, and she took a piece of paper out from the bag she’d left beside the bed. I’d seen it countless times by now—it was the list of things she wanted to do. She looked at one of the items on the bottom of the list and marked it with her finger.

Suddenly, my nitpicky brain began nagging me. <<Jess, the New Year’s Festival happens every year, right? Why is something mundane like that on your bucket list?>>

With her cheeks puffed out, Jess glowered at me. “That part of you is the reason you’ve stayed a virgin for your entire lifetime despite being such a charming person.”

<<Uh... Could you please pick one between praising me and disparaging me?>>

She huffed. “I’m praising you.” The ends of her bare legs, her ankles, fidgeted and rubbed against each other a little as she muttered something. It sounded like words that spilled out subconsciously. “It’s...not the standard kind of ‘things I want to do’ list.”

*What does she mean by that? Are there life to-do lists out there that aren’t standard?*

Jess looked away. She refused to meet my eyes as she whispered, “It’s a catalog of things I want to do with *you*, Mister Pig.”

Her words struck me like a punch in the face.

Memories flashed across my mind. Sitting at a campfire. Gazing at shooting stars. Getting lost. Arriving at Rach Valley, an area famous for its wine. Searching for an enchanted hot spring at Broperver. Going on a voyage from the Alte Plains. I’d been puzzled, thinking that she was checking off things during the most insignificant occasions.

And now, I knew that I’d been right. They were all insignificant things when you did them *alone*. But to Jess, they weren’t anything close to “insignificant.” Ultimately, they were all things she’d wanted to experience with *me*.

Every word tumbled out of my mind—I was speechless.

“I had been living in solitude for my entire life, but after I met you, I realized something for the very first time,” Jess said serenely. “There are some things out there that you can’t do alone. It seems like you can do them by yourself, but you would remain blind to the many new and wonderful faces of the big wide world.”

For a while, Jess and I stared into each other’s eyes.

That is, until a commotion filtered into our room from the lower floor. My intuition picked up a voice mixed within that seemed somewhat familiar. When Jess noticed the stir, she stood up from the bed, barefoot. “Now then, shall we go to the baths?”

According to Jess, though they didn’t have thermal springs, this place was rich with underground water. Inside the spacious bathhouse covered with uniform white tiles was a vast bathtub filled to the brim with crystal clear hot water in a beautiful shade of aqua. Unknown herbs floated on the water’s surface, permeating the bathhouse with a mild and sophisticated fragrance.

All the guests in the hotel had access to the bathhouse, but at a glance, Jess and I were the only ones present. Within the dense steam was only the tireless rustling of flowing hot water echoing out.

No article of clothing covered Jess's frame. Thanks to the steam, her virgin annihilation effect was suppressed, but just in case, I immersed myself in the water while closing my eyes most of the time. When I lifted my eyelids by a margin, I saw Jess next to me with the water up to her shoulders. Her hands seemed somewhat restless—she was stroking her slender arms.

<<The bath here smells quite pleasant,>> I commented.

"I agree," she replied. "You also seem very delicious when you're simmering with herbs, Mister Pig."

<<Please don't eat me.>>

Possibly due to the fact that she was spending a lot of time with an otaku, she reacted snappily to whatever bizarre tangent my brain threw at her. "I would never!"

<<I'm sure that your bare legs are gaining a wonderful fragrance too.>>

"Please don't sniff me..."

<<I would never.>>

Jess giggled. After she'd had her fill of laughter, she let out a deep sigh and closed her eyes. "We're bathing together and enjoying silly banter... Mister Pig, this counts as a *rome-comm*, right?"

<<Yeah. Uh, probably.>>

"I'm so happy to hear that... I think I'm finally getting the gist of what a *rome-comm* is."

Within the almost entirely white bathhouse was white steam that drifted around like fog. When I looked away from Jess, I almost had the delusion that I was floating on a cloud.

There was a soft rattle. Someone had opened the door.

In the corner of my vision, I spotted Jess opening her eyes. "It sounds like someone else has come in."

A silhouette unhurriedly approached us from the entrance. There was the pitter-patter of small footsteps.

<<Is it one of the other guests?>> I wondered.

Was it all right for a pig like me to be in the bathtub? Actually, wait, was I even allowed in the bathhouse? Abruptly feeling like I shouldn't be here, I stretched out my bent knees.

The footsteps maintained a cautious rhythm as they steadily approached our direction. Their owner was possibly relatively light as the footsteps sounded small and gentle. I couldn't see them clearly inside the steam. But I could make out their silhouette. They had a small build—were they a young boy, perhaps? I craned my neck and observed the newcomer with rapt attention.

They might have left the door ajar since a chilly gust of wind darted across the room. Like curtains being pulled up before a play, the fog cleared. The newcomer fully entered my vision—they'd gotten much closer than I'd expected.

Slender, well-proportioned toes pressed against moist white tiles. Their nails were neatly trimmed. Bones drew faint contours along the dorsum of their feet, leading to petite ankles. The outlines gradually grew fuller as they reached their calves. Scars and bruises littered their knees. Their thighs had no unnecessary fat— *Oh, it's not a boy but a girl.* She looked to be a few years younger than Jess. Her silhouette constricted just above her hip bones and further up were her protruding ribs that showed since she was slim. Sitting on top of them was a diminutive chest that you might miss if you didn't pay attention. Her neck was so thin that it made her look helpless. Finally, her face—

It was a face I recognized.

She stopped and looked down at us as we bathed in the water.

Jess raised her voice. "Miss Ceres!" Was it just my mind—completely shaken from the sight of Ceres in her birthday suit—playing tricks on me, or did Jess's tone hint that she'd anticipated this encounter?

"Oh, Miss Jess, I'm so glad! Finally..." With a somewhat nervous expression, Ceres took a step closer to us. Even though I was at point-blank range, Ceres didn't even make an attempt to conceal what ought to have been out of sight. I noted her barely pigmented pale skin. Her fine body hair. And her slightly jiggling humble bo—



“Ah!” Jess gasped. “No, Miss Ceres, you mustn’t come any closer!” She stood up vigorously behind me, splashing water everywhere. And now, I was sandwiched between two naked maidens. In essence, we formed a ham sandwich. My wide pig’s field of vision vividly captured the bouncing boo—





“Waaah, I’m so sorry!” Panicked, Ceres flailed her hand around her shoulders. She took a step back and looked at Jess. “Um, what should I...?”

“No, um, well...” Jess hesitated. “I’m afraid your state of undress is the problem. Mister Pig is over here.”

Astonished, Ceres took a few more steps backward and immediately covered her modest chest with her right arm. Her left arm stretched out toward her thighs and only half cov— *No, stop right there. Ceres can hear the narration too,* I reminded myself.

Ceres whipped her head back and forth as she looked around her.

*Huh?*

It made no sense. She should be able to see me right in front of her. *So why is she looking in all kinds of directions?* Furthermore, I’d thoroughly described Ceres in the narration. As a mage, she should have heard every single word. It was simply absurd for her to miss my presence.

These very reasons caused me to be completely flabbergasted by Ceres’s next sentence.

Furrowing her eyebrows, Ceres asked, “Um... Mister Pig is here?”

## Chapter 5: My Fluffy Romantic Fantasy Is Wrong, As I Expected

Leaving behind the bewildered Ceres, Jess practically fled from the bathhouse. She promptly finished changing into her clothes with the aid of magic before walking down the cool corridor toward the exit.

After a short delay, I gave chase. For a moment, I thought I'd heard the familiar voice of a handsome hunk pursuing us, but Jess didn't stop. She repeatedly wiped the area around her eyes with her sleeves while she ran, as if it was the only thing she knew how to do. Completely clueless, I ran after her.

I wanted to organize my thoughts. Why was Jess running away from Ceres? Why hadn't Ceres been able to see me earlier? Why was Jess crying...?

Despite not even having the protection of her coat, Jess marched out of the accommodation's premises and raced down the inclined path we'd climbed this morning, single-mindedly making her way to the port.

The last night of the year left the streets deserted. The crimson cloths decorating the house roofs were dyed navy blue by the darkness as they fluttered in the northerly wind. When I looked down, the faint moonlight, intercepted by misty clouds, gently traced the cobblestone paving. It was so very cold at the northern extremity of Mesteria. I felt a spike of envy at the warm light flowing out from the houses—a sign of harmony and companionship.

Halfway down the slope, Jess's feet steadily slowed to a walk. Her shoulders heaved as she advanced toward the port without any of her possessions. "I'm so sorry... Mister Pig... I can't do this after all..." Her gait was so unsteady that my heart leaped to my throat.

<<Aren't you cold?>> That lame sentence was the only thing I could say to her.

"I was running, so not really..."

We passed through the residential district and came all the way near the shore. The coast was paved with robust stone, and ships of every size were moored at the orderly rows of wooden piers. There was barely a soul here either. Most of the townspeople were likely spending New Year's Eve in their own homes.

As we walked along the coastline of the vast harbor, Jess slowly addressed the elephant in the room. "I said I'd speak to you tomorrow morning, but...it looks like I must confess everything right now." Her voice had a grave tone that I'd never heard before, and I felt my pork fillet tensing up.

"Our delightful journey... Our quest to find a star ends here." Something trickled down her cheeks—it was sweat, but it looked just like tears. However, she spoke clearly. "It's time for us to face the monster called truth."

<<Are you going to tell me what's really going on?>>

"Of course. This concerns you as well, after all."

The sound of a maiden's solitary footsteps bounced off the cobblestone path of the dark port town. Jess abruptly halted, turned around to face me, and crouched down. "It's been a long time since I've patted you, hasn't it?"

She forced herself to smile as she stretched out her arm at me. Her hand moved—it should be stroking my head. That was what it seemed like in my eyes. But I didn't feel her touch. I *did* faintly sense her body heat, but—

"I wasn't trying to be mean." A tear flowed down from the corner of her eye. "It's just that I can't touch you anymore, Mister Pig."

My eyes widened. <<What did you just say?>>

"You can try it too. Here, shake my hand." With misty eyes, Jess offered her hand to me, holding it close to the ground. I lifted my right front leg before placing my trotter on top—and failed. My forefoot passed right through her hand.

Jess tugged up the corners of her lips but only sorrow filled her eyes. She opened her mouth.

“This is the truth. You don’t have a corporeal body.”

*Huh...? Wait, what?*

“...That’s why no one can sense your presence other than me.”





My mind was in shambles. <<Hold on, wha... How can that...? Why...? You're the only one who can perceive that I'm here, Jess...? Am I dreaming or something? Am I not in the real world right now?>>

"No, this is reality. To be precise, your spirit is dwelling within me. That's why I'm the only one who can see you. I can also tell what you're thinking. You truly exist in my world—and solely in my world."

<<My...spirit? You almost make it sound like I died...>>

Jess stood up and began walking again. I followed her, still shaken.

"You *did* die. You experienced certain death in Mesteria." She spoke without turning around to face me, and her voice gradually began trembling.

*Pause. What in the world is going on?*

"It sounds like you've lost your memories, so I shall tell you what happened. Very late on the night that you kissed me, you threw yourself off a cliff in the royal capital. I had a bad premonition, and I woke up with a start. I realized you weren't on the bed. Then, I searched all over the royal capital and finally found you, Mister Pig. But by the time I did, your body was already... It was already too late, and..."

The sea breeze felt like it had grown even colder.

Out of the blue, the memory of a starry sky blurred with tears floated to the surface of my mind. I'd stood on the edge of the cliff. I'd climbed stairs while thinking back upon my precious memories with Jess. I'd secretly sneaked out of Jess's bed.

The waves splashed systematically against the shore, resonating apathetically.

"I barely remember anything that happened next. According to Mister Shravis, I became very emotional and was deaf to everyone who tried to talk to me. He mentioned that there were times when I tried to throw myself off a cliff or hang myself. At the very end, I apparently calmed down after being injected with sedatives, but he said that I refused to eat and gradually wasted away."

Hearing the ghastly story paralyzed my entire body. There was also a hint of accusation in Jess's detached tone—no, perhaps I was only imagining it due to

my own guilt.

“What I can recall vividly is a day after some time had passed. It was when I touched my scarf that was soaked with your blood. I can remember sensing some kind of mysterious heat within my body that, for some reason, also seemed very familiar.”

I swallowed. <<Your scarf...>> There was an item that came to mind—the cloth stained reddish brown in Jess’s bag that I’d caught a glimpse of.

It was the scarf Jess had bought half a year ago in Baptsaze to hide her collar. It was the scarf I’d chosen especially for her. It had been a scarf in the color of a crystal clear and slightly shallow lake.

Jess had always worn it somewhere on her. Even after being freed from the collar she had to conceal, she’d wrapped it around her wrist or arm and hid it under her sleeve. Despite it not serving a fashionable purpose at all, she’d always, *always* worn it.

Perhaps that had remained true when she’d discovered my corpse. And then, it had been soaked through with blood because I was so... Because Jess was so...

“I went to Mister Shravis for advice about the strange sense of heat I felt when I touched the scarf. I was so sure that he’d say I was imagining things, but he didn’t.”

The void within my memories was being pieced together with Jess’s words. It was admittedly a peculiar feeling. And when I pictured Jess interacting with the Prince Deadpan Reply while I wasn’t around, for some reason, I—

I closed my eyes briefly. <<What was his answer?>>

“He said that the heat I’d felt might be your spirit. Mister Shravis mentioned that grandfather had told him something once—the bond between the home world of the pigs and Mesteria will sever one day. If all of you don’t return before then, your spirits will have nowhere to go.”

I recalled the words of Eavis, the previous king and Jess’s grandfather. *“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.”*

<<Even after the host pig’s body perished, I failed to return to my original world...>> I muttered. <<Does that mean the connection between the two worlds has already been broken?>>

“I can’t give you a confident answer about anything...” She paused. “He said that another obvious scenario is that my subconscious magic detained you, and there’s a high chance of that. But either way, your spirit didn’t return to your world, instead possessing me.”

*That’s ridiculous* was what I wanted to think, but our current situation was the most irrefutable evidence of her words.

“However, the problem is that nature has a rule where only one spirit can be expressed with one body. Even if the heat I sensed was your spirit, Mister Shravis’s opinion was that your spirit was only being held back by my spirit in an extremely twisted manner. He said that you’ve become a silent ghost who’s a mere shell of your formal self. That at this point, there was nothing we could do.”

<<So that’s why I don’t remember a thing from that period.>>

“Yes. I borrowed an ancient book on soul magic from the library and studied the matter. I think you’ve seen it many times. It’s that book with a red cover.”

A book with a red cover—I remembered seeing Jess reading it at night and also seeing it stashed inside her bag. *Soul magic?* I frowned.

“Soul magic is a field of magic that concerns spirits, life, and death. Little is known about the subject, and the results are unpredictable. It’s also very dangerous, so it has always been categorized as dark magic—a taboo field, so to speak.”

Spontaneously, Jess’s question from once upon a time flashed across my mind. *“Then... What would you do if I were actually a very bad girl?”*

<<You...put yourself in so much danger for me?>> My voice was shaky.

“No. I did all of it for myself,” she declared firmly. “I learned that if I used your blood, which was soaked into my scarf, it might be possible to detach your spirit with soul magic. The moment I heard that, I walked down the path of taboo without a shred of hesitation.”

<<Taboo... What kind of things did you do?>>

“I did something very bad that I could never tell you, Mister Pig.”

Those words killed all the courage in me. I was scared to ask her more, and I quailed. My body relinquished all thought and walked behind her on autopilot.

She continued, “I ended up having to leave the capital in the middle of my mission, but...I still persevered in my research and somehow managed to successfully separate your spirit.”

That got my attention. *She had to leave the capital in the middle of her mission?*

Jess didn’t stop to clear up my doubts. “And then, you regained your awareness, Mister Pig. But I wasn’t competent enough to grant you a body... From my perspective, you look like you always have. I can also read your thoughts. However, you aren’t corporeal. Other people can’t see you. I...also lacked the ability to broadcast your thoughts to other people. I ended up being the only person in all of Mesteria who could perceive your existence. I’m sorry...” She hung her head.

<<There’s nothing you have to apologize for. Honestly, I owe you a big one since I wasn’t able to go back to my original world.>>

Even from behind her, I could see her tears falling from her cheeks. I wanted to say something to comfort her, but I didn’t know what to say.

Meanwhile, another part of my mind thought that it all finally made sense. Now that I thought back on our journey, almost no one had noticed the presence of a pig. No one had ever mentioned a pig in their conversations, and they’d only ever looked in my direction when Jess had turned to face me. The reason was simple: the people we’d encountered hadn’t been able to see me, the pig.

The gazes of doubt directed at me hadn’t been condescending gazes at a

strange pig that was mismatched next to a beautiful maiden. They hadn't been looking at me—they'd only been straining their eyes at the space that had Jess's attention, trying to see what was there.

That was when a horrifying realization dawned on me.

Jess was the only one who could see me. In that case, from a bystander's point of view, she'd been traveling alone the entire time. All her conversations with me had seemed like her talking into the void to the onlookers.

*Hm? <<Hang on... Wait.>>* I frowned. *<<That doesn't add up. When we went to the apple orchard in Fairy Creek, the elderly man living there, Arle, had a young wife. Her name was Ferrin, I think. She noticed me from the very beginning, and above all, she even stroked my head.>>*

A moment of silence.

Her reaction was different from what I'd expected. Jess continued to tread on with feeble footsteps. The complex coastline of the bay was just a tad too long for a stroll at night.

*"So...you really were able to see Missus Ferrin."*

I couldn't make sense of her words. *<<What do you mean by that?>>*

Just after I said that I recalled our conversation from back then.

*"That aside, remember his wife? Ferrin, was it? She looked really young. They must be a couple with an impressive age gap."*

*"...Oh. So that's why..."*

Back then, I did have the vague feeling that we hadn't been on the same wavelength.

"Yes, it's exactly what you suspect. I wasn't able to see Missus Ferrin." I felt as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped on my head. "Mister Arle sounded like he could see her, and your thoughts were all based on the belief that you could see her too. That's why I went along with your narratives, believing that she must be there—I just couldn't see her..."

Ah... I sighed with a mix of regret and melancholy in my heart. *How could I have missed it? I should have put two and two together since I saw that gravestone along the creek bank.*

Back then, Jess had said, *"The surface has eroded, so it's difficult to make out, but words are engraved into the stone. There's one set of characters over here, then another over here... Is it a name, perhaps? I can decipher one of them. It says 'Pommy.'"*

<<There were two sets of characters—two names on the gravestone at Fairy Creek, weren't there? One was the name of the elderly couple's daughter, just like Arle had said.>> I hesitated. <<But the other—>>

"It was likely the name of his wife, Missus Ferrin..."

*So that's the whole story. Just like I'd suspected at first, a monster was hiding in that apple orchard, just like all the other places—a hideous monster called truth.* <<Arle didn't just lose his daughter in that drowning accident. He also lost his wife, Ferrin. Does that mean...the Ferrin I could see was a ghost?>>

"I'm not sure whether that's the most accurate description. But one fact that we've now confirmed is that even though I couldn't see her, she was visible to you, who has been reduced to a spirit. Perhaps Arle's fixation with her ended up tying Missus Ferrin's spirit to the world of the living."

*She's saying that a strong obsession caused a similar effect to soul magic.* Huh. <<That explains why she seemed unnaturally young... It's because she looked exactly like she did when she passed away.>>

I recalled Ferrin, who'd been sitting in silence the entire time, and how she'd stroked me even though I didn't have a physical body. Was she a spirit of the dead that only Arle could see, just like how only Jess could see me? Had I been able to see and touch her since I was a spirit, and vice versa?

The words of that pretentious peacock who'd tried to hit on Jess backed up this hypothesis. *"You went to a place like that?! It must've been the most boring place you've ever gone to. There's only a loony old geezer living around there, right? He keeps tossing his excess apples into the creek, and sometimes, they wash up rotten here. He's a big nuisance. Seriously, I don't know what's going on in his head. Ha ha ha!"*

Jess had been telling the truth after all. *I've become a spirit who can only be observed by her or my kind.*

That was when I noticed yet another detail. <<Wait... All the mirrors around me so far have been either cloudy or flipped to the other side, rendering them completely useless... Were you possibly responsible for that, Jess?>>

Her steps pressing onward slowed even more. "Yes... Because you won't...show up in the reflection, Mister Pig, and... Nngh..." Choked sobbing began breaking up her words and agony tore me apart.

*It's evident now. There can only be one reason spurring Jess on to relentlessly march north to hunt for the Salvation Chalice. She desperately sought it out to save me, a mere spirit clinging to life in a twisted manner.*

*But there's something I don't understand. Why did she keep such an important truth from me? Why didn't she ask for Shravis's help? Why did she choose to run away from Cere—*

"Can't you tell?" Jess's walk ground to a halt. She turned around and looked at me with a face drenched with tears. "Your condition is alarmingly unstable. In fact, during the period right after I succeeded at separating your spirit, you would constantly appear and disappear erratically... Every single time, I felt as if my heart were being clawed to shreds."

*Oh...* Now that she mentioned it, I couldn't vividly remember when I'd returned to her side.

"Even now, you might disappear at any time. You might be gone when I wake up in the morning... And there's no guarantee that the Salvation Chalice will work on you either. One day, I might suddenly open my eyes to discover that I'll never, ever, see you again, so if...that's my reality..." Jess's voice was trembling and fragile. But it still stabbed into my heart like a stake. "At least at the very end... At the very end, I want to make...make happy memories with..."

Jess crumpled, her bottom meeting the cold cobblestone paving where the tide waxed and waned. She broke down sobbing. I could only stand in front of her in a daze.

*No. I can't even stand. I don't have a body, after all, I thought numbly. She's*

*right in front of my eyes, but I can't touch her, much less stroke her head to give her comfort.*

It felt as if my blood had been cooled in ice water. As it circulated, it paralyzed my brain. However, the ugly monster called truth persistently closed in on me, refusing to stay away.

The facts lined up in my mind one after another. Jess had been oddly indulgent. For some reason, she'd wanted to act out a rom-com. Almost every night, she'd been reluctant to fall asleep.

There had been a reason for all of that. There had been a terrifying truth lurking in wait. There had been a truth that I wished I'd never unearthed.

Jess had shouldered all the distress and anguish by herself so that I would remain happily ignorant, trying to enjoy what might be our last moments together with everything she could.

Her delicate shoulders trembled. "Why?! Why did you die, Mister Pig?! You promised you'd stay by my side forever... So why...?"

Memories of Jess's words on our journey surfaced one after another.

*"It's very painful to be all alone in such a relentless world. For my entire life, I prayed for something. Even now, I'm wishing in my heart. I want there to be someone who will always be with me and take my side no matter what happens. And you are the one who granted my wish, Mister Pig."*

*"It's a catalog of things I want to do with you, Mister Pig. I had been living in solitude for my entire life, but after I met you, I realized something for the very first time. There are some things out there that you can't do alone. It seems like you can do them by yourself, but you would remain blind to the many new and wonderful faces of the big wide world."*

*"You mustn't ever disappear from your most precious person's side, okay?"*

*I tried to leave such a girl behind. What was I even hoping... What was I even*



—

Incorporeal tears streamed down my incorporeal cheeks. As if on autopilot, I blurted the words that came to my mind without a filter. <<I'm not someone who belongs in this world. I'm someone who should be in a world that isn't yours... Not to mention you already have a splendid fiancé, Shravis.>>

Jess had asked me for a reason, so I gave a few to her earnestly. But even after voicing them, they didn't sound like what had spurred me on.

"I said that it doesn't matter! I said I wouldn't give up! I *told* you so many times, but you...!" As her frame heaved with sobs, she almost looked like a white rose that had fallen into the mud.

Jess was a kindhearted, beautiful, and studious maiden. She was a secret princess with royal blood who had been chosen as the prince's fiancée, and her magical abilities had even gained her the recognition she deserved.

And that was when at long last, my real feelings floated to the surface and transformed into words. <<...Just like I thought, I don't deserve you, Jess.>>

"Huh?" Even as her throat convulsed uncontrollably, she turned to look at me with wide eyes. It was the expression of someone who couldn't understand a single word that had come out of my mouth.

<<You haven't done anything wrong. I'm the problem—even if I took my status as a pig out of the equation, I'm still not a man worthy of a wonderful woman like you.>>

Somewhere in the distance, seabirds cried out a single time.

I inhaled slowly. <<I hope you can understand. I'm an otaku, a four-eyes, a scrawny twig, and a super-virgin. See? I'm the last person suitable for a maiden who's perfection personified like you. Not to mention that you're the daughter of Hortis, the king's younger brother—you're the descendant of the royal family that rules over all of Mesteria.>>

Jess shook her head violently, sending her hair flying everywhere. "Who cares about the background I was born into?! More importantly, I don't think you're unworthy, Mister Pig!"

She was almost screaming as she refuted my point.

“When I prayed to the stars in that mansion in Kiltyrie, *you* were the one who came to my side. *You* were the one who escorted me all the way to the royal capital. When I felt completely lost in this world with my memories sealed, *you* were the one who escaped from that fort with me in Nearbell. When I obtained the Contract Stake and found the Destruction Spear, *you* were the one by my side. You’ve always, *always*, stayed with me no matter where I went. All I ever wanted was for you to remain by my side in the future too... Just having you here with me...is already more than enough...”

I was speechless. In the back of my mind, nostalgic memories surfaced one after another.

She was right. We’d never been apart since I’d woken up in the pigsty under Jess’s care. Even after the previous king sent me back to my original world, I’d returned to Mesteria of my own volition. I’d come to change this crooked world for the better with Sanon and Kento and pave the way for Jess’s happy future—

“Answer me, Mister Pig!” Jess’s voice snapped me back to reality, back to the dark coast in a wintry port town. “Is there not even one small part of you that wishes to be with me?!”

The tugging of the salty sea breeze left Jess’s hair in a complete mess. Her features that had been long burned into my memory were now contorting with grief. Tears stained her cheeks. But even then, it was the face I’d grown to know and love with all my heart.



At long last, I became aware of my true feelings. The reason I'd returned to Mesteria wasn't what I told myself; I hadn't come to fix this world of wrongs or to furtively deliver happiness to Jess from the sidelines. I wasn't a man with such a strong will nor an advocate for righteousness.

No matter how many superficial words I piled up, they were nothing but frivolous decorations. My motive was much more straightforward.

Even while knowing that I wasn't worthy of her, even while knowing that I would become a hindrance tarnishing Jess's glorious future—

*I just...wanted to see her again.*

*I came back to this world because I wanted to be with Jess. Despite that, I walked to that cliff and...* I swallowed. <<I do. I want to stay by your side.>>

The moment I said those words, Jess's honey-brown eyes bore into me.

Chaotic thoughts overflowed in my mind, and I scrambled for words to express them. <<Yeah, I wanted to stay together with you! On that night, I had my very first kiss, and after hearing your wish for us to stay together forever, a part of me was screaming that I wanted to realize such a future! The right thing to do was to go back, and I knew that a man like me could never deserve you no matter how hard I tried. But I realized that the selfish part of me was dreaming of a life with you! That's why I thought that if I missed my chance that night, I would never have the courage—the heart to leave you ever again! That's why I tried to take that last chance and return to my old world!>>

And at the end of that jumbled thought train was an epiphany. My awareness caught up belatedly with the hopeless, helpless emotion of a virgin who was a hopeless, helpless fool when it came to matters of the heart.

<<So...I'm sure that it's already too late.>>

Her eyes widened with confusion. "Huh?"

*Yeah. I've already gone past the point of no return.*

I closed my eyes briefly and thought back on Jess's words. *"Let's go on another journey together one day—a journey that will go on forever and ever."*

I'd realized that this selfish, hopeless part of me could no longer turn away

from the allure of that offer. <<After traveling around Mesteria with you, I can't even work up the motivation to leave your side anymore. I don't want to be separated from you either. Even if I'm a hideous toad dreaming of a beautiful princess, even if the difference between us is literally worlds apart...>> I inhaled. <<If you will love me despite my countless imperfections, I want to be here with you too. Until the day our inevitable end arrives, I want to go on a journey with you that will go on forever and ever...>>

I had enough self-awareness to know that such a speech was nothing but off-putting when coming from me. However, Jess had poured her heart out to me, yelling as tears drenched her face, so I had a duty to do the same.

"Mister Pig..." she whispered.

<<Forgive me. Forgive me, Jess, for trying to run away from your side.>>

A pause. "Did you really think saying that would be enough to right all of your wrongs?"

The Jess before my eyes wasn't the one who adorably puffed out her cheeks with indignation. Instead, teary-eyed, this maiden glared at me with a mixture of resentment and bitterness.

"There is only one condition that can earn my forgiveness." A harsh and relentless gaze that looked out of place on her stabbed into me like a dagger. "Say that you will stay by my side forever. *Promise* me."

*Promise...* I cast my eyes down.

No one could predict what the future had in store. If I were to consider this carefully and rationally, I could never make such an irresponsible promise. But what Jess wanted right now was my answer. And I was sure that what she was asking of me wasn't a guarantee of a future that would last as long as our eternity but a resolve in the present that was robust enough to withstand the tumultuous path to such a future and beyond.

As blind to the future as I might be, there was one answer I could give her right now. <<Let's be together forever and ever.>> It was almost like a marriage proposal, and even as the one delivering that line, I felt awkward and restless.

Finally, Jess's tears dried up, and the corners of her eyes softened with a

smile. She nodded with elation. “If you break this promise, Mister Pig, I will make use of every single method available to me and chase you to the end of the world, the end of time itself, or even the end of the underworld if that’s what it takes.” Even in the darkness of night, her honey-brown eyes were serene and bright. “Then...I will have and hold you even if death tries to do us part.”

Unhurriedly, we retraced our steps along the seaside path as we made our way back to the hotel. It appeared that we’d come quite far during our lengthy conversation. On the cliffs far in the distance, I spotted the illumination of the residence that served as our hotel.

*We must have frightened Ceres since we ran for the hills moments after we saw her. We’ve got to apologize to her when we get back. I, uh...also should apologize to her about accidentally seeing her without any clothes on.*

There was a tranquil silence between us as we pressed on. The steady, subdued rustle of waves rocking the ships sounded as if it were in sync with our steps.

This moment of peace only lasted until we were about to turn a corner to leave the port.

Soft rattling resounded as a small boat headed in our direction. It was a run-down wooden boat with a coach roof. It accelerated toward us rapidly and practically wedged itself between the nearby ships as it reached land.

A black, shadowy silhouette rushed out from the cabin and shouted, “Jess!” The figure hopped onto the bow before making a great leap toward us. As they landed on the ground, they swiftly pulled down the hood obscuring their face.

Curly golden hair. Fair skin. Thick brows. Finely chiseled features. It was Shravis, the Prince of Mesteria.

He quickly walked up to Jess before tightly embracing her delicate frame. “I see that you’re safe and sound. I’m relieved.”

Just like Ceres, Shravis hadn’t noticed me. He hugged Jess relatively close to his chest as a delighted smile softened the corners of his eyes. A ghastly scar

marred the skin just above his cheekbone.

*Wait...* I frowned. Something wasn't right. His curling hair didn't give off elegance—instead, disheveled was a much more fitting description. Wounds and mud sullied his snow-white skin. *He doesn't look like a prince. He's more like a soldier.*

A while later, Shravis released Jess from his chest. He placed his large hands on Jess's shoulders and stared right at her face, which was damp from tears. "What happened?" he asked with a touch of concern. "You were crying?"

Jess appeared to be shocked and was at a loss for words.

Then, a woman's voice echoed out from the boat. "Well, well, we've finally caught up to her."

Revealing attire that seemed mismatched with the winter season. A magnificent, polished axe decorated with gold and silver on her back. It was Itsune, an executive officer of the Liberators. Behind her was a youth who carried a great crossbow—Yoshu, her little brother. I also spotted the shadowy silhouettes of a young maiden and a beast.

Possibly due to the watchful eyes of his companions, Shravis lowered his hands from Jess's shoulders.

"Yesterday, we received a letter from Naut that you appeared to be heading to Mousskir, Jess," Shravis explained in his signature cool and composed voice. "We stole a boat and hurriedly sailed here on the open sea. I'm glad that we managed to find you without incident." He frowned. "That said, I didn't expect you to be all alone in a place like this..."

"Mister Shravis..." Jess's tears had stopped, but her voice was still hoarse and small. "I'm sorry. I left all of you behind..."

Shravis vigilantly scanned the environment as he addressed Jess. "These times must be difficult for you because you had a tragic parting with the pig. I can empathize. He was a very precious friend to me too. But you mustn't give in to self-destruction anymore, Jess. In our current situation, we must press on somehow with just the people left behind."

I could only watch Shravis speak encouragingly to Jess from immediately

beside him.

He cleared his throat once before rapidly talking in one go. “Jess, we have learned many new things since the incident. Mother is still alive—no, perhaps it’s more accurate to say that she’s being purposefully kept alive. Since the Clandestine Arcanist took over father’s body, I have been his highest priority. He’s allowing mother to survive as a hostage to lure me out. I know that in my head, but I want to rescue her by any means possible. Will you please give me a hand?”

I blinked dumbly. *Huh...?*

I couldn’t keep up with their conversation. *Hold on, the Clandestine Arcanist took over King Marquis’s body? Queen Wyss is a hostage? That old mage is after Shravis’s life? Then, as someone with royal blood, is Jess possibly also in danger...?*

Hurriedly, I cut in. <<Time out. Jess, what in the world is happening in Mesteria right now?>>

Jess turned around to face me. Shravis gave me a skeptical look—*No, that’s not right. I know the truth now. His emerald eyes aren’t staring at me but the void Jess is focusing on.*

“Did something happen?” Shravis asked.

Slowly, Jess spoke up in a subdued voice. “I...managed it.”

“Managed what?”

“I successfully performed the second soul magic on Mister Pig’s spirit—the separation of spirits.”

Shravis was shaken, and it showed. “Did I hear that correctly? You truly succeeded...? What are the results? Has he regained his awareness?”

Jess nodded. “Yes, he has.”

The prince’s widened eyes shifted in my direction once again. But they focused on an area that was slightly left to my standing position. “Looks like the spell hasn’t made him visible.”

“So far, no one other than myself can perceive him... And that applies to his



thoughts as well.”

Eyes furrowed, Shravis began, “Then he might simply be—” He held his tongue.

*I get where he’s coming from. I’m an incorporeal spirit of a pig whom only Jess can see and hear. We can’t rule out the possibility that I’m only a hallucination that she’s convinced herself is real.*

*But then again, there’s the principle that “a pig thinks, therefore a pig is.” I’m real—I exist here.*

“Mister Pig is here without a doubt,” Jess emphasized. “Even now, he is looking at us and listening to our conversation.”

A bright red color instantly bloomed on Shravis’s face. I could tell what he was thinking even without the abilities of a mage—he’d hugged Jess, and I might have gotten a front-row seat to the display. <<Pass this message on to Shravis, please. “Nice seeing you again, cherry boy.”>>

Hearing my request, Jess dutifully communicated on my behalf. “Mister Pig said, ‘Nice seeing you again, cherry boy.’”

Shravis looked conflicted and stumped as he gazed at the ground near me again. “I see... Oh, I’m so glad we have the chance to meet each other again...” His uncertain tone suggested that he wasn’t all that convinced by Jess’s words.

Jess decided to change the topic. “Mister Shravis, I haven’t told Mister Pig any of the recent developments, including what happened to the royal court. Could you please explain everything from the beginning for my sake and his?”

“I suppose I don’t mind, but...” During Shravis’s faltering, frenzied footsteps from the uphill path were heard. There was more than one person. His body tensing up immediately, Shravis stood in front of Jess to shield her. “Who’s there?”

Itsune and Yoshu alighted from the boat and took to Shravis’s sides without a word, almost as if they’d rehearsed it. Up close, I realized that both Itsune’s greataxe and Yoshu’s crossbow had transformed into magnificent weapons embellished with gold and silver. The Yethma bones remained unchanged, but all the other parts had been reformed with artistic beauty while taking great

care not to ruin the weapons' practicality.

"You morons, it's me," declared an exasperated and familiar voice. "Look before you go around pointing your weapons at people."

He was a tall, lithe, and handsome hunk with his blond hair trimmed short. Twin shortswords with gold and silver ornaments hung from his hips. It was Naut. Behind him were Ceres, a young boy, and a black pig.

Naut sighed before glowering at Jess. "Sheesh, you sure didn't make this easy for us. I never thought there'd be a day where I'd end up literally chasing the skirt of a woman who isn't even the person I like, and for so long at that."

"M-My apologies..." Jess remorsefully shriveled into herself.

"Whatever. Looks like His Royal Highness's here too, so that means pretty much all of us have finally found each other again." The slender Naut approached Shravis, who had a large and sturdy frame in comparison. Possibly because they hadn't seen each other in a long time, the head of the Liberators and the prince locked gazes for a good while. "Looks like you're in better shape than I expected, huh? Was everything all right on your end?"

"I somehow made it out safely." Shravis nodded. "If it weren't for Itsune and Yoshu, I would have died many times over."

Naut smirked. "This favor won't be cheap, Your Royal Highness."

"I have no intention of asking for a discount."

A chilly gust slipped over from the ocean. At the northernmost tip of Mesteria, all our comrades had reunited once again. So many nostalgic faces were in front of me, but sadly, I couldn't communicate with them directly.

Shravis got down to business. "By a strange twist of fate, it seems all the necessary people are present. I want to discuss what has happened and what we should do moving forward."

"What has happened?" Naut raised an eyebrow. "But we already know."

Shravis indicated to Jess. "Jess made the decision to research forbidden magic and has used it to resurrect the pig's consciousness. We can't perceive him, but according to her, the pig's spirit is here. Only Jess can communicate with him as

his spirit medium.”

Naut ostensibly scowled. “What do you mean by that? The low-life swine’s here?”

I looked at Jess. <<Tell him, “Exactly, cherry boy two.”>>

Just like before, Jess took that at face value and turned to Naut. “Exactly, cherry boy two.”

Silence. It was as if the air itself had turned into ice.

Until Jess added, “That is what Mister Pig just said.”

Looking dumbfounded, Naut’s ears flushed crimson, but he accepted Jess’s story readily. “Huh. I gotta say, I held a grudge against him for running away all by himself and leaving us to deal with this mess, but I suppose if he’s around to lend us his wits again, I’m not complaining. All right then, where should we begin?”

Shravis spoke up. “We’ll start with what happened to the royal court first. As the prince, I’ll give him the details. Pig, are you listening?”

I told Jess to nod, and she did.

Surrounded by the members of the Liberators, Shravis gazed down at the rippling waves as he spoke. “The incident happened roughly a month after you threw yourself off that cliff. It blindsided us all. When my father went underground to check on the Clandestine Arcanist’s condition, the elderly mage attacked him. We had put a collar on the Clandestine Arcanist to seal his magic and even used every type of magical seal and measure we could put in place to restrain him. But that man made his own body decompose, scraping down his neck little by little until it detached, freeing him from his binds. When my father entered the underground stone chamber, he instantly dealt with the elderly mage’s attacks by burning that man alive, but he made the fatal mistake of breathing in the ashes.”

With apathy apparent on his face, Shravis continued, “The mage used soul magic and wrested control over my father’s body from him—along with control over the most destructive magic within Mesteria. And so, the most atrocious mage of Mesteria came to be.”

I didn't want to believe what he was saying, but because of that, I was even more morbidly absorbed in the events I'd missed out on.

"The last word my father could utter rationally was 'Run.' Jess and I both barely escaped from the royal capital with our lives. We...were the only ones who managed to get away. Mother was captured by the Clandestine Arcanist. We sought temporary refuge with the Liberators, but the mage pursued me obsessively since I have divine blood running in my veins. The onslaught of attacks by him and his forces scattered us to the four winds."

My ominous premonition had been on the money. Though it should be a secret between Jess and I right now, Jess's father was the king's brother, Hortis. Just like Shravis, she had divine blood—Vatis's blood in her veins. If the Clandestine Arcanist learned of it, Jess might also become a target of his fanatical attacks.

Completely oblivious to my dread, Shravis continued matter-of-factly, "For the time being, we have managed to survive mostly unscathed, but I can't say the same for Mesteria. The royal court that has been usurped by the mage maintains a façade of peace, but in reality, it has ceased its original function and is trying to push the world down a nightmarish path."

Now that I thought back, there had been several statements during our journey that had bothered me a little.

*"Lately, it's gettin' more and more dangerous on the streets."*

*"Sadly, the current state of our society makes it rather difficult for businesses to be successful."*

*"It doesn't matter who she is or where she's from. In these times, we even have our way with employed Yethma without a care, remember?"*

Mesteria should have entered an era of peace and change. *But the collapse of the royal court was enough to destroy that peace in the blink of an eye...*

My mind went to Jess. During this upheaval, she must have been filled with apprehension. *I mean, her life might be in danger once again. I can't even*

*imagine what she went through. But even while her whole life was being turned upside down, she desperately sought me out... And possibly, it was said desperation that pushed her into the field of taboo magic, frantically using anything that might revive my consciousness...*

Naut interjected, “That’s the exact moment when Jess chose to disappear into thin air. The prince, who has assassins after his life across the entire nation, continued living on the run with Itsune and Yoshu while I searched for Jess.”

Jess had acted like someone had been chasing her, and the reality was, she’d been running away from Naut the entire time. Her reaction after she’d punctured a hole in the clouds to allow light to flow into the hot spring made sense now—she must have thought she’d messed up because the royal court and Naut would discover her location. She’d also immolated that heckripon because she didn’t want the royal court, which was now occupied by the Clandestine Arcanist, to find her.

Our rom-com journey had been balanced on a razor’s edge the entire time.

Jess hung her head. “I’m sorry... I didn’t think I would be even a little bit useful to all of you by being around...”

Shravis sighed with exasperation and resignation. “Jess, how many ecdysias have you experienced?”

Hearing that, Jess counted on her fingers. “As far as I am aware... I’m on my ninth.”

I whipped my head around to gawk at her. *Ninth?!*

“I’m still on my seventh,” Shravis said. “If we use uncle’s calculation method, you would be four times as strong as me in a battle. I’m certain that if you put your mind to it, you could destroy at least an entire city by yourself.”

Ecdysias—they were magical molting for mages that doubled their mana reserves each time. The more ecdysias a mage experiences, the stronger they become, and so it was often used as an index to measure a mage’s battle prowess. *Nine... That means even while I was out of it, Jess continued to use magic and experienced one ecdysia after another.*

The prince took a determined step forward. “Please don’t run and flee, Jess.

Mesteria ought to be a peaceful nation. Furthermore, I have to rescue my mother alive by any means necessary. I beg you, will you please lend me your aid? If we unite with the Liberators, there is still hope. I'm sure you don't want uncle's sacrifice to be in vain either."

Jess looked back into Shravis's eyes. Hortis had been the one to bridge the insurmountable rift between the royal court and the Liberators, and he'd paid the price with his life. He was also Jess's father.

The peace that he'd dedicated his everything to realizing was now being torn apart at an almost laughable speed.

Seeing how Jess was trying to find the right words to say, Naut added his piece. "We're not telling you to join our battle and kill people or anything. You've got nowhere to go in Mesteria anyway, do you? What we're saying is that as fellow wanderers without a place of refuge, we'll gain more by sticking together rather than going separate ways. Don't you think it's more reassuring too?"

Faced with the peer pressure of two handsome blond hunks, Jess looked at me, as if trying to find a way out. "Mister Pig, what do we do?"

Doubtful gazes convened on Jess. She must have seemed rather strange as she addressed the void. *Just like how all those people looked at her with skeptical eyes throughout our journey.* I cast my eyes down briefly.

<<No matter what choice you make, I'll always be with you, Jess,>> I said softly. <<I won't run, not anymore. Do what *you* want to do, Jess.>>

"I..." Jess hesitated.

Seeing that, Shravis gave her a suggestion that helped her decide. "You want to restore the pig to his former state above all else, right? You can give it a try. If you've succeeded at separating his spirit, your goal shouldn't be too far away from our objective."

*Huh?*

"May I ask what you mean by that?" Jess frowned, puzzled.

Shravis placed a hand on his hip and quirked up the corners of his lips. "The

Clandestine Arcanist transferred his spirit into father's body and wrested control away from his spirit. Meanwhile, you absorbed the pig's spirit before successfully reviving his consciousness. Though the main spirits being expressed in your body and in my father's body are different—one is the host and the other is the outsider—the two of you are in almost identical states through the lens of soul magic. And apparently, the key to resolving this condition coincidentally happens to be located north of here, on Terminus Island."

*Wait, could he be referring to...?*

"You mean the Salvation Chalice?!" Jess exclaimed.

To our surprise, Shravis inclined his head quizzically. "The Salvation Chalice? No, not quite. Does that mean you didn't come here because you read this?" Shravis fetched a book with a crimson cover from out of nowhere. "*Records of Soul Magic Development: Part Two*. It's the most detailed reference book about soul magic in Mesteria, which Lady Vatis compiled. I believe you took the first part of the duology with you. Everything known to us about soul magic up to the second stage is written inside that part. Meanwhile, the second book is focused on the third and fourth stages—magic that is concerned with the Abyssus of Mesteria."

"The Abyssus?" Jess echoed the word. She didn't recognize it either.

"It's a second Mesteria molded by the attachments and obsessions of humans," Shravis explained. "The Abyssus is a place where even spirits can materialize. We might be able to come into contact with father if we enter that realm. The entrance to the Abyssus, according to the records, is on Terminus Island."

I frowned. *What's he trying to get at? How does coming into contact with Marquis's spirit overlap with restoring me to my original state?*

"Will Mister Pig regain his body if he goes to the Abyssus?" Jess asked, clenching her hands into fists.

Shravis shrugged slightly. "You wouldn't know until you try. But there is a precedent—when Lady Vatis dived into the Abyssus, she succeeded at granting her husband Ruta, who was reduced to a spirit, a body. This was all recorded in her book. I was completely under the impression that you also placed your

hopes on that possibility and decided to head north to test it, but I know better now.”

The Salvation Chalice. The entrance to the Abyssus. By some whim or deliberate arrangement of Lady Fortune, all of our destinies were converging once again at the Terminus Island.

Naut, who’d listened to the pair’s exchange with a mystified look, cut in. “Hey, I don’t know what you’re going on about, but to put it in simple terms, we just need to go to the island in the north. Do I have that right?”

“It seems so.” Shravis nodded.

There was still a lot more I had to ask the pair about the topic of soul magic, but for the time being, we had a plan going forward. <<It sounds like our fate is completely inseparable from this country’s, huh?>>

Jess looked at me and nodded. Then, she turned to look straight into Shravis’s eyes, then Naut’s. “Let’s press on to the Terminus Island.”

“It’s settled, then,” Naut said readily.

Shravis walked between Jess and Naut before placing a hand on each of their shoulders. “This will be our last battle.” Finally, the prince’s eyes, burning with determination, shifted to my rough direction. “Together, we shall reclaim Mesteria from the clutches of the wicked.”

Since Jess’s luggage was still at the hotel, the two of us temporarily separated from the others and returned to the hotel before clearing our room of our belongings.

Very soon, Royal Year 129 would come to an end. A new year was just around the corner.

We walked out of the hotel and began traveling down the inclined path to the port where everyone else was waiting. Along the way, Jess smiled and asked, “Is it all right if we walk a little slowly? It’s going to be midnight soon. Let’s embrace the start of a new year together.”

<<Sounds good.>>



Our pace grew sluggish. A frigid winter breeze galloped down the white cobblestone path heading toward the ocean. The wishing star glowed bright crimson in the northern sky. It had been cloudy during the day, but it had gradually cleared away with time. We should have fine weather tomorrow.

“I want...” Jess whispered hesitantly. “I want to talk about something fun. Could we spend the rest of today, until the last hour, enjoying our *rome-comm*?”

<<Something fun, hmm...>> I trailed off thoughtfully.

I fell into contemplative silence, but Jess must have taken it as a lack of enthusiasm because she raised the stakes. “We can also talk about something indecent if you’d like.”

*Wait, really?!?! <<Uh, no, we’re not going to talk about indecent things...>>*

“Oh...” Her shoulders slumped.

*Aw, don’t look so dejected. You’re putting me on the spot here. <<Here’s a piece of advice: when your present feels hopeless, you should talk about the future. I’m sure that thinking about what you ought to do makes you stressed, so let’s think about what you want to do. How about we dive into our dreams and wishes to paint the picture of a future we’d love?>>*

“That sounds brilliant—let’s go with that!” Jess exclaimed with a heartfelt smile before pointing at the wishing star. “Well, we’ve come all the way to the northernmost tip of Mesteria. Even if our hands can’t reach it, how does trying to deliver our wishes to the wishing star sound?”

<<Great idea.>>

At the end of the day, it likely wasn’t the stars who would grant our wishes but ourselves. That said, I felt that wishing on stars wasn’t meaningless at all—it was a good method to reflect and learn what your true yearnings were.

*Even if it’s the most outrageous, unthinkable desire...you must put it into words. Because it’s not just a wish; it’s also a prayer.*

“If the star was willing to grant you one wish, what would you wish for?”

I answered instantly. <<I want your *Les Panties*, cutie-pie Jess.>>

In a somewhat appalled tone, she muttered, “What in the world are you going to do if the wishing star actually listens to your prayers...?” she muttered, somewhat appalled.

*That means I’ll have to go around and collect the seven balls again.*

Jess tilted her head quizzically. “Seven balls...?”

<<It’s nothing. Don’t mind the narration.>> *I should give her a serious answer right now.* <<Thanks to you, Jess, our journey to the north was filled with fun and delight. I want to go on another journey one day. It’ll just be the two of us. Next time, I’ll be in a proper, respectable human body. There will be no secrets, no lies.>>

“I feel the same way.” Jess had a gentle look in her eyes as she relished in the dream. I looked up at her from her side; she was a stunning sight. “I want to go on another journey with you too, Mister Pig—a journey of freedom where no one will be chasing after us.”

<<I’m sure we will.>>

For a second, I thought I’d seen the wishing star flash brightly.

The low toll of a bell rang out from somewhere. Not a moment later, crackling sounds followed, and our environment abruptly lit up. When I looked around us, I realized that small orange fireworks were climbing into the sky from the houses in the town.

“Oh, Mister Pig!” Jess’s eyes shimmered like stars as they reflected the fireworks. “We’re in a new year!”

I thought about greeting her with “Happy New Year,” but then I remembered that she was still mourning her father’s passing. In Japan, you’d usually avoid saying words of congratulations to someone who’d recently lost a loved one, and I decided to stick to that custom. <<I hope you’ll take care of me this year too.>>

Jess beamed at me as she nodded. “Yes. I will also be in your care again this year.”

*My brethren, have you ever spent New Year’s Eve all alone with a blonde,*

*purehearted maiden? Or greeted each other, wishing to spend a wonderful year together the moment midnight arrives? Oh, you haven't? You poor thing!*

Chuckling merrily, Jess hurried the pace of her walk just a tad. "Mister Shravis and the others will get worried about us. I think it's about time we head back."

<<Yeah.>>

The sound of joy and companionship spilled out from the houses along the street. But no longer did I feel jealous or longing.

After all, Jess was with me. No matter what kind of perilous adventure might await us, I had someone whom I'd exchange vows with, both of us promising to stay together forever.

That alone was enough to light a warm hearth within my heart.

Naut and the gang had taken up camp inside an abandoned brick warehouse until sunrise. We joined them. We planned to set off for Terminus Island collectively tomorrow morning.

The living surrounded a warm, magical fire as they enjoyed a brief moment of union and harmony.

Just like how Jess wasn't able to relay my voice to anyone else, even the powers of a mage failed to deliver the thoughts of Sanon, the black pig, and Kento, the boar, to me. Because of that, I had no clue what they were talking about when everyone else was listening attentively to Sanon's speech.

"Whaaat?! No, he's not a hallucination that I convinced myself was real!" Jess exclaimed. "Mister Pig *is* here!"

I finally figured out the topic after hearing Jess's insistent voice. The heedful Sanon suspected that my spirit might just be Jess's delusion.

The black pig snorted out loud, as if communicating something. Ceres looked troubled as she opened her mouth. "Huh? Um... Me being naked has nothing to do with this, surely..."

Judging by the reactions Sanon received, it appeared that the degenerate lolicon swine wanted to deny the reality that I'd accidentally seen Ceres in her

birthday suit up close. The boar spoke up and said something, and everyone present nodded with satisfaction.

Jess was one of them. “I see... If I’m able to find out something that only Mister Pig knows from his spirit, all of you will believe that he truly exists.”

Sanon stepped forward, as if announcing he had an idea. Ceres nodded. “Understood.” She turned to the area next to Jess where I should be. “Mister Sanon has a question for you, Mister Super-Virgin.” There was a short pause. “What was the title of the story you last wrote when you were in your original world?”

The black pig’s eyes glinted with intelligence.

I knew what he was talking about. It was a novel I’d written about my great “hue hue oink” adventure in Mesteria, which I’d published on the internet a little bit at a time—a novel that Sanon, a fellow Mesteria teleporter, had dug up and used thoroughly to create our second opportunity to teleport here. Indeed, in this world, only the three of us pigs would know this piece of information.

Jess’s eyes, filled with confidence, looked at me eagerly. I stared back into her eyes unflinchingly and told her the answer. Jess’s brows twitched for a single moment with doubt. *Well yeah, I can’t blame her. I’m sure that a novel with such an outlandish title wouldn’t exist in Mesteria.*

She repeated my words, as if tasting them with her tongue. I could practically see all the question marks popping up above every human surrounding the fire. However, the reactions of the black pig and the boar were different. They must have said something in their thoughts because the imaginary question marks disappeared one after another.

With this, I had proved my existence. The code words that had testified to the success of Jess’s soul magic had been just a tad bizarre in a setting like this. She’d only said a single sentence—

*“Butareba: The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig.”*

## Afterword (Fourth Bite)

Hello, it's been a while. Takuma Sakai here.

Time flies—a year has already gone by since I made my debut as an author with a novel that has a most peculiar title. Being an author is still a struggle to this day. In every volume, I'm crafting the story while wheezing, panting, and oinking with effort. Once again, I'm blessed with the opportunity to continue this story thanks to all of you, my wonderful readers. I would like to express my most sincere gratitude from the bottom of my heart. Thank you, truly.

Now then, since this is a good opportunity—is it?—I'd like to talk about the events that led to my becoming an author.

It all started one winter when I was in my first year of university. I discussed how I should spend Christmas with my significant other—no, I didn't. I didn't even have a significant other to begin with. I was single-mindedly focusing on studying for my exams, which were looming over me when my friends from back in high school invited me out to dinner. It had been a long while since I'd gone out to eat with them, so I decided to show up. But to my shock, what I was served at that dinner party was raw pig liver, and—

Jokes aside, the first time I ever wrote a novel was in primary school. During this period, a certain long fantasy series from the United Kingdom took the whole world by storm. People from all over the world attentively clung to every word, wanting to know the fate of a slim boy with glasses, and naturally, I was one of them.

I was always somewhat of a bookworm by nature, but after that fantasy world spellbound me, the experience left me with the skill of plunging headfirst into a story with my heart and soul.

In my opinion, novels are an unparalleled form of VR in our day and age. As long as you have the ability to immerse yourself in the story as you read, just flipping the page is enough for you to jump into that world. I read stories I liked over and over, so immersed that I utterly forgot the passage of time.

As an extension of my love of stories, there were times when I took up the pen.

I believe that the greatest merit of crafting your own story is the fact that you can experience the world you freely imagined without being pulled down by the restrictions of reality. Once you start writing, you can't stop. Inside the stories you write, as long as it makes sense in some way, you can do anything you want. Which means that you can even travel around a fantasy world while a purehearted young maiden looks down at you and calls you a pig. Bewitched by the allure of being an author, I wrote novels every day as I charged forward during my middle and high school days as an unpopular kid.

And then, one winter when I was in my first year of university—I think this is getting old. Let's stop here.

Reminiscing about the old days made me realize the overlap between novels and journeys in my mind. As a matter of fact, I love going on journeys too. Please allow me to expand a little on the topic from here on out.

Going on a journey is the same as writing a story—you're leaving your routine life and diving into a world different from your own. We travel to experience things we can't during our normal, everyday life.

Of course, there *do* appear to be a few exceptions, such as when you're traveling for a certain goal or to enjoy a fluffy romance with a beautiful maiden... But even then, I think that journeys are filled with all kinds of charms, such as experiencing new and exciting things or stepping into a different culture. Surely, I'm not the only one who starts feeling a bit thrilled when I come across something I've never seen before or don't know about at my traveling destination, right?

The simple act of broadening your horizons just a little or briefly stopping your feet to take a quick look around can turn your journey into a quest to solve a mystery. Even the most insignificant questions that come into mind might lead to a unique truth in that land or culture if you think about it carefully. All the things you've studied until now and observed during your journey are your hints. The detective is none other than you, the traveler. Don't you think that sounds kind of fun?

Even without a beautiful maiden brimming with curiosity by your side, it should be quite entertaining to keep an eye out for mysteries while you travel. If any of you reading this are interested, I highly recommend testing it out. It never hurts to try!

These are times when the divide between people is growing more severe. A part of me thinks that taking an interest in what you don't know and having the imagination to try and figure it out might be surprisingly useful.

This section ended up rather lengthy. In any case, I'm praying from the bottom of my heart that our society will return to a place where all of you (and me) can freely travel around without anxiety. When it's difficult to travel, you can consider possibly writing or reading stories to get a taste of a journey!

By the way, there are all kinds of wonderful things in Aomori, the city where I currently live. For example, an unbelievably sour hot spring—Sukayu Onsen—or our big, bright red apples. If any of you are weighing out different destinations for your trip, I highly recommend Aomori! Our pork is rather delicious too.

Now then, it looks like the adventure of cutie-pie Jess and Mister Pig will go on for just a bit longer. I think it's going to be filled with all kinds of twists and turns, but I have full faith that until the very end, it will be a fun and enjoyable story when you look back.

I will be really delighted if you are willing to continue watching over their journey with me!

Takuma Sakai—April 2021





Author:  
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:  
Asagi Tohsaka

(4<sup>th</sup> Bite)

# Butareba

-The Story of a  
Man Turned into a Pig-



Author:  
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:  
Asagi Tohsaka

A Pure-  
hearted

and Flawless

Beautiful Maiden

Keeps Calling Me a

Pig



Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-





Quote

“You mustn’t be distracted by other thoughts while on a date. That’s why you’re still a Mister Virgin.”

[NAME] 

Jess

Profile

A young mage who can read minds. She has royal blood in her veins.

Quote

“Always determining the one pair of Les Panties with the body of a farm animal and the mind of an otaku. His name is...Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin!”

[NAME] 

Pig

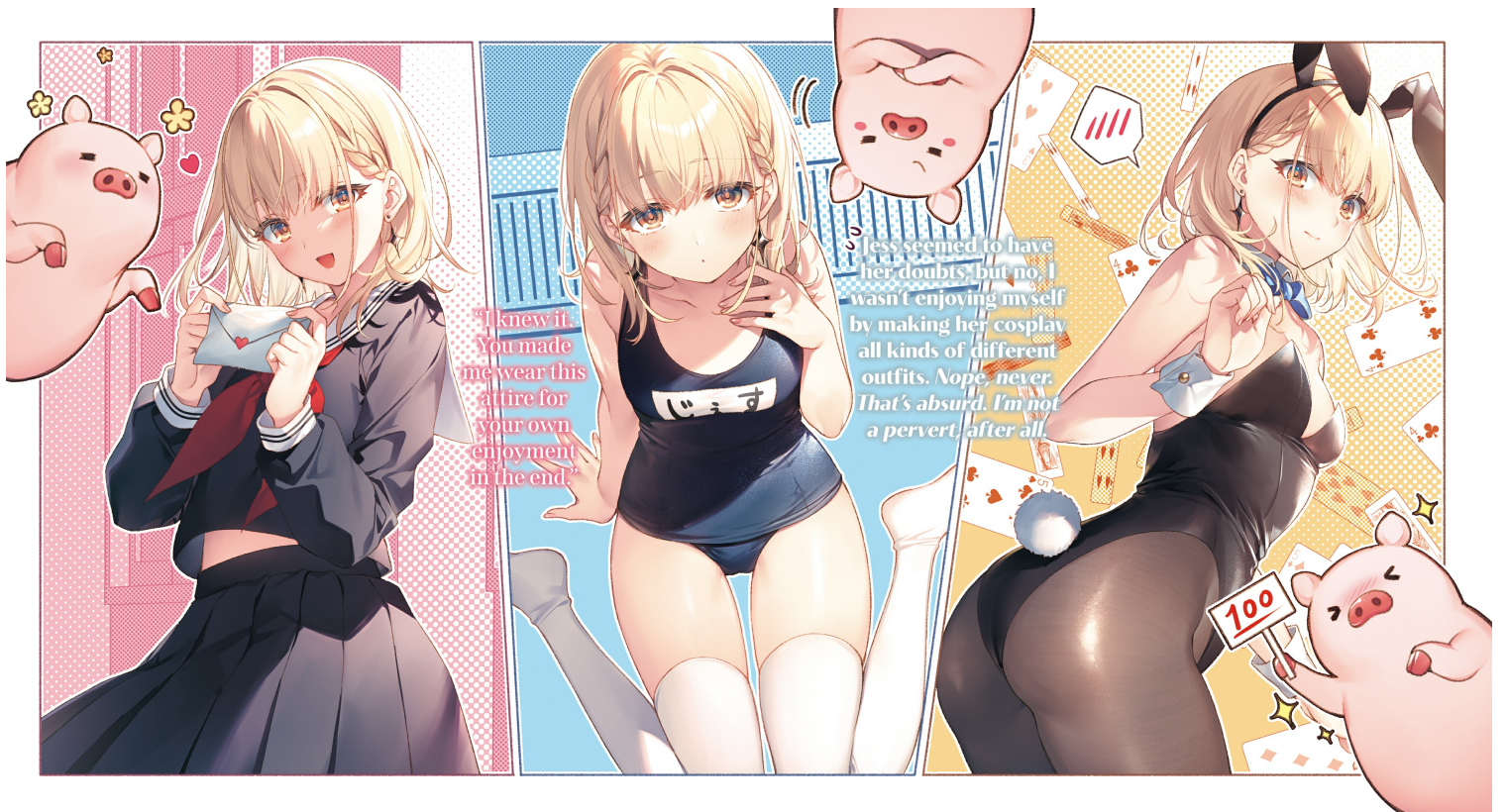
Profile

A run-of-the-mill science student otaku who teleported to Mesteria from modern-day Japan.



-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

Characters





“We’re bathing  
together and  
enjoying silly  
banter...  
Mister Pig, this  
counts as a  
rome-comm,  
right?”





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