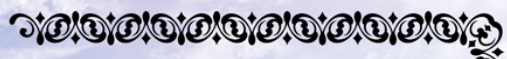




(2nd Bite)



Author:
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka



Butareba

-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-



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“Um, is being called Super-Virgin by a woman a good thing?”

«I must say, I am a bit jealous.»

«Um, of what, may I ask?»

«Your nickname, Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin, Mister Lolip.»

«I'm afraid it's an awfully regrettable nickname that stuck because I keep referring to myself as such... Why in the world would anyone be jealous of it?»

«I mean, it's not every day you get the opportunity to be called “Super-Virgin” by purehearted girls, is it?»

«You see, there are some breeds of otaku out there who feel joy when women humiliate them.»

[NAME]
Pig

Profile

A scrawny four-eyed super-virgin.

[NAME]

Rossi

Profile

Perverted dog.

[NAME]

Ceres

Profile


A thirteen-year-old Yethma residing in Baptsaze.

[NAME]

Black Pig

Profile

An otaku friend the pig encountered during an IRL meetup. His alias is Sanon.



Today's lesson was
about fire magic.
It was my first time
using dangerous
magic, so my heart
beat a little faster
than usual.

[NAME]

Jess

Profile

The girl whom the pig is
hopelessly in love with.
Currently studying
magic in the capital.

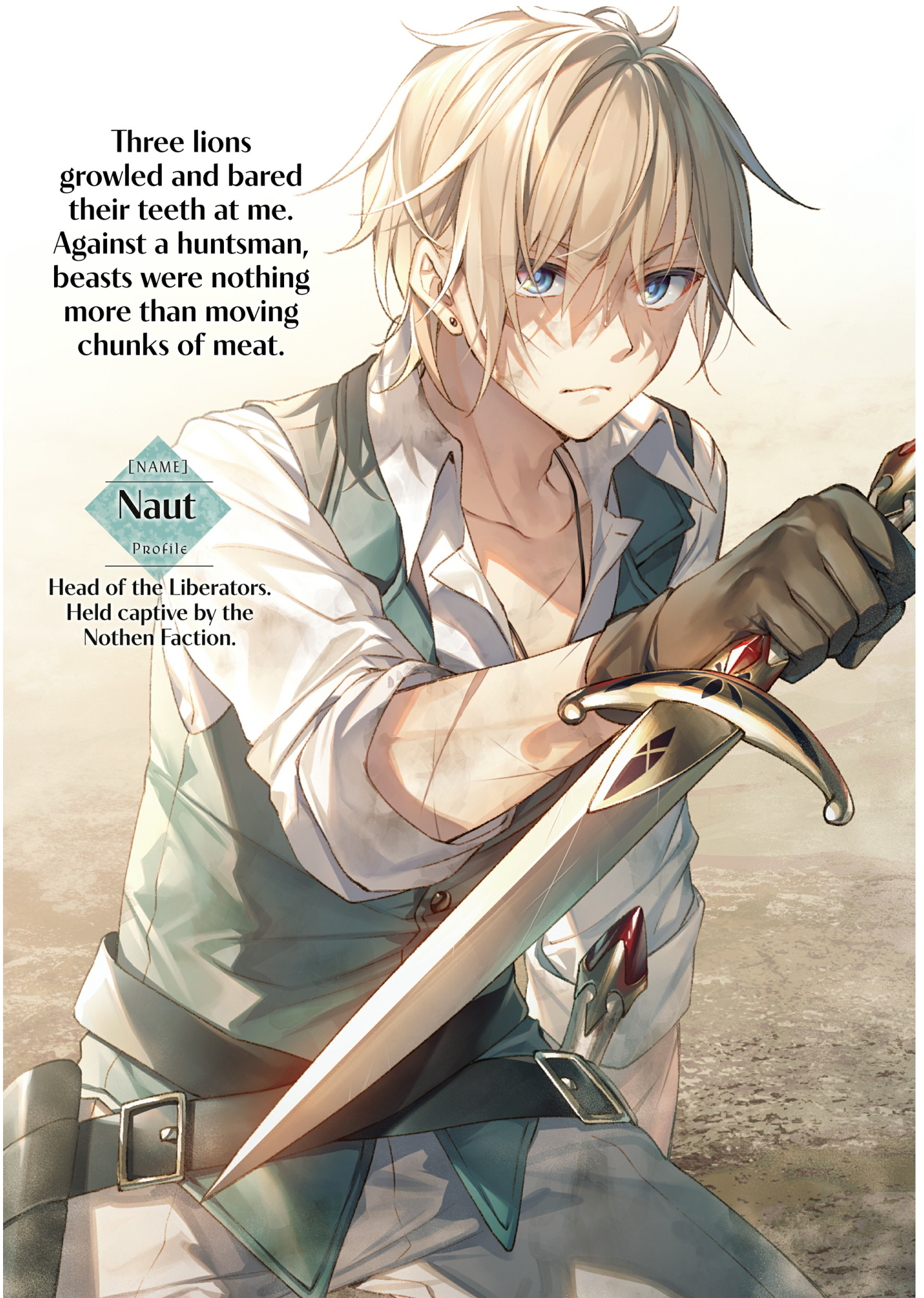
Three lions
growled and bared
their teeth at me.
Against a huntsman,
beasts were nothing
more than moving
chunks of meat.

[NAME]

Naut

Profile

Head of the Liberators.
Held captive by the
Nothen Faction.





"I'm sorry,
I'm still quite
inexperienced..."

«No,
I don't mind,
but, uh... Your
magic is ridicu-
lous.»

"Do you
mean...
it's really
weak?"

«You know,
you sound just
like an isekai
protagonist
right now.»

I was *this* close to
becoming roast pork.

Jess makes an
explosive entrance
as an oblivious,
overpowered mage
with maxed-out
stats!



[NAME]

Shravis

Profile

Eavis's grandson.
Seemingly Jess's
fiancé...?

[NAME]

Wyss

Profile

Shravis's mother and
Jess's teacher.

[NAME]

Eavis

Profile

The King of Mesteria
who is hailed as a
"peerless mage."



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Fragment 1: A Precious Something

Every so often, a sudden feeling of loss would hit me as I recalled the hollow void in my memories.

It would sometimes happen when I looked at the distant mountains or gazed up at the night sky.

I'd remember that I once had something irreplaceable, and my eyes would grow hot with tears.

But I still didn't know the cause of my heartache.

It was as if I'd left a bookmark between pages that were glued together, refusing to open again.

After responding to the knock on my door, Madame Wyss immediately entered the room. Her long golden hair rippled like a small, calm stream. She was a tall, slender, and shapely woman. Her graceful air accentuated her stunning beauty. Ever since I'd arrived in the capital, she'd been kind enough to tutor me.

Today's lesson was about fire magic. It was my first time using dangerous magic, so my heart beat a little faster than usual.

I was sitting next to the window and facing the desk. On the desk was an open tome, *Magic Fundamentals*. Outside the window was a gloomy, cloudy sky. Far below it was a dark forest. I was near the summit of the capital, in the palace where the king and his relatives resided. But lately, it was usually just Madame Wyss and me. All the men were very busy preparing for or in the middle of battles against the Nothen Faction.

Madame Wyss sat next to me and promptly started by saying, "Let's begin. Tell me, what is fire?" Her lessons always began with a question.

"Um... It's something warm and bright."

“Well then, does that mean if you make something warm and bright, it will always be fire?”

When she followed up with a question, it meant that I was wrong. “...No, there needs to be something flammable. When you heat something flammable inside air, there will be flame.”

Madame Wyss raised an eyebrow. She looked a bit impressed. “Exactly. To make fire, we need something that can burn. What should we burn, then?”

“Should we burn...firewood?” I faltered.

“Can you make firewood?”

“No...” At my level, I could only make simple things. I wasn’t downplaying my skills either. The only things I could make were really, *really* basic, like water or air.

“Okay. Let’s try to come up with something you can make.”

“I have never tried it before, but I think I might be able to make oil.”

“Do you think so because you have mastered making water?”

Since she asked me about the reason behind my answer, it must have been incorrect. Bracing myself for her to admonish me for my naivete, I nodded honestly. “Yes. I thought that oil was similar to water.”

“That is a rather hasty conclusion,” she answered. “Oil has a very complex structure. If you wish to create something complex, you need the necessary knowledge and hands-on experience, as well as a powerful imagination. But I suppose you are heading in the right direction. Today, we shall start with creating your flammable material.”

Madame Wyss drew a circle on the desk with her slender finger, and a simple glass container appeared inside it. She slowly raised her hand, and simultaneously, a transparent liquid welled up from the bottom. She continued, “Here. Have a whiff.”

Hearing that, I leaned forward and brought my nose closer to the glass. Immediately, a sweet, sharp scent stung my nose, and I choked. “Um, what is this?”

Madame Wyss smiled impishly and raised her index finger. “Can you guess? You should have drunk this liquid before.”

I blinked at her. “I...have?” Nothing was coming to my mind. Was it really possible to drink something this dangerous?

For a while, I went silent, trying my very best to think of something. Madame Wyss finally spoke up. “It is alcohol.”

“Oh... I see?”

“Is something the matter?”

“I just thought that I’ve never drunk alcohol before...”

Madame Wyss’s head tilted slightly when she heard my answer. She seemed faintly shaken. However, the noble mages here were all experts on blocking their minds from others, so I could only guess what she was thinking.

But one thought immediately filled my mind. *Have I perhaps drunk alcohol before? I have, but maybe...I’ve forgotten that memory?*

I had a reason for thinking that. The King of Mesteria, King Eavis, had sealed my memories. Because of that, I couldn’t remember anything between my departure from House Kiltyrin as a servant and my arrival in the capital. He apparently had a genuine reason for sealing my memories; however, I still couldn’t help but be curious about what exactly I’d forgotten. Perhaps something painful had happened, and I was better off not knowing. Still, it bothered me.

Madame Wyss seemed to have perceived my pondering because she cleared her throat. “In any case, this is alcohol. This liquid evaporates readily and burns easily.” She pointed a delicate finger at the glass container, and an orange flame began flickering above it. “It is ideal if you can achieve this step today. If you have the time and energy, try changing your flammable material. The type of flames you generate should be different.”

“Type of flames?”

“Yes. It is explained in the magic tome, but you can separate alcohol into two parts—the ‘water’ part and the ‘oil’ part. If you decrease the ‘oil’ component,

your liquid will become a substance closer to water, producing a dark blue flame when burned. However, if you increase the ‘oil’ component, it will create a more intense flame.”

Just listening to her explanation was thrilling. I couldn’t wait to test it. *I mean, it’s fire!*

Madame Wyss smiled at me. “Well then, Jess, let’s read through your book here before we move to the lab.”

I held back my eager impulse and promptly ran my eyes over the text.

While secluding myself in the lab and single-mindedly experimenting with techniques to create oil, I heard a loud slam echoing from the hallway outside. Someone seemed to have closed a door nearby.

I looked at the clock on the wall. It was already the second hora—the date had changed, and it was getting close to early morning. *Who could be arriving at a time like this?* I wondered.

I walked out the dark hallway and saw someone leaning against the stone wall nearby. They appeared to be either hurt or very sick. I ran over to them, and my eyes widened in surprise. “Your Majesty!”

It was the King of Mesteria. His gray hair and beard were sullied by dirt, and his face was strikingly pale. He was clad in a muddy black robe and could barely support his body with his shaking limbs. His ashen eyes, normally bright with his sagely wisdom, turned to me as I stood there in a daze. “What happened, Jess? Your face is covered with soot.” His voice was hoarse, and he sounded even more age-worn than usual.

“M-My apologies. I was experimenting.” But right after I answered, I realized that our positions should be reversed. I was the one who should be worried about him. “I should be asking you that question, Your Majesty. Are you all right?”

King Eavis straightened his spine. His right hand was stained an unnatural black, and an odd mesh-like pattern covered his skin. “It seems that I have made a blunder. I was cursed.”

I gasped. “Cursed? Who in the world...?” The only people—mages—in Mesteria who could use curses were the royal family. Or at least that was how it was supposed to be.

Shaking his head, he said, “I am just as clueless as you. But the situation is grave. A mage intent on killing us has begun carrying out their plans somewhere. A mage whom we have no knowledge of—the Clandestine Arcanist.”

Chapter 1: Curiosity Killed the Pig

There is no task more insufferable than trying to make a written account of an IRL meetup of a bunch of otaku, so I shall give you the TL;DR.

I transformed into a pig in the kingdom of swords and magic, Mesteria, and I went on a spigtacular adventure with a beautiful and angelic blonde maiden, Jess. Our journey to the capital together ended in success, and though my reluctance to part with her tugged at my heartstrings, I chose to bid her farewell and returned to present-day Japan.

Upon returning, I recovered my status as a normal otaku, and as time passed by, I began thinking that Mesteria and even Jess had all just been figments of my imagination.

But it hadn't been a dream. I even had proof.

I encountered three otaku with glasses who claimed they had the same experience of transforming into pigs in Mesteria. Due to a bad habit of otaku, we didn't call each other by our IRL names but by our online aliases. *Since I'm here, I might as well quickly introduce them to you, my brethren.*

The first was Sanon, a mechanical engineer. A bearded man in his thirties, he was a part-time good-natured otaku and a part-time pervert who had a significant preference for anime with young girls.

The second was Kento, a high school boy who went to a prestigious private boys' school. His full username was actually †DarKnightDeaThWaLtz†keNto, but let's not probe into that. If we ignored the rather unique aura that oozed from his alias and personality, he was a run-of-the-mill otaku who took everything seriously.

Finally, there was PhiloponMeth, a female medical student. Let's also not question her criminally *meth*-odical name here. That aside, her mannerisms hinted at a good upbringing. She was the type who liked mobile games and laughing heartily.

By the way, my alias was Lolipork. I don't want any scandalous misunderstandings, so I shall give a proper explanation about mine. I wasn't a young girl, nor was I pork—I was an insignificant science major college student. When I'd published my slightly indecent fantasy fluff isekai story—based on my pig adventures in Mesteria—on the internet, I'd taken the opportunity to change my Twitter account name to “SlowLifeScrawnyPork.” But for some reason, online denizens had taken the ball and ran with it, shortening it to “Lolipork.” That hadn't been all—people went a step further, and the enigmatic nickname “Lolip” had spread like a virus.

On the topic of my slightly indecent isekai fantasy fluff story, now that I knew Mesteria truly existed, I had made the work private on the internet, partly to protect the royal family's secrets. To commemorate my work, however, I'd applied for a certain literary award targeted at rookie writers. But I doubted it would ever win anything. The title was way too strange.

Anyway.

Sanon's experience in Mesteria had been unforgettable for him, and he'd utilized his astounding internet investigation skills and the charm of sweet parfaits to summon his kindred spirits. And so, the four of us otaku with glasses had assembled. Over several conferences, we devised the Return to Mesteria Project.

Today was the day of the project's execution. *I can already hear the question: how are we going to get back there?*

Do not fret, my brethren. Our team of otaku with glasses had combined our knowledge and wits to deduce the principle behind everyone's teleportation to Mesteria, and we'd come up with a plan to take advantage of it.

Based on our observations, the teleportation of other otaku had begun because of me. When my consciousness had been transferred to Mesteria, it seemed that some traces of the magic had lingered behind. Ever since then, a most peculiar phenomenon began. Whenever studious otaku with glasses fainted in the vicinity of the same train station where I'd collapsed due to abdominal pain, their consciousness would possess a pig in Mesteria. Examples of such cases were PhiloponMeth, Sanon, and Kento. The three eventually

returned to modern-day Japan after their host pigs perished.

To make a long story short, if we blacked out near that train station again, our consciousnesses might teleport to Mesteria!

Allow me to explain the details of our plan. PhiloponMeth's father turned out to be the owner of a major hospital right next to the train station in question. During our previous teleportation, all of us had been hospitalized there while we were in comas. We'd be using this fact to our advantage.

We were going to do everything it took, even if it meant doing something morally questionable. PhiloponMeth would threaten her father and make him reexamine the patients who'd been in abnormally long comas for seemingly no reason, just like her. Under that pretense, he would arrange three hospital beds for everyone except PhiloponMeth. When we were all ready, she would use a stun gun—the real deal that Sanon had procured through shady channels—and knock us out reliably. If we were teleported to Mesteria safely and went comatose, PhiloponMeth's papa would be responsible for taking care of our bodies. That was the gist of our plan.

A slight tangent, but PhiloponMeth had apparently been sent to Mesteria almost immediately after I'd gotten food poisoning. However, she didn't have many good memories of the place, nor did she want to part from her younger sister, whose future was riddled with anxiety due to an incurable disease. Therefore, she wouldn't be part of the teleportation squad this time. However, she'd shown her support for our overly reckless project and had willingly become the linchpin of our plan. It wouldn't be possible without her.

"Mister Lolip, are you ready?" PhiloponMeth was wearing rubber gloves, and in her hand was an imposing stun gun. She looked down at me as I was lying on the bed. Her hair was trimmed into a short bob, and red-framed glasses decorated her benign face. Her appearance seemed so mismatched with what she was about to do that it was disorienting.

"Yes. Go ahead." I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my temple against the pillow. There was only one thought in my mind.

Jess.

Will I...see you again?

The three other teleporters who had gone to Mesteria after me evidently hadn't seen Jess or heard anything about her whereabouts. It made sense. After all, Jess was in the isolated royal capital. She should be getting a fresh start on her life as a happy, privileged member of the royal family.

A shadow fell over my eyelids, and my vision grew even darker. I felt something touch the back of my neck.

Jess...is it okay for me to see you again? For a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin like me to once again barge into the life of a maiden as wonderful as you...?

"No, stop..."

I heard the voice of a young maiden speaking in Mesteria's tongue.

I opened my eyes. The pain had only lasted an instant.

Where am I? I thought as I scanned my surroundings.

The environment was dim. Clumps of mud clung to my cheeks. When I inhaled, the Eau de Pigsty caressed the olfactory epithelium in my nasal cavity. *This means...*

My thoughts were interrupted by the voice ringing out from the other side of the haystack. "Please, no. If you keep licking me, I'm going to get all sticky..."

I listened carefully to the voice and stood up. When I looked down at my feet, I saw pink hooves that had a split in the middle. My altered senses brought on a sense of nostalgia.

Though this statement would sound strange under any other circumstances, it fit my current situation perfectly: I'd safely transformed into a pig. After three whole months, I'd succeeded at turning into a pig in Mesteria once again. The color in my vision and my control over my body adjusted to suit me, just like how they'd been after Jess had cured me. Her magic remained, obstinately protecting me.

I tottered over to the source of the voice with my four trotters, and the first thing that entered my vision was a big black pig. A slender, delicate girl wearing an umber dress was sitting on hay, and the black pig was licking all over her

cheeks like a dog.



“Ah! That tickles... Not my neck... Eep!”

“Grunt, oink...” The sound of a pig and a young maiden messing around resounded within the pigsty.

Uhhh... Sorry, can someone tell me what's going on? What in the world am I being forced to watch right now?

The girl, who'd been the helpless victim of the black pig, suddenly whipped her head around to look in my direction. Her hair was short, and her neck was slender and delicate. She had large eyes on her petite face. Right below the outer corner of her right eye was a mole. And finally, around her neck was a silver collar that gleamed with a subdued luster.

I tried to speak. “Groaink.” My sentence was transformed into the unpalatable noise of a too-far-gone otaku who was in the middle of a simping session. *Oh, right. I completely forgot.*

In my head, I added double angle brackets to my sentence to indicate that it was my “spoken” line. <<You're...Ceres, right?>> Of course, I was quiet on the outside.

She was a Yethma like Jess—a member of a “race” that could communicate without relying on mouths or ears. She served the innkeeper who operated an inn in the first village Jess and I had stopped at during our journey. I remembered her as a shy and withdrawn girl.

Ceres, whose cheek was glistening with pig slobber, widened her eyes in slight surprise. The black pig suddenly shrunk into itself and froze.

After a moment of silence, Ceres finally spoke up. “Um... I remember you. You're...”

<<Yeah.>>

But I hadn't expected Ceres to continue that sentence with “...Mister Super-Virgin, right?”

My mind froze for a moment. *I mean...she's not wrong, so I'll let her off the hook, I guess.* <<Got it in one. I was the scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who traveled with Jess. It's been a while.>>

The black pig, who'd been observing me, turned to face Ceres. She gave it a nod. "Yes. The pig over there is also... Yes, it seems so."

The black pig opened its mouth slightly. Its expression shifted, and I could read it like a book. It clearly thought, "Fudge."

Hmm, I see.

<<Ceres, I know that we should greet each other properly first, but can I ask a favor? Please add me to the telepathy network. I want to talk to that black pig.>>

Yethma could function like a wireless router and broadcast the thoughts of others. Therefore, even though we'd both been transformed into pigs who could only snort pathetically, we could still communicate as long as a Yethma was helping us out.

Ceres hesitated. "Okay, I will." She then nodded at me.

I looked straight at the black pig who had been reduced to an unmoving statue and asked him bluntly, <<Mister Sanon, why are you doggedly licking a thirteen-year-old girl?>>

Silence. There was no response from the black pig.

I wasn't fooled. <<You *are* Mister Sanon, aren't you? You won't fool me by pretending to be a pig.>>

The voice of an adult man entered my mind. <I-I'm not, oiiink.>

The defendant is found guilty. Court is adjourned. <<You *are*, oink.>>

While fidgeting rather suspiciously, the black pig tried to appeal his case. <No, um, this is a misunderstanding. It was...an accident, yes.>

<<Well then, can you please explain yourself?>>

<I didn't do it on purpose, I swear. My tongue just happened to accidentally touch her. I wasn't licking her doggedly, not at all!>

I raised a mental eyebrow. *Is it ever possible to "accidentally" lick a girl's face until she's sticky all over?* <<Mister, I'm afraid that no matter how I look at the situation, what you did doesn't qualify as "an accident.">> I glanced at Ceres.

The fine strands of her short hair were clinging to her face thanks to the adhesive known as pig saliva.

Looking slightly troubled, she smiled sheepishly. “Hee hee.”

<It’s, well, you know... I couldn’t hold back my pig instincts, you see.>

That half-hearted excuse was giving me déjà vu, and feeling utterly exasperated, I stopped arguing with the guy. <<There are many things I want to say to you right now, but all that aside... It seems that we have safely made our way back to Mesteria.>>

The black pig’s ear twitched. <Yes, indeed... Ah, I must say, I was completely under the impression that you went to where cutie-pie Jess is, Mister Lolip.> His focus went in all kinds of chaotic directions.

Sanon, the degenerate lolicon in front of me, had mentioned that he’d teleported to Ceres’s side last time. He ended up teleporting nearby Ceres once again, so it was a logical deduction that I would teleport near Jess as well. But in the end, I’d shown up here with him, taking him by surprise.

And of course, *I* was taken by complete surprise as well. *I didn’t teleport to where Jess is. I...still can’t meet up with her.*

I mean, that’s just life, right? It’s not like I returned to this world because I wanted to lick cutie-pie Jess hoggedly. Naturally, I’m not here to slobber all over cutie-pie Ceres either. I came back because I have unfinished business in Mesteria.

During our first IRL meetup in Japan, I had listened to the stories of the three other teleporters as I dug into my parfait. According to them, Mesteria’s state of affairs had suffered an upheaval after my departure, sending the land into an unheard-of tumultuous pandemonium.

One hero rose to action inside this chaotic world with a mission to save the Yethma shackled to a cruel destiny. It was none other than the handsome huntsman Naut.

We had returned to help Naut and to save the young girls known as Yethma. *As you can see, I didn’t come back to indulge in a fantasy fluff story with Jess. I totally didn’t. I swear. You will trust me on this, right, my brethren? Who would*

ever want to return to a lovey-dovey relationship with a beautiful blonde maiden he had bid a teary eternal farewell to? I'm not an otaku who forgot my boundaries and fell madly in love, after all. At most, I just think it'd be kinda nice if I was lucky enough to see her. Well, if Lady Luck is on my side, I'll probably come across her again somewhere in this nation. Whatever.

I felt an intense gaze on me, and I turned around. Ceres was staring hard at me. I inhaled. The air in the gloomy pigsty was suffocating and stagnant.

At this point, I was completely oblivious to how many excruciating twists and turns were waiting for me on my journey before I could finally reunite with Jess.

One by one, we looked over all the other pigs, but Kento, who should have teleported with us, was nowhere to be found. However, before worrying about where he disappeared, we had to worry about ourselves. Fortunately, a familiar face had taken us under her wing. But the problem was that we pigs had woken up in the village where I'd first met Ceres: Baptsaze.

It was a peaceful village sitting quietly inside a southern forest of Mesteria, which meant that it was far, far away from where all the action was going on. None of the lead actors were here. Not Jess, and not even Naut this time.

Our top priority was finding Naut with Ceres's help. *Actually, lemme retract that statement. We have something higher on the priority list because the two of us pigs are muddy all over.* Since we were coming into physical contact with a beautiful maiden, the least we could do was be as hygienic as possible, even if we were pigs. It was basic manners.

And so, under Ceres's lead, the two of us went to a stream and bathed. It was autumn in Mesteria. Withering grass the shade of dull gold shimmered enchantingly as the light of the afternoon sun spilled onto the meadows.

Jess and I had reached the capital three months ago, accompanied by the lush and vivacious green leaves of summer. I'd been told that Naut, who'd parted ways with us in the Needle Woods surrounding the capital, had successfully slain his mortal enemy, that giant man.

"But Mister Naut didn't come back immediately," Ceres continued as she

dipped her feet into the stream. She scooped up water with her hands and washed her neck carefully. “On his way back here, assassins attacked him...”

The three of us were going over the status quo of Mesteria while we washed ourselves.

<<I heard that the giant who Naut killed was quite a key figure in the underground world,>> I recalled.

She nodded. “Yes. He was one of their bosses, Enn the Mutilator. Even the royal court had been keeping an eye on him. He was a very influential man. That was why Mister Naut became a big target of the underground world.”

She sure knows a lot about this topic, I thought.

The black pig, Sanon, splashed water around noisily as he bathed.

He added, <While dodging the tenacious pursuit of ruffians, Nattie continued running for his life. But he didn’t just run—whenever he had the opportunity during his journey, he would assemble kindred souls who hated Yethma hunters. Sometimes, he’d even fight against his pursuers. After overcoming countless battles to the death, in less than a month, he became a hero whose feats are whispered about far and wide.>

It seemed that the battle between Naut and the assassins had escalated in scale rapidly, dragging in all kinds of people as his journey progressed. While I’d indulged in my otaku hobbies in Japan, the handsome hunk had accomplished a valiant achievement in Mesteria.

I wondered what had caused this significant difference between us. Was that my self-conceit? Our different environments? <<If I remember correctly, Naut banded together the Liberators after that, right?>>

Ceres nodded meekly. “With time, Mister Naut could finally fight on even footing with his pursuers. When things calmed down a bit, he finally returned to this place. But even during his visit, the aggression of the underground world only grew more extreme with time...and in response, he raised an army under the name of ‘Liberators.’”

At times, a single stab of retaliation by a young man can escalate to a war involving an entire nation.

The criminal society of Mesteria united as one in their vigor to murder Naut. This turned out to be a catalyst—northern Mesteria, the breeding grounds for crime and hoodlums, had declared independence from the reign of the royal court. A jewel merchant, Arrogan, had proclaimed himself the “New King” there. Now, northern Mesteria was under the control of the Nothen Faction, which consisted of criminals and thugs.

As for Naut, morale had been high for his ever-growing comrades, and he even had the support of the masses. His army, the Liberators, would fight for the rights of Yethma. As a result, Mesteria was thrown into a three-way war between the royal court, the Nothen Faction, and the Liberators.

I searched my memories. <<And that’s when Mister Sanon showed up.>>

Hearing that, the black pig turned to me. <Yes. I collapsed due to overworking, but when I woke up, I had become a pig under the management of an angelic lo—I mean, an angelic girl. That was my first encounter with Cece. Right?>

The black pig snuggled up to Ceres, who shyly smiled as she stroked him. His tail swished around in an elated dance.

Ceres nodded. “Right. Mister Sanon went along with my selfish request, and together, we went to where Mister Naut—no, where the Liberators were based. For a while after that, the two of us acted as members of the Liberators.”

I’d heard plenty of stories about it from Sanon. He had made full use of his little gray cells and had supported Naut as the tactician of the Liberators. *And, judging by his extraordinarily passionate affection towards Ceres, it seems that he didn’t just make use of his brains—while he was at it, he definitely indulged in a happy fantasy life with a girl who’s less than half his age...*

However, Sanon’s epic conquest had ended abruptly in less than one month. <<The Battle of the Rocky Plains happened during his first teleportation, didn’t it?>>

A shadow fell over Ceres’s face, and she hung her head despondently. “Yes. We Liberators lost our war against the Nothen Faction, and everyone fled.” Her eyes slowly shifted to the black pig’s face. “I was completely convinced that

Mister Sanon had lost his life during that battle as well...”

<The pig died, yes, but my consciousness was able to return to Mesteria once again, just like this! No matter how many times this body of mine perishes, my soul will eternally run after you, Cece, so don't you worry!>

The black pig shook his whole body like a dog and sent water splashing everywhere. *Uh, I think there are plenty of things I need to worry about after hearing that, but...let's not dwell on it now. Back to business.* <<Hey, Ceres, Naut was captured during the Battle of the Rocky Plains, yeah?>>

Ceres nodded sluggishly. “Yes. Mister Naut is a prisoner of the Nothen Faction right now, and...I hear that he's being forced to fight as a gladiator in the arena there.”

It matched DarKnightDeaThW—*ahem*, Kento's story. After Sanon's return to Japan, Kento had apparently possessed the pig of a Yethma called Nourris near the royal palace in the North. While Naut's enemies toyed with his life, turning him into a slave and entertainment, DarKnightDeaThWaLtz had been killed during his resistance against forces from the Nothen Faction, who'd seized Nourris as property. That was when he'd returned to Japan.

Kento had been the one who told us about the situation in the North. Though he was unaccounted for right now, since we'd attempted to teleport all at once, we might find him somewhere in Mesteria.

After a bath, we were relieved from our muddy state. Once we were all clean, we climbed out of the stream and dried our bodies in the autumn breeze that carried the scent of the forest, which held a hint of sweetness.

As for Ceres, she was sitting quietly on the riverbank, using a stone as her stool. She was staring at the northern sky, and her eyes were moist from the stimulus of the wind.

In the corner of my vision, the black pig was chasing a butterfly like an innocent child. Perhaps his elation over his freedom from his corporate slave life was getting to his head.

Ignoring him, I approached Ceres. <<Ceres... I'm sorry. Things got to this point because I took Naut along with us. It's my responsibility.>>

Hearing my apology, Ceres shook her head weakly, resigned. “It’s not your fault, Mister Pig. Mister Naut was someone who dreamed of changing Mesteria for the better. It was only a matter of time before he departed to fulfill his destiny.” Then, she looked at me cautiously. “Um...”

<<Something on your mind?>>

“Is Miss Jess doing well?”

<<Should be. Thanks to Naut, we reached the capital safely. Jess should be leading a happy life there right now.>> For some reason, I couldn’t work up the motivation to give her a detailed explanation. *I-It’s not that I’m still depressed because I didn’t get to see Jess or anything. Totally not.*

“Ah, I’m so sorry! Um, if you don’t want to talk about it, please don’t force yourself.”

She read the narration! I completely forgot about that feature in this world.
<<No, you really don’t have to worry about stepping on my toes. I’m fine. And... Oh, right. I learned the trick to enter the capital, so when you turn sixteen, I’ll help you when you make your journey there.>>

“The capital... I see. If you’re with me, Mister Super-Virgin, that’s very reassuring.”

Uh... Has she established that as my name? Just as that thought crossed my mind, the black pig abruptly charged over before snorting with so much force that I was worried his snout might burst.

<Excuse me, sir. Cece already has plans to lead a happy life with me and Nattie, for your information!!!>

I raised a mental eyebrow. <<Anything you say, mister. Well, never mind, then...>> Sanon already had several yellow cards from me based on his actions so far, but his rampant thoughts aside, he was a kindhearted dude with a proper philosophy about his “hobbies.” As long as he didn’t act on it, it was none of my business. Furthermore, he came equipped with an incredibly sharp mind. *If he says so, Ceres should be in good hands.*

After all, I had someone else—

Sanon's voice echoed in my mind. <I'm sure you're aware that right now, we have one mission we must accomplish above all else, Mister Lolip.>

My eyes widened. *Did he notice the doubt festering in my heart?* I nodded firmly and threw all unnecessary thoughts out of my mind.

I'd teleported to Jess's side last time for a reason. That meant there must be a very good reason I'd teleported near Ceres this time and not Jess. Right now, Jess wasn't the person who desperately needed help. It was Naut, whose life was being toyed with, forced to be a gladiator in the North. And it was Ceres, whose crush had been snatched away by an immoral pig, resulting in her being separated from her precious someone.

<<Of course. Let's go rescue Naut with Ceres,>> I said, determined.

* * *

I lifted my eyelids, and the midday sunlight seared my eyes.

The stage, covered with a layer of sand, was unnecessarily vast. The stadium seating made of stone was filled with cruel spectators that numbered in the thousands. Above was the blue sky without a cloud in sight. In front of me was... I breathed a sigh of relief. My opponents weren't human today. Three lions, fettered by chains, growled and bared their teeth at me, impatiently waiting to sink their fangs into my flesh.

Though the dry sand covering the wooden arena was clean at the moment, the reality was that not a single day went by without some casualties. The replaced sand had been dyed a murky red, soaked thoroughly with blood from the previous match.

On the parched clearing, the lions and I faced each other. The low-pitched toll of a bell echoed out, and there was a metallic rattle as the chains were removed. Thunderous shouting threatened to split the arena into pieces. Were they angry bellows or thrilled cheers that filled the air?

My left hand couldn't move. With my right hand, I gripped one of my twin shortswords and assumed a stance, ready to counterattack.

Against a huntsman, beasts were nothing more than moving chunks of meat.

“You’re way too awesome! You were so cool out there, Master!”

Those words belonged to a cheerful fourteen-year-old boy who grinned at me from the other side of the gilded cage. His name was Batt. In high spirits, he eagerly supplied “feed” to the prisoner—me—who might not live to see another day. Today, it was a lump of assorted grains. Nearly most, if not all of it, was still unhulled. Without a word, I grabbed it and gnawed. It was my first meal in two days.

“When that lion trampled on you, I thought even someone strong like you was a goner. But I totally didn’t expect what happened next! You stabbed its foot with the sword you kept close to your side! That means you must’ve predicted its movement! I gotta say, I was almost creeped out when I saw that.”

As Batt spoke, I swallowed the grains, the pointy spines on the husks scratching my throat like fingernails. He was a talkative boy who reminded me of a puppy. It was apparently his job to hand out feed to the prisoners locked away in the underground area of the arena. He seemed to have taken a liking to me and often struck up conversations. I didn’t have anyone else to talk to, so he wasn’t a nuisance.

I responded, “The skill of a huntsman is decided by his ability to predict a beast’s movement patterns. The further you can read ahead, the better. To do that, it’s important to gain a deep pool of experience against as many types of beasts as possible. If you want to stand on your own as a huntsman and not remain a disciple, remember that much.”

Batt’s eyes lit up. “I see, I see. I knew it. You’re awesome, Master!”

His response was the same as usual. I doubted he understood much of my advice. He appeared to be around Ceres’s age. It seemed that teenage girls were more grounded than boys after all. “Get back to work already. If you dawdle around my cage, you’ll draw unwanted suspicion.”

“Gotcha! See ya tomorrow, Master!”

Batt flashed a broad, toothy grin before hopping away into the darkness like a rabbit. I was thrust back into pitch-black solitude.

Slaves like me were held captive in this prison below the arena until we died.

There was no place for sunlight to pour in from, and mice scuttled back and forth across the cold, damp floor. The only source of illumination was the lanterns along the corridor. Wardens dragging slaves to the stage and the spectators' jeers filtering down from above indicated the passage of time. This dark, damp, and malicious place was decorated by the dull colors of wood, stone, soil, and iron. The only exception was my cage, which was adorned with gold like some kind of sick joke. For some reason, I seemed to be receiving special treatment.

Batt was gone, and I'd finished consuming my "feed." There was nothing left to do, and I felt my eyelids close.

"Wake up."

I was lying in a heap on the ground and dozing off when I heard a woman's low-pitched voice. I swatted off the pebbles that had dug into my arms as I squinted my eyes in the darkness to peer outside my cage.

There was a girl with long golden hair. She seemed to be around fifteen or sixteen. A dirty rag covered her body. She had slender limbs, cheeks covered with freckles, and dark, emotionless eyes. The girl wore a silver collar—she was a Yethma.

After a pause, I asked, "What do you want?"

"I have been ordered to take you outside."

"By whom?"

"By the New King."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "King?"

"Indeed."

"Who are you? Why is Arrogan calling for me?"

"My name is Nourris. I am one of the Yethma who work in this arena. I was only appointed with this task by chance, so I am unaware of the New King's intentions."

She spoke in a curt and detached manner. No ripple in her expression. It

seemed that she wasn't lying.

Nourris inserted yellow ristae into shackles connected to rusty, hefty chains. She threw them inside the cage through the gap between the bars. The shackles slithered across the ground and accurately bound my hands and ankles as I sat.

With a key that was connected to the shackles, she opened the lock of the cage before saying, "I will guide you to the palace."

I walked down the dark path, pulling the chains along the ground with every step. I was then guided into a carriage. The streets of the North had few pedestrians, and a dismal atmosphere hung over the entire city. From the barred windows, I could see houses with flaking plaster layers that were likely once warm and soft colors. They revealed the earthen-colored inner walls.

Nourris sat across me. She turned her freckled, impassive face towards the window and silently watched the scenery outside. Her job likely never brought her joy.

Eventually, the palace of the North—Atypidae Palace—appeared in my vision. It was a sturdy stone castle built on the high ground of a stark mountain. Additional crooked towers that looked newer—likely constructed from wood and clay—lined up haphazardly. The carriage ascended the bare mountain, passed through a pure black gate, then entered the palace. I was instructed to dismount the carriage, and under Nourris's guidance, I navigated the hallways until we stopped in front of a towering metal door.

"My work is done," Nourris stated decorously before moving to one side.

The door opened. Two wardens wearing leather masks that concealed their entire faces dragged me inside.

A hoarse voice entered my ears. "Raise your head."

I turned to look at the source. On a stone throne sat a morbidly scrawny man whose skin was parched and gray. His eyes were sunken in and difficult to make out. A silver crown dug into his temples. He looked like a mummy forced to wear formal clothing.

He continued, "You were supposed to die in suffering and agony. But you surprise me with how tenacious you are. You are still alive."

“Got a problem with that?”

“Why would that be problematic? The only thing you will achieve is prolonging your suffering before your death.” An unpleasant laughter shook the shoulders of Arrogan, the New King. It sounded like something between a strangled croak and a harsh cough. “But I am afraid that I cannot let this go on. Exactly one month has passed since your arrival here. I did not bring you here to become a hero of the arena.”

“What do you want?” I asked flatly.

Arrogan used his long scepter to indicate one side of the room. A door opened, revealing the adjacent chamber. In it was a chair bent backward in an unusual way, and protrusions littered its entire frame. It was a torture device that bound a human in place and dealt incessant anguish to its target with its physical design—without leaving visible injuries—and the magic of *ristae*.

I could feel my arms, which were seized by the wardens, spasm on reflex.

Next to the torture chair stood a tall, elderly man. He wore a gray robe, and his hood was pulled down just above his eyes. His entire silhouette felt like a shadow. A pair of shining, golden eyes inside the darkness pierced me.

I was carried into the adjacent chamber and restrained to the device. The shadowy, elderly man peered into my face. The only things I could see were his prominent nose and golden orbs.

A deep, dreadful voice rang out from under the hood. “Now then, I am rather curious, Naut of the Liberators. How much pain does it take to break a man like you?”

* * *

After we agreed to help Ceres in her search, the three of us walked towards the mountain on the other side of the village.

In the middle of our trek, Sanon said, <I must say, I am a bit jealous.>

I blinked. <<Um, of what, may I ask?>>

<Your nickname, Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin, Mister Lolip.>

<<I’m afraid it’s an awfully regrettable nickname that stuck because I keep

referring to myself as such... Why in the world would anyone be jealous of it?>>

<I mean, it is not every day you get the opportunity to be called “Super-Virgin” by purehearted girls, is it?>

Ceres, who’d relayed the depraved conversation between two otaku who were beyond salvation, tilted her head in question. “Um, is being called Super-Virgin by a woman a good thing?”

The question posed by an innocent thirteen-year-old girl led to a moment of awkward silence.

Finally, I explained, <<You see, there are some breeds of otaku out there who feel joy when women humiliate them.>>

Ceres tilted her head a little more. Confusion was clear on her face. “Huh...? Humiliate? Is Super-Virgin a mean word?”

I’d dug my own grave. Seeking help, I sent a pleading gaze in Sanon’s direction. The dependable black pig nodded.

<Cece, it’s not anything mean, really, but it might sound like an insult depending on how you use it. Calling this man Super-Virgin is completely fine, so you can rest assured.>

Uh... I narrowed my eyes at Sanon. Perhaps I’d put faith in the wrong person. *But since I’m the one who introduced myself as that, I guess I’ll have to accept it.*

I thought the topic would end there, but another imaginary question mark seemed to appear above Ceres’s head, because she asked, “By the way, what exactly are you happy about when a woman humiliates you?”

Well darn. This maiden is a more formidable opponent than I expected. My brethren, can you give a detailed and logical explanation about the joy some experience in such situations? <<Now that’s an interesting question. It’s, you know, that...?>> Once again, I dumped the responsibility on Sanon.

<Cece, when you humiliate someone, you are establishing a certain kind of asymmetric relationship between the humiliator and the humiliated. There is a clear hierarchy in this relationship. To put it another way, it is a relationship that involves domination and submission. When someone takes control over you,

you are liberated from all kinds of expectations and responsibilities. Submitting to the control of your object of admiration—in this case, a girl—will allow you to fulfill the primitive desire of men for girls to pay attention to them. It will simultaneously give you a feeling of freedom from the stress that weighs down on your shoulders every day. That's why some feel joy.>

Sanon had rambled rapidly, a standard otaku skill, and after hearing his explanation, Ceres fell into a pensive silence. "In that case... Should I humiliate you with words as well, Mister Sanon?"

<Indeed, I would be very, very open to that ide—>

I interrupted him. <<Stop right there. No, don't do it, Ceres. You aren't someone who can be mean to others. It's not your thing.>>

Ceres smiled. "Yeah, you're right."

The black pig snorted with displeasure.

That aside, his explanation was extremely accurate. Is Sanon one of "those" people? As someone who squealed over Jess calling me a pig, I guess I'm not one to talk...

By the end of our conversation, we'd arrived at the ruins of the Baptsaze convent. The fire in the past had destroyed it utterly, leaving only its stone foundation and some crumbling walls.

I turned to Ceres. <<Now that we're here, what are you looking for?>>

Ceres averted her gaze slightly. "Um... I'm not quite sure what we're trying to find."

Oho?

She continued, "Mister Naut hid something the first time he returned to Baptsaze. It seems rather important, and he told me to dig it out if he ever disappears..."

Sanon said, <That means this happened before I met you, Cece. Do you have a rough idea of where it is?>

Looking somewhat uncertain, Ceres pointed at the meadow beside the convent. "It should be somewhere around there."

<Did he leave any special signs?>

"I, um... I forgot. There might not be. That's why when I saw you two pigs, I thought you might be able to help me."

She...forgot? <<It's an entire meadow. If we don't have any clues, it's going to be a tough job. Can you remember something? Anything?>>

"Mister Naut's hands were covered in dirt, so I think he buried it with his hands..."

That's a rather strange hint, but I suppose we have a lead now. <<Okay, so Naut buried it himself. You mentioned it was during his first visit back. And that was...?>>

"Roughly two months ago," she replied.

Oh. Hmm... I narrowed my eyes slightly. *I see. In that case, it will be difficult to find traces on the ground or use Naut's scent as a trail.*

Sanon spoke up. <Mister Lolip, let's go with a pig wave attack for now. We can sweep this meadow from one corner to the other.>

I nodded. It was already evening. We didn't have much time before night would arrive.

As I searched, I felt doubt appear in my mind. Something wasn't right. Naut had told her to dig it out if he ever disappeared, and Ceres claimed that she'd forgotten the crucial landmark. However, she still remembered that it was somewhere in the meadow next to the convent. *So why didn't she memorize the rest of it?* Above all else, Ceres didn't know what this important "treasure" was. Why hadn't Naut told her?

My thoughts were going around in circles, and my suspicions were nagging at me.

Oh, whatever. I owe Ceres a lot. This isn't the time for nitpicking—I should try to deduce the hiding place.

Okay. So Naut came to the ruins of this convent to hide something "important." Five years ago, this place went up in flames. As a result, Naut's crush, Eise, was captured and killed...

I see. Naut chose a place that's special to him as the hiding place. There's quite some distance between here and the heart of the village. For him to come all the way out here, I doubt he'd choose to bury it somewhere random in the meadow. It's more natural for him to choose a symbolic place.

I scanned our surroundings. The meadow we were searching was facing the convent ruins. <<Hey, Ceres. Just wondering, but inside those remains, is there any intact object or place that retains its former glory?>>

Ceres approached me. "Well... It hasn't been used in a long time, but there should be the entrance to an underground tunnel that leads to the village."

<<No, that's not quite what I mean.>> I searched for the right wording. <<Do you know anything that would serve as a landmark or sign? Even if it's just faint traces, that's fine too.>>

"In that case... I think I know something." Ceres half jogged over to the ruins with small steps. Sanon and I followed her.

When we arrived, she explained, "I heard that after the fire five years ago, there truly wasn't anything left, as if the convent was burned down by magic. But there's one special tile." She pointed at a square tile that was around fifty centimeters in diameter. Similar tiles covered the ground, but unlike all the others, this one had a circular mark on it. "The collar of one Yethma fell down here and didn't burn. Because of that, only the area beneath it was spared from charring, as you can see. Other than this, I can't think of anything noteworthy..."

Interesting. It contradicts Ceres's statement that Naut had buried the item in the soil with his hands, but it's worth a shot. <<Mister Sanon, do you think it's possible to remove this tile without using too much brute force?>>

The black pig nodded. <The tiles around it are gone. The strength of Nattie or a pig might be enough to slide it over.>

Sanon used his large snout to push the tile. Pigs are animals that dig up dirt with their noses. Their snouts hide great strength, and even solid soil will not deter them from digging holes as they please.

With a small creak, the tile moved. Scraping sounds grated on our ears as the

tile moved while grinding fine sand beneath it. It was a huge success. And then...

<<Ceres! Look! There's something inside!>>

There was a deep hole in the dirt beneath the tile, and inside it was something that reminded me of an earthenware jar. With wide eyes, Ceres approached the hole and carefully picked up the jar with her slender arms.

She scrutinized it. "This is..."

The jar turned out to be made of white porcelain, and it had a lid. It seemed short and stout in form, but its top half was slightly narrower with an obsidian-black hoop circling that area.

I had an ominous premonition. <<Is that...?>>

"Um... It's a collar. It's someone's... It's a Yethma's silver collar."

<Cece, maybe it's not a good idea to open that...> Sanon warned.

Ceres, however, placed the jar on the ground and lifted the forbidden lid. I peered inside. The jar was filled with whitish ashes and what were clearly fragments of bones. Looking shaken, Ceres put the lid back on. The friction between porcelain objects caused a shrill, pained screech.

"I-I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I couldn't help but be curious, and..."

Was this jar of bones what Naut had hidden? Judging by the obsidian-black collar, the bones belonged to a Yethma. <<Can I take a quick look?>> After asking that out of politeness, I leaned forward to inspect the collar.

The change happened immediately. As if someone had soaked it in a deoxidizer, the blackened collar instantly restored its silver luster.

Astonished, I stepped back on instinct. <<Sorry, did I do something?>>

Ceres looked at me with her big eyes. "This collar...might belong to someone you know, Mister Super-Virgin."

<<How did you figure that out?>>

"A collar that has lost its owner will only regain its radiance when someone important to its Yethma owner approaches it..."

A chill ran down my spine. *No way, did Jess— No, it can't be. Jess's collar split in two right in front of my eyes. By process of elimination, the silver collar must be...* <<I...think it belonged to a girl called Blaise. We met a Yethma on our journey who perished in the Needle Woods right in front of the capital.>>

She was a quiet girl who loved praying and had big boobs.

I continued, <<Naut probably took her collar and remains back with him before burying them here.>>

For a while, Ceres was completely silent. Perhaps she was too shaken by this turn of events. But eventually, she muttered in a low voice, "That makes sense. Mister Naut likes women with large chests, after all." She hung her head, and her gaze traced her flat-tering torso before it landed on her toes.

I was lost for a moment, but I know now! She read the narration! <<Y-You've got the wrong idea, Ceres! Naut didn't have any kind of intimate relationship with Blaise at all!>>

"I-I'm sorry!" Her ears were bright red as she apologized. "Um, I know that. I'm so sorry for saying something silly."

Sanon joined the conversation. <Hey, Cece, what should we do with this? Should we take it back to the inn?>

Ceres looked a bit torn as she rocked her head ambiguously. I couldn't tell whether it was a nod or a shake. *I see. Judging by her indecision, it seems that we never needed to dig up this jar of bones. I need to confirm something with her.* <<Hey, Ceres, I've been wondering. This is just a guess, but Naut didn't tell you to dig this up when he disappeared, did he?>>

Sanon tried to cut me off. <Excuse me, Mister Lolip, but—>

I didn't pay him any mind. <<We're on your side. I'm certain that we'll share many secrets with you from now on, Ceres, so let's not bring any lies to the table. I promise I won't be mad, so could you tell me the truth? You secretly saw Naut hiding something in this area, and it weighed on your mind. So you tried to look for it. Is that right?>>

After a pause, Ceres nodded. "Yes... He left on a journey with you and Miss Jess and got into a lot of trouble later on. When he finally came back, he was

trying to conceal whatever something he was holding in his arms. I asked him about it, then Mister Naut said, ‘It’s something important. But you’re better off not knowing.’”

She cast her eyes down. “I couldn’t help but be bothered though...and I sneakily followed him. I saw Mister Naut coming to a stop in the meadow over there, but Mister Rossi almost noticed me, and I...”

Naut had brought along Rossi, his dog buddy. Rossi had almost caught a whiff of Ceres’s scent, and she must have run away in a panic. When Naut had returned, his hands had been dirty with soil, and so Ceres had tried to search the ground beneath the meadow. However, she hadn’t had any luck because the item in question had been hidden beneath a tile.

Sanon tried to reassure her. <I completely understand where you’re coming from. Anyone would be curious about the secrets of the person they like.>

“I-I don’t like him or anything!” Ceres shook her head furiously. “It’s just that, whenever I think that I might never see him again, I’m terrified... I want something, anything that might be connected to him, and I just... I’m sorry, I...” Her eyes grew moist with tears. “I lied and made you two help me...”

<<You don’t have to apologize. I can empathize with you as well.>> When I’d realized Jess was hiding something, I couldn’t even describe how unsettled my heart had been. When Naut and Jess had been all alone inside the inn Ceres worked at, the emotions that had seized my heart almost tore me apart.

Ceres kept denying it, but I knew the real name of her feelings. It was an emotion that the mind couldn’t reason with—when this uncontrollable emotion was involved, no matter how hard you tried to not pay any attention, it was impossible.

And for that very reason, I had to help Ceres with everything I had.

In the end, we returned the jar of bones and the collar to their resting place beneath the tile. After that, we made our way back to the vacant inn—there weren’t any guests. Ceres’s mistress welcomed us.

“I never thought Sanon would come back,” the woman said. “And he even

brought Jess's pig with him!"

Her name was Martha, an auntie with a stout build and red hair. She was also the ringleader of the group that had provided shelter to Yethma five years ago in the convent. Martha seemed to know Sanon well, but since I vaguely remembered not conversing at all with her last time, I introduced myself while cautiously avoiding the word "super-virgin."

She received us with a warm attitude, but when we voiced our request to bring Ceres with us to find Naut, Martha rejected us resolutely. "I can't let you do that. I understand how you feel, but I won't let Ceres leave with you people this time."

Determined, Martha folded her arms, and Ceres's shoulders slumped with dejection.

The woman continued, "It's not that I'm against it... Of course, one part of it's because I don't want Ceres to put her life at risk ever again, but the problem is that before they reach sixteen, Yethma are bound to the 'house' they serve. That's what my contract with the royal court states. As long as this house exists, under normal circumstances, it's absurd for Ceres to abandon her job and head somewhere far away. Last time, I let Sanon's enthusiasm persuade me and permitted her to leave...but there won't be a second time."

Ceres hung her head and became even quieter than she usually was. The two of us pigs couldn't come up with any effective persuasion either.

Ceres communicated to us both, <Thank you. Let's head to my room.>

She led us both to her bedroom, which was a corner room inside the inn. Though it was her private quarters, she kept it at a higher hygiene standard than the guest room I'd stayed in with Jess. She didn't have many possessions, but stylish furnishings and ornaments befitting a young maiden decorated the room.

The moment we walked in, Ceres headed straight for her bed. With a muffled thump, she face-planted on the mattress. The black pig and I traded silent glances. Even if we didn't ask Ceres to relay our messages, we understood what was on each other's minds.

Ceres couldn't leave Baptsaze. In that case, why were we even here? Did we come to this world to babysit a thirteen-year-old girl?

A faint, stifled whimper shattered the silence. Ceres had made that sound.

I felt like I should be anywhere but here, but I couldn't just turn and leave the room either. Though I wanted to chat with the other resident pig and drown out Ceres's voice so that she could at least have a semblance of privacy, unfortunately, we couldn't speak the human language.

"Grunt?" I asked.

"...Grunt."

It's no good. This isn't a conversation.

The next moment, Ceres propped up her upper body and turned to face us. Her pillow seemed to have soaked up her tears, but her large eyes were puffy and red. "It's a very boring story that isn't worthy of anyone's time, but...could you please lend me your ears for a moment?"

<<Sure. Go ahead.>>

<Of course, I'm always here to listen.>

Ever so slowly, Ceres moved her trembling lips. "Um... I came here five years ago. Back then, I was only eight years old. I was in an unfamiliar place, I couldn't even work properly, and I was always timid, so I kept causing everyone trouble."

<<No one can blame you for that. Being forced to work at the age of eight is abnormal to begin with.>>

Ceres moved her head a bit and continued, "I was a burden. I was thin and bony, and everyone laughed, calling me 'bag of bones' or 'twig.' I was...really sad."

The girl's monologue had begun without warning. The only thing I could do was listen carefully to her every word.

"Until one day, a certain man returned to this village. He brought back the collar of the kidnapped Miss Eise with him and gave it to Madame Martha."

I didn't even have to ask her about the identity of the mystery man. He was the pride of this village and now the heroic revolutionary, Naut.

"When Mister Naut first met me, he told me this: 'Your eyes remind me of the person I liked.' And then, he roasted delicious rabbit meat for me, saying, 'But you're too thin. If you keep that up, your boobs will never get bigger, you know.'"

Uh, that young man likes boobs a bit too much...

"After I became acquainted with Mister Naut, all the villagers started treating me differently. Everyone started doting on me and fussing over me. Mister Naut is a hero. He's always the center of attention, the one who dictates the mood. I'm sure that everyone only started being nice to me because they followed his example."

Ceres's voice, which had finally steadied, suddenly started shaking again. "Even since then, Mister Naut has always been special to me. I'm a Yethma, and I'm a child. I know that I don't have any right to fall in love with him. But he wouldn't leave my mind. I can't forget about him even if I tried. Now, he's far away and might die at any second, but I'm here, and I can't do anything..."

She took a deep breath and looked right into my eyes. "I can't bear it."

Her unexpected soliloquy ended just as abruptly. After crying her heart out, Ceres fell asleep, exhausted.

Fragment 2: A Precious Someone

Together with Madame Wyss and Mister Shravis—King Eavis’s grandson—I entered the king’s bedroom. His Majesty King Eavis was the ruler of Mesteria and a peerless mage. His bedroom was magnificent and luxurious, decorated with ornaments of gold and silver. Magic lamps illuminated the room with a warm glow.

King Eavis was lying in a big canopy bed. His voluminous gray hair rippled like waves, and his gray beard was long and impressive. Though he looked age-worn, his noble visage was still handsome and shapely. However, there were dark bags under his eyes now, and he was very thin. He reminded me of a person ailed by a grave illness.

“How are you feeling, Your Majesty?” I asked.

For a while, there was no reply. King Eavis glanced over at Mister Shravis before saying, “I suppose the correct answer is that...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know...?” Mister Shravis sounded awfully shaken. He had charming, finely chiseled features that he’d inherited from King Eavis. His curly hair was the color of gold. As of this year, he was eighteen years old. He was a sincere and responsible person.

“Indeed,” King Eavis replied. “I have never been the target of a curse before. Even if you ask me whether I will recover, my only answer is that I don’t know unless I investigate the matter.”

“Is it...truly a curse?” Madame Wyss seemed to be agitated as well. Her voice was trembling.

“My magic wasn’t enough to fully eliminate this spell.” King Eavis pulled his right arm out from under his blanket. On the back of his hand was something that looked like a dark and ominous bruise. Black veins coiled around it like ivy vines. “That means I was cursed by an unknown mage.”

The power of magic eclipsed all nonmagic techniques and substances. We

could purge poison and illnesses with magic, and a fully-fledged mage like King Eavis could dispel pseudo magic performed with ristae until there was no trace at all. Since it was a problem that he couldn't eliminate, it could only be someone else's magic.

"But, grandfather," Mister Shravis began anxiously, "other than the four of us present, the only mages that are capable of such a thing would be..."

King Eavis tucked his jaw slightly towards his neck. "Yes. The only candidates are Marquis and Hortis."

"Then..." Mister Shravis chewed on his lip. "Was it...uncle?"

A gloomy expression took over the faces of the other three present. Though I felt guilty about interrupting them, I asked, "Excuse me, but who might Mister Hortis be?"

Madame Wyss explained, "To tell you the truth, His Majesty actually has two sons. One is my husband, Marquis, and the other is his younger brother, Hortis."

I'd heard stories about Mister Marquis from time to time. He was King Eavis's oldest son, Madame Wyss's husband, and Mister Shravis's father. While King Eavis was hailed as a peerless mage, I'd heard that Mister Marquis was the most powerful mage. But well, there were only a handful of mages allowed to use magic freely, of course.

I voiced a second question. "Mister Marquis is infiltrating the North under His Majesty's command, yes?"

Madame Wyss nodded. "That is correct. He has changed his appearance and is investigating near the castle in the North."

"Where is Mister Hortis, then?" I asked.

"He's disappeared." King Eavis was the one who replied to my inquiry. "Five years ago, he opposed our policies and vanished from the capital. We have absolutely no information regarding his whereabouts. I was under the impression that he was already dead by now, but perhaps..."

Mister Shravis cast his eyes down. "Who would have thought that uncle

would curse grandfather?”

Madame Wyss shook her head. “My opinion is that it is rather unlikely.”

King Eavis nodded slightly in agreement with her. “I share that opinion. Even if Hortis were alive, I doubt he would use such means. But knowing him, he might be skilled enough to even remove *Loc* spells.”

I tilted my head quizzically. “*Loc* spells?”

King Eavis was kind enough to explain. “Yethma collars, as well as the blood rings of the citizens in the capital, are protected by special spells called *Loc*. Without knowledge of the *Cæg* spell, the key that will release such spells, one cannot take off those items. However, a sorcerer with great technique like Hortis might be able to remove the *Loc* spells through unofficial means. If he removed collars and blood rings with a method that we cannot detect...” His Majesty trailed off.

Deep creases formed between King Eavis’s eyebrows as he continued, “We cannot disregard the possibility that mages have been set free without our knowledge and are roaming this land as they please.”

There was pin-drop silence.

Yethma collars were magical items that sealed away the mana of mages, turning them into harmless Yethma. I’d heard that only King Eavis and Mister Marquis could remove them. These collars were protected by a special spell, and if someone wanted to take them off without using the official method...the only option was to behead the Yethma.

Meanwhile, blood rings were attached to the hearts of the citizens living in the capital. They served a similar purpose as Yethma collars and placed a heavy limit on the mana of their owners. The rings weren’t visible from the outside, and other than the official method, the only way to remove them was...to sever the many blood vessels transferring blood from the heart to the entire body.

If the man known as Mister Hortis removed these devices, then girls once treated as Yethma and citizens of the capital with sealed mana would regain their full abilities while leaving the royal court in the dark. The order that King Eavis had protected throughout his reign would be thrown into utter chaos.

Knowledge from my lessons appeared in the back of my mind. I recalled the Dark Ages—the period when mages fought against each other and caused a lot of bloodshed. It was an age where boundless violence clashed, causing destruction that had almost led to the entire world collapsing.

I was taught that Lady Vatis, King Eavis’s great-grandmother, had put an end to those bleak days. She had weakened all the mages she had been allied with. As for the other surviving mages, she had tracked them down and executed them one by one. She’d dictated that only her own clan was permitted to wield their rightful power.

Her reforms had given birth to the “race” known as Yethma. Children with mana born to citizens of the capital were collared to seal off their magic. Their memories would be wiped, and they would work as slaves outside the capital. When they reached the age of sixteen, they would be sent into the wild on a journey to their birthplace, and they had to travel there with their own power. If they weren’t able to reach their destination, it would only be a matter of time before they were killed.

The girls—whose mana, aggression, and self-interests were sealed—had been circulated as slaves since then. They’d supported Mesteria’s society after the Dark Ages at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Furthermore, by existing and being weeded out accordingly, they had served their purpose of preserving the race known as mages, which was the very source of the royal court’s authority.

I had once been a Yethma as well. However, I was lucky enough to reach the capital successfully, and King Eavis had even felt that I had promise. Now, I was being educated as the future consort of a prince—as Mister Shravis’s fiancée.

That was when my mind faltered. *But, I thought, I can’t remember how I traveled to the capital at all.*

After talking about Mister Hortis, we began a strategy meeting.

From the beginning, this was a war where we had an overwhelming advantage. There shouldn’t be any mages in the opposition, so the difference between our military might was evident. Places known as govern camps were vital to the Nothen Faction’s strategy, and if King Eavis annihilated them one by

one, we could reclaim control over those territories.

Mister Marquis was hiding undercover near the Nothen king, Arrogan. Once we had an understanding of his government, we could destroy the monarchy in the North. That would deal a fatal blow to our enemies.

The strategy aligned with the teachings that had been drilled into me: nothing could pose a threat to our royal court.

But was that really the case? I spoke up. “Pardon me, but why would Mister Arrogan start a revolt if he didn’t think he had a chance to begin with? He must have some kind of tactic that allows him to fight on equal footing against even our royal court with mages. Otherwise, I cannot imagine anyone declaring war against us.”

King Eavis hummed thoughtfully. “Considering my current condition, that is rather likely.”

Our king was afflicted with a curse that even he, a mage unmatched in terms of skill, couldn’t dispel. It was evidence hinting at the unforeseen presence of an unknown mage—the Clandestine Arcanist that King Eavis had mentioned before. This mage must have been the trump card up the Nothen Faction’s sleeve.

After mulling it over, Madame Wyss offered her opinion. “With all due respect, is it possible that you were lured into a trap, my king?”

“Hmm. By that, I assume you’re implying they predicted I would head into the battlefield in person and had set up a trap—a curse—in advance. I cannot rule out that possibility. I was cursed in Nearbell. Compared to all the other areas under the Nothen Faction’s rule, that land was protruding into our territory and on the verge of defeat.”

He continued, “When I visited it, I discovered that there were barely any defensive measures in place. But it would make sense if they never had any intention of defending Nearbell to the end—they wanted to lure me out and curse me from the beginning. Perhaps I played right into the Clandestine Arcanist’s hands.”

Seeming flustered, Mister Shravis spoke up. “In that case, there is at least one

mage among the opposition. Grandfather had to withdraw from the warfront due to the trap, and father is hiding undercover near Arrogan... If we don't change our strategy, our territories will be invaded one after another, and we will not even be able to put up any resistance!"

"Indeed." King Eavis nodded. "The problem is that even if we wanted to summon Marquis back, it would have to be at the right time. We have yet to fully unravel the governing system in the North. Defeating Arrogan prematurely might only lead to the rise of a second king. If a mage is truly our enemy, it would be foolhardy to destroy the monarchy there before we gain information about their identity. It is always better to call him back before it's too late, of course, but not now."

The Clandestine Arcanist might be powerful enough to oppose the royal court. There were still many unresolved mysteries, and it would be very dangerous if we recklessly fought our opponents with pure power alone.

Tension filled the bedroom. Everyone was on edge.

Mister Shravis looked up with determination. "Grandfather, I shall head into battle in your ste—"

"You must not." King Eavis cut him off firmly. "If you die, Shravis, who is going to take over the crown? I have arranged recent training for you, but it's not because I want you to fight in this war. Your job is to bring peace to Mesteria once again after the war is over."

"Peace... You mean, just like my father?"

"Yes."

Mister Shravis stole a glance at me. He looked a bit conflicted. I didn't know what he was thinking. After a long pause, he said, "I see. As you wish."

Madame Wyss looked somewhat restless and changed the topic. "For now, let us think of a war strategy that does not involve our king. How many soldiers do we have?"

King Eavis replied, "We have a total of thirty squadrons scattered across Mesteria, and each has approximately two hundred soldiers." He shook his head slightly. "Those without thorough training cannot put up a fight against

ogurs. It is likely impossible to increase our forces quickly.”

Our king was a man who wholeheartedly believed in a world of absolute peace. Even our military only had the bare minimum of soldiers. However, the Nothen Faction was enlisting soldiers from their territory by force, strengthening their army by the day.

Furthermore, they apparently even used powerful monsters known as ogurs. They were large humanoid creatures that excelled in every aspect as soldiers—they boasted superior agility, strength, and endurance. Unless we dispatched veteran soldiers, all other fighters would be instantly killed.

Mister Shravis kept his eyes trained on the ground as he said, “I hear that the main forces of the Liberators that suffered defeat during the Battle of the Rocky Plains had three hundred fighters. Though their numbers were few, they should have been elite soldiers consisting of mainly valiant youths. If we fight halfheartedly, it is evident that the only thing we will achieve is a higher death toll.”

“That is a good point,” King Eavis agreed. “In the case of our soldiers, we will need five hundred to capture one town. However, if we happen to attack an area where they focused their troops, there is a high risk that we will suffer a crushing defeat.”

Madame Wyss frowned slightly. “The Liberators might have lost, but my king, I remember you mentioning that their leader used his quick thinking to help the survivors escape. Though they have lost their head, the remnants of the army are likely still in hiding. There should be many civilians who empathize with their cause and are willing to take up arms. Could we take advantage of that?”

“My dear Wyss, are you proposing that we borrow the power of those who rebel against the royal court? They have been attacking our local bases and observation points, claiming that such actions are necessary for the salvation of Yethma. Though a part of my people show support for them, the Liberators are no different from Arrogan. I have no plans of borrowing the help of those posing a threat to our current government.”

“...My apologies. That was thoughtless of me.”

“No, that is all right. I have thought of that tactic as well, though only as a

possibility.”

I’d heard that the leader of the Liberators was a man called Mister Naut. I wasn’t sure whether it was a coincidence, but around the time I’d arrived at the capital, he had suddenly begun making a name for himself. He’d upheld the goal of destroying the world that exploited Yethma and had gathered one kindred spirit after another. Many huntsmen, who called themselves “freedom folk,” had empathized with his cause and had become the heart of his army. More and more civilians had joined him, and his forces had grown to an extent that neither the royal court nor the Nothen Faction could dismiss.

However, their vigorous march had ended in roughly a month. They’d suffered a crushing defeat in one battle, and Mister Naut had been captured. According to Mister Marquis’s reports, Mister Naut had been reduced to entertainment as a gladiator, and he didn’t have long left to live.

I wondered what kind of man he was. The rumors said that he was a swordsman of fire with remarkable skill and a determination to risk his life for the Yethma race. Perhaps...he might have helped me in some way as well, even if it had been indirect.

There was a void in my memories between my departure from House Kiltyrin and my arrival in the capital. King Eavis apparently had a genuine reason for sealing my memories. And now, I had a suspicion. Perhaps, just maybe, Mister Naut was the person in question?

There was someone I couldn’t forget. Inside all the haziness, I recalled one lone fact clearly—someone very precious had protected me.

But the bookmarked pages were glued together, refusing to open again.

...*Huh?* Strange. When had I closed my eyes?

I tried to lift my face, and my entire vision turned inky black. I felt my body slide down from the chair and fall onto the ground.

Chapter 2: When You Smell a Dog, Give Chase

A dog's barking woke me. Across the bed where Ceres slept was a window, and a faint, reddish light filtered in. *Is that the crimson sunrise I see?* Still groggy with sleep, I grunted and snorted on instinct. Then, I noticed that the barking sound was quickly approaching us. *Hey, what's going on?*

There was a loud banging on the door. "Woof, woof!" The source of the sound was immediately outside. Sanon and I were startled awake. We jumped to our feet, our eyes fixated on the rattling doorknob.

Ceres let out a sleepy "Hmm...?"

With a clicking sound, the door opened. A white silhouette leaped inside.

A second later, I realized that it was a big white dog jumping onto Ceres's bed. He began passionately licking all over Ceres's face. Sanon's zeal couldn't even hold a candle to this dog.

"Ah, Mister Rossi..." Ceres sat up and caught the excited Rossi with her arms. This large dog was Naut's buddy. "Okay, okay, I get it, you can stop now..."

My eyes widened. <<Did Naut come back?>>

Ceres was trying to evade the rampaging dog as she replied, "No. When Mister Naut was captured, Mister Rossi escaped alone and made his way back to Baptsaze. Ah, stop... This is too much..."

I see. If that's the case, why did Rossi suddenly run in and pounce on Ceres?

<Mister Lolip,> Sanon said via Ceres's telepathy. His tone was grave.

He indicated the window, and I looked outside. The next moment, I learned that the red light wasn't a beautiful crimson sunrise—the forest was on fire. There was some kind of whistling sound, immediately followed by a thunderous explosion near us. The red light grew more intense. *What the...*

<<Ceres, run!>>

We frantically made our way to the pub, and there, Martha was in the middle

of detaching the silver crest—a kind of amulet made from a silver collar and two swords—from the wall. She called out to us, “Our village is under attack! Ceres, get to safety first! Then I’ll escape on a horse.”

Flustered, Ceres’s gaze darted in every direction. “But, Madame Martha—”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll meet you in Munires. Go to the Inn of the Sleeping Pony and find Kroyt.”

Martha dismantled the silver crest and stored it inside a leather bag. Outside the window, something crashed down on the other side of the street and blew up. An earsplitting sound tormented my eardrums, and the pub’s glass windows shattered.

My body moved before I could think. I had to protect Ceres. However, Sanon and Rossi were already shielding her with their bodies.

Martha, who’d fallen onto her bottom, made a shooing motion at us with her hand. “Get out of here now! Don’t worry about me, I’ll escape right away!”

The two pigs nodded. Rossi seemed to understand her words because he began sprinting.

Sanon addressed me. <Let’s go. We’ll follow Ros.> With his snout, he prodded the crouching Ceres in the back.

We practically pushed Ceres up onto her feet. Rossi was at a corner inside the inn and faced us, waiting. The three of us followed him, leaving the inn through the rear entrance.

The inn hadn’t caught on fire yet, but the surrounding trees were swallowed by ferocious flames. Though there was some distance between it and the wildfire, depending on the direction of the wind, the building might be at risk as well. When the black pig saw the roaring flames, he halted his steps, as if an idea had dawned on him.

<<Mister Sanon, what are you waiting around for? We need to run!>>

Slowly, the black pig turned to face me. <My apologies, but I suddenly recalled something I need to do. Mister Lolip, please escort Cece to safety.>

<<What...? Good sir, why do you suddenly sound like a character in a mystery

novel who is about to die? Mister Sanon, you need to escape with us. If we get separated, it might be ages before we find each other again.>>

With the all-consuming fire as his backdrop, Sanon suddenly seemed to emit a bloodcurdling pressure.

<Well then, please wait for me at the creek slightly ahead.>

Leaving only those words behind, Sanon turned on his trotters and began running towards the fire. *What happened? In a situation like this, how can anything be more important than running for your life? Did he suddenly have the urge to become a whole roast pig or something?*

But we were in a race against time. My hesitation might transform Ceres into a whole roast girl, and I couldn't afford that. <<Ceres, do you know where the creek Sanon mentioned is?>>

"Yes. The creek, right? Let's go."

Rossi, who'd been watching us, broke into a run after hearing Ceres's words. The two of us ran after him.

...Wait.

Suddenly, I realized a certain possibility, and my sprint ground to a stop. *I must be wrong, but is Sanon going to...* I turned around and strained my eyes. The scene that filled my vision was exactly what I'd suspected. The black pig held a tree branch twice the length of his body in his mouth. Roaring flames licked the leaves of the branch. He dragged the branch as he walked.

The direction he was heading in was Martha's inn where the fire still hadn't spread.

The creek's water trickled down the gaps between rocks, completely oblivious to the destruction nearby. Partly due to the rocky terrain here, the flames had yet to reach this area. We waited motionlessly. Soon, the black pig walked over. He came from the direction of the inn.

<Apologies for the wait. We should leave.>

Cautiously, I asked, <<You didn't get any burns, right?>>

Sanon nodded with an equal amount of discretion. <I...wasn't harmed by the fire. I have safely completed my mission.>

Our eyes met, and we communicated with our gazes. He'd done it for Ceres. It was something I would never resort to if I were in his shoes, but...I could see grim determination blazing in the black pig's eyes.

This entire patch of the forest was dyed crimson by fire. The roaring of drafts and the crackling of wood grated on my ears. When I let my guard down, the fumes caused a stinging sensation in my eyes. I didn't know what exactly was attacking the village, but it seemed that time was of the essence. We probably wouldn't stand a chance if they found us.

Rossi's ears perked up in attention, and he scanned our environment restlessly. His demeanor was completely different from earlier—he didn't immediately run off. His nose twitched repeatedly.

<<Is Rossi okay?>> I asked.

Ceres placed a trembling hand on Rossi's back. "He seems to be on high alert... There must be something scary out there..."

I sniffed the wind as well. A pig's nose was sharp enough to rival a dog's. If Rossi had detected some kind of scent that had alarmed him, I might be able to glean some information about the threat as well.

I concentrated on my nose. There was the salty smell of the ocean. It reminded me of a pungent fish market or a salty seashore. Then there was the unpleasant odor of sweat. Alcohol. Little hints of various scents blended together, and I could easily deduce that there were just as many sources—just as many threats.

Beyond the roaring flames of the burning forest, I heard something that sounded like clanging on the other side.

<<A large group is coming from our upwind direction,>> I reported.

<This place is under the rule of the royal court. Their army would never set its own village on fire. It must be the troops of the Nothen Faction,> Sanon observed.

<<Why suddenly attack a village all the way in the south?>> They began their attack on Baptsaze just after our arrival. Was it only a coincidence, or...?

<We can deduce the reasons later on,> the black pig said. <Mister Lolip, please remember that we are on a battlefield. Our top priority is running away.>

With that said, Sanon nudged Rossi with his snout, ushering him forward. Rossi, however, was as still as a statue.

Sanon seemed bewildered. <Is something bothering him? Usually, he would always eagerly search for a way out...>

Rossi seemed to be on edge. He swished his head back and forth. It wasn't that he refused to move—I suspected that he *couldn't* move. Inside the scarlet illumination, no matter where I looked, the sky around us was smothered by black fumes.

<<Nearly every place around us is on fire. If we want to avoid getting roasted to a crisp, there is likely only one exit—and that's the direction where the large group is coming from. No matter where we go, only dangers await.>>

Ceres let out a feeble, sorrowful voice. "That's..."

Think, pig. You can't let a helpless girl perish here. That's unforgivable. I also don't have the luxury of obediently turning into roast pork in this place. After all, in the capital, she—

I shook my head and forced my mind to get back on track. *When you're surrounded, the only escape routes are...either up or down. But it's not like we can fly. What about the underground...?* <<Ceres, you mentioned that there was an underground tunnel connecting the convent and the village, right?>>

"Yes."

<<Do you know where the entrance is in the village?>>

Ceres whipped up her head in realization. "Um, it should be near Madame Martha's inn. It's no longer in use, so I'm not sure what it's like inside right now..."

<<The convent is on the outskirts of the village. It's halfway up the mountain,

so it will take a while before the fire can climb up there. If we use the underground tunnel and escape to the convent, we might be able to evade the fire.>>

“I see!”

The black pig also nodded. <Since we have a plan, let’s hurry. It seems that the army is just around the corner.>

The odd party of a girl, a dog, and two pigs hurriedly returned to the vicinity of the inn. In the middle of our run, hearing the commotion that approached us, I turned back and witnessed something terrifying on the other side of the grove.

A towering humanoid monster that seemed to reach three meters in height—nearly twice as tall as the average man—was walking down the main street of the village. Armed with sturdy and bulging muscles, the monster was covered from head to toe with thick, ashen skin like a rhinoceros, and it held a spear that was as thick as a log.

Sanon was kind enough to inform me about its identity. <They call that monster an ogur.>

It was apparently a type of powerful soldier that the Nothen Faction utilized. Clearly, a pig or the average human could never stand a chance against such a monster. The ogur’s hands and feet were nauseatingly large, and they were webbed like a frog’s.

To avoid discovery, our group crouched low to the ground as we ran across the forest. By the time we arrived, Martha’s inn was completely engulfed by fire. Seeing that, Ceres’s eyes widened a fraction.

As if to distract her from that fact, Sanon said, <Cece, where’s the entrance to the tunnel?>

Ceres pointed to the cliff at the back of the building. There was a wide hole inside the rock surface, and several dilapidated planks blocked it.

A moment of hesitation could cost us our lives. I charged and smashed those planks into pieces.

* * *

Surprisingly, there was no pain at all. Only a despairing fatigue pinned me down to the prison floor.

The torturer had been an elderly man who was abnormally tall. Several rings decorated his bony fingers, and his glinting, glowing golden eyes had made my body seize up with dread. Sensing the alarming aura he exuded, I'd wondered why such a man was reduced to a torturer, of all things. However, I only had the luxury of entertaining such thoughts during the first twenty or thirty seconds.

I'd been strapped to the torture device, forced to arch my back against my will, and then restrained in that position. There had been no interrogation—only unbearable pain that seemed to last forever. As I'd let out groans of agony, the torturer had gazed at me from nearby, staying completely silent.

A woman's voice now entered my ears. "What a pathetic sight."

I twisted only my neck to look up at the visitor. Standing right outside the golden cage was a slender Yethma with impassive eyes—Nourris, who'd dragged me away to the castle. From the hems of her sullied clothing, I gained a glimpse of her shabby undergarments.

"Are you sexually frustrated?" she coldly asked.

I was locked up. I hoped she could at least turn a blind eye to the fleeting, vulgar thoughts of a prisoner that would never lead to anything. Somehow, I managed to squeeze out a sentence from my throat. "What do you want?"

"You were just tortured. I assumed you might desire water. Or do you lust for a Yethma's body instead?"

Only after hearing that did I finally realize that Nourris was holding a leather mug. "Don't put me in the same category as scum. How could you treat yourself like that?"

"I am a slave, and I will treat myself as such. I am an obedient slave born with a convenient nature for that purpose." Her facial muscles barely moved, her words blunt and detached.

Anger gushed forth, and I lifted my upper body. "It's because you guys think that way—" I cut off, propping myself up with both elbows, then used my right hand as a crutch to raise my face. "You people are going to stay that way for

your whole lives because you've already given up."

"Incorrect," Nourris replied, apathetic. "No matter what we think, the role of the Yethma will never change. Just like how livestock exists to be eaten."

I couldn't immediately come up with a reply. After a pause, I muttered, "Since you've already brought it here, could you give me some water?"

Nourris was as still as a statue. "I am a slave. If you want to make a demand to a slave, you should ask in a fitting manner."

What the hell is with her? I couldn't help but think. It was almost as if she was trying to destroy my conviction. "If that's the point you're making, I'm a slave too. I'm a prisoner sentenced to death who's been reduced to a mere toy. You should give me water in a fitting manner—in a manner you would treat a slave."

Nourris quietly approached the cage and wedged her bony leg in the gap between the bars. She placed the leather mug next to her thigh. "In that case, drink from my leg." As she spoke, she inclined the mug and poured water down her leg.

There was no moment of doubt. I leaned into Nourris's inner thigh and allowed the water to flow into my mouth. My parched throat found relief.



When the mug was empty, Nourris asked, "Have you no shame?"

"I have my hands full with just surviving right now," I replied. "What's the point in trying to act cool when you're the only one around?"

A moment of silence stretched on.

She was the first to break it. "Why are you willing to go to such extremes for your survival?"

"...Because there's something I want to do."

"What is it?"

"Kill every last bastard who earns money by murdering Yethma. Then, I'll crush the system that's the source of the Yethma's misfortune."

Eise's smile appeared in my mind, clinging like a haunting memory. Eise, the girl who'd been clever, mischievous, and kind. Eise, the girl who'd been kidnapped, raped, and beheaded.

"Eise," Nourris said the name on my mind. "In the end, it was all due to a personal obsession, I see."

"Anything wrong with that? It's because so many people are willing to support such a personal obsession that I'm being given such 'special' treatment, isn't it?"

Nourris pulled away slightly and looked at the golden cage. "Indeed, it seems that you are being confined with special security. Your interrogation must have been rather relentless as well."

"Not at all. I was tormented in absolute silence."

"Did they not ask you anything?"

"Nope."

"In that case, why were you released from your torture and sent back to this underground prison?"

Hearing her question, a memory surfaced. More like mere fragments of memories.

“Escapee from a gobern camp—”

“A boar was rioting—”

“We captured and brought the Yethma here—”

I’d heard snippets of a conversation from the adjacent throne room, and my torture had been suspended. I couldn’t remember anything afterward. I’d likely lost consciousness.

Nourris read my mind without my permission and said in a low voice, “I see. So the Yethma I passed by while I carried you was an escapee from a gobern camp.” Judging from that, Nourris must have transported my unconscious body to my current location—the underground area of the arena. “She looked pitiful. Her face was covered with bruises, and she had been whipped on her back. She will not last in that condition.”

She spoke as if it was none of her business while taking several steps back. Finally, she left me with the words “Apologies for my intrusion. Farewell.”

Though I’d only drunk water, for some odd reason, my fatigue eased slightly.

* * *

Parts of the underground tunnel had collapsed, but thanks to the presence of two pigs with excellent excavation abilities, we somehow managed to travel all the way to the other end. When we arrived at the convent, under Rossi’s guidance, we headed north on the mountain trails and reached the Oil Valley immediately north of Baptsaze. By now, the sun had climbed high into the sky.

The Oil Valley was a roughly one-hundred-meter-long gorge carved into white rock. A large suspension bridge hung over the rift, but Rossi didn’t even hesitate walking away from it. He descended the steep slope and headed to the valley floor.

A nostalgic voice played back in my head. *“The origin story of this area’s name has to do with a battle during the Dark Ages. It’s supposed to have had a lovely name long ago, but thousands of people passed away during a battle that occurred here. Their blood stained the valley, and it almost looked like oil trickling down, which apparently led to the name ‘Oil Valley.’”*

Feeling Ceres's gaze, I shook my head and typed angle brackets in my mind. <<We should be fine since we've come this far.>>

"We can't let our guards down, but I have faith as well," Ceres replied.

<<We walked without rest for a long time. Let's take a break.>>

Under my suggestion, we stopped inside a thicket halfway down the slope and allowed our feet to recover.

<We were really lucky that Ros was with us. Our escape route was remarkably effective. He is such a clever boy.>

Sanon snuggled up to Rossi, and in response, the dog licked the pig's snout.

I raised a question. <<Did Rossi stay in Baptsaze this entire time? Even after Naut was gone?>>

Ceres, who'd been wiping her muddy face with her hands, dutifully gave me an explanation. "Yes. Mister Rossi was captured with Mister Naut, and he apparently went far into the North but escaped on the way. Ever since then, he's been staying with me and protecting me."

<Earlier, Ros was on the lookout outside, wasn't he?> Sanon asked.

"Yes. He's a bit dirty right now, and we haven't put any visible weapons on him. That way, if a bad guy ever finds him by some chance, they will mistake him for an ordinary stray dog."

Ahh, now that she points it out, I see that. But there's one thing... <<What's that metal bangle on Rossi's front leg, then?>> It was my bad habit of nitpicking minor details. There was a tight-fitting metal bangle near the ankle of Rossi's front left leg. It was blackened, but there was no sign of rust. Perhaps it was made of silver. I had the vague memory that he'd worn it during my journey with Jess as well.

Ceres shook her head. "I'm not quite sure. He apparently wore it even before he met Mister Naut."

<<'Met'?>> I noticed her specific wording. <<Naut didn't raise Rossi from a puppy?>> Rossi was well disciplined and thoroughly trained, so I'd just assumed that Naut had reared him.

“I heard Mister Naut met him during the journey to take Miss Eise back five years ago. It’s quite a curious story, isn’t it?”

<Considering how clever he is and how skilled he is as a hunter, Ros’s previous owner might have been an adept huntsman as well,> Sanon deduced.

I see. That would make sense. <<Oh, and one last thing.>>

“Ask away.”

<<You said that you haven’t put any “visible” weapons on him. Does that mean he has stealth weapons?>>

“Yes. Please take a look.” Ceres pulled back Rossi’s jowls and showed me his teeth. Sharp canines gleamed under the sunlight. On them were metal fittings that reminded me of braces. “There are three small ristae stored on the roof of his mouth. If Mister Rossi bites down on them, their magic will add effects to his teeth. He can wield fire fangs that can burn, ice fangs that can freeze...”

Hm? Wait, I think I’ve heard of those moves somewhere before...

She continued, “...and thunder fangs that can paralyze the enemy with lightning.”

I see, his moves have been set up so that he’s super effective no matter what opponent he has to face, hmm? That aside, what an ingenious invention. If you direct the mana into your tongue and not your fangs, you could pull off something wicked like paralyzing your target by licking them! I want one too!

“Um...” Ceres looked a bit appalled. She placed her hand on the back of the black pig next to her, who was sniffing her eagerly. “I don’t think that’s very nice...”

Personally, I felt that she should be more wary of the other pig present. *Oh well. This isn’t the right time for idle chatter.*

The black pig swished his tail back and forth as he gazed at me. <Now then, I believe we should strategize our next move, Mister Lolip. Neither of us expected such a sudden turn of events immediately after our arrival here.>

<<That is a good idea,>> I said politely. <<If we want to save Naut, our only option is to head north and search for comrades. Auntie Martha told us to meet

up with her at the Sleeping Pony in Munires... Is that a good idea?>>

Munires was a large commercial city that was farther north. It was roughly one day of travel on foot from Baptsaze. On the first night of my journey with Jess and our new companion Naut, we'd stopped by Munires. The Oil Valley, our current location, was between Baptsaze and Munires.

Ceres stroked Rossi, who was sniffing her legs, as she explained. "Munires is a key city of the south, so the royal court's army guards it heavily. It should be safe. I also heard that a significant number of the survivors of the Liberators, which Mister Naut commanded, are hiding inside that city."

<But wait, Cece. The question is, which direction did those soldiers earlier come from?> Sanon pointed out something we shouldn't ignore.

<<If those troops marched down from the North... There's no guarantee that anywhere north of this area is in good shape. Munires might not have been spared.>>

<That is what I am worried about. There is no reason for them to suddenly attack *only* Baptsaze. It is an insignificant village. It would be safe to assume that the areas north of here have been invaded.>

Ceres seemed uneasy, however, her tone was firm. "But...Munires is a big city. If it were under attack, we should have heard about it and also seen people running in this direction. Until Baptsaze was attacked though, this area was the very picture of peace..."

<Yeah, you make a good point... This is all very strange.>

This topic was giving me the creeps, but it wasn't like we could oink and grunt away here forever. <<For now, let's keep our guards up while heading north. If we don't meet up with auntie, the survivors of the Liberators, or any other allies, then Ceres has nowhere to go.>>

<Indeed. Since Nattie is in the North, we would want to avoid heading south. All right, once we get some proper rest, we should cross the river and make our way to Munires.> Sanon spoke sternly, but he used Rossi's actions as a distraction and began sniffing Ceres's legs as well.

Ceres looked mystified. "Um... Do my legs stink that much?"

The black pig snorted erratically, flustered. <No, that's not it, Cece. It's not that you stink, it's more like you have a pleasant aroma...>

Hello, police? There's a guy I need you to arrest, and he's right in front of me!

Ceres tilted her head quizzically. "Ah, that reminds me. Mister Super-Virgin also stared at my legs last time. Is there something strange about them?"

Sorry, police! Please, uh, hold the phone for a moment! <<No, nothing's strange about them at all... I just, you know, looked at them without meaning to...>> I stammered and slurred my words.

In response, Ceres poured salt on the wound with a pure and inquisitive expression. "If they're not unusual, why were you so interested in my legs?"

Does this girl have a talent for pinpointing concepts that are difficult for men to explain? My brethren, would you be able to come up with a good reason why you would take an interest in a girl's legs? I hurriedly looked at Sanon with a plea for help in my eyes.

With shining and excited eyes, the black pig looked up at Ceres and launched into his articulate ramble.

<You see, Cece, skin is a very significant indicator of one's health. If your skin is pale, it means that sufficient blood isn't flowing inside. If your skin is red, it means that more blood than normal is flowing in those areas. The type and amount of sweat you excrete is also good for judging the condition of your body. Therefore, being attentive to your legs, where much of your skin is exposed, is very important if we want to know your physical condition.>

Ceres placed a finger onto her lips before releasing it. "Wouldn't my face be enough for that?"

Sanon was rendered speechless for a good while. There was no way to talk ourselves out of this situation—we had been defeated.

While Sanon was prattling his excuses to Ceres, Rossi had relentlessly sniffed Ceres's bare legs the entire time. *I don't want you to get the wrong idea, my brethren, so I'll put this out there. I'm not jealous of that dog at all. I'm really not.*

I averted my gaze and stared down at the river running through the valley floor. This wasn't the time to sniff Ceres's legs. I had higher priorities.

A voice played in my head.

"So everyone is the same to you, Mister Pig."

"I mean, do what you wish, I guess. Please look at the one you prefer."

Just the memory of her voice made my pig heart seize up.

Naut's crisis. Ceres's earnest wish. This world's twisted nature. The problems I should be concerned about were clear, but above all else, there was someone I could never forget.

Jess.

I wondered what kind of expression I should make if we were reunited. After a parting like we had, would it really be okay for me to show up casually and say, "Tee hee! I hopped over again!"? Was I really of a status to request permission for an audience with Jess to begin with? More than anything, was it even possible for me to cross paths with Jess?

The sudden touch on my back startled me, and I jolted. In her attempts to dodge the attacks of the lecherous dog, Ceres had ended up right next to me.

"It seems that your situation is complicated, but...I hope your wish comes true, Mister Super-Virgin." Ceres smiled. It was awkward, clumsy, and very kind.

I was probably duty bound to teach this young maiden about the true meaning of super-virgin as soon as possible.

* * *

"...ter...Master...Master! Oy, no way, did you... You haven't kicked the bucket yet, right?"

I'd been sleeping like a corpse on the prison floor when Batt's voice roused me. The prison was dim like always, so I didn't have any indicators of time.

I faced the boy. "I'll never die."

I saw the innocent boy smile with relief. "I knew it! You're the unyielding hero who will climb back onto your feet time after time!" Batt offered a bruised

apple through the gaps between the bars. It seemed to be my meal for the day.

I voiced my thanks before accepting it. Leaning against the cage, I bit into the apple. I felt alive again. “Hey, Batt.”

“Yeah?”

“How are Yethma treated in the govern camp of this region?”

His expression stiffened.

Govern camps. This system was the secret behind the rapid expansion of the Nothen Faction’s influence. They would lock away women, children, and the elderly—vulnerable groups—inside zones called govern camps as hostages, turning those left behind into their puppets. Of course, only a brutal death awaited the hostages of rebels against the Nothen Faction.

As long as they defended these camps to the bitter end, the corresponding regions would submit to the Nothen Faction’s rule. Therefore, maintaining govern camps was vital. However, managing an incredible number of hostages required labor. At the same time, allowing hostages to die due to excessive work would eventually lead to a revolt by those who had lost their families. Therefore, Yethma were used to maintain these camps as the slave class at the bottom of the hierarchy. Apparently, since they were of a lower status than the hostages, the Yethma helped maintain the hostages’ peace of mind as well.

“I mean...” Batt gestured. “It’s pretty awful. The govern camp here is huge, so there’re a lotta male hostages, and...ya know.”

My chest ached, so much so that it was unbearable. I remembered what I’d heard from Nourris—a Yethma had tried to escape the camp and had been captured. She’d been whipped and covered with bruises. What had she ever done wrong?

“...Hey, Batt. Don’t you think it’s rotten to the core?”

“Huh? You mean the apple?” He blinked at me. “Sorry ’bout that, but it’s the only thing they gave me.”

“No, I mean this entire world. Don’t you want to smash it into pieces?”

“O-Oh. Yeah, I guess, but...”

He didn't seem to have any motivation to defy the injustices prevalent in this society. Though he acted cheery in front of me, I was willing to bet that his family had been taken hostage, just like all the citizens under the rule of the Nothen Faction. That must be how he'd ended up here in the underground area of the arena, giving feed to prisoners.

"Hey, if I ever disappear...could you promise me one thing?" I asked slowly. "You don't have to act. I just don't want you to ever abandon your thought that this rotten world is wrong. Could you do that for me?"

I was a captive—the only person left I could entrust my wish to was this boy in front of me. I could only tell him, and him alone, that this world ought to be destroyed.

When I turned my head to look at him, I saw Batt standing still, as if he were petrified with fear inside the darkness. A raspy voice that reminded me of a ghost echoed from the gloomy shadows. "Well, the question is not whether he can keep that promise, it is whether you will allow him to."

Someone seemed to have grabbed Batt by the scruff of his neck. It was that torturer—the shadowlike elderly man. He was right in front of the gilded cage. He continued, "How are you feeling, young man? You seem remarkably energetic for someone who went through such an intense torture session."

"What are you doing?" I snapped. "Let that child go."

"Now, that is a rather difficult request. This boy is a valuable stage prop, you see."

What the hell was he saying? "A torturer who attends the king directly showed up in a bloody, revolting place like this. What business do you have here?"

"Why, you do not have to be so impatient. I will gladly inform you. For you see, I came all the way here because I wanted you to suffer crushing despair." His voice was frosty. His golden eyes pierced me from the darkness beneath his hood, emitting an eerie glow that didn't shed any light on the rest of his features. "Let us begin with the good news first. This very morning, I burned down the village you apparently dropped by often when you were just a huntsman."

Blood drained from my face. This man had burned down Baptsaze?

His detached voice rang out again. "Indeed, the village's name was Baptsaze. However, I am afraid the Yethma you were said to be partial to slipped away from my clutches."

My head was in a mess. Was he talking about Ceres? Why did he even know about her? ...*No, wait. Stay rational.* "Don't spout nonsense. Baptsaze is a village farther south than Munires. The Nothen Faction's territory hasn't expanded that far yet."

"Even if it is distant from the regions under our reign, there are methods to deploy our soldiers there. But do not fret. Ceres, was it? She should still be alive. Of course, she will be dead the moment I find her." The elderly man shook his shoulders. Perhaps he was laughing.

Batt was stiff like a statue.

I clenched my jaw. "What the hell are you trying to do? Why did you attack Baptsaze?"

"I was looking for the ideal way to kill you, you see. Duels and torture are regrettably getting nowhere."

"You could easily feed me to beasts and save yourself the trouble."

"That is too merciful. Even if I managed to kill you, your spirit would still survive. I want you to die in a sea of despair. In the Needle Woods, you cut down someone very important to me. Surely you have not forgotten him. His name was Enn. Someone precious was stolen away from me... Can you even imagine how I feel?"

Does he even know who he's asking that question? I thought irately. At the same time, something felt odd about this exchange. Wasn't I supposed to be executed as the head of the Liberators? Why was the personal resentment of a mere torturer involved in my death?

The elderly man's voice interrupted my thoughts. "What a perceptive brat we have here. I suppose rambling on too much is not the best idea. I shall be concise. Next comes the bad news."

Rattling sounds entered my ears. I soon realized that Batt's teeth were shivering and chattering.

"I just had a brilliant idea, you see," the elderly man said slowly. "I shall put on a special show at noon today."

An ominous premonition sealed my mouth shut.

The man rattled on. "I shall arrange a battle between you and this...Batt, was it? Only one of you will survive. If you try to stall and turn it into a draw, I will publicly execute both of you."

Goose bumps rose on my skin. *No, don't...*

"Ah, what a delightful reaction. Well then, I suggest you mull over your plans carefully. If you want to survive, your only choice is to kill this kid. If you want this kid to survive, your only choice is to die. How about that? An agonizing conundrum indeed, is it not?"

I felt the urge to snap back at him, but no words would leave my mouth. The elderly man disappeared into the darkness, taking the motionless Batt away with him.

Desolation and anguish engulfed my entire body. I'd wanted to live longer. I still had many things I wanted to do.

But I couldn't let that boy die. The only thing I could do was end my own life first.

As I recalled the person I once liked, I felt something hot trickling down my cheeks soundlessly.

* * *

Sanon was grazing on grass along the path when he communicated something to me.

<This is...very odd, I must say.>

<<Yes, I agree. There don't seem to be any signs of an attack. Well, the atmosphere is a bit unnerving, possibly because Baptsaze went up in flames.>>

By now, it was evening. After thorough observation and scouting, we stepped

into Munires. It was a large commercial city featuring a vast main street paved with cobblestone and rows of pastel-colored buildings. However, the thriving mood of freedom and liveliness was more subdued when compared to my last visit. Instead, soldiers armed with red leather armor and polished, pointed spears patrolled the streets. According to Ceres, they belonged to the royal court's army.

"There are so many soldiers out and about... I'm a bit worried." Ceres looked back and forth anxiously. Rossi walked with her and was glued to her bare legs. "It will make things difficult for the Liberators in hiding here, and they might have to leave..."

Sanon and I followed the pair while watching our rear vigilantly in the guises of pigs—I mean, *we are pigs through and through, but that's not the point.*

Ceres mentioned that she'd visited the establishment once, and under her guidance, we headed to the Sleeping Pony. The moment we arrived, realization dawned on me. *Oh, it's the inn I stayed at last time with Jess and Naut.* It was a cozy building with light brown walls and flowers on display. Just like Martha's inn, it came with an annexed pub.

When we stepped into the pub, I noticed the silver crest hanging on the wall: two swords intersecting inside a Yethma collar. It served as the symbol of Yethma protectors, and a special magic guarded it.

The voice of an elderly grandpa rang out. "Oh, I'm so glad you made it! You must be Ceres, right?" A grandpa with a gray mustache approached us, and he seemed like the stereotypical grandpa you'd see in the countryside. A piece of linen cloth was wrapped around his hair. His eyes, framed by smile lines, were lit up with joy as he gazed directly at Ceres.

There was the sound of yapping, and the next moment, Rossi leaped at the grandpa before licking all over the now crouching man's face. It seemed that this man was on very good terms with Rossi. *Hmm. When I stayed here three months ago with Jess, they didn't seem that close...*

Ceres bowed and greeted him. "You must be Mister Kroyt. Good evening, sir."

"You made it here safely. Whew, what a relief." Kroyt wiped his slobber-slicked face with his sleeve while smiling at Ceres.

“Yes... I somehow managed to escape.”

“I see, I see. I’m so glad to hear that.” But his sigh of relief only lasted briefly before his expression grew tense. “Ceres, I have news about Martha.”

“...Please tell me.”

“Follow me. It’s not far.” With those words, Kroyt ushered Ceres deeper into the establishment. Rossi was the first to follow, and Sanon and I were quick to move as well.

I wondered what awaited us. I didn’t have a good feeling in my gut.

We were led to one of the guest rooms. When Kroyt knocked on the door, a hoarse voice echoed from within. “Go ahead.”

The door opened, revealing someone lying on the bed. There was a faint smell of something burnt lingering in the air.

“Madame Martha!” Ceres sprinted up to the bed. “You are safe!”

“My life and the collar made it out intact, yeah.”

It was Martha. Her gaze was directed at the leather bag next to her pillow, which contained Eise’s collar.

“Your life and—” Ceres stared at Martha and froze, cutting off her sentence midway. Upon a closer look, Martha’s curly hair had become unnaturally and awkwardly short. It was singed. Parts of her face were red and swollen as well.

“Quite the miserable sight, aren’t I?” Martha said wryly. “I tried to leap across the flame with my horse, and as you can see, I came out with serious burns as souvenirs. I somehow managed to reach Munires thanks to my desperate efforts.”

“That’s horrible...” Ceres’s subdued voice slipped out.

Seeing her in low spirits, Kroyt offered something to her. “Don’t worry about the money. Use this.”

Ceres accepted the item. It was a black rista—the source of mana for prayers that only Yethma could use.

Martha frowned slightly. “Stop it, Kroyt. We can’t accept something like this.

Ceres, give it back to him.”

Just as she was instructed, Ceres held the rista out, but Kroyt clasped his hands behind his back. “That’s a rista I happened to get a hold of for free today,” he explained. “There aren’t any Yethma in my house anymore, so it’s useless in my hands. Use it to heal Martha as soon as possible.”

For free? If I remembered correctly, ristae were expensive. Was that really possible? But if he didn’t employ a Yethma, it also wouldn’t make sense for him to possess a black rista that was only meant for them, so he must have received it from someone else (whether it was free or not is up for debate). *Hmm...*

Ceres glanced at Martha for instructions. In response, Martha smiled and nodded. “Guess we’ll take him up on his offer. One day, we’ll have to pay him back in some way, Ceres.”

Hearing that, Ceres immediately approached the side of Martha’s bed and knelt on the ground. She wrapped her hands around the rista, then placed them against her forehead. Her large eyes gently fluttered closed.

Silence.

A while later, Ceres opened her eyes, and Martha sat up. Her hair was still scorched, but in the blink of an eye, nearly all traces of her burns had vanished. There was only some redness left at most. She’d had a somewhat rosy complexion originally, so they didn’t stand out.

Martha ruffled Ceres’s hair vigorously. “Thank you, dear. You’re amazing. I’m all better now thanks to you.”

“I am glad to hear that. I owe you a lot, Madame Martha, and I want you to stay healthy...” Ceres turned around to face Kroyt, who was leaning against the doorframe. “Thank you, Mister Kroyt. I was able to heal Madame Martha because of your generosity.”

Kroyt smiled from ear to ear. “Don’t sweat the small stuff. The black rista is yours now, Ceres, so use the remaining mana for whatever you want.” He then prepared to leave the room, but he abruptly stopped in his tracks and turned on his heel to face Ceres, as if he’d recalled something. “Ah, right. I’ve got good news. Have you heard about it, Ceres?”

Ceres blinked. “Um...”

“You should know that Naut was captured, right? Our great hero actually broke out of the arena at noon today.”

“Huuuh?!” Ceres squeaked. “Mister Naut escaped?!”

The two of us pigs shared a surprised look. It was shocking news.

Kroyt continued, “The news reached this city not too long ago. Everyone can’t celebrate openly, but in private, we’re all going crazy. Most of the merchants in Munires are sympathetic to the Liberators, after all.”

Interesting. Our teleportation, the attack on Baptsaze, then Naut’s escape... It seems too convenient for this series of events to be a coincidence. My mind was struggling to keep up with all this information, but either way, it was definitely wonderful news. Seriously, he’s such a tough guy. It seems that his flames of determination are still burning strong, huh?

Ceres leaned forward eagerly. “Um, where might Mister Naut be right now?”

Kroyt looked a little bewildered as he replied, “I haven’t a clue either. According to the rumors, Naut disappeared into thin air back at the arena, and no one knows where he’s gone. I’m quite curious about his plans from now on.”

I saw Ceres clenching her hands into small fists.

Kroyt continued, “That said, it’s not like we normal folk can do anything. We’ve gotta keep up our day-to-day life here. But, well, it’s something to celebrate for sure. Now then, I guess I’ll get back to work. I have to tidy up the basement. Ceres, could you stay behind and take care of Martha?”

After glancing at the three docile beasts in the same room, Kroyt made a move to leave.

Stop right there! “Noink oink grunt loloinc heh!” I made a giant fuss.

Somewhat startled, Kroyt turned around. “Deary me. What’s wrong, little pig?”

<<Ceres, I want to talk with this old man. Can you relay my messages to him?
>>

<Erm... Okay, I will.>

After Ceres revealed the identity of us pigs, I cut right to the heart of the matter. <<Can you please tell me the whereabouts of the survivors of the Liberators?>>

Surprise and bafflement fought for a place on Kroyt's face as he looked at me. "Hang on, what're you talking about?"

<<Mister Kroyt, you were giving shelter to the Liberators in your basement, weren't you?>>

The grandpa stared at me with evident shock and suspicion. He seemed to be completely thrown off by my statement, and his expression practically screamed, "Where did you learn about that?"

But truthfully, it was a simple deduction one could make by stringing a few pieces of information together. According to Ceres, the survivors of the Liberators were—or had been—hiding inside the city. Next, Rossi, who hadn't been good friends with Kroyt when I'd stayed here last time, had acted extremely friendly to the grandpa today. This was evidence suggesting that during the three months I'd been away from Mesteria, Rossi and Kroyt—or rather, Rossi's owner Naut and Kroyt—had seen each other countless times.

And then, there was Kroyt's earlier statement, *"That's a rista I happened to get a hold of for free today."*

An expensive commodity like a rista would only fall into someone's lap for free when pigs fly. If there was no Yethma in this household, there was no reason for him to purchase one either. In that case, one would naturally arrive at the possibility that he'd received it as compensation or as a reward for something. That begged two questions: who did he receive it from and what had happened today?

"Now then, I guess I'll get back to work. I have to tidy up the basement."

He specifically mentioned that he had to "tidy up the basement." Let's think about possible causes for this seemingly abrupt task at this time. What if he'd been, say, sheltering the Liberators in his basement, and they'd left hastily on a journey after receiving word about Naut's escape? The royal court had been

keeping an eye out for the Liberators. To destroy incriminating evidence, Kroyt had to clean up the basement as soon as possible. That would make a lot of sense.

Sanon snorted. <Please, tell us. Cece wants to see Nattie. I am begging you, we desperately need clues that will help us come into contact with the Liberators.>

Kroyt chewed on his lip beneath his gray mustache. He seemed to be torn about what he should do. My intuition told me that if we continued to push him, we would find success.

That was when the bed creaked, interrupting our exchange. Martha was facing us. “Hey, Sanon. Shouldn’t you talk it over with me, Ceres’s mistress, before you request something like that?” Her tone was ambivalent—it was hard to say whether she was supportive or disapproving. But her chiding voice was kind.

<That was my blunder. Madame Martha. Please allow us this one request, ma’am,> Sanon pleaded earnestly.

“I remember telling you clearly that I won’t let Ceres leave with you people this time.”

Ceres cast her eyes down. Next to her, the black pig stared right into Martha’s eyes with blazing determination.

<I also remember that you mentioned the main basis for your argument was the existence of her workplace, that inn. However, due to the *wartime fire* earlier on, your inn has burned down.>

Sanon stated his argument shamelessly and brazenly. There was an overwhelming aura to him that seemed mismatched on a pig.

“Well, you have a point there, yes. But surely you haven’t forgotten what happened last time when you brought Ceres with you when I gave you permission to drag her into the war of the Liberators. She barely helped in any way, and she nearly lost her life during the Battle of the Rocky Plains.”

<No, Cece was a valuable ally. The Yethma girls can relay thoughts from an impressive distance, and they can also heal wounds with their prayers. They are

invaluable as support personnel during war. To achieve perfect teamwork and coordination, we need as many Yethma comrades as possible, not to mention that Ceres is a cut above the rest when it comes to healing Nattie specifically. Cece is a key member of the Liberators.>

Hm? What does he mean by “a cut above the rest” when it comes to healing Naut? I glanced at Ceres, and for some reason, there was a dust of pink on her cheeks.

For a while, Martha didn't say anything. Eventually, she said, “Ceres.” She paused, looking into Ceres's eyes. “Is leaving what you really want to do?”

Ceres looked back at Martha and nodded.

Martha continued in a subdued voice, “You might die. Not to mention that in times of unrest like these, if you were ever captured by those scoundrels from the North, you might be violated until you lose your sanity. They might tear your stomach open without giving you anesthetics. Those people won't hesitate. Even while knowing that, do you still want to go?”

Ceres sucked in a deep breath. “Yes. It is much more preferable than waiting here and doing nothing.”

Martha raised her eyebrows in resignation. “I see... Well, my house burned down, and I can't make you stay beside a homeless lady like me forever. Naut and his friends are trying to accomplish something truly great. If you can help them on their mission, Ceres, I would be very proud of you.”

Eyes lighting up, Ceres said carefully, “Then, Madame Martha...”

“You have my permission, dear. Do what you want to do. Kroyt, tell these children where to go.”

Kroyt's gray eyebrows knitted together. “If that's the case, I'd love to help, but... Yes, I gave refuge to those youngsters in my basement. The problem is that though I support them, I'm just like Martha at the end of the day—I'm an ordinary, law-abiding citizen who lives under the royal court's rule. I suppose I secretly took care of them, but I know next to nothing about their activities. I haven't heard anything about where they went either.”

Sanon passionately appealed to him. <But you were in contact with them,

correct? It is evident that the members of the Liberators left this city to meet up with Nattie. You must have some clues, such as the direction they are headed in, surely?>

Kroyt shook his head. "In difficult times like these, those youngsters have become very cautious. Apparently, they share information within a closely knit group, and no one else. Their only parting words were, 'Thank you for taking care of us.' After they left in a rush, I heard about Naut's rumored escape a little later, and it finally made sense to me. Knowing them, they must have already gone far away by now."

I could almost hear his underlying advice: *It's better to give up and live in peace here.*

Ceres's shoulders drooped despondently. "I see... There isn't much we can do, then."

Well, it's painfully clear that it's safer for Ceres to stay here. But... I recalled my initial visit to Martha's inn with Jess. Back then, Ceres had wanted to detain Naut, and I'd half tricked her so that I could convince Naut to go with us for Jess's sake. Ceres had swallowed her grievances towards me and sent us off with a smile.

"I hope your wish comes true too, Mister Pig."

I remembered Ceres's parting words. This time, it was my turn to grant her wish.

<<Mister Kroyt, may we take a look at the area where the Liberators stayed? Surely that can be arranged.>>

Though Kroyt claimed it was already empty, he still led us into the basement from the rear entrance. The vast expanse of space was utterly deserted. Six wooden bunk beds with three tiers each lined the walls, and a handful of worn-out sofas were scattered around messily. In the middle of the basement was a large square table.

Leaving behind a girl and three beasts, Kroyt returned to his work.

I pumped myself up. <<All right, it's time to do some detective work.>>

Ceres blinked. “Detective work... Does that mean you’re going to think about where the Liberators went?”

<<Exactly, Ceres. And I have absolute faith in myself.>>

Hearing that, Sanon gazed at me. <Oh? Why is that, may I ask?>

<<Our noses are our greatest weapons. We only need to deduce the rough direction in which they left. Other than that, as long as we have the smell of their bedding to refer to...we are all set.>>

<I see!>

Sanon figured it out, but Ceres gaped at me in confusion. *I should explain.* <<Ceres, the noses of dogs and pigs are incredible, and humans can’t even compare to them. They can detect traces of smells that are only one-ten-thousandth the strength of their original or even fainter remnants. They also excel at discerning different types of scents.>>

An example always made things easier to imagine. <<For instance, if you traveled away on foot from here, even if you walked for an entire day, we could follow the faint scent trail you leave behind on the ground and track you down. Plus, we can also easily deduce what you ate and where you ate, and even the exact spots where you answered the call of nature.>>

Ceres’s features stiffened. *Oh, yikes. I thoughtlessly ran my mouth.*

“Mister Sanon, that must mean back then, you really *did*...” Ceres trailed off.

<Y-You’ve got the wrong idea, Cece! I only caught a whiff of it on pure accident!>

The black pig fidgeted and moved around in a panic. I didn’t know what incident they were referring to, but I knew one thing—when I returned to modern-day Japan, my top priority would be dragging this cradle snatcher to a police station.

<<Anyway,>> I cut in. <<Our mission here is to find clues telling us the general direction the Liberators are headed in. It doesn’t have to be too specific. Then, we need to collect as many items with their lingering scents as possible. Simple.>> After making that declaration, I walked around the room.

<<Hmm? This string is...>> On the ground, I spotted a cut-off segment of wrinkled hemp cord. There was a knot in it. I sniffed the cord. <<Ceres, do you use birds to send messages in Mesteria?>>

She hesitated. “Yes. Especially when we’re in a hurry.”

<<The scent of a bird lingers on this cord. My guess is that the sender used this to tie a piece of paper with information about Naut’s escape to a messenger bird’s leg.>>

<Really?> The black pig approached and also smelled the cord. <You are right. I smell a bird.>

With a smile that looked more like a grimace, Ceres pressed her hands on the area between her thighs. *Seriously, what the heck happened?*

Rossi waved his tail as he approached us before following our example and smelling the cord. He immediately pulled away and began exploring the room, sniffing everywhere.

My eyes widened because that was exactly what I’d planned on doing. I’d thought that if I looked around for items with the same smell, I might find a lead. If Rossi had come to the same deduction and wasn’t doing this thoughtlessly, he possessed critical thinking that was extraordinary for a dog.

“Woof!” Rossi barked and came back with a small piece of paper scrap in his mouth. He released it, allowing it to fall onto the ground, and I scrutinized it. The paper scrap was wrinkled all over, as if it’d been crumpled up into a ball, and it was only a tad bigger than a postage stamp. In the middle of it was a plain and simple double circle, which reminded me of an archery target. That was all.

Hurriedly, I leaned my snout forward to detect any lingering scents. There was a pungent, musky smell of beasts—perhaps it was sheepskin parchment. However, there were top notes of a burnt odor and a scent that reminded me of an aviary. <<Ceres! Mister Sanon! Look at this!>> I called out frantically.

Ceres picked up the piece of paper. “This is...”

As Ceres spoke, Rossi returned with another paper scrap in his mouth. It also depicted a double circle.

Sanon recognized it. <This is a code that Nattie and the others used often, from what I remember. It means “assemble.”>

I mulled over our findings. <<Okay, it seems we have multiple pieces of paper with the same code. They likely used several birds simultaneously to send messages to multiple individuals. There are two possible reasons they did this: speed was necessary, or they wanted these messages to reach their targets at all costs. It might even be a combination of both. Considering how the remaining Liberators departed hastily on the day Naut escaped, we can also assume that this message means “Assemble near Naut right away.”>>

Sanon made an observation. <This isn’t ink. They drew the circles by deliberately scorching the parchment.>

Ah, so that’s where the burnt odor is coming from.

“Mister Naut probably seared it with the flames from his twin shortswords,” Ceres guessed.

The two of us pigs nodded in agreement.

Sanon then appeared to be deep in thought. <In that case, the question is, *where* are they assembling? The only information we have is the double circles. Hmm...>

I offered my own opinion. <<We can look at it from another angle. The Liberators decided on a destination solely based on these double circles. It would be risky to send his exact location through messenger birds. I think it is safe to assume that the scattered Liberators are assembling at a place that seems the most logical to them after seeing this message.>>

<I see. In that case, we should arrive at the same conclusion if we give it some rational thought from their perspective.>

I nodded. <<For starters, Naut must want to flee from the Nothen Faction’s territory as soon as possible. As for where he takes refuge, he’d naturally prefer places with the most Liberators and supporters.>>

“The capital is in the middle of Mesteria, and in respect to it, the forces that are sympathetic towards the Liberators are mostly concentrated in the southeast area,” Ceres explained. “There’s no reason for him to head west

purposely, so it should be safe to say that he headed east of the Needle Woods that surround the royal court, I think.”

My eyes lit up. <<You’re a genius, Ceres! While we’re on the topic, I’ve got one question. On the eastern side, where exactly is the current boundary between the Nothen Faction’s territory and the royal court’s territory?>>

“I heard that really recently, the royal court’s army recaptured a big harbor city in the east called Nearbell. Nearbell’s apparently geographically isolated, and the royal court used that to its advantage... Right now, the front line should be Mautteau, a mountain castle village slightly north of Nearbell.”

Well, well. Her knowledge is impressive. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less. She must’ve been deathly curious about what’s been happening outside. <<From the perspective of the Liberators, they should prioritize meeting up with Naut as soon as possible outside the Nothen Faction’s territory. However, the royal court’s army is concentrated at the front line, making it a dangerous place.>>

My intuition was pointing in one direction. Sanon seemed to concur, and he nodded to me.

<The message is to “assemble”... If a large crowd were to assemble, a big settlement would be more desirable, yes?>

“That means...” Eyes wide, Ceres turned to me.

I nodded. <<Yeah. Our destination is Nearbell.>>

Martha sat on the bed with a solemn look in her eyes. “Ceres, are you really going to leave?”

“Yes...” Ceres knitted her eyebrows together regretfully. “My deepest apologies.”

After a moment of silence, Martha finally spoke up. “It’s such a shame. With a body like mine, I’m not fit enough to keep you company.”

“Madame Martha...”

“Take good care of your life, okay?” Martha requested gravely.

“I will.”

“And as for you pigs over there...”

Hearing her summons, the black pig and I tottered over.

She narrowed her eyes and continued, “Just so you know, pork dishes are my specialty. I’m sure I don’t have to spell out what’ll happen if Ceres doesn’t come back safely, right?”

Eep! <<I will protect her with my life,>> I promised.

Sanon was next. <I will do the same. I will not take my eyes off Cece, not even for one second.>

Is that...really okay? As in, the legal kind of okay?

Martha nodded slowly. “I’m counting on you.”

And she just told him to go ahead with it! I yelped internally.

Night was already on the horizon, so we planned to leave for Nearbell at dawn the next day. If we gave Ceres literal piggyback rides, then from what I heard, we should arrive in roughly three days.

On the day of our departure, a lovely, pale blue sky welcomed us. But in the distance, gloomy, ominous clouds hung over it like a curtain of strife.

* * *

Nourris was the one who came to fetch me. She was holding my twin shortwords—the swords with Eise’s bones. The flames that Eise ignited would return me to her side.

<There is no time. I will make this brief. Do not look at me.> Inside my mind, I heard Nourris’s detached voice. <There are special ristae inserted inside these two swords. Each can release a single, explosive burst of a significant amount of mana.>

Without even the hint of an expression on her face, Nourris restrained me. I glanced at my swords. A crimson color was condensed at the centers of the ristae, while the rims were close to colorless.

<If you swing either of your swords towards the ground, you will be able to soar high into the air. The amount of mana is just barely enough for you to bring along that boy named Batt. When you land, swing your other sword at the ground. It will decelerate you as you fall, and you will not die when you reach the ground.>

I walked towards the elevator that rose to the arena stage. Disbelief filled my mind. I could *escape*.

<Thank you,> I thought. <I owe you one.>

<Failure is unacceptable.>

<Got it.>

We were right in front of the elevator. The warden held a small sword. Strange.

Nourris, who had been releasing my restraints, jolted and looked at the warden. Beneath the helmet that concealed the warden's face, I saw lips pulled into a meaningful sneer. Nourris and I were then thrown onto the elevator together, and the warden tossed the small sword next to Nourris. With the noisy rattling of chains, the elevator carried the two of us up onto the stage.

The message was clear. I should have known—the Nothen Faction would never give me an easy way out like killing myself and ending it there. Only one could survive. It likely meant that even if I died, either Batt or Nourris still had to perish. Perhaps they had assigned Batt and Nourris to me so that they could set up for this cruel, sadistic day.

That wasn't the problem right now, however. This rista only had barely enough power to send Batt and me flying. One of us would be left behind in the arena.

The elevator didn't stop to wait for my mind to find a solution. It rose onto the sand-covered stage, and I squinted my eyes like always.

Clear skies. Strong winds. Ascending clouds of dust. Sunlight rained down from above and reflected off the sand.

The amphitheater was packed with thousands of spectators looking down at

us. Faceless citizens surrounded the elliptical stage on the audience seats that were arranged like tiered walls. I wondered whether they were forced to watch against their will or had come voluntarily out of a thirst for blood. Did they desire my death or my brutal victory?

No one gave me answers to those questions. The only things that reached me were angry shouts, jeers, and cheers that blended into each other in an incoherent mess.

When the elevator stopped, Nourris picked up the sword with an apathetic face before putting distance between us. She faced her back at me, and her gesture made it clear—*Leave me behind*, was her unspoken message.

I chewed on my lip. How could I ever do something like that? I asked myself, *What should I do? How can I save all of us?*

Sanon flashed across the back of my mind. No matter what the odds, that man had never given up hope. He'd saved me. In his last moments, he'd used his own life to help Ceres and our comrades get to safety.

Think. Think harder.

Nourris's voice echoed in my head. <Before anything else, you should stop that boy.>

Heartless cheering engulfed the arena. The elevator on the other side of the dust clouds climbed to the surface, and Batt—who stood motionlessly in a daze—appeared on the stage. In his small hands was a sword that gleamed dully.

It didn't take me too long to interpret Nourris's message. Feeling the gazes of the spectators pelt down on my frame, I ran straight at Batt. His scrawny arms rose in slow motion until he placed the blade against his own neck.

"Stop it!" I yelled as I closed in on him.

I grabbed the hilt of his sword and twisted it, pulling the edge away from his neck. Keeping my grip on it, I thrust the point of the sword towards the ground, and Batt fell forward, losing his balance. With my elbow, I jabbed Batt's shoulder and snatched the sword from him. He fell.

I tossed Batt's sword into the distance. Though the stage was covered with

sand, the layer beneath it was wooden planks. His sword pierced the ground and proudly remained standing.

Jeering and booing filled the air. They were likely ushering me to kill my opponent. “Relax, Batt,” I muttered, keeping the movements of my mouth to a minimum. “We’re getting out of here.”

Batt’s eyes, glistening with tears, widened with surprise. He was lying on the ground pitifully, and I gave him the faintest of smiles with the corners of my lips, as if to say, “Everything is all right. I’ll save you.”

Now, I only had to figure out a way for all three of us to break out.

No. That’s wrong. A delayed realization hit me. It was already too late—I’d forgotten the nature of the Yethma race.

Frantically, I turned around to see Nourris’s body sway and crumple onto the ground. A sword was sticking out of her stomach. Even from a distance, I could see red blood rapidly staining her tattered clothes. She’d stabbed herself.

On the other side of the dust clouds, the life of a Yethma girl slipped away like sand through my fingers. The cheers and jeers suddenly faded away, and I felt as if time had ground to a halt. The body of a young girl lay face down, her limbs thrust out carelessly. And then, she never moved again.

A hurricane of booing enveloped the arena. I forced down my anger and despair, and I felt tears blurring my vision. *Do you see this, you senile old torturer? This is the spectacle you wished for.*

But this wasn’t the time to drown in my sorrows. I pulled my right sword out of its sheath and craned my neck to look at the sky. It was blue and boundless—the entrance to the future.

Something caught my eye. *Hmm...?* For an instant, a shadow with an unusual shape had appeared on the azure sky. It had large wings and a long tail. The possibility that crossed my mind seemed too absurd.

The next moment, the sound of crumbling rock echoed out from the circumference of the arena. There was a deafening roar. The source of the voice had radiated light the color of the sky, but now, it slowly regained its murky black, revealing its true form.

The towering silhouette that appeared was unmistakable. It was a legendary creature that I'd only glimpsed in picture books: a dragon—a tyrannical monster that breathed fire. An enormous, gaping maw that looked as if it could swallow a human whole was lined densely with sharp fangs. Tough scales shrouded its slender but gigantic frame. Vast wings stretched out from its back, and it had a long tail covered with pointed spines.

The booing of the arena transformed into shrieks of terror. The dragon perched on the arena's rim before opening its mouth wide in my direction.

My instincts screamed at me, *Get away!* On the spur of the moment, I pulled Batt towards me and tried to dodge the attack. But it was in vain—I wouldn't make it in time. At this rate, the flames would strike us directly. Our only escape path was the sky.

"We're soaring up," I hissed. "Hold on tight." I wound my arms firmly around the boy.

Though he looked dumbfounded, Batt somehow had enough awareness to hurriedly throw his arms around my neck. With my impaired left arm, I held on to Batt while I swung my right shortsword down fiercely.

A loud explosion rattled my ears as the wooden floor split apart, and simultaneously, I groaned. I felt as if someone had tugged hard on my organs. Batt and I sliced through the air at an astounding speed and began ascending towards the sky. Instantly, my vision was dyed black—what was going on?

The black blockage disappeared. When I looked down, I discovered that the entire arena was shrouded in black smoke. My guess was that the dragon had breathed out black smoke instead of fire.

But the question was, why? To my knowledge, only the royal court with mages would have enough power to control legendary creatures like dragons, and they should want me dead. Despite that fact, the dragon had spat out nonlethal fumes. Why was that? And more importantly, why was the dragon here to begin with?

We had flown out at an angle, drawing an arc in the air as we soared above the circumference of the arena. We were much higher than the outer walls, so much so that my mind began thinking—with this much leeway, perhaps we

could have brought Nourris along as well.

But it was all too late. We were already falling. I sheathed my right sword and took out the other. Judging by our angle, we were going to land in a forest. Calculating our direction before I'd launched ourselves had been child's play. Trees rapidly approached us.

Right before we collided with foliage, I swung my shortsword. An intense repulsive force shrouded my body. Pain came next, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

A maelstrom of force tossed my body about carelessly in all kinds of directions, and I even lost track of where up and down were.

In the end, it seemed that I'd tumbled across the ground and had crashed into a tree trunk. When I opened my eyes, I found myself inside the forest.

"You all right there, Batt?" I peeled off the arms that had clung to my neck and climbed to my feet.

The boy on the ground rubbed at his eyes. "*Amaaazing*. What even *was* that?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I used two special ristae to break out of the arena from above. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Ah, I'm totally fine, but..." As Batt stood up, he looked at my eyes, confused. "Why are you crying, Master?"

Fragment 3: A Precious Moment

I opened my eyes. I was lying on a bed.

Outside the windows was a vast, clear sapphire sky. It was already noon.

I wondered how long I'd slept for. Actually, I barely remembered when I'd fallen asleep. *No, I do*, I corrected myself as the memory came to me. I'd been thinking about Mister Naut in King Eavis's bedroom. Right after that, my vision had gone black, and then...

Perhaps my suspicions were right after all. A story about Mister Naut might be written on the sealed pages. And so, when I tried to recall those memories, I'd passed out. That was just a theory though.

I climbed down from bed and slid my feet into my slippers. The next moment, from some unknown direction, the chime of a bell rang out. Just as I was wondering what was happening, there was a thud, followed by the frantic pitter-patter of racing feet. My bedroom door opened.

"Jess, you are awake!" It was Madame Wyss. "Oh, I am so glad..."

I realized what the chime had represented. A spell cast on my slippers must have notified Madame Wyss about me getting out of bed. "My apologies, how long was I—"

"You were sound asleep for more than an entire day. Please do not strain yourself so hard next time." She sighed.

"Um..." I blinked at her. "Did I...strain myself?"

"You were experimenting with fire magic. I looked at the lab, and goodness gracious, you produced enough fuel to burn the entire place down. Even the ceiling was smothered with soot... It was a miracle you didn't suffocate."

"I am so sorry... But I learned from texts that, like breathing, during combustion, air moves in and out. That is why I controlled winds to ventilate the room. Furthermore, when I was practicing with manifesting flames of higher

temperatures, I created oxygium and mixed it with flammable fuel. I never felt short of breath or anything like that.”

Madame Wyss looked at me with a mixture of shock and exasperation.

I shrunk into myself slightly. “Oh. That isn’t the point... I am sorry, I was too thoughtless.”

She let out a long sigh. “Having a thriving curiosity is admirable. However, you have caused your ecdysia to happen almost immediately, so you need to tackle matters with much more caution from now on.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. Ecdysia—magic molting. When young mages release a lot of mana or when their magic is worked up, they will sometimes faint. By the time they wake up, the quality and capacity of their mana will be on a whole other level compared to before. This phenomenon is called “ecdysia.”

From what I heard, it wasn’t very common. Mister Shravis had only experienced it three times, and even Madame Wyss only encountered it a mere seven times.

On that topic, the most powerful mage, Mister Marquis, had experienced ecdysia nineteen times. Meanwhile, the peerless mage King Eavis’s number was twenty-one. As for the legendary Lady Vatis—who ended the Dark Ages—the history books wrote that she had experienced forty-three ecdysias, though there was no way to know whether that was accurate.

Madame Wyss’s voice cut into my thoughts. “Jess, you should report to King Eavis. I am certain he will be overjoyed.”

Ah, right. I’d collapsed suddenly in front of King Eavis and fallen asleep. He must be worried. I should head over right away.

Responding with a “Yes,” I swiftly made my way to the king’s bedroom. King Eavis seemed even more haggard than the last time I’d seen him. The black marks that had coiled around his right arm like ivy had spread, some even peeking out of his collar.

When I entered the room, King Eavis was absentmindedly staring out the window. “Ah, Jess,” he addressed me. “Do you feel better?”

A chair moved by itself until it was next to his bed. Its motion, however, was slightly sluggish.

I bowed slightly. “Thankfully, I am the picture of health, as you can see. My deepest apologies for all the concern I caused.”

“Oh, do not take it to heart. I must say, I have a rather keen eye for talent—indeed, you do not betray my expectations. To think that you have already experienced two ecdysias...”

Huh? “Um... This should be my first ecdysia, Your Majesty.”

“Take a seat. Let’s have a chat.”

Hearing that, I settled on the chair. I was anxious that his indisposed condition had thrown his memories into disorder.

King Eavis cut to the heart of the matter right away. “You are aware that I have sealed your memories, correct?”

“...Yes.”

“To tell you the truth, I placed the seal on your memories after your first ecdysia. Immediately after an ecdysia, all magic is washed away from the mage’s body, and all defense mechanisms stop as well. The mage is rendered utterly vulnerable, so to speak. I took advantage of that instant to seal your memories from the day you left House Kiltyrin to the day you underwent ecdysia.”

“Ah... So that is what happened...”

“Amid your recent ecdysia, my magical seal dissipated during the process, and I cast a seal on your memories once again. It is natural for you to feel doubt and suspicion—why am I so particular about your memories? In fact, I would not be surprised if you resent me for hiding something precious to you.”

“No, I could never resent you...” I shook my head. “I heard you had a reason for doing it, and all of the royal family have been kind to me. You must have had a very valid reason for your actions.”

“You possess a heart of gold. But I am well aware of your overflowing curiosity, Jess. You are rather interested in what happened in your sealed

memories, yes?”

I hesitated before admitting, “Honestly, I am.”

“That is only natural. But I am afraid I cannot readily release the seal just to grant your wish, and I cannot tell you what happened either. I suppose I shall tell you one fact, however. I have not erased your memories—they are only sealed away. When your outstanding magic and infinite curiosity lift that seal one day, Jess, we will not hinder you.”

Realization dawned on me. Now that I’d experienced my second ecdysia, King Eavis was telling me to regain my memories in time through my own efforts.

After a pause, he continued, “Of course, though your magic is impressive, I shall put it out there that you have yet to reach a level sufficient to unravel my seal. Unless you experience one or two more ecdysias, you will not arrive at that stage, I believe.”

“I see. I understand.” I could feel my shoulders slumping with dejection.

In the silence that fell over the bedroom, the only sound that echoed was King Eavis’s labored breathing.

A question was burning in my mind, and I couldn’t resist the urge to ask him. “Um... Your Majesty, you said that I am talented. But I cannot use impressive magic yet, and I am not particularly smart either. What was the reason you deemed me as talented?”

A smile took over King Eavis’s gaunt visage. “I have two facts that are grounds for my reasoning. The first is your unparalleled curiosity and desire to act on that inquisitive instinct. In this age, there is no need for anyone to seek out novel things, but for some reason, you still pursue the truth with all your efforts. It makes me wonder whether someone rubbed off on you. This talent is invaluable.”

“Yes,” I replied, but I wasn’t very convinced.

“Judging by that expression, you don’t believe me, do you? I am not surprised. The second reason is what made you stand out to me during your Yethma period.”

I gulped in anticipation and nodded.

He continued, “Jess, the power of your earnest prayers caused an unprecedented miracle that even the entire history of Mesteria has never seen before.”

For some reason unknown to me, the image of a beautiful starry sky appeared in my mind. “What did my prayers bring about?”

He shook his head slightly. “That, I cannot say. It is directly connected to the reason I sealed your memories.”

“Oh...” I felt despondent, but suddenly, I recalled someone saying these words to me.

“What’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with being selfish? Everyone has the freedom to pray to the stars.”

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t remember who had said that.

Without warning, the crystal ball placed beside King Eavis’s pillow glowed red, interrupting my thoughts. The king put his hand on it and shut his eyes. After a lengthy magical communication session with someone unknown, he summoned Mister Shravis. I wasn’t dismissed from the room; I remained by the king’s side.

Mister Shravis rushed into the bedroom wearing black leather armor. Perhaps he’d been in the middle of training. “Grandfather, how may I help you?”

The king replied, “Marquis has contacted me. Take a seat.”

Another chair moved until it was next to me. In the middle of its transportation, it nearly toppled over, but it somehow made it all the way. Mister Shravis anxiously observed King Eavis’s noble visage before sitting right beside me. His sturdy arm seemed like it would brush against my shoulder any moment now. When he noticed my gaze, he moved the chair away from me and sat down again.

Mister Shravis turned to face the king. “May I ask what father said? Do we have all the pieces necessary to destroy the Nothen Faction now, perhaps?”

“No, not yet, from what I heard.”

Mister Shravis frowned very slightly. “Then...what was it about?”

“There has been a sudden turn of events. It is difficult for him to maintain his subterfuge, and driven into a corner, he claims that he was forced to use a dragon to cause mayhem. Marquis apparently plans to remain there and to speedily uncover the framework of the Nothen Faction’s government based on the actions of Arrogan and his allies.”

“Is there any way I may assist him?” Mister Shravis humbly asked.

“Well...” King Eavis paused. “It seems that Naut has taken advantage of the commotion to escape.”

“Escape?” It wasn’t just Mister Shravis saying that—my voice chorused with his.

The king inclined his head a little. “Marquis has successfully cast a *Trac* spell on Naut that will tell us his position. I will make a map based on that, and Shravis, I want you to observe him for a period of time.”

“Is that a command to keep an eye on the rebels?” Mister Shravis asked for confirmation.

“Indeed. It will be your first job outside the capital. But there is no need to kill anyone or fight. Without a doubt, the Liberators will soon assemble near Naut. I only want you to monitor them from a safe distance. Marquis will take care of the rest. Are you up to this task?”

“I can accomplish it, yes, but...” Mister Shravis faltered. “It is all rather sudden...”

“Anxious, are we?”

“...No, not at all.” Mister Shravis, with a solemn expression, shook his head. It seemed that he was indeed anxious.

I’d remained mostly a silent bystander until now, but I mustered all the courage I had and spoke up. “May I...go with him as well?”

A moment of absolute silence. Both King Eavis and Mister Shravis gazed at me with astonishment.

Ashen orbs tucked inside King Eavis’s sunken eye sockets stared right at me. “Do you wish to go, Jess?”

“No, I just hope that I might be able to help Mister Shravis in some way...”

“I do not recommend lying to the king himself,” King Eavis said. “Even if I am frail with age and a curse, my magic is going strong.”

“I-I am so sorry!” I stammered.

The king let out a raspy laugh. “Now, now, that was just a joke. Do not be so nervous, my dear granddaughter-to-be. It is reasonable for you to have an interest in Naut and the outside world. Hiding it, in fact, would be wrong. Honesty is your virtue, after all.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.” My heart was pounding. I wondered whether I’d said something out of line.

“I was actually hesitating whether I should send Wyss as Shravis’s companion, but, well... Since we have a better plan now, I shall call that off. It is about time you children leave the nest. Jess, if you want to go, you may.”

Mister Shravis knitted his eyebrows together. “But, grandfather, the outside world is—”

“It is dangerous, I am aware.” The king gazed at Mister Shravis. “I could say the same for dispatching you as well. My personal opinion is that if you and Jess are together, I can breathe easy. On top of that, it will be a good opportunity for the two of you to strengthen your relationship.”

There was a noisy clatter from Mister Shravis’s chair. I glanced over to see a rosy flush on his noble face.

“Grandfather, we are in times of war,” Mister Shravis protested. “Such jokes are not appropriate.”

“Being unable to laugh at jokes is a flaw you and Marquis share. Perhaps all the humor in this family has already been hoarded by Hortis.” At this point, the king’s laughter sounded like a cold draft slipping through the cracks during winter. “My mind is set. Make your preparations and depart before dawn tomorrow, Shravis, Jess. The two of you will go together.”

I’d made my proposal while thinking that he’d likely reject me, but to my great surprise, King Eavis had agreed. Enthusiastically, I replied with a “Yes, Your

Majesty!”

After a short delay, Mister Shravis nodded. “Your wish is my command, grandfather.”

At the same time, a question wormed its way into my head. If Mister Naut was associated with my memories, sending me over to him was a decision that conflicted with the king’s seal. Did that mean Mister Naut had nothing to do with me? Or was King Eavis deliberately trying to stimulate my memories?

King Eavis only smiled and kept his silence.

Chapter 3: Life Is Full of Surprises

Nearbell turned out to be a city of black stone. Stone fortifications lined the coast, and sailing vessels in a variety of sizes crowded the murky evening ocean in rows. The houses in the harbor were made from stacks of dark ashen stone blocks, and the salty sea wind left spots and speckles on the exposed walls. Between them was a complex network of cobblestone paths that reminded me of a labyrinth.

Lanterns hanging from the edge of the eaves began flickering and lighting up from place to place, splashing their surroundings with a warm glow. The cool sea breeze brought relief with every stroke against my travel-fatigued body.

It was a large city indeed, but the few people present in comparison made it feel somewhat sparse.

Our merry band with a strange lineup—a young girl, a pink pig, a black pig, and a dog—finally arrived at our destination after three entire days of traveling. Ceres was currently holding a pair of black *Les Panties* up for the black pig to sniff.

“Any findings?” Ceres asked slowly.

<It smells wonder— *Ahem*, excuse me, it has the same scent as the streets, but it doesn’t lead down a straight path, so tracking it down is a bit of a challenge,> Sanon said while sniffing *Les Panties* vigorously.

No matter how you looked at him, he was a low-life pervert, but in his defense, his actions were technically justifiable. We’d found several clues in the basement of the Sleeping Pony, and Sanon had narrowed the selection down to the personal possessions of Naut’s closest comrades. The three items we’d ended up with were as follows: the sock and *Les Panties* of a woman called Itsune, as well as the pillowcase of her younger brother, Yoshu.

We’d split the three items between the three of us beasts, and we each followed a different scent trail. I was a pig with self-restraint—everyone wasn’t

the same to me—so I'd chosen the youth's pillowcase instantly. Seeing that, with the comment, "I suppose I don't have much of a choice, do I?" Sanon had selected *Les Panties*. Finally, Rossi was in charge of the remaining sock. No one questioned Sanon about why he chose *Les Panties* instead of the sock.

Next to the pervy black pig who sniffed *Les Panties* and the pervy dog who sniffed a sock, I leaned my nose in towards the pillowcase. The item I was responsible for had a scent that reminded me of a high school boy's pillow with an added citrusy fragrance. Just like Sanon had said, I could detect this unique mix of smells in various places around the city, but the trails either ended abruptly or branched off—there wasn't a clear, direct path to a specific destination.

Due to the reasons above, we still couldn't locate the exact whereabouts of the item owners. If they had some kind of base they'd settled down in, their scents should be concentrated in the vicinity of such an area, but oddly enough, we couldn't find anywhere that fit the criteria.

At this rate, the sun would set before we could find our targets. At a loss, we went around aimlessly in circles when the black pig unexpectedly began sniffing an eatery's terrace chair. The smell of seafood drifted my way, and my hog maw clenched.

<Mister Lolip, please come over here.>

Under Sanon's ushering, I approached him. <<Did you find something?>>

The black pig smelled the chair once again before meeting my eyes. <I can smell the fragrance of Tsunnie's bum from the seat of this chair.>

<<Ah. Okay, if you say so...>> My tone was flat.

<I made the right choice when I picked the scent trail of dignified panties. It seems that Tsunnie visited this eatery.>

I see. When you sit down, you sit on your bum. If you want to locate an area where your target stayed for a long time, I suppose using the scent trail of Les Panties isn't too bad of an idea. Though I felt that he was just tacking on excuses to belatedly justify his unique...*preference*, this was a significant clue, so I should invest some serious thought.

At once, I approached the ground near the chair with my snout. *Hmm, this is...* <<I smell tar. It is quite potent.>> I also detected the unique citrusy smell I'd sensed from the pillowcase. The intense smell of tar overlapped with it.

Ceres blinked blankly. "Tar...?"

Since she didn't seem familiar with the concept, I gave her a quick lecture. <<Tar is a sticky liquid that comes from lumber. It's a liquid produced when you heat wood in the absence of air. Tar is often used as preservatives and insect repellents, but in the case of this city...it's likely used as a waterproofing material.>>

This finding would also explain why we hadn't found any base-like areas inside the city. Copious amounts of tar were used to waterproof ships. The commanding officers of the Liberators, the siblings Itsune and Yoshu, were very likely using a ship as their base of operations.

The *Shattered Collars* was a large wooden sailing ship. Her black hull gently rocked with the peaceful waves, and her folded white sails reflected the captivating purple and red gradient of the sky after sunset. Beyond the salty smell of the ocean and the acrid smell of tar was the faintest hint of gunpowder. On the hull were the Mesterian words for *Shattered Collars* written in white, which seemed to have been painted on rather recently.

Locating the ship had been simple. When we'd headed to the pier with the tightest security, we'd come across a swordsmith who was acquainted with Ceres and Sanon, and we were immediately granted an audience with the commanding officers. Just like I'd deduced, the headquarters of the Liberators were currently inside this very ship. From what I heard, there were roughly thirty warriors inside the vessel, and comrades approximately ten times that were lurking within Nearbell.

Under the guidance of a Liberator, we boarded the ship. But this was when Ceres faltered.

<<Is something wrong, Ceres?>> I asked.

She looked up at the ship worriedly. "No, it's just... It's my first time getting on a ship."

Hearing that, a memory came to me. One of the rules of the royal court dictated that Yethma must never ride vehicles. The Yethma and the one who permitted her would both be sentenced to death.

During her moment of hesitation, the black pig pushed Ceres's petite bottom with his snout and ushered her on board.

<According to the laws of the royal court, the Liberators should all have been given capital punishment a long time ago,> he reminded her. <The royal court knows that if they forcibly punish the Liberators, there would be a strong backlash from the masses, so they can't act brashly. We've already come this far. Our only option is to press forward.>

I had to admit that I was somewhat, no, *extremely* reluctant to listen to a man who was burying his snout in a young girl's bum. But in the end, we chose to place our faith in Sanon, and all of us boarded the *Shattered Collars*.

We were immediately ushered into the captain's cabin.

"Oho? So you're that low-life swine Naut mentioned."

The voice belonged to the tentative captain, Itsune. She was a tall woman with her raven hair tied back in a ponytail, and she seemed to be around the same age as me. Her defining traits were her tanned skin and her aggressive-looking, piercing eyes. On her back was a greataxe that looked as if it could slice a pig in two with one blow.

Her legs were parted audaciously as she sat on a wooden crate, and she was leaning her upper body slightly forward, propping herself up with her two hands that were placed on her knees. The area around her chest was exposed negligently, and her clothing revealed scenery that would likely make Naut jump with joy.

Ceres glanced at me with disapproval. *What did I do to warrant such a reaction?*

There was also a young girl inside the cabin. Her long hair was weaved into one long braid, and she placed dishes of water in front of me, Sanon, and Rossi. She wore a rustic green dress. The silver collar around her neck revealed her identity as a Yethma.

Itsune called out to the girl and beckoned her with a hand gesture. “Don’t bother, Lithis. You don’t have to be so nice to those animals.”

A smile lifted Lithis’s cheeks, which were scattered with prominent freckles, and she giggled before sitting between Itsune’s thighs. Tanned arms wound around Lithis’s abdomen from behind.

Hmm...? I raised an internal eyebrow.

Itsune placed her jaw on Lithis’s shoulder as she said, “That aside, I’m surprised you managed to find us, Sanon. Tell us how you did it for future reference.”

With Ceres’s help, Sanon communicated his message. <I tracked down your scent. We asked Mister Kroyt from the Inn of the Sleeping Pony for permission to investigate the room in the basement, you see.>

“Inn of the Sleeping Pony?” Itsune’s black eyes turned to Ceres, and the next moment, her gaze was glued to the black *Les Panties* that Ceres was still holding. The young girl immediately hid the incriminating item behind her back, but it was too little, too late.

“Those’re my pan...ties...” Itsune’s face flushed bright scarlet. Possibly sensing something, Lithis stood up quickly. “Oy, Sanon. Ya know, I think I’d be doing the world a favor if I chopped off the snout that sniffed the dignified panties of a lady, don’t you?”

Itsune retrieved a yellow rista from her waist bag and inserted it into the greataxe on her back with a click.

<Th-This is a misunderstanding, Tsunnie,> the black pig stammered in a panic. <Ros was the one who smelled your dignified article of clothing.>

Receiving a sharp glare from Itsune, Rossi shook his head slowly.

Sanon’s lie had been exposed. He was guilty as charged.

Itsune stood up and got into a stance with her greataxe. Lightning crackled around the blade, and the unique, pungent odor of ozone wafted in my direction. Was this woman’s greataxe an Electric-type or something? Upon a closer look, a part of the haft seemed to be made from bone, just like Naut’s

twin shortwords.

Someone chose that exact moment to knock loudly on the ajar captain's cabin door, stopping the woman in her tracks.

A youth with black hair and fair skin walked in. He seemed to be roughly the same age as Naut. "Hey, cool your head. You're the one who was careless about retrieving all your belongings, sis. It's your fault for making such a mess."

Long bangs covered his eyes, but they didn't hide his prominent nose and his defined jawline, which hinted at a charming face. On his back was a significantly long crossbow. Two bones lay diagonally across the wooden cross framework, as if reinforcing the weapon.



“Quit the nagging,” Itsune snapped grumpily. “You can’t blame me, we were in a hurry.” Despite her disgruntled tone, she put away her weapon and sat back on the wooden crate.

With bangs so long they cast him as a gloomy introvert, the youth walked past me. The distinct citrusy scent immediately hit my nose. Considering how he’d called Itsune his sister, this youth must be Yoshu.

“It’s been ages, Ceres.” Yoshu smiled at the girl he addressed. “Hope you’ve been doing well.”

Ceres bowed in greeting. “Um... Yes, fortunately, I’m in good health.”

“Glad to hear that. I overheard some of the commotion, and you guys were talking about Sanon, right?” As he spoke, he looked down at the two pigs present. “Huh? I thought you’d disappeared, Sanon, but you came back and multiplied?”

I quickly introduced myself. My speech was something along the lines of, <<Ah, no, I am afraid I am not Sanon. The pig you see over here—that’s me—is a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin.>>

“Ahh.” Making a noise of realization, Yoshu lifted his chin. “You’re that lowlife swine. I’ve heard about you from Naut.”

For some reason, people kept calling me “lowlife swine” ever since I arrived here. How in the world had Naut described me? I felt as if the information he spread was extremely biased. *I’m not a lowlife, definitely not.*

“I was actually curious... Would you be knowledgeable about the internal affairs of the royal court?” Eyes with visible white between his irises and lower eyelids peered at me through the veil of his fringe. His piercing gaze was fixed on me.

Feeling nervous sweat forming and trickling down my skin, I replied, <<S-Sorry, I, uh... I don’t remember much of that, truthfully. They might have wiped my memories.>>

Yoshu turned to face Lithis, who had ended up in Itsune’s arms again. With a wide smile, she gave him a nod.

He faced me once more. “I see. Well, you probably have your own circumstances to deal with. I won’t press you too hard.” He swayed his head slightly to fix his bangs. “That aside—sis, it sounds like we can prepare the rest of the ships safely. Preparations ought to be done by tomorrow morning. We should be able to depart by dawn.”

Itsune fiddled with Lithis’s braid, and she furrowed her eyebrows. “Morning? Wasn’t Naut going to arrive soon? If he’s forced to wait, I can already imagine the grumpy scowl on his face.”

Ceres whipped her head up, and she looked at Itsune with wide eyes. “Mister Naut is arriving soon?”

“Sure is,” Itsune replied. “You’re lucky you rushed here, Ceres. We plan on setting sail and heading south immediately after Naut gets here.”

Ceres’s large eyes seemed to sparkle like stars.

I see, so the Liberators will leave by sea promptly after meeting up with Naut. It looks like we made it just in time. Itsune’s right—“lucky” is the best word to describe us.

Yoshu sighed. “That said, sis, we haven’t gathered all our supplies yet. Even if we mobilize every single member inside the city to help us, the earliest we can leave is in the dead of the night. We don’t want to make a big fuss and draw unwanted attention, after all.”

“Night works too.” Itsune shrugged. “Don’t be naive and think morning’s a valid option. Speed is of the essence.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

Itsune quickly and efficiently dished out instructions. “Hurry up and get to work. As for you, Lithis, allocate a hammock to Ceres.”

When Yoshu heard Lithis’s name, he looked at Itsune with a hint of displeasure on his face.

Under Lithis’s guidance, we descended the stairs and arrived at the lower deck.

Sanon communicated to the leading Yethma with a braid, <Was your name Lithis, young miss?>

The girl with freckles turned around and gave him a big grin. "I am now."

The black pig inclined his head. <Did you have a different name in the past?>

"I'm sorry, um... Half a month ago, I lost my memories and was roaming aimlessly when Miss Itsune and the others took me under their wing. I don't remember my previous name. And that was when Miss Itsune gave me a wonderful name, Lithis."

<I see. So that's what happened. Thank you.>

Lithis, or so she was called, allocated a hammock in one corner to Ceres. Lithis chose this particular corner, which was rather spacious, so that we beasts could accompany Ceres when she was asleep. Then, she half jogged as she traced her path back to the captain's cabin.

My curiosity was piqued. <<Mister Sanon, why did you ask that girl about her name?>>

The black pig gazed at me with a slightly conflicted look. <The Yethma girl called Lithis is already dead.>

A chill ran down my baby back ribs, and pig bumps formed on my skin. <<...What?>>

<You must have seen the bones used on Tsunnie and Yoyo's weapons. Those belong to Lithis.>

My memories of the greataxe and the crossbow sprung to the surface of my mind. They'd seemed bulky, but the pair still carried the weapons inside the ship, just like Naut had never been without his twin shortswords made from Eise's bones.

<<So...the Lithis you are talking about was a Yethma who had ties with those siblings?>>

<Yes. Those two were originally from a household with a high standing within the royal court's military. Their extraordinary fighting capabilities are due to such an upbringing. However, Lithis, who served their household, was

apparently executed unjustly. That event snuffed out any goodwill they had for the royal court, and eventually, they became Nattie's allies.>

Ceres perched on her hammock and balanced herself skillfully, rocking with its movements as she silently watched over us. Occasionally, her gaze would wander off restlessly—she must be waiting for Naut with bated breath.

Pink dusted Ceres's cheeks, possibly because she'd read the narration. Putting her out of my mind momentarily, I resumed our conversation. <<Itsune...named the girl she took under her wing after another girl who was snatched away brutally by death?>> Faced with this grotesque knowledge, I felt a pang inside my spare ribs.

<That seems to be the case, yes... I have to admit that the thought is a little unsettling, but it shows the extent of Tsunnie's passion and resolve. Anyone can tell after seeing her in battle.>

I blinked. <<In battle?>>

<When she fights, Tsunnie's greataxe is shrouded in ferocious lightning. One strike would make even an ogur with the toughest armor pass out. Within one second, she will chop off her enemy's head without fail. As for Yoyo, his crossbow bolts are protected by a special wind. He can accurately shoot an enemy's heart even several hundred meters away,> Sanon explained. <Both their weapons achieve feats that exceed the highest effectiveness of their equipped ristae. This is only possible when the heart of the wielder and the heart of the bones are intimately connected as one.>

My mind instantly went to the flames of Naut's shortswords. He'd slashed distant enemies with arcs of flame. He'd leaped high into the air, making use of its recoil. *Back then, I only thought he had an awfully convenient weapon, but now...*

I let out a lengthy exhale. <<I see. The bonds between the wielder and the deceased Yethma directly affect the weapon's strength with the Yethma's bones. Is that correct?>>

<I believe so, yes. A human who loses their dearest one will wield the mightiest weapon... It is truly irony at its finest, but at the same time, it is what gives the Liberators their literal edge.>

A memory flashed through my mind.

“Are you fine with her getting killed by Yethma hunters, then? Are you going to snatch back her collar and make new swords with her bones? Is that what you want?”

Those were the words I’d spouted at Naut when attempting to convince him to join our party back at Baptsaze. It had been a deliberate taunt—making him see red and be all emotional would help my negotiation proceed smoothly. But now, with that knowledge, I felt remorse. *I said something truly out of line to Naut back then—something I really shouldn’t have.* One of the factors that transformed the simple countryside huntsman into a hero must be his overpowering emotions for Eise, which he didn’t know how to let go of.

In the next moment, a belated realization hit me, and I whipped my head around to look at Ceres. The lovestruck maiden hung her head and stared hard at the floor covered with black wooden planks. When the black pig noticed her reaction, he claimed to have suddenly recalled other business he had to attend to and quickly ran off somewhere.

Well done, I thought self-deprecatingly. *Ceres is finally going to meet Naut, but your stupid, unnecessary thoughts ruined everything. Oh, what should I say during situations like these—*

“Um, Mister Super-Virgin...” Ceres interrupted my narration. “Please don’t worry too much about me. I’m fine, really.” She gave me a weak smile. It was a bad habit of Yethma—always claiming they were all right, even when they were the furthest thing from that word.

<<Hey, Ceres. There aren’t many people out there who know how to read minds. When you’re not fine, you need to say that honestly. Otherwise, you’ll end up shouldering all the burden by yourself, and it’s only going to become even more painful.>>

Ceres’s large eyes gazed at me. When I stared back, she slowly admitted, “To tell you the truth...I’m a bit scared.”

<<I see. What’s making you scared?>> I prompted gently.

“I just thought that, well, Mister Naut might have already forgotten about

me...”

Uh... Pardon? <<How could he? It’s not like he’s the heroine in a romance story with the amnesia trope.>>

“Ah, that’s not what I mean.” She hesitated. “Right now, Mister Naut is facing adversities I can’t even imagine, and he’s also investing an equally unimaginable amount of effort to realize his goals. I’m starting to wonder whether I even have a place in his mind. A helpless, meddling girl might be nothing but a nuisance...”

Though she’d come this far, Ceres was now fidgety and had started having doubts. She had gone past the point of pitiful in my mind and was reaching the territory of “impossible to decipher.” <<Even if you aren’t someone very important to him, Ceres, I can declare that you definitely aren’t someone he can overlook. An old friend traveled all the way here just to support him. I’m sure Naut will be over the moon.>>

“Do you...really think so?” she asked in a faltering voice.

<<Of course. You haven’t even seen the man yet, so why make yourself anxious over fears that might not even be true? Hiding in your shell forever means you will also be insignificant to him forever. If you’re scared of him forgetting about you, then *make* him remember you,>> I implored her. <<You came all the way here, powered by your passion and desperation to seek him out. You only have to keep that up—invest all your heart and soul into staying by his side. Slowly but surely, you will take up more and more of his heart.>>

She seemed to be wrestling with some kind of a conundrum because she was deep in thought for a while before she said, “But...I don’t want to get in the way of Naut’s achievements. I’m terrified he might forget me, but at the same time, I don’t want to butt in and intrude... So I think I... As long as I can cheer on Mister Naut from the sidelines as a bystander, it’s enough...”

She sounds just like a well-mannered idol fan who abides by the etiquette and rules strictly, but she really doesn’t have to. I suppressed a sigh. <<Come on, you crossed valleys and mountains to get here. Don’t stay on the sidelines as a bystander. Your telepathy and prayers will be useful to Naut, right? Just stay by his side and support him with everything you have. I’m sure that if you persist, his attention will fall on you one day.>>

Ever so slowly, Ceres nodded. “Thank you. Yeah... You’re right. The most important thing is to support him with all my power. Right.”

I responded with an encouraging dip of my head. Seeing that, a faint smile overtook Ceres’s face.

Sometime later, Sanon finally returned. For some reason, he held what seemed to be metal eyeglass frames in his mouth. <Cece, look. Here’s a special item that will cheer you up.>

Ceres accepted the pseudo glasses from the black pig’s mouth and tilted her head quizzically. “What’s this?”

<It’s the prototype model of something we call “glasses.” I actually requested Al to make them ages ago, and I asked about it just now with the braid girl as my proxy. I figured I might as well try, you know? And lo and behold, he made them and held on to them just in case. Go on, open them up and hook the bent parts over your ears.>

Though she was mystified, Ceres followed Sanon’s instructions and put on the pseudo glasses. “Did I do that right?” Ceres, the Glasses Version™, faced me.

Oink! If you’re happy and you know it, squeal like a pig! Glasses are hopelessly suitable for this girl!

It was noisy, and when I looked around, I realized the source of the commotion. Next to me, the black pig was snorting erratically. What an outlandishly perverted pig. *Hey, did I just hear my own nasal grunting? Nah, I must be imagining things.*

<Amazing! Cece! They look perfect on you! Could you turn around and push them up with your hand?!>

Dutifully, Ceres raised her glasses a little. *Oh boy, this is... Wow.* Next to me, the black pig stamped his trotters on the ground and expressed his exhilaration with every cell in his body. *Sheesh. Look at this pervert. I don’t get him at all. Gotta keep my distance.*

<Mister Lolip,> Sanon encouraged me, <do you have any requests? Go ahead.>

I gave it some thought. *Well, this is a pretty rare opportunity, so I guess I could say a thing or two.* <<Ceres, could you face me and repeat after me?>>

After hearing my next words, though a bit shy, Ceres opened her mouth and spoke in a small voice. “Y-You’re a bad Mister Pig... You need to be punished!”

Aroooooink! <<Mister Sanon, you’re an evil genius.>>

<Right? I thought glasses would suit her ever since the day I met her. Sitting above her soft and full cheeks—which hint at her childish innocence—is a silver-rimmed crystallization of intellect that brings firmness to the mellow contours of her face! She is the final form of a loli with glasses!>

My mind stuttered and went silent. *Well, well. He’s beyond all salvation. A pervert of his level might even be infectious—just being around him makes me feel as if I’m going to catch the virus as well.* <<Oh, right. Hey, Ceres, how about this?>>

Hearing my proposal, Ceres inclined her head a little. Despite her confusion, she still fulfilled my request. She looked up at me with puppy dog eyes and...

“B-Big brother.”



I practically squawked in my mind. *Yahooooink! My brethren, have you ever had the pleasure of a beautiful blonde thirteen-year-old girl with glasses calling you “big brother”? Oh, you haven’t? You poor thing! What a shame! Seems like you didn’t amass enough good karma in your previous life, heh!*

A bashful smile softened Ceres’s features as she saw us grunting and squealing in excitement. “Um... Is this metal mechanism *that* impressive?”

<It’s sublime!> The black pig was so worked up that he even let out goofy “Ah-hyuk! Ah-hyuk!” laughter from his mouth.

Ceres knitted her eyebrows together. “But...what exactly does putting on this mechanism improve?”

The black pig froze like a statue. *True, she raises a good question. What exactly is the charm of glasses? I’m struggling to find the right words... My brethren, can you give a coherent and clear explanation regarding the beauty of glasses?*

Sanon fell silent as he squeezed his brain for every last drop of wisdom it possessed.

Finally, he began his explanation warily. <You see, Cece, glasses are devices that rectify the function of your eyes. They’re often used when you read books or when you’re studying. Therefore, they’re associated with intellectuals. Furthermore, glasses are worn in front of one’s eyes. The thing is, a huge part of the impression you make is dependent on your eyes. Because of that, not only do glasses give you an intelligent aura, but they are also devices that can change your impression completely, causing a phenomenon known as “gap moe”—the hidden depths you display will ensnare those who see your surprising, novel side. In my words, this is the charm of glasses.>

Ceres blinked. “Gap...*moi*?” For a while, she didn’t offer any input as she fell into pensive silence. But then, she seemed to have regained some of her spirit as she said, “In that case, I shall wear them until Mister Naut arrives!”

Our party had fallen asleep due to exhaustion from our journey, but Rossi’s shrill yapping woke us. Still partly in dreamland, I fought against my heavy

eyelids, and in my bleary vision, I saw a large white silhouette race up the stairs like a bullet.

A moment later, the implications of the events sank in. Only two things could incite such joy in Rossi: Jess's bare legs or his master. Both were important to me, so I hurriedly gave chase. Behind me, I heard the chaotic pitter-patter of trotters and feet as Ceres—the Glasses Version™—and the black pig followed suit.

By now, darkness had pulled the curtain of night over the sky. On the deck, Rossi swished his white tail so fiercely that I feared it might fall off as he pinned someone down and licked their face eagerly. Yoshu was there too, holding a lantern, and next to him was an unfamiliar boy who looked naive and honest. The young stranger, donning rustic clothing that was wrinkly and worn-out, seemed like he was roughly Ceres's age. He seemed taken aback by the sudden emergence of a zoo.

A voice that sounded exactly like a stereotypical handsome hunk rang out. "Calm down, I know, I know..."

A wave of nostalgia washed over me. It was Naut. He somehow got Rossi under control as he sat up, and the sight of him made me gape in shock.

Tattered clothing. Sunken, gaunt cheeks. His left arm hanging limply. A soot black mark near his Adam's apple. A large wound left by a sharp blade extending from his right cheek to his temporal region. His blond hair had grown out, giving him a feral look.

I struggled to find the exact words to describe him, but he seemed like a whole new man compared to the Naut in my memories. The difference was comparable to a certain high school prodigy who'd practically transformed overnight after he coincidentally picked up a special notebook.

The first thing his gaze laid upon was Itsune, who rushed up from the captain's cabin. "You seem to be doing well," he observed. "Good to see."

Itsune let out a big sigh of relief. "You know, I thought you were a goner for real this time."

"Cut the nonsense. Me, dying? No way in hell." As he spoke, Naut's right hand

reached out and patted Itsune's shoulder firmly.

Itsune jerked her jaw in the direction of the boy behind Naut. "Who's the kid?"

"He's Batt. He helped me back at the arena. Some complications made it impossible for me to leave him behind."

Raising an eyebrow, Itsune replied, "Batt, hmm? That's a good name. Are you going to take him as your disciple or something?"

The eyes of the boy looking at Naut lit up with anticipation.

"One of these days," the huntsman who'd been through the wringer said as he finally turned to face our direction. "You're here, Ceres?"

Naut walked over. Ceres let out a high-pitched and emotional "Yes!"

The grim expression sculpted by Naut's mimetic muscles, however, didn't stir at all. "It's going to be a dangerous road ahead. If you want to head home, tell me whenever you feel like it."

Ceres froze. "Ah... Um... Thank you."

The hell was that? He's ignorant of Ceres's resolve and determination, but that isn't an excuse to trample on her heart! Furious, I snorted noisily, which attracted Naut's attention. He looked down at me.

I recoiled on instinct. Those eyes were no longer the ones I remembered on the purehearted huntsman who took a liking to large breasts.

"Long time no see, you damn low-life swine. I heard about you from Yoshu." After a small pause, his low voice uttered one question. "Is Jess alive?"

I glanced over at Ceres. Behind her pseudo glasses were watery eyes holding back tears, but she gave me a small nod.

With Ceres as our in-between, I told him this. <<Yeah. She should be in good health...and leading a pleasant life in the capital.>>

Even now, there wasn't even the slightest shift in Naut's expression. He seemed to mull over something for a while before he finally said, "I see. So you pulled it off."

That marked the end of our clipped exchange. Naut crouched in front of the black pig and began a conversation with him.

We moved from the dark deck to the bright captain's cabin. Inside, Lithis—or at least, the girl given that name—waited for us restlessly. Naut, who'd dived right into a strategy meeting with Sanon, halted his gait abruptly when he spotted the girl's face.

At long last, his expression transformed. His eyes widened in surprise. "Weren't you supposed to be...dead...?"

The girl blinked in surprise. Her permanent smile remained as she tilted her head, puzzled.

Naut's muscles tensed. His right hand pulled out one of his shortswords as he charged forward, closing the gap between the girl and himself in the blink of an eye. A blade glowing crimson slashed across the air, forming an elegant arc as it danced closer and closer to the girl's neck.

Then came a metallic clang that resounded in the room. The abrupt turn of events had rendered everyone frozen with shock, but Naut sheathed his sword indifferently and supported the girl with his arm—she'd gone weak in the knees with fear.

The handsome hunk's face drew nearer to the girl's neck. He seemed to be scrutinizing the part of her collar that had clashed with his blade. "It's the real deal... Sorry, my mistake."

Naut shook his head and helped the girl sit down. If it were a real Yethma collar, no weapons or force could leave any damage on it. He must have used that fact to determine whether this girl was a real Yethma.

Flustered, Itsune ran over and shoved Naut away. "What the hell was that for?!"

"The blame is all mine. She kind of reminds me of the Yethma that helped me escape in the North..." he trailed off. "On that topic, who *is* she?"

"She's Lithis," Itsune replied.

“Lithis...?” Naut echoed that word with disbelief.

“This girl lost practically all her memories and was wandering aimlessly in the vicinity when we found her. Her accent seems like someone from the North, but she’s a real Yethma all right,” Yoshu explained. “That’s why we decided to take her in. We don’t know her name, so sis is calling her Lithis.”

“I see... Strange things keep coming our way one after another, huh? Can’t even catch a break.” He settled on a wooden crate nearby and suddenly turned back to face Ceres. “Ceres, is it true that Baptsaze went up in flames?”

Ceres immediately replied, “Yes. We were attacked by the Nothen Faction’s troops in the morning three days ago.”

“That must mean there was an ogur or two, right?”

The girl nodded. Naut averted his gaze from her, dragging out a sigh before continuing, “From what I know, it’s my fault they burned down Baptsaze. I can’t apologize enough.”

Silence.

My interest was piqued, and I cut into the conversation. <<What do you mean by that?>>

Dark, overcast eyes met mine. “Remember that giant we ran into inside the Needle Woods?”

<<Enn the Mutilator, was it?>>

“Yeah. That guy apparently had some kind of deep bond with a torturer who attends the New King up in the North. Just because I killed that brute, I incurred the torturer’s fervent wrath. He tortured me with no intention of interrogating me, and as if that wasn’t enough, he even made a move on Baptsaze because I have ties to it... The hoodlums from the North are still pursuing me tenaciously. They see me as a big eyesore who takes priority above all else.”

Torturer...? Is he saying that the grudge of a mere torturer spurred the Nothen Faction’s army into action?

While I was off in nitpicking land, beside me, Ceres placed a hand on her chest and raised her voice. “You were...tortured?”

Naut sent a fleeting glance in her direction. “Relax. The type of torture I experienced isn’t something that would leave lasting effects. Anyway, a boar apparently went on a rampage inside a govern camp, and a Yethma escaped. Because of that, my torture was interrupted before he could get anywhere.”

Ceres looked at him worriedly. “But it must’ve been painful.”

“Don’t underestimate me. Compared to my suffering from five years ago, physical pain is nothing.”

“Ah... Um... I-I’m really sorry...” In the blink of an eye, her voice deflated and wilted like a shriveling flower.

I digested all the new information. Now, I knew the reason the Nothen Faction had singled out Baptsaze and attacked it specifically. It was a village with a strong connection with Naut, the leader of the Liberators, and the Nothen Faction held intense resentment towards him.

But something bothered me. The areas north of Baptsaze were left untouched—how did the troops travel into the middle of enemy territory so suddenly and stealthily? Then there was one more question: Baptsaze was attacked the morning after our second teleportation to Mesteria. Was it genuinely just a coincidence?

Unease and suspicion churned in my mind.

I was pulled out of my thoughts when Yoshu walked between us and offered something to Naut. “Hey, Naut, since Ceres is here, let’s not waste this chance. Use this.” He held out a black gem shaped like a hexagonal prism—a rista, which served as a source of mana.

Naut lay down on a wooden bed. Ceres knelt beside him, clasped the black rista with both of her hands, and pressed it firmly against her forehead before squeezing her eyes shut. Through prayers with a black rista, Yethma could manifest miracles rivaling the magic of mages. Curing wounds and illnesses were prime examples.

Without delay, the wound that had marked Naut’s temporal region gradually faded away. The rest of us watched over the scene from a slight distance.

Yoshu faced us two pigs and whispered, “I’m jealous. Ceres being here means no matter what kind of horrible wounds Naut suffers, she can heal them.”

I requested that the girl, “Lithis,” relay my voice to Yoshu. <<What do you mean by that? Is Ceres talented at healing?>>

“Not exactly? Uh, how do I explain this... Sanon, can you do the honors?”

Sanon obliged. <A Yethma’s healing ability through prayers is utterly dependent on the strength of her emotions. It is not a matter of knowledge or technique. If her target was a total stranger, she might not even manage to heal a small hangnail. Her prayers will only demonstrate magnificent results when she heals someone precious to her. In Cece’s case, her emotions for Nattie are so powerful that she can even treat major wounds, as you can see.>

I suddenly recalled Sanon’s speech to Martha at the Sleeping Pony. “...*not to mention that Ceres is a cut above the rest when it comes to healing Nattie specifically. Cece is a key member of the Liberators.*”

And naturally, another memory floated to the surface of my mind—when I’d been stabbed on the farm of House Kiltyrin, a certain Yethma maiden had healed me. A pig had sustained a grave injury that had almost caused him to bleed to death, but he’d regained a perfectly healthy body thanks to that young maiden. That was how much Jess had cherished and needed me.

I cast my eyes down. *Despite that, I...*

Perhaps Blaise had given up on prolonging her life for this reason. I’d thought once or twice that as long as we got our hands on a rista, Jess might be able to heal the wound on Blaise’s stomach, but I knew better now.

Until moments ago, I’d assumed Jess’s abilities were the norm. I’d misunderstood the power of Yethma. Without proper evidence to back it up, I’d theorized that they had miraculous healing abilities able to deal with all afflictions. But that wasn’t the case.

I shook my head, clearing all unnecessary thoughts from my mind. *Seriously, what the heck am I thinking? Stop it,* I berated myself.

The prayers ended within the span of a few minutes. Naut sat up and swung both his arms in circles. The mark near his throat remained, but it seemed that

everything else was all better.

“Thanks, Ceres,” he said. “You must be exhausted. Get some rest downstairs.”

Ceres reached out one hand towards Naut, but for a reason unknown to me, her hand shrunk back. “Um... Is it too much of a bother if I stay with you?”

Naut furrowed his eyebrows, confused. “I mean... Your concern makes me happy, but we don’t really need your help during our prep to set sail. You only have to come along and relay Sanon and the low-life swine’s speech when I have strategy meetings with them. It must’ve been a tough and grueling journey here. Get some rest while you can so you’ll be prepared for your next mission.”

“O-Oh, right. Yes, um, understood...” Ceres stammered.

Oy. Bruh. Is this guy one of those obnoxious light novel protagonists whose alias should be Captain Oblivious? He’s getting on my nerves at this point.

Ceres ran over to us with small, frantic steps before smiling at the black pig and me. “Well...you heard him. Let’s head down and rest for now. Both of you walked for days. You must be tired, yes?”

Above the clumsy, fragile smile on her lips was the pair of pseudo glasses that shined miserably, for it hadn’t even been mentioned once during our entire conversation.

Ceres smiled and removed her pseudo glasses. With false cheer, she said, “Looks like it wasn’t really his thing.” And then, she face-planted onto the hammock. But she didn’t sleep—she helped relay the discussion between Sanon and me.

<Please do not let your guard down, Mister Lolip. Yes, we have safely met up with Nattie and the others. However, this is only the starting line. What we do next is critical. Let’s utilize as much of our wits and knowledge as possible to aid them and change this world.> The voice that echoed in my mind had lost all traces of a humorous otaku with an unhealthy obsession for young girls.

He continued, <As for our first step, we should focus on defeating the wicked and deplorable Nothen Faction. To achieve this, we might have to eventually

form a united front with the royal court, whom we are at odds with. When or if that happens, Mister Lolip, you are the only one among us with a connection to them. You will be an extremely valuable person—no, our linchpin. I am certain you know what I mean.>

<<Of course. You can count on me.>> I nodded.

<After the downfall of the Nothen Faction, our next goal, of course, is liberating the Yethma. The royal court is what established and maintains the system. At present, I have absolutely no clue whether our interactions with them will turn out to be peaceful or violent, but even then, I know that you will still be our linchpin due to your ties with them.>

He added, <In the worst-case scenario, you might end up on the side of the royal court while I remain with the Liberators, and we will be forced to face each other on opposite sides of the war. However, our goal is—and will forever be—the same: we want to save these girls from a cruel fate. I want to confirm that with you right here, right now.>

<<Yes, that is correct. Let's both do everything within our power for the best future possible.>>

I mulled over Sanon's words. The liberation of Yethma was Naut's dearest wish and goal, and of course, it was my wish as well. There were innocent girls out there being forced to suffer and die unjustly like Blaise, and I could never write them off as "necessary sacrifices for the greater good."

Here was where I had to add a "but," however. If you looked at it from another perspective, a society maintained by this system of Yethma was a vital part of the royal court's policy to prevent a second dark age. And now, Jess was a member of the royal court. *If, by some chance, I'm forced to choose between the liberation of Yethma and Jess's happiness... Will I truly be able to prioritize the freedom of Yethma?*

I was the one who'd told Jess to live on as royalty. Did I really have the right to suddenly go back on my word and declare, "I'm gonna tear apart the royal court after all!"? Naut's wish was to create a new world, but to do that, he had to destroy it first. Could I really help Jess find happiness on the other side of that broken world...?

A loud grunt from the black pig snapped me out of my thoughts. *Did he catch on to my doubts?*

<Mister Lolip, may I ask one question?>

Hearing his serious tone, I replied just as solemnly. <<Yes.>>

<Why do you think the Yethma girls are so willing to pour their hearts out to you and me?>

I'd braced myself for him to admonish me about my indecision, so hearing this, I felt somewhat relieved. <<That is, well...probably because we are willing to stay by their side and sympathize with them from the bottom of our hearts?>>

<No, that is incorrect.>

I inclined my head slightly. <<Ummm... In that case, may I ask for your input, Mister Sanon?>>

<It is because we are *pigs*.> The black pig was motionless as his gaze drilled into me. He looked peculiar and almost comical, but he was also somewhat terrifying.

<<Because...we are *pigs*?>> I echoed.

<Indeed. The Yethma girls are willing to confide wholeheartedly in otaku off the deep end like us, but it is definitely not because we are nice and reliable people. It is because we are pigs. Being a race treated as the dregs of this society, the only people, no, *animals* these girls could trust with all their heart are beings that are even less than dregs—that are even lower than the very bottom of the hierarchy.>

Sanon's words were eye-opening. Jess, Ceres, and Blaise... They'd all laid their earnest feelings bare in front of me. Though I hadn't known them for very long, they'd shed tears and hugged me. As if they'd finally found an outlet, they poured out all their painful memories, as well as their hopes and dreams.

It wasn't because they'd judged me as someone worthy of their trust. It was because they didn't have anyone else to confide in other than me—other than a pig. It was because I was the first being they'd met who was of equal—no, of a

status that didn't hold power over them.

That must be true for all Yethma. The girls that sustained this society without complaining or rebelling were all suffering. They felt like they would crumble under the pressure at any moment, but they couldn't ask anyone for help. Just the simple act of living was equal to being wrung dry for their worth before being killed. And that was happening all over this world.

"Th-That's not true!" Ceres raised her head and cut into our conversation. "Both of you are truly wonderful people. I never decided to open up to you because you're pigs, not at all...!"

The black pig's eyes remained fixed in my direction like needles pinning me down. His unspoken message was clear: *Think about the reason we turned into pigs. That is the reason we came to Mesteria. That is the very meaning of our existence here. That is our duty.*

I was fast asleep inside the ship, which was rocking gently with the calm waves, when Ceres's prodding roused me in the middle of the night. We passed by the black pig, who was curled up and asleep, and I followed Ceres onto the deck. A refreshing sea breeze chased away the pungent smell of tar, and the peaceful sound of waves echoed out at a leisurely frequency.

On the lookout platform of the mainmast was Yoshu, who was sitting cross-legged and dozing off. The preparations for the *Shattered Collars* were almost finished, and we were probably just waiting for the other ships in the fleet to get ready. Ceres chose to take cover behind a wooden crate temporarily left in the area and sat down while hugging her knees so that Yoshu wouldn't spot her. Then, she beckoned me to sit by her side.

<I'm so sorry for disturbing your rest,> she communicated meekly.

<<I don't mind at all. Is there something you want my advice on?>> I asked patiently.

<Um... Half yes, half no.>

<<Well, go ahead. I'm always here to listen.>>

<It's about what Mister Sanon said earlier. He...might be right. If you weren't

a pig, Mister Super-Virgin, I probably wouldn't have gone up to talk to you about Mister Naut on that night three months ago.>

<<Yeah, I figured as much. No misunderstanding there, so don't worry.>>

<But that wasn't the case for Miss Jess.> I could see my reflection in Ceres's large eyes. <I didn't tell you back then, but...she had romantic feelings for you. It was similar to the special feelings I have for Mister Naut. Miss Jess didn't open up to you because you were a pig. I can promise you that. I desperately wanted to tell you this no matter what...>

Her large eyes grew misty with tears, and Ceres turned away from me. <I'll be honest. I'm very, very jealous. She has someone she likes, and he even returns her feelings... He tries to stay by her side no matter where or when... I'm truly envious of her. And because of that...I don't know how you two got separated, but I hope you'll return to her side one day. I think that is where you should be.>

Ceres balled her petite hands into tight fists in front of her shins. <Um... My apologies, I'm not very good with words...>

<<Thank you. It's all right, you expressed yourself very well.>> At the same time, I was also very well aware of what I should say to her. <<You mentioned you also wanted my advice on something. Is it about Naut?>>

She hesitated. <...Yes.> She refused to turn around, keeping her expression hidden.

<<Well, Mister Sanon is a kind guy, but his world is filled with momentous and grand things, so it's kind of tough to approach him about personal matters.>> I nodded.

Ceres's head moved ambiguously. Sanon was a *bona fide* lolicon, but at his core, he was a man with a powerful sense of duty who cared more about the future of the Liberators than her feelings. From Ceres's perspective, he probably wasn't very approachable when it came to private discussions.

I decided to broach the topic. <<Seriously, Naut is such a scumbag. Such a cute and loyal girl with glasses came *all* the way here just for him, but that guy acted like he has a heart of ice!>> I huffed.

<Um, I'm not cute...>

<<So not true. You're only second to Jess on the cuteness ranking.>>

Ceres giggled a little. <Thanks. But...I think this is for the best. Right now, Mister Naut only has the future in his eyes, and he doesn't have the time or heart to turn around and look at me. I know that. As long as I can stay by his side and be useful to him though, it's more than enough for me.>

A single tear slid down from her eye before shattering on her knee. <But...I can't stop my heartache. What do I do? How can I get rid of this bitter pain?>

<<Who ever told you that Naut won't look your way?>> I argued.

Ceres faced me. Resignation was written all over her expression. <Anyone can tell. Clearly I'm not worthy of him at all. Mister Naut is a hero who everyone adores while I'm a servant from the countryside... Plus, my chest is pretty much flat...>

<<Hey!>> I yelped. <<You're thirteen, for goodness's sake. It might get bigger with time.>>

<Do I seem like someone with such potential...?>

Oh, uh... She has a point. I honestly can't imagine Ceres with large boobs.

She sighed. <Right?>

Um, excuse me, that was narration... <<But, well, just putting one fact out there. I don't think Naut likes women with large boobs. I think he only likes large boobs.>> I weaved together quite a philosophical statement if I say so myself.

She blinked. <What made you come to that conclusion?>

<<I mean, you know he liked Eise, right? Her boobs probably weren't that impressive.>>

<Um... Why do you think so...?>

<<It's an elementary deduction. Martha and Naut both said that Jess and Eise are very much alike, remember?>>

Her only response was <...>

Hmm? Did I say something strange?

Ceres giggled with mirth. <If you say that, Miss Jess will tell you off.>

That wasn't exactly the point I was trying to make, but nothing was more worthwhile than seeing a smile on a young maiden's face. <<Nah, it's fine. You're the only one listening to me, after all.>>

Suddenly, a different voice echoed in my mind.

<I wonder about that.>

Startled, I scanned our surroundings and found someone wrapped in a black robe crouching behind Ceres. The lowered hood hid their features. The perpetrator swiftly put his hand over Ceres's mouth. Her body convulsed for an instant, but in the next, she shut her eyes and hung her head. Her hands, which had been hugging her knees, unraveled and lay limp.

No. No way. This can't be happening. "Oink! Oiiink!" I frantically snorted as loud as I could, but the perpetrator dashed right in front of me and covered my snout with both hands.

The face that had been concealed by the hood's shadow finally revealed itself. From my angle, I could see chiseled features and curly golden locks.

It was the king's grandson, Shravis.

<Be quiet. I don't want attention. That girl is in good health.>

Shravis released his hands from my face before gingerly catching Ceres, who nearly tumbled over, in his arms. He carefully laid her down on the deck.

My mind was blank. I didn't know what to do.

The sudden turn of events, however, didn't stop there. There was a hissing sound that reminded me of a whistle, and the next moment, something hit Shravis's back. I suspected it might be a steel plate or something inside his robe because there was a loud metallic clang before the "something" was sent flying onto the ground.

I looked down. The item in question was a crossbow bolt.

Shravis reacted immediately and nimbly sprung to his feet like a cat. Without

even turning around, he extended his arm in the direction where the bolt had come from. Pale white lightning crackled and darted out from his hand before striking its target, the lookout platform. I saw Yoshu collapse.

Not a second later, there was a blinding flash of light, accompanied by a deafening explosion that reminded me of thunder. A part of the deck split apart. Wood chips and dust flung up from downstairs, together with a shadowy silhouette. In their—no, in *her* hand was a large axe.

Against the backdrop of the pitch-black sky, lightning crackled as it shrouded the greataxe. The shadowy silhouette leaped up before turning in midair. Making full use of her momentum, she swung the greataxe's blade in a straight line towards Shravis.

My eyes widened in alarm. *No!*

<Get away from here.> Shravis's voice echoed in my head. I took a step back and shielded Ceres with my body.

A thunderous smack shook my eardrums. Shravis held his arms up, intersecting them in front of his face, and I witnessed the greataxe blade slam down on them. However, with a ferocious explosion of sparks, the blade was bounced back. Though Shravis didn't sustain any injuries, he staggered from the impact and took a few steps backward.

In the corner of my vision, luminous flames swept across the air, and a shadowy silhouette leaped behind Shravis. It was Naut. Before I could even blink, he'd closed in on Shravis's back. Naut wound his arm around the prince's neck and pressed his crimson, glowing blade against Shravis's throat.

"Surrender," Naut announced. "Name yourself."

Under Naut's threat, Shravis didn't move. Itsune, whose first blow had been bounced away, stood back up and pointed her greataxe in Shravis's direction. Their teamwork had been perfectly coordinated—they'd attacked in waves, not giving Shravis even one second to catch his breath. Yoshu's attack had diverted his opponent's attention, Itsune's powerful strike had caused her target to lose balance, and Naut had slid in, taking advantage of that opening. Of course, if their enemy had been a normal human, they would have likely died three times over.

A calm and composed voice rang out. “Unfortunately, I won’t give you my name. I won’t surrender either.”

Itsune asked in a sharp voice, “A normal human can’t push back a greataxe with their bare hands. Do we have a mage here?”

There wasn’t even a ripple in Shravis’s indifferent tone. “What if I said ‘yes’?”

“I’ll kill you,” Naut replied immediately.

“You think you can? Think carefully about your situation before you speak.” Shravis pushed the blade against his throat aside and distanced himself from Naut. As for Naut, he was frozen in his stance, as if he was still restraining Shravis from behind. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to move—he *couldn’t* move.

Shravis, clad in his black robe, dominated the vicinity with his overwhelming pressure. “I apologize for trespassing. I have no plans of crossing swords with you lot. The girl over there and the archer on the lookout platform are only unconscious. I’m not going to reproach you for allowing Yethma to board the ship, nor will I report this ship to the army of the royal court. I came here for one thing and one thing only—this pig.”

The next thing I knew, an invisible force tugged on my entire body, and I was floating in the air.

The prince continued in a matter-of-fact voice, “Perhaps our respective factions will never completely see eye to eye. But I hope that, one day, we will transform our Mesteria into a better place together.”

And with that, Shravis walked all the way to the side of the ship. He leaped over the railing and jumped into the sea. My body copied his movements, chasing him from behind. Ten meters below, floating in the sea, was one of the small boats that had been attached to the *Shattered Collars*. Shravis was on board, waiting for me as if it was the natural thing to do.

If I were being honest, as I was lowered near the surface of the sea during my levitation, I nearly wet myself.

“Let’s go.”

After he moved me on board, the small boat glided across the ocean like a

water scooter.

Under Shravis's lead, I arrived at a stronghold along the coast that was apparently under the control of the royal court. Soldiers of the royal court's army, armed with guns and spears, lined up impeccably along the entrance gate.

The fortress, which was a masonry structure, was an elongated building that looked as if it had been glued to the cliffs that made up Nearbell's coast. Its interior was just as boorish with exposed, gray stone walls. Torches dotted the long, dark corridor, providing some semblance of illumination. Barred windows were the only other decoration on the corridor walls, offering an overlooking view of the shadowy ocean.

Shravis was briskly walking down the desolate corridor when he suddenly seemed to remember something. "I'm probably imagining things, but just for confirmation, were you discussing the size of Jess's chest earlier?"

I tried to worm out of this predicament. <<No, I could never. It would be extremely insolent of me to talk about the breasts of the future queen... I wouldn't dare.>>

Shravis shrugged. "Whatever. You don't have to answer that question, but tell me this instead. Why did you come back?" He didn't even look my way as he spoke.

Why? I mean, of course I—

He interrupted my thoughts. "Is it because you couldn't give up on Jess in the end?"

<<No,>> I declared without hesitation.

"Is it because you couldn't tolerate grandfather's policies—the treatment of Yethma in this nation?"

<<...What if I said 'yes'?>>

"I'm not the one who decides what happens to you." Shravis came to a stop and opened the door to his right.

A certain possibility popped into my head, and I peered inside. But all I saw was a deserted, vacant room.

“Jess isn’t here. She’s standing by in a different room.”

Those words made my heart skip a beat. Blood pumped ferociously into my arteries, and I could feel my liver heating up and getting cooked by my fiery emotions. *Jess is...here in Nearbell?*

“The situation’s a bit complicated. If you accept my conditions, I’ll let you see her.”

Shravis then sat down on a chair next to the wall. Right behind me, the door clicked shut by itself.

I steadied my breathing as I echoed what he said. <<Conditions?>>

“I have three. The first is to become my ally.”

This was when Shravis finally let down his hood, revealing his fair skin and striking features that reminded me of a Western sculpture. His thick brows were furrowed and tense, carving solemn lines into his expression.

<<You want a powerless pig like me as your ally?>>

Not even acknowledging me, Shravis continued, “There are desperate times when you’d even want to rely on a pig. The royal court’s situation has changed. Grandfather—King Eavis is afflicted with a curse, which has confined him to his bed in the capital. The next in the chain of command is my father, Marquis.”

My eyes widened. <<Wait, the king was cursed? By whom?>>

“We wouldn’t be in such a bind if we had that knowledge. I only know one fact for sure: grandfather doesn’t have long to live,” Shravis said in an impartial tone. “My father is a man with strong beliefs, but he is merciless. Compared to grandfather, he isn’t someone who thinks about consequences. If we leave the government in father’s hands without interfering, Mesteria will head down a dark path. I don’t want to stand by and watch as that future unfolds. I want your cooperation.”

<<Is your father *that* difficult to reason with?>>

“He’s both impulsive and extreme, an unfortunate combination. My father is

a man who would even burn Baptsaze's convent to the ground. And he hasn't changed since then—he went against grandfather's orders and reduced the castle in the North to ashes. As if that wasn't enough, he's also hopping from place to place since he doesn't know where the Nothen Faction's troops have gone. All this after grandfather emphasized over and over again to only attack after we figure out our enemies' chain of command..." Shravis stifled a sigh.

Wait. Pause. Shravis's father was the one who set fire to the convent? And then he burned down the castle in the North? What, is he a flamer by profession who likes to start flame wars everywhere on the internet and IRL or something?

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before I spoke up. <<Okay, I understand that you have doubts about your father's reign. At the moment, I don't have any objections to your proposal. But remember, I'm a pig. What can I even accomplish?>>

"That has to do with my second condition. I want you to be the mediator between the Liberators and myself."

<<Mediator... Can't you do that yourself?>>

"You saw what happened earlier. The Liberators loathe those associated with the royal court—the creators of the Yethma system—to the point of trying to kill all of us. And indeed, they nearly succeeded at murdering me earlier." His speech faltered. "I...truly thought I was going to die there."

I blinked. <<Really? You seemed like you had everything under control.>>

"If it weren't for this robe grandfather made, I would have, without doubt, transformed into a corpse. I wouldn't be standing here and talking to you if that swordsman of flames went straight for my throat and stabbed it immediately. I—we members of the royal court are not in a position to negotiate directly with those people. That's why I want you to take on that role."

<<I see. I think that's a job I'm capable of, yeah. One thing I'm confused about is why you're trying to negotiate with them in the first place. What in the world do you want from the Liberators? Do you truly think forming a united front alongside a group that clashes with you in every way would work out?>>

"That's..." He hesitated. "Frankly, I don't know the answer to that question

yet either. But I know one fact—if the situation doesn't change, both the royal court and the Liberators will crumble sooner or later.”

He continued, “While we aim our hostility at each other, the threat from the North is gradually closing in. They are powerful enemies we know nothing about who possess a tenacious army that never seems to end—no matter how many soldiers we defeat, more keep filling their shoes. At this rate, both the royal court and the Liberators will be wiped out, even though we share one goal: to turn this nation into a better place. I don't think the current situation will lead to the best possible future for Mesteria, and I want your help to find that one ideal path together.”

At first glance, Shravis's eyes seemed still and composed, but upon a closer look, they were wavering with anxiety. One unexpected incident after another must have dealt significant blows to his spirit. And that was why...he was placing all his hopes on a mere pig like me.

<<Okay, I follow. What's your third condition?>>

Hearing that question, Shravis averted his gaze from me. After a pensive pause, he slowly said, “This might be the most painful one for you, but...” This time, he looked right into my eyes as he spoke. “Grandfather has sealed all of Jess's memories starting from the day she left the household she served to the day you departed this world. Naturally, she doesn't remember a thing about you. My request is that you pretend as if it's your first encounter with Jess tonight and never reveal your identity to her.”

Wha...

“Grandfather seems to have reasons for his actions, and even I am prohibited from mentioning the void in Jess's memories. I hope that you will respect and go along with his wishes. If you don't promise me this, I can't allow you to see Jess.”

My mind was blank for a good while. But when I finally found my thoughts again, I reassessed his words.

Hey, isn't this convenient for me too? I'd wanted to see Jess. The problem was that I'd already chosen to pull myself out of Jess's life in the past. In the present, Jess had a bright future ahead of her as a soon-to-be member of the royal

family. Frankly, I hadn't known whether I had the gall to march up to Jess shamelessly after what I'd done.

But now, the world has prepared a perfect solution to all that. Wonderful, right? Don't you agree, my brethren? I can see Jess again. I won't even disturb or ruin her life in any way.

<<I'm in. Sounds good. I'll be your ally, your mediator with the Liberators, and pretend I've never met Jess before. That's all you need, right? Sounds more fun than I thought. I can't wait to get started.>>

Shravis seemed taken aback by my zealous enthusiasm. He gazed at me cautiously and said, "That's great to hear. But there's one thing I want to ask you first."

<<Go on.>>

"Though it's only something purely on paper right now with no ramifications at all, Jess is my fiancée in name, and I'm aware of your feelings for her. So, I have one thing I want to confirm. Do you hate me?"

...Hate? Does he honestly think someone fabulous like me would think that way? <<Hey, I think you've got the wrong idea. I don't like Jess in that way, not at all. I'm only her *fan*, her avid supporter. Respectable otaku with good etiquette are people who support our *oshi*—our idols—from the sidelines without any complaints. We always remember our boundaries and never reach out beyond that point. We won't get jealous either. We only devoutly cheer them on in secret and pray for their happiness.>>

I'm sure that's the case for you guys too, my brethren. A virtuous otaku will never fall madly in love for realsies with their idol.

For a while, Shravis stared at me quietly. Eventually, as if some sort of understanding had dawned upon him, a small smile lifted the corners of his lips. "...I see. If that's what you claim, I won't question it. I can trust you, yeah?"

<<Of course. If I go back on my word, feel free to do anything you want with me. Stew me, roast me, or eat me raw—take your pick.>>

He frowned slightly. "No, I'm not an idiot. I would never eat raw pork."

Ah. I see. <<Well then, we've got a plan. Once you're satisfied, give me a chance to meet my *idol*.>>

I walked down the dark corridor mutely. Against my wishes, my pork heart wouldn't calm down. But I figured that was a normal reaction because I was going to see my idol in person.

When I glanced out the window, I spotted a large ship that had unfolded its sails and was moving out of the harbor. It was the *Shattered Collars*. They were finally ready to set sail, it seemed. Someone affiliated with the royal court had discovered them, and that was cause for unease. I was willing to bet they wanted to get away from Nearbell as soon as humanly possible.

Two headlands protruded into the sea like the jaws of a stag beetle, and the coast between them was Nearbell's harbor. Outside the area sectioned off by the bluffs was the vast, pitch-black ocean. I wondered where the *Shattered Collars* was headed with Naut, Ceres, and Sanon on board.

...*Hm? Wait.* For no apparent reason, apprehension gnawed at my heart. Was I dead nervous because I was going to be in the presence of a beautiful blonde maiden? *No, this feeling of queasiness is more like...*

Naut's words floated to the surface of my mind. *"The hoodlums from the North are still pursuing me tenaciously. They see me as a big eyesore who takes priority above all else."*

And then, my mind went to Shravis's speech earlier. *"...he went against grandfather's orders and reduced the castle in the North to ashes. As if that wasn't enough, he's also hopping from place to place since he doesn't know where the Nothen Faction's troops have gone."*

Maybe I'm being paranoid. The Nothen Faction, which apparently places importance on Naut's life above all else, wasn't near their castle and is currently MIA. Based on my knowledge of that huntsman, being on the ocean is a handicap. I sincerely hope they don't run into the Nothen Faction's army while they're sailing...

The next moment, another memory flashed through my mind—the soldiers who had attacked Baptsaze. The salty scent of the ocean had wafted from the

direction of the advancing troops. More importantly, the hands and feet of the monster called an “ogur” had been webbed like a frog’s or duck’s...

Then, there was the question that had popped into my mind on the ship. *“The areas north of Baptsaze were left untouched—how did the troops travel into the middle of enemy territory so suddenly and stealthily?”*

It wouldn’t make sense if they’d traveled across land. *But what if they traveled by sea? Is there a chance that an ogur’s webbed appendages are adaptations for moving in water?*

Alarmed, I called out to Shravis. <<Hey, give me a moment.>>

His strides halted. He placed a finger on his lip and mulled over something solemnly. “I can hear all your deductions. Your words reminded me of something grandfather was puzzled about. Despite their magnitude, the Nothen Faction’s forces seldom appear in the surveillance network of heckripons. That, strangely, remained true even after we concentrated our heckripons in the North. What’s your guess about the cause?”

<<...It’s because heckripons aren’t in the ocean, isn’t it?>>

“Yes. Or at least, that theory is becoming increasingly credible.” Shravis looked at the harbor. A fleet with the *Shattered Collars* in the lead seemed ready to leave port at a moment’s notice. “This doesn’t look good... If the Liberators are surrounded at sea, there’s even the possibility of their total annihilation.”

<<If that’s the case, we better warn them fast. They might set sail any moment now.>>

Shravis took a short while to digest the information before he said at length, “You’re right. I’ll quickly head over and give them the message. Jess is in the room at the end of this corridor. Wait there with her.” He was about to take a step forward, but he returned to his standing position. “Remember what you promised me.”

He pulled down his hood and turned on his heel, sprinting into the corridor he’d just walked down.

I gazed at the end of the hallway. There was an aged wooden door on the stone wall. The glossy timber was the color of amber candy.

I looked away. A black ocean. A fleet in the distance that began its lethargic movement.

Well, I won't get anything done if I stand here like a statue. Shravis went elsewhere. If there isn't someone around with the power to communicate with me, I'm nothing but a mere pig. Right. The only thing I can do is...open the door.

My ham—I mean, my heart pounded almost audibly. I took small steps forward.

I reached the end of the corridor. The handle of the door was high up. My clumsy, stout trotters could never hope to reach it.

The last time I'd been so nervous about opening a door was probably during high school when my homeroom teacher had told me to “come to the staff room later.” In front of the staff room door, my heart had been in my throat—I'd feared that the teacher had discovered me reading indecent light novels during class.

I shook my head. *Oy, what am I even thinking? Get on with it.*

Mustering all the courage I had, I nudged the door hard with my snout. The door rattled noisily.

A nostalgic voice flowed out from within. “Mister Shravis...?”

No. I can't do this after all. I can't. I have to get out of here—

The door opened. An unbelievably beautiful maiden stood in front of me.

...

“Hm...?”

Our eyes met.

“My. How did you end up in a place like this?”

...

“Did you get separated from your owner?”

The maiden crouched down. Her knees were parted unguardedly just like before, and a white...

“Huh...?”

Fudge. That's right, she can read all the narration like a book.

“Mister Pig...” Honey-brown eyes peered into mine. “Are you crying?”

It was only after hearing her words that I noticed the cold streams tracing my cheeks. *No, I'm not, this is just...*



“Um... Do you possibly understand my words, Mister Pig?”

<<...Y-Yeah, I do, oink! I’m actually a pig fairy, oink!>>

“Whaaat?! You’re a fairy?!”

You’re actually going to take my words at face value? Are you an innocent light novel heroine or something?

“Light...novel?” The beautiful maiden inclined her head.

Ah, no, that’s not what I want to talk about. <<U-Uh, I shall answer your question earlier, young one, bork! I’m not shedding tears because I’m happy or sad, pork! When foreign substances are introduced to my eyes, they try to wash stuff away, bork! They reflexively excrete tears to do that, you see, pork!>>

“Did your sentence ending just change...?”

Yikes. I was so flustered that my persona became a chaotic mishmash.

“Um, you don’t have to force yourself. A real pig doesn’t cry out ‘bork’ or ‘pork,’ after all...”

Oh, good point. From now on, I’ll try to emulate reality as best as I can and use an accurate sentence ending, snort.

“You are such a strange one, Mister Pig.” The beautiful maiden giggled. “By the way, may I ask what brings you here?”

Right. I didn’t come here to have the honor of looking at a beautiful maiden’s Les Panties or anything along those lines.

Jess gasped before hurriedly climbing to her feet. She lightly pressed down on her skirt. “I-I am so sorry for showing you such a dreary sight!”

She was wearing a white blouse and a navy blue skirt. Her attire seemed just like something I’d seen before. <<Shravis brought me here. He told me to stay put until he gets back.>>

“I see! In that case, please don’t wait out in the corridor. Come in.”

Jess led me inside the room. It seemed to be a sitting room. Two chairs faced each other across a small wooden table where some kind of paper was spread out. Jess had probably spent time with Shravis here. In all likelihood, they’d had

each other all to themselves.

The beautiful maiden sat on the edge of one chair and looked straight at me. “Um... Do you know me, Mister Pig?”

<<Huh? No, you’re a total stranger...>> At most, I would be given the speech tag “Acquaintance B” in a game.

“Oh. You knew my name, so I just assumed...”

<<Shravis told me. In his words, “My fiancée, whose name is Jess, is in that room. Wait there with her.”>>

“Mister Shravis said that...?” Jess tilted her head.

Did I say something weird?

“No, it’s nothing to worry about. It’s just that Mister Shravis has never called me his fiancée, not even once, so I was a bit surprised...”

<<I see. By the way, you’d do me a great favor if you turned a blind eye to the narration and only responded to the parts I put in double angle brackets like this.>>

She blinked. “Angle...brackets... Understood, I will.”

Good, belly good. With this, I’ll be spared from her probing into the fact that Shravis talked about the size of her chest.

Jess’s cheeks instantly flushed bright red. She pressed her hand near her chest area, as if concerned about the topic, before turning away. However, she didn’t bring up the contents of my narration. She was someone who respected the wishes of others, and that was very helpful.

“M-Mister Pig, why do you understand our language?” She tried to change the topic. “Were you originally a human?”

<<Indeed. I was born and raised in another country, but after eating raw pig liver, I fainted and somehow became a pig in Mesteria. I sound like a total idiot, don’t I?>>

“So that’s what happened... Someone once taught me that I must never eat the raw flesh of a pig. I don’t know what the teachings are like in the country

you came from, Mister Pig, but perhaps it's better to cook it first next time." Jess turned to face me and gave me a slightly clumsy smile. "Though it's probably inappropriate to say that since you're a pig now."

Well, Jess's words are absolute. You heard her, my brethren. Cook your pig liver first if you don't want to experience the story of a man turned into a pig.

If I cooked my pig liver properly back then, I wouldn't have ended up here, feeling as if I'm going to drown.

"Um, Mister Pig, if there's something in your eyes, shall I fetch some water to wash it out?"

<<I'm fine, really. Don't worry too much about me.>> I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head to fling the tears away. The amnesia trope wasn't my cup of tea. <<...How's it been lately? Staying...happy and healthy?>>

"Huh? Are you asking about me...?" She blinked.

<<No, sorry, you've got the wrong idea. Why would I be worried about you? I'm asking about Shravis.>>

"Oh, sorry... Mister Shravis, right? He seems to be in good health."

<<I heard these are rough times, even for the royal court. Everyone must be busy, including you.>>

"I suppose, um..." She hesitated.

It was a natural reaction. Spilling all the details about the royal court's internal affairs to an unfamiliar pig was out of the question. <<Well, I know you've got to keep some things confidential. But because I'm Shravis's good friend, I'm pretty knowledgeable about what's going on.>>

I continued, <<I know that Eavis was cursed and that Marquis is searching all over for the Nothen Faction's army. You can rest assured and tell me whatever you want. Just in case, you can double-check with Shravis when he comes back. If I'm lying, you can turn me into sashimi or whole roast.>>

"I really don't think we'd eat a pig raw, but...you make a good point." She looked convinced by my speech and began talking even without being prompted. "Everyone in the royal family seems occupied due to the war... I'm

only spending my days learning magic from them, so it hasn't been particularly rough for me personally."

<<Oh, so you know how to use magic now!>>

"Y-Yes..." She was taken aback.

<<Sorry, ignore me. I heard you were a Yethma until three months ago, and I just thought it was an awfully short period of time for someone to master magic from scratch.>>

"Ah, so that's what you mean. Of course, I still can't use anything impressive. I've learned how to start a tiny fire, but that's it... I'm not useful on the battlefield at all, and I feel really guilty about all of the royals working so hard."

<<I see. So you aren't participating in the conflict. Instead, you're helping Shravis out over here, huh?>>

"Yes, pretty much. I wouldn't quite call it 'help' though. Most of the time, I'm only baggage..." She chewed on her lip. "But I was curious about what was going on outside. I asked for permission to leave the capital, and here I am."

<<You're interested in the outside world? That's a good thing.>>

"Is it...?" Jess cast her eyes down, her lack of self-confidence clear in her mannerisms.

Seeing that, I said gently, <<In the world out there, there are plenty of people who are only interested in themselves. You're willing to take the necessary risks in your quest to learn about this world, and that's an important trait as someone who will make decisions on behalf of your people.>>

"Ah, no, I'm not... I'm not really doing this for the good of the world or anything like that..."

<<Oh? You're not?>>

She nodded. "To tell you the truth, King Eavis sealed away my precious memories between my departure from the household I served and the period before I reached the capital. But I couldn't help but be curious about what happened..." Pure, sincere eyes turned to look into mine. "Mister Pig, do you know of the man known as Mister Naut?"

Naut? <<Yeah, I know him well. He's a friend of mine. You're referring to the leader of the Liberators, right?>>

"I see... Um, I heard that Mister Naut started making a name for himself right around the time I entered the capital, and I thought, well, it might not be a coincidence," she explained. "Maybe Mister Naut helped me in some way. When he escorted me to the capital, something might have happened, and that caused the Nothen Faction to go after him... All these thoughts and possibilities kept appearing in my mind, and that was why I asked to accompany Shravis on his mission to monitor Mister Naut."

What remarkable observation skills. Is she secretly a high school detective determining the one truth with the body of a beautiful maiden and the mind of an angelic maiden? <<That's very interesting. And then? What are your thoughts after seeing the guy?>>

"Well... I haven't gotten a good look yet, to tell you the truth. We've been lying in wait for him in Nearbell, and when he arrived, I approached the Liberators' ship with Mister Shravis. But then, something caught Mister Shravis's attention, and he brought me back here. And as I was waiting, you appeared in front of me, Mister Pig."

Ah. So that's what happened.

"Um, Mister Pig, you're a friend of Mister Naut, yes? What kind of person is he? Can you please tell me?" Jess asked eagerly, almost pleadingly. Were her memories *that* significant to her?

<<He's a good guy. He's strong, heroic, handsome, he hates Yethma hunters more than anyone else in this world...and he likes big boobs.>>

"Big..." Jess trailed off and directed her gaze downward. I had the feeling that I'd added unnecessary information due to my selfish desires.

And of course, Jess didn't let that slide. "Sorry, but what is this 'selfish desires' referring to?"

<<No, nothing at all. That aside, you seem to be pretty invested in these sealed memories of yours.>>

"Yes, I suppose... Um, I know that this might sound strange, but my intuition is

telling me that I've forgotten something very precious..."

<<You can tell?>>

"I left a bookmark."

I blinked. <<A bookmark?>>

"If memories are something like a book, my present condition is like this: the pages starting from my departure up to my life in the capital are drenched and stuck together. But there's a bookmark sticking out, and I'm left with the strong desire to read the section again, even if I can't remember anything else..."

She gasped, and a dust of pink bloomed on her cheeks as she shook her head. "My, this is unseemly. I've been rambling about such private matters without restraint... For some reason, I feel as if I can confide in you about anything I want, Mister Pig."

<<Must be a habit from your Yethma days. You spent a huge chunk of your life as a race at the very bottom of society. When you're talking to a human, you probably still instinctively think of them as someone of higher status than you, and you can't fully open your heart to them. In exchange, you can readily pour your heart out to a nonhuman.>>

"I see... That would make a lot of sense," she commented, fascinated. Then, she hurriedly corrected herself. "Oh, but I don't think of you as someone lesser than me, not at all! You just feel like...someone very friendly and approachable, that's all."

<<I know. Relax. It'd be nice if you think of me as a pig fairy and talk to me casually, snort.>>

Jess giggled.

I'd single-mindedly aimed to meet up with Naut. Who would've thought that the world would suddenly throw such a curveball at me?

Fate, truly, is filled with unexpected twists and turns.

Jess and I were starting to get worried about Shravis—who was taking his sweet time coming back—when there was a colossal explosion offshore. The

deafening sound was what alerted me to the blazing flames at the opening of the bay.

The beautiful maiden peered through a telescope and reported nervously, “A ship is on fire...”

No way... Was he too late? No, that can't be. Sanon is with the Liberators. If Shravis had given them proper warning, the Liberators wouldn't do something brash like setting sail for the open seas as planned. What the hell happened?

<<Can you give me more details about the situation?>>

“Yes. A large sailing ship is falling apart and burning up... It seems to have compromised a handful of other ships. Many ships are closing in from afar— Ah!”

<<What happened?>>

Jess looked into the telescope so fervently that I almost feared it would dig into her eye socket. “The ships coming from the opposite side aren't sailing vessels. They have such an odd shape...and they seem to be approaching our direction with remarkable speed.”

No sooner had she spoken than bright bursts of light erupted all over the open sea. Not even a second later, explosions rang out in various places around Nearbell. *Are they bombarding us with explosive projectiles from the ocean? Do those ships belong to the Nothen Faction, then? They arrived this quickly? They must have obtained knowledge of Naut's location beforehand...*

Jess pulled away from the window. She placed a hand on her chest nervously and looked at me. “Wh-What do we do...?”

<<Everything's under control. I warned Shravis about this possibility in advance. The Liberators and Shravis should have made some preparations to counterattack during the time they had.>>

The moment the last word left my mind, Nearbell began firing off its own shell barrage. Thunderous explosions of cannons rang out, and almost immediately, water splashed violently offshore, forming what looked like pillars.

<<Any updates?>>

Jess frantically peeped into the telescope and informed me, “The ships with the strange design haven’t made it into the harbor yet because the burning ship is blocking their way.”

I see, so setting the ship on fire was a calculated move. They deliberately exploded a ship with no passengers, spreading the destruction to enemy vessels while delaying their invasion into the bay. That’s probably the gist of it.

At a battle of this scale, there is nearly nothing Jess and I can contribute. It’s probably best for us to take cover at the safest location possible. <<Is this place safe?>>

“Um... I’m not sure. Only members of the royal court and those affiliated with our army are allowed entry, but I don’t know how long we’ll last against the attacks from the ocean.”

While we dawdled and wasted time on indecision, a booming explosion echoed out. What followed was the sound of a structure collapsing in our immediate vicinity.

This doesn’t look good. The fortress we’re in is under attack too. <<Let’s evacuate to the place with the least chance of being shelled. Jess, do you have something like that robe with maxed out defense?>>

After a confused “Huh?” and taking a moment to digest my words, Jess fetched a black robe that had been hanging on the wall. “Do you mean King Eavis’s robes?”

<<Yes, that. Put it on, then we’ll get out of here.>>

“Understood.” Jess put on the robe with maxed out defense over her clothes.

<<Pull down the hood while you’re at it. You don’t know when you might get hit.>>

“Right. But what about you, Mister Pig?”

<<Don’t mind me. Let’s go.>> I practically ushered Jess outside the room.

The long, gloomy corridor with stone walls suffered devastating damage roughly fifty meters ahead of us—only the length of an Olympic swimming pool.

“Mister Pig, over here.” Jess headed towards a flight of stairs that led

downward.

If we walk down from here, we're going to end up inside the ocean. Is this route really the right option?

And of course, Jess read the narration without permission. "There's a cave along the coast. We should be able to avoid the projectiles there." She practically ran down the stairs, and I desperately followed suit.

Like moles, we advanced through the cramped passage that had been dug through the rocks. Before long, we entered a spacious chamber—a vast cave. It opened its mouth wide at the open sea, and the pale moonlight poured in generously, even reaching the cave's depths where we stood. Below our feet was pebbled ground that paved the way to the waterside. A small, shabby boat was pulling its way up onto the shore in our direction.

A rear entrance like this sounded like the best way to jeopardize the safety of a stronghold, but just as I thought that, Jess gave me a meaningful smile and turned around. Lo and behold, the passage opening that we'd walked out of only moments ago was nowhere to be found. There was only a jet-black rock wall.

"Only people who know the way in can enter the passage from outside," she explained. "It's a secret back door."

<<Awesome. That means we can relax for now.>>

Even if someone on the sea discovered us, we could just head back the way we'd come before they caught up. Once we entered the passage, our pursuers would have no way of chasing us.

...Such thoughts, as it turned out, were too naive.

I noticed something moving underwater, and the next moment, the mystery object made a beeline in our direction at a frightening speed before leaping into the air like a flying fish. A gigantic body that seemed to be at least three meters tall lunged at us.

There was no hesitation. Jess and I jumped in the same direction to avoid the assault.

“It’s an ogur!” Jess exclaimed.

Concurrently, the ogur slammed into the place we’d been standing only moments before—the rock wall that concealed the entrance to the fortress. And the rocks it struck, of all things, were what collapsed as a result, almost like a scene from a shonen manga.

The ogur climbed to its feet languidly. Its bulky silhouette looked like that of a bodybuilder, except twice as large while maintaining the same proportions. Its dark gray skin glistened, slathered with seawater. Its hands had excessively long fingers armed with webbing that looked tough and solid.

Witnessing how fast it had swum answered one of my questions. By making these guys tug ships around, the Nothen Faction’s army had obtained incredible mobility, which allowed them to escape the royal court’s pursuit.

While my mind was busy going on a tangent, the ogur turned around and faced us. Its face looked like a human man, but it was swelling all over in a grotesque way, making it simply terrifying to look at.

A low groan seeped out through the gaps between its crooked teeth. “Uh... Dah...?”

I gazed at Jess. Her face was ghastly pale, and she slowly edged backward. *Yikes. Our hands are tied. But Jess’s wearing that maxed out defense robe. If I lure it away, will she be able to escape while I buy time?*

<No, stop. Come over here, please. I will do everything within my power to stop that monster,> Jess called out in her mind.

Hearing that, I backed off until I was right next to her. The moment I was out of the way, Jess spread her arms wide towards the ogur and nimbly flicked her wrists. Deafening splashing echoed in the cave as a copious amount of liquid scattered on the ground.

I turned back to see the ogur, who looked ready to pounce on me, stop abruptly in its tracks. A pungent smell wafted over—it reminded me of the odor in an automobile while it was refueling.

Jess’s words flashed through my mind. *“Of course, I still can’t use anything impressive. I’ve learned how to start a tiny fire, but that’s it...”*

Realizing her plans, I pushed Jess down immediately, lying on top of her so that I could shield her petite body. The next moment, the violent roar of an explosion shook my eardrums, and a bright flash blinded my vision.

The scent earlier had shared similarities with gasoline. It was a volatile fuel, and if you ignited it, the fire wouldn't just spread to where the liquid was—it would even impact its surroundings.

Like an absolute moron, I thought, *Looks like she can cook me thoroughly with this. That's good.* But I soon realized that slender arms were hugging my cranium tightly.

I didn't feel the heat of the fire.

Jess had wrapped the maxed out defense robe around me at the last moment. The tip of my snout just happened to end up between Jess's mounds. Though I wanted to write a detailed description of the sensations I was experiencing, this wasn't really the right time for that.

When the explosion subsided, I rolled off Jess's frame and stared warily in the direction where the ogur had been. The creature was still engulfed by flames as it writhed around in pain near the water's edge, but soon, it stopped moving.

I sucked in a sharp inhale. <<...You okay, Jess?>>

"Yes. What about you?"

<<Same here.>>

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. I'm sorry, I'm still quite inexperienced..."

I shook my head. <<No, I don't mind, but, uh... Your magic is ridiculous.>>

Jess had been sitting up when she heard that, and she gaped at me with wide eyes. "Do you mean...it's really weak?"

<<You know, you sound just like an isekai protagonist right now. You might as well write a novel called *Jess's Isekai Life*.>> I huffed. <<What I mean is, your powers are so destructive that if you don't keep them in check, they'll be dangerous. I don't see why you'd choose to use a volatile fuel in a situation like this. Not to mention that we are in a half-enclosed cave. There was a chance we might asphyxiate, and I was *this* close to becoming roast pork.>>

“Oh, you’re right... My deepest apologies...”

<<Well, whatever. Thanks for protecting me just now. This place is no longer safe. Let’s look for a chance to escape outside on that small boat.>>

The small boat seemed to be of a special make—just the touch of Jess’s hand on its edge was enough to set it in motion, and it began moving by itself. We abandoned it at a nearby beach before fleeing into the pine forest that covered a significant portion of the coast.

We should’ve put enough distance between us and the dangers, I thought, but a loud clang made me tense up. Something bounced off Jess’s robe. There was the sound of twigs snapping—someone had stepped on them.

When I looked at the source of the sound, I spotted three men approaching us. One held his crossbow at the ready, while the remaining two were armed with spears. They were clad in filthy leather armor. They didn’t seem to be the royal court’s soldiers.

“Well, well. What are you doing in a place like this, young miss?” one man drawled.

<We need to run,> Jess told me telepathically before turning her back on the trio and sprinting as fast as she could. There was another loud clang as a second crossbow bolt bounced off her robe. I was hot on her heels, and we ran across the dark pine forest.

The three men grinned with amusement as they chased us. Jess panted heavily as she frantically fled from their clutches.

They have the nerve to brandish their deadly weapons at cutie-pie Jess? Unforgivable! I proposed, <<We’re out in the open right now. How about you aim your fatal fireworks at the guys behind us?>>

<But they are humans...>

<<You can’t aim your fire at humans?>>

<My apologies...>

<<No, you shouldn’t apologize. Having morals that stop you from killing

humans is something to be proud of. Okay then, I'll cause a stir and distract them. While they're stuck in one place, pour out flames between those people and yourself. Keep them at bay with a wall of fire. It's a pine forest, so you have plenty of fuel.>>

<But—>

I didn't even give Jess time to stop me before I turned on my trotter. Our pursuers were only drawing nearer and nearer. I charged forward with all my might.

Letting out a blaring battle cry of snorts and grunts with my nose, I raced across the ground like a boar. Startled, the three men froze. Taking advantage of that opening, I used the cover of night to rush right past the trio.

All right. They're sitting ducks. Mission accomplished. All that was left was to make a large detour so that I wouldn't be caught up in the fire and return to where my owner awaited. As I dashed through the pine forest, I called out to Jess. <<Don't look in the direction of the fire. It takes a long time for your eyes to adapt to the darkness.>>

<Got it. I'll start now!>

Loud splashing entered my eardrums once again—the amount of liquid she sprayed around was much greater than I'd anticipated. Then, a deafening roar threatened to split my eardrums, and I closed my eyes on reflex. Hot gusts stroked my back. When I opened my eyes, I saw a towering mushroom cloud thrust into the heavens like an impaling stake.

Finally, I returned to Jess's side. <<Bruh...>> I stared at her with incredulous eyes.

Sweat formed on her forehead, and with a troubled face, she said, "Huh...? Have I done it again?"

Is she an isekai protagonist for real? Should she start calling herself a wise man's granddaughter? <<No, it's okay, but I think you overdid it. A giant fire on a pitch-black night like this is too flashy—you'll stand out even from afar.>>

"O-Oh, now that you mention it..."

<<Let's hurry up and get a move on. Unwanted attention is never good.>>

It seemed that our pursuers had lost our trail. *Actually, I honestly wouldn't be surprised if they were accidentally roasted in that fire. Oh well, it's their punishment for pointing their weapons at cutie-pie Jess.*

"Excuse me, but what might 'cutie-pie' be?" Sweat flowed profusely down Jess's cheeks as she voiced her question.

<<You can think of it as a title of respect. Don't pay attention to the narration.>> I paused. <<By the way, are you okay?>>

"Um... Sorry. Yes, I'm feeling all right."

Even as we conversed, we kept running. When I glanced at Jess, she placed her left hand on her chest, sprinting with a distressed expression. <<Let's stop here for a moment.>>

The moment I made that proposal, Jess's run ground to a halt, and she sat feebly below a pine tree. Something seemed off. Worried, I asked, <<Is something wrong? Are you feeling sick?>>

"No, I'm fine... I'm the picture of health!" She clenched her hands into fists and pumped them slightly in the air, as if psyching herself up to work hard. Though the night was cool and refreshing, her face was slick with sweat—she certainly didn't look "fine."

<<Hey, how about you catch a ride on my back?>>

She blinked. "Huh...?"

<<You must've been exhausted after using a spell you weren't used to. You can hop on my back. I'll carry you.>>

"I could never trouble you like that..."

<<I've actually given someone a literal piggyback ride before. As long as you don't sit in a weird position, it should be all right. It's not too much of a burden for me either. Come on.>>

My words managed to persuade her, and she obediently straddled my back.

Just in case, I said, <<Sit as far back as you can and sandwich me tightly with

your legs. Put all your weight on your hands... Yep, just like that.>>

I took a tentative step forward. There weren't any licentious noises such as a "Mn...!" Deciding that I could proceed without apprehension, I charged through the pine forest and rushed in the opposite direction of the coast.

<<How is it? Is the ride pleasant?>>

"Y-Yes..."

She faltered as she responded, and concerned, I stole a glance at her. Her expression was scrunched up into a grimace, as if she were in pain. <<Are you still feeling unwell?>>

"No, that's not the case... It just...feels a little strange..."

I frantically stopped my sprint. *Did I rub against an...inappropriate place?*

"You didn't, it's not you. I don't know why, but I..." Jess's hands were on my back, and I felt them trembling minutely. "Why am I...crying?"



She had been shedding quiet tears. *Why, you ask? I actually want to ask that same question.*

<<Maybe something got in your eyes,>> I said jokingly. But I immediately felt slight regret and decided to rephrase my sentence. <<You must feel really anxious. It's all right, I'm here for you. Let's survive this night together and make our way back to the capital.>>

"Yes."

I ran. Honestly, I didn't know where I was going, but I had one mission: escort this maiden to a safe place. No matter what kind of dangers awaited us—

"Ough... Aughooogh..."

Low-pitched groaning prickled my ears. *Those things again?* But before I could finish my train of thought, an ogur charged in our direction. Perhaps due to its evolution to adapt to the underwater environment, however, its movements were sluggish inside the pine forest.

The creature was upwind from me. Hidden behind the nauseating odor of the ogur were the scents of several humans and gunpowder. *Well, fudge.*

I quickly changed directions and ran away from the ogur—towards the heart of Nearbell. <<Jess, I'll take care of what's in front of us. Can you aim at that ogur?>>

<I'll try,> she said with grim determination.

I swerved around the pine trees, making a trail of zigzags as I went. The sound of several giant masses of liquid bursting rang out behind me. With every eruption, the potent odor of gasoline attacked the olfactory epithelium in my nasal cavity.

<Sorry, but I can't land a hit...>

<<I see. Don't be hasty. Don't ignite it yet.>>

I messed up. This place is downwind. If we set fire to the fuel, it would probably serve as a smoke screen of some sort, but we'd definitely be caught up in the aftermath.

Without warning, I suddenly lost balance. *What just...* When I looked back, I realized that Jess had slid off my back. *No way, seriously? It can't be.* I halted and observed Jess. Moonlight illuminated her complexion, which was as white as a sheet. Sweat poured down her skin, but she closed her eyes peacefully. She was still breathing. It seemed that she'd only fainted.

The decent distance I'd managed to put between us and the ogur shrunk rapidly. *Double chocolate fudge. I might be a goner.*

With my snout, I lifted Jess and turned her over so that she lay face down. She seemed to be short of breath, so I tilted her head slightly before gently nudging down her hood to shroud the entirety of her angelic face.

This might be my last chance to see Jess's face. *But I have no regrets. Just getting to see her again and knowing that she's healthy and happy is enough for me. Even if this unfamiliar pig disappears from this world tonight, I'm sure that Jess will be fine. As an oblivious, overpowered mage with maxed out stats, she'll definitely mature into a splendid and admirable individual in no time.*

And now...it's time to go out with a bang.

The ogur approached—and I charged right at it. I negated my momentum by ramming into its right leg and twisted my body to chomp down on its left Achilles tendon. It was much tougher than I'd expected; I felt as if I was biting into timber.

Despite not dealing any respectable amount of damage to the creature, I'd successfully gained its attention. I snorted and oinked noisily while running in the opposite direction of Jess, and the ogur chased me. *It only has one brain cell, which works in my favor.*

Some distance ahead of me was a group of six armed men sprinting my way. Just like I'd deduced from the scent of gunpowder earlier, one of them held a gun.

As I ran, the pungent odor of gasoline enveloped me. It seemed that I'd entered the plot where Jess had sprayed fuel indiscriminately earlier.

I hoped that the basic precautions about fuel weren't common knowledge in Mesteria—for instance, the rule that you must never use fire in an area with the

smell of volatile fuel.

“Grunt oink oooooink!!!” I shouted as loudly as possible while I rushed at the men. A man with a spear had been running next to the gunman, and I crashed right into the guy. The spearman toppled over and collapsed.

My ears picked up someone cursing me. “What the hell’s wrong with this pig?!”

“Hmphoink!” I snorted with derision before running towards the approaching ogur, sandwiching me between it and the men.

As I sprinted, I tilted my head towards the gunman and grunted tauntingly. “Yoooink?”

Appearing to reach the end of his patience, he pointed his gun at me. “Die, you bloody swine!” he hollered.

I instantly changed directions and distanced myself from the ogur and the men. *Gotta go at top speed. Pigs are capable of running as quickly as short-distance runners. I’m sure I’ll manage to escape safely somehow. Time to unleash my inner boar!*

A thunderous roar rang out—there was an explosion. In that moment, a white flash blinded my eyes, and I felt my body float up into the air. Either the sound or the wind pressure threatened to burst my eardrums. The blast swept me away before gravity pulled my body harshly back to the ground.

Luckily, a thick layer of pointed pine needles acted as a fluffy cushion, and there wasn’t any severe damage to my bones. However, it felt as if my butt was literally smokin’ hot—a painful stinging assaulted me. I must’ve sustained burns.

I turned around and was greeted with the sight of an entire field of fire. The ogur and men were nowhere in sight. *Welp, I doubt anyone in that area could escape alive. We’ve gone beyond the realm of barbecued meat and entered into barbecued charcoal territory.*

As I thanked my lucky stars for my narrow escape from death, I hurried back to where I’d parted with Jess. Trying to find a maiden completely covered by a black robe in a dark forest definitely wasn’t the easiest task, but after a lengthy

struggle, my nose offered a solution to my conundrum. I could never miss such a pleasant fragrance. I wondered what kind of soap she used.

The wind changed direction, so the flames weren't spreading to our area. With my snout, I flipped the beautiful maiden's body over. <<Are you okay?>>

There was no response. I leaned in my ear until it was right next to her face—she was breathing. *But she's been out cold for so long... Is something wrong? Hopefully, it's not an illness. Did she use too much magic? She was splashing fuel everywhere like confetti, after all...*

A voice suddenly entered my ears. "Oh? Look at what I found—a cute little girl."

The next thing I knew, I spotted a tall man shrouded in a mud-colored robe approaching us slowly. He held a blade with a shape that reminded me of a Japanese machete.

We were on a battlefield. Even if Jess weren't a Yethma, an enchantingly cute girl collapsed on the ground only had one fate awaiting her. *Give me a break already. I'm completely out of tools at this point.*

"Sorry, little piggy," he drawled. "I'm taking your wonderful owner with me."

I frantically tried to lift Jess and put her on my back. Unfortunately, even though she was a beautiful, slender maiden, elevating her limp body off the ground was a challenge. *You never know until you try...should I charge at the guy to make one last stand? That machete doesn't look like good news though. If he attacks me, I'll turn into pork cuts. Not to mention that my hind legs can't move properly right now... But I have to do this. Even if I die, if there's hope for Jess to make it out alive...!*

Just as I hardened my resolve, we were interrupted.

A giant bird of prey suddenly swooped down from above and crashed right into the man. Receiving a heavy blow to his cranium, he was flung away. He collapsed on the ground, motionless. His neck was twisted at an inconceivable angle.

A voice echoed out. "My apologies for arriving late. I applaud your valiant return, courageous young man. Your bravery is admirable indeed."

I turned to face the source. What had seemed to be a bird of prey at a glance turned out to be a man kneeling on one knee. Gigantic, feathered wings stretched out from his back. He reached out his black hand at me, and I felt the pain in my bottom ebb away. *Is he a mage...?*

He was wearing a purple robe with gold embroidery. When I looked up, the visage that faced me was a familiar one—he was an elderly man with gray hair and a long beard. An odd black mesh pattern covered his face, but it did little to hide his identity.

It was Mesteria's king, Eavis.

My mind was completely blank. I couldn't process what had just happened.

"Jess is unconscious because she has undergone ecdysia. She will stay that way for a while," Eavis explained to me before pointing his palm at Jess.

What's this about an "ecdysone"? Is he healing Jess?

"Not quite. I am recasting the seal on her memories." Eavis allowed his hand to rest at his side, but Jess remained unmoving.

Is sealing her memories that important, even in a situation like this? <<Um, Your Majesty, what should I do...?>>

"I know that she will remain unconscious, but don't get any naughty ideas, young one. Wait here a while. If you come across trouble, snort loudly. I will return at once."

With that said, Eavis staggered to his feet. His wings flapped fiercely, sending him into a clumsy flight.

Hey, I could never do naughty things to cutie-pie Jess. I huffed. That aside, wasn't Eavis supposed to be confined to bed because of his curse? Is that responsible for the black pattern on his face? Could he have possibly flown all the way here from the royal capital in that condition?

My thoughts were a mess. It had all been too sudden. *First things first, I gotta calm down.* And so, I began sniffing Jess's neck until there was a grand explosion of light—*Jeez, is that an atomic bomb or something?*—over at where the bay should be. The extraordinary flash even pierced the pine forest,

painting stripes of white and black on the ground.

After roughly ten seconds, the light subsided. Shortly thereafter, someone fell onto the ground in front of me with a heavy thump.

It didn't feel like a landing—a crash would be more accurate. The utterly exhausted king was covered with pine needles as he gazed at me. “Be at ease. I have annihilated the main forces of the Nothen Faction’s army. The remainder of our enemies who have marched into Nearbell should be forced to retreat.”

He did all that in an instant?! I gaped. Bruh, calling him overpowered doesn't even cut it!

“I am Eavis, an unparalleled mage within Mesteria, and this is my power. You certainly may pass down that story to your descendants.” He'd been sprawling on the ground after he fell. Now, he allowed his body to go limp, and he was lying face up on the ground.

<<Um, Your Majesty, are you feeling all right?>>

“Do I look like I am fit and healthy?” Eavis spoke while his eyes were trained on the sky.

I tottered over and leaned over him to peer into his face. <<My apologies. Is there... Is there any way I can help you?>>

“You saved Jess. That is already an accomplishment worthy of praise, but...I suppose there *is* something. Courageous young man, will you keep me company during my final moments?”

Wha... <<I am afraid I do not follow.>>

He sighed. “Even a mage like me has limits, and I seem to have reached them. I no longer have any mana left to suppress my curse. It was an irreversible and lethal countdown to begin with, and it seems that it has finally reached the stage where it will achieve its purpose.”

A black, nauseating mesh pattern fully covered his face and hands.

<<You are cursed, I see. Who in the world is the culprit?>> I asked anxiously.

“That is a mystery. It must be a mage who hides a notably powerful obsession—the unidentified Clandestine Arcanist outside the royal court.”

Isn't the king's clan the only mages with free rein over their magic? The supporting pillar that preserved the royal court's totalitarian rule, keeping all wars at bay until now?

“Mesteria is on the verge of the greatest and most destructive disorder since the end of the Dark Ages. The Clandestine Arcanist. The revolt of the north. The founding of the Liberators. Finally, the advent of beings from a foreign world, such as you and your comrades,” Eavis observed. “Now that I reconsider the matter...perhaps the royal court is only reaping what we have sown. All these seeds of discord were planted the moment we created the hideous class known as Yethma.”

<<I agree, yes.>>

Eavis's torso moved up and down painstakingly. He seemed to be laughing—or at least, attempting to. “Courageous young man, you certainly have nerves of steel. May I place my hopes on that indomitable spirit of yours?”

<<What do you mean by that?>>

“At the very last moment, I wish to change my course of action.” Eavis took a deep breath, but it sounded more like a draft in winter.

He continued, “Perhaps you have already heard this from Shravis, but my son, Marquis, is an extreme man. If he takes over the throne without interference, there is a high chance he will use his authority recklessly. Though I instructed him to watch over the government in the North without meddling, he broke that promise and razed their castle to the ground. His power has corrupted him, and he plans on resolving all problems with brute force alone. Alas, look at the results... The Nothen Faction's army is still thriving, while we are completely lost. Who is their head? Where should we attack?”

<<I see. In that case, what, exactly, is your new plan?>>

“I will stop all attempts to send you back to your world. I want you to stay behind in the royal court and offer your support to Shravis and Jess. My wish is that you guide them down the path you consider correct.”

I blinked. *Me...?*

“Just like I thought, there is meaning behind the return of you and your kind

during this pivotal moment. The thought is slightly terrifying, but it seems that the power of an innocent maiden's wish still lingers tenaciously. I wish to place my faith in it."

I mulled over his speech. Jess's wish was still ongoing, and it'd enabled the teleportation of bespectacled otaku from modern Japan to Mesteria. Summoning me a single time hadn't been all there was to it.

There was another crucial fact to consider—where I'd teleported to this time. Why had I appeared near Ceres and not Jess? *Now that I think back, did Jess's wish make such a choice because it's the most beneficial to Mesteria as a whole...?*

I began pondering what would have happened if I'd appeared near Jess right away. In such a scenario, I probably wouldn't have witnessed the Nothen Faction's troops in Baptsaze, nor would I have heard the information about the North from Naut on the *Shattered Collars*. Accordingly, I wouldn't have predicted the attack on Nearbell and warned Shravis. In that case, the Liberators might have been truly wiped out during this battle.

I recalled Jess's words once upon a time.

"Back then, your only choice was to go to the capital with me to find a way to become human again, right? I'm not smart, so when I made my prayers, I hadn't thought that far. But after you decided to join me on my journey, I realized the truth. If you were human, Mister Pig, you also would have had the choice to head somewhere else. But that wasn't the case. You turned into a pig because of my wish."

Jess's wish had clearly gone beyond her realm of knowledge and awareness. And it was *working*. Perhaps choosing to place his faith in it wasn't all that irrational. <<I understand. From my standpoint, I am also elated to have this opportunity to protect Jess and her fiancé.>> *But.* <<May I ask one question?>>

"Ask anything. I shall answer until I breathe my last."

<<Your Majesty, you referred to us pigs in the plural. You are aware that I am not the only one, yes?>>

"Indeed. Analysis and divination magic are specialties of mine, you see. I can

decipher the rough movements of monumental spells. After your summoning, there have been a total of seven world teleportations until now, and there seem to be three thinking pigs in the present.”

Ah. I knew it. <<There is me, the black pig with the Liberators, and one more... This is just a guess, but the last one is a boar near the ruler of the Nothen Faction, right?>>

“I’m afraid I cannot read fine details like that. But I know they are in the North. What made you come to such a conclusion?”

<<The three of us attempted to teleport together,>> I explained. <<But one of our teammates has gone missing. Last time, he teleported to the North. I simply guessed that it happened again.>>

Something that had baffled me sprung to the front of my mind.

“Then there was one more question: Baptsaze was attacked the morning after our second teleportation to Mesteria. Was it genuinely just a coincidence?”

The attack had been way too timely. With that question in mind, if I considered Naut’s speech again...

“A boar apparently went on a rampage inside a gobern camp and a Yethma escaped. Because of that, my torture was interrupted before he could get anywhere.”

Pigs are domesticated boars. Since there are even boar-pig hybrids out there in the world, the two species are capable of crossbreeding, meaning they are quite similar. *A boar went on a rampage and a Yethma escaped... This is just a theory, but is it possible that our last bespectacled otaku, Kento, is that boar in question?*

The sequence of events was probably something like this: Kento, who’d teleported to the North at the same time we appeared near Ceres, had immediately kicked up a fuss to set a Yethma free. However, he’d been captured by the head of the Nothen Faction due to his actions, and he had ended up revealing the name of a village that had ties to Naut and was possibly another pig’s teleport destination.

After learning this, the Nothen Faction had hastily dispatched their troops out

on the open ocean to Baptsaze. The torturer had even suspended Naut's torture despite his animosity against the huntsman to pour his energy into the attack on Baptsaze, so the Nothen Faction must've rushed things considerably. That was how they'd managed to send troops to Baptsaze the day after our teleportation.

"That sounds like an exceedingly convincing theory. I believe that your deduction is mostly on point." An ominous sound began mingling with Eavis's breathing, reminding me of a frog's croak. "It seems that my time is almost up. I have already said everything I want to the members of the royal family. You have permission to hound me for answers until the very last minute."

<<Oh...>> Solemnly, I cast my eyes down briefly. <<Is there anything you wish to tell me, Your Majesty?>>

"If you insist..." He paused. "I do wish to talk about Jess."

<<Jess... Is it about her memories, perhaps?>>

"Indeed. A part of my reasons for sealing her memories is, of course, because your existence was a hindrance to my political strategies. Jess was frightfully depressed, and she wasn't useful at all. That is why I made my choice." He paused. "That would be the correct conclusion to make, at least, but it is also extremely misleading."

<<Did you have other motives as well?>>

"Exactly. My first goal was to spur on the growth of Jess's magic."

I blinked. <<Magic?>>

"Magic is quite a curious thing, you see. Nothing stimulates it more than the genuine wishes of its wielder. Jess is extremely curious about her sealed memories. Her desire to regain them is ferocious. To achieve that, she must conquer my magic. I am sure you can guess what would happen next."

<<Her desire to strengthen her magic will make it grow.>>

"Indeed. Jess was born with tremendous innate talent, and she has the hidden potential to become the most extraordinary mage since Lady Vatis. Her attempts to regain her memories will be her first step down that glorious path. I

hope you will respect my wishes, young man, and keep your secret under lock and key until she unseals her memories with her own merits.”

I went silent for a moment. <<So to put it another way, does that mean Jess has a chance of remembering everything?>>

“Very much so,” he agreed. “And that time might arrive much earlier than I expected.”

Eavis turned to me. His face was masked by the abhorrent pattern, but his kindly eyes looked past the pig and at Jess. “Even as the unparalleled mage in Mesteria, I have absolutely no clue about this nation’s fate. In this world of uncertainty, I want to entrust the future to Jess’s earnest prayers...and you, who were summoned by them.”

<<...Yes.>>

“One last thing before I go.”

I gulped and waited for him to continue.

Eavis whispered, “The connection between the world you came from and Mesteria is unstable and transient, just like seafoam. 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.”

He looked right into my eyes as he continued, “Courageous young man, cherish your life until a meaningful moment. And then, return to your world during that meaningful moment.”

I see. <<Understood. I shall engrave those words into my mind.>>

<Good.> At long last, Eavis’s mouth stopped moving, and he began communicating directly into my mind. <Oh, what irony. The spell I used during our first farewell will be used again to initiate a second one.>

Eavis closed his eyes. His right hand moved feebly until it was right above his chest.

<I am leaving this nation in your hands.>

This man, who had been the root of the misfortune imposed on the young

maidens across these lands, left those words behind as he took his last breath.

Fragment 4: A Precious Item

Sometime before dinner, King Eavis summoned me.

I'd been filthy from revising various spells when I received the message. Hastily, I cleansed myself and went to the dining hall as instructed.

The hall was very grand. On the tall domed ceiling were paintings with pretty colors. Lined up in front of the pillars were towering plaster sculptures. In the middle of the hall was a large round table. Soft, cushioned chairs surrounded it.

King Eavis was waiting for me in the seat directly across from the entrance. "Come. Sit next to me, Jess," he beckoned.

I walked over with brisk strides. King Eavis's limbs were becoming thinner, but he sat in a perfect, dignified posture. It crossed my mind that he was probably supporting himself with magic.

I took a seat right next to the king. "Um, how are you faring...?" I asked worriedly.

"I am perfectly fine. I was actually getting tired of eating food in bed, which brings me here today."

"Ah, I see..." I paused. "By the way, may I ask why you summoned me here?"

"There is something I wish to give you."

I nodded. "Understood."

King Eavis glanced to the side, and the next moment, two items floated over from that direction before settling down on the round table. One of them was a small silver chest that could probably fit in one hand, and the other was a large golden key that I would struggle to hold with one hand.

I tilted my head and asked, "What might these be...?"

"I have something akin to clairvoyance. I began seeing a future where these items are necessary, so I shall hand these over first."

Confused, I asked, “A...future?”

King Eavis gently smiled at me. “When I sealed your memories, I also took away certain items you treasured. Those items are inside this chest.”

“Oh... They are?” I asked slowly.

“Indeed. However, you need this to open the chest.” King Eavis indicated the golden key beside it. “That is not all. Unless the correct individual uses this key, the moment it is inserted into the chest, the chest will go up in flames and dissipate. You will forever lose the opportunity to learn what it holds.”

There wasn’t anyone else present in the dining hall. It was very quiet.

“Um...” I spoke up. “May I ask what you mean by ‘the correct individual’?”

“The items inside are reminders of the time you shared with a certain someone. Unless that specific individual uses this key, the chest will not open. If anyone else makes an attempt, the items will disappear. You only have one chance.”

“...I understand. But why is this key so large?”

After hesitating for a while, King Eavis said, “That is a question *you* must find the answer to.”

I didn’t even have a single clue or lead about the reason, but these were King Eavis’s instructions. I nodded. “Understood. I shall receive them humbly.”

“Put them away in your room and store them with great care. It would be preferable if you head over there right away. Then once you return, Jess, let’s enjoy dinner.”

The meal that night was particularly lavish: large and appetizing aromatic roasted prawns, calf stew that simmered until the meat melted on my tongue, and colorful vegetables. In hindsight, I probably ate a little too much.

At the dinner table was King Eavis, Mister Shravis, Madame Wyss, and myself. We had a really fun chat, enjoyed tea after the meal, and leisurely lounged the evening away before I returned to my bedroom.

Was the special dinner because Mister Shravis and I were going to leave the capital the next morning? I was curious, but in the end, I never learned the

reason behind the wonderful dinner party.

Chapter 4: Never Drag Your Feet about Conveying Your Feelings

The morning after the naval battle, the elusive Shravis finally contacted us.

Inside the king's office with an antique interior were King Marquis, Queen Wyss, Jess, and a pig—three humans plus a single animal. *Don't have a heart attack when you hear this, but these are the only central members that make up the royal court right now.*

Marquis settled down behind an archaic wooden desk that had seen better years. Jess and Wyss were on the sofa in front of it. As for me, I was sitting down on the floor carpet. I felt like a pet that had been dragged into a grave family meeting.

Last night, Marquis had arrived at Nearbell after the battle was over. He'd retrieved Jess, the deceased Eavis, and me before escorting us all the way to the capital on a dragon.

However, no one could find Shravis. Eavis had apparently cast a *Trac* spell on Shravis, but that, for some reason, had been removed.

Perhaps due to irritation about his own blunders, Marquis had been in a foul mood. He hadn't even gone searching for his only son, instead sitting in his office for an entire night and waiting for Shravis to contact him. When he'd finally learned where Shravis had disappeared to, he'd gathered us all here.

Marquis had turned out to be a more lithe man than I'd expected. Since I'd heard he had a quick temper, was extreme, and also liked fire festivals, I'd completely been under the impression that he was a brawny man with only muscle cells in his cranium, but that hadn't been the case. He was a slim man in his prime with his golden locks slicked back, and he looked like the stereotype of someone who saw earning money as an IRL game, just like certain people you'd find in cinematic versions of Wall Street.

His thin lips were pulled into a permanent, uptight smile. However, his eyes

that peered out below his thick brows didn't even have a shred of amusement in them, his ashen orbs glinting like a hawk wherever he went.

"Shravis, it seems," Marquis began in a low, indifferent voice, "did not stop at going against father's orders and fighting as the Liberators' ally. When he underwent ecdysia, he even became the Liberators' prisoner. In exchange for his release, they demand that I publicly announce an alliance with the Liberators. That, at least, was written in a letter he addressed to me." He flung a small scrap of paper onto the desk.

Jess was flustered. In a shaky voice, she said, "Mister Shravis was captured...? I cannot apologize enough."

Wyss placed a placating hand on her shoulder. "The blame is not yours to bear. It was my child's fault for acting without consulting us first."

"Not to mention that father would never entrust Shravis's safety to an inexperienced woman like you." Marquis began tapping noisily on the desk with his index finger. *Is he the woodpecker-type boss who keeps harassing people in the workplace with his position of power?*

He continued, "Shravis is ignorant of father's death. Yet, he daringly sent that letter to me. In the letter, he asks that I move things forward while keeping it a secret from father. He is a most crafty fox. He must've written it knowing that father would never agree to an alliance with the Liberators. Shravis himself is the one who wishes for a united front between the Liberators and the royal court."

A sneer curled Marquis's mouth.

"He also removed the *Trac* spell by himself. In his letter, he claims that it vanished with his ecdysia, but from what I remember, father placed the spell on his robe, not his person, so that must be a lie. Above all else, a mage who has experienced four ecdysias like him could never be a captive with no way out. Preposterous. He can just reduce mere nonmagical citizens to ashes. In conclusion, he is deliberately choosing to stay there and using his own safety as a wager to manipulate his birth father."

I see. So that's what happened. Oh, sorry to bother you. Uhhh, should I raise my hand or something, Professor Hamlet? <<Your Majesty, may I ask about your

stance on the alliance?>>

Frosty eyes looked down at the pig. "I am different from father. I will make use of everything at my disposal. While the Liberators are useful, I plan on squeezing them for every last drop of value they possess. Therefore, even if I choose to decimate them in the end, I am not against a superficial alliance with that group." He paused. "Not to mention that I was the one who helped Naut escape from that arena in the first place."

"You were...?!" Wyss gasped. She seemed surprised.

I was just as surprised. *Wasn't it supposed to be a Yethma girl who set him free?*

Marquis sent a fleeting glance in my direction before continuing, "It was, admittedly, a plan I executed without informing father. The Liberators hold a great influence over the masses, so we chose to leave them be. However, we must never show empathy for their cause, and we shall undergo scrupulous preparation to purge the Nothen Faction with our own forces. That was father's policy."

He was still tapping his finger on the desk as he continued. "He likely didn't have any intentions of joining forces with a group that raises objections to the royal court's system, not even temporarily. Father even placed rigid restrictions on me, prohibiting me from interfering with the members of the Liberators. However, father is no longer with us. My intention is to thoroughly milk the Liberators and the ardor of the masses, who support them, for all their worth."

Hope was finally on the horizon. I owed it all to Shravis. <<In that case, my king...>>

"Yes. Putting their final verdict aside..." This was when Marquis finally stopped tapping his index finger. "I shall announce an alliance with the Liberators to get rid of the Nothen Faction once and for all."

Jess and I headed to the bathroom together.

First, an apology to all of my brethren who got their hopes up. Sorry, but our goal isn't to enjoy a lovey-dovey bathtime. When I said I wanted to talk in a

place without any chance of being overheard, Jess chose the bathroom, and that's why we're here.

The bathroom was paved with tiles, which had a color theme centered around blue and navy blue. In the middle of the room sat a large circular bathtub. Jess took off her socks and walked in with her bare legs. She sat down on a small seat and bent her smooth, bare legs before she began to brush me while her legs remained exposed.

"It doesn't really qualify as a token of gratitude for last night, but, um... This is the only thing I can do for you, so...please allow me to take care of you while we talk," she offered, her legs bare as she slowly poured hot water over my body. "By the way, do you like bare legs, Mister Pig?"

How did she figure that out...? <<No way, I'm not a pervert or anything. When it comes to girls, I don't just like legs—I like them from head to toe.>>

Jess seemed startled, and she placed a hand on her chest. "Um... Head to toe would be a little...embarrassing..."

Three giant question marks filled my brain. <<Uh, just putting it out there, but I'm not telling you to show me, okay?!>>

"O-Oh, right. I should've known. Sorry."

Perhaps she was a natural airhead, but either way, her defenseless demeanor made my heart leap into my throat sometimes. She made me extremely anxious because I felt as if she would take off all her clothes if anyone asked her to, and I sincerely hoped she'd do something about it sooner rather than later.

"U-U-Um, that's not true!" she protested. "I would only show my naked body to someone special!"

Oh. Only to someone special, huh? <<Glad to hear it. Also, thanks for brushing me.>>

"It's nothing, really." She gave me a tiny smile.

Jess had finally awoken when morning had come around. She'd seemed like she still couldn't come to terms with Eavis's death and Shravis's disappearance. However, it seemed that she'd managed to regain some of her cheer through

this silly conversation, and I was eternally grateful for that.

As she scrubbed the back of my ear with a brush, she asked, “Okay, so what is it you wanted to talk about?”

<<I have a question first, if you don’t mind. What’s “ecdysia”?>>

“Ecdysia is something like molting for mages. When we use a lot of magic or extend ourselves in some way, we lose our consciousness and magic temporarily. When we wake up again, our magic becomes stronger than before.”

<<I see. That’s pretty cool. It’s like leveling up. Was yesterday your first ecdysia?>>

“No, it was my third.”

Marquis mentioned that Shravis had experienced four ecdysias, didn’t he?
<<That means you’re able to fight toe-to-toe against the Shravis from yesterday, huh?>>

“Um, I don’t think that’s the case. The number of spells we have mastered and our amassed experience are on completely different levels, after all... Mister Shravis has been training his magic since he was a child.”

Oh, interesting. Well, putting that to one side... <<Judging from what you said, you become temporarily vulnerable after an ecdysia, right? And so, Marquis initially assessed that Shravis was captured in his powerless state.>>

“Yes. For a while after an ecdysia, you pass out and lose all magical protection, rendering you utterly defenseless...just like me. I can’t remember anything after that ogur chased me yesterday in the pine forest.”

That’s a relief. Looks like she didn’t notice me secretly sniffing her neck, phew.

“Huh?!”

Oh. No. <<...In any case, let’s move on to the main topic. It’s a solemn one, so brace yourself.>>

“R-Right!” Her face was bright red as she patted down the hair on the back of her head.

<<I've got one more question. Even if you become temporarily vulnerable, you regain your magic by the time you're awake, yeah?>>

"Yes, that's the case." She looked at me, confused.

<<I see. In that case, Marquis's theory doesn't make sense.>>

She blinked. "What? U-Umm... It doesn't?"

Oh, right. Within the royal court, I'm the only one who witnessed the first encounter between Shravis and the Liberators. <<The thing is, Shravis was scared of coming into contact with the Liberators. When he fetched me from the ship, he was nearly killed for real. Therefore, there *is* a chance that he distanced himself from them and ended up fighting as their ally in the big picture, but I doubt he'd voluntarily become their captive. The risk of getting killed is too high.>>

"That...happened, I see. In that case, was he captured involuntarily due to an ecdysia after all?"

<<That's probably not right either. Like Marquis said, even if he was seized against his will, he was able to send a letter—so he's able to use magic now. That guy can flee with his own abilities whenever he wants to. Thus, there is only one possibility—*Shravis wasn't taken hostage to begin with.*>>

"Huh?" Her eyes widened. "But why would he...?"

<<That guy was struggling to find a method for the Liberators and the royal court to work in harmony somehow. He probably put on a show as the first step towards that outcome. There's a chance that he truly underwent ecdysia though. When you mix truth with lies, it becomes more convincing.>>

"I see... But if that's true, the Liberators' demand for an alliance would also be a lie..."

That's the Jess I know. She's quick to catch on, which is a great help. <<Yep. That's the problem. The Liberators don't want an alliance—in fact, they're zealously looking for ways to overthrow the royal court. Even if the royal court announces an alliance, it's not going to happen that easily. Judging by the current circumstances, the Liberators would actually think it's dodgy or suspect it's a trap.>>

The royal court, which maintained a shroud of secrecy around the capital and its internal affairs, had naturally classified Eavis's death as highly confidential information. Therefore, the Liberators would definitely be wary of the royal court's abrupt change in attitude.

"What do we do, then...?" Jess sounded lost.

<<My friend—well, more like my ampigo—is with the Liberators. That guy is an influential voice among their ranks, and in his opinion, an alliance with the royal court might be necessary depending on the situation. The problem is, he doesn't know what's happening on our side, so he probably wouldn't thoughtlessly agree to such a proposal. I want to send a message to that person—I mean, that pig, and tell him that our proposal is genuine.>>

"I see. If that's the case..." She trailed off.

<<Is it doable?>>

"King Marquis has cast a *Trac* spell on Mister Naut. I think even I should be able to deliver a letter to that location."

Jess, with her legs bare, stood up and rinsed my back. *Gude, belly gude.*

Just one thing though... Is it acceptable in her mind to do such fanservice for a random guy who isn't special at all? Really? I thought quietly in the back of my mind.

Jess transcribed what I told her on a piece of paper, translating it into Mesterian. Thanks to the healing I'd received three months ago during my previous teleportation, I could now read the text in this world as well. Jess's handwriting was very refined and neat; her script oozed the aura of a cultured intellectual.

After she finished writing the letter, under her guidance, we arrived at a bird-breeding coop. Though I called it a "coop," it wasn't small at all but rather large enough to rival an indoor zoo, and birds of various breeds flitted around freely. Large windows allowed sufficient ventilation, and every bird within sight was tweeting and twittering cheerfully.

As we made our way to the birds of prey section, Jess pulled out a map she'd apparently received from Wyss. "The circle on this map actually displays Mister

Naut's location," she explained.

Indeed, on the almost completely black map was a red circle. But when I took a closer look, I frowned internally. *Hold on...* <<Hey, Jess, why are there *two* dots?>>

"Huh? *Two*?" Jess looked at the map again. It was hard to tell at a glance, but two red circles were huddled together. "Oh, you're right. Why would there be two of them? This red dot is supposed to move according to the location of the *Trac* spell King Marquis cast..."

<<Maybe the guy split into two, and two Nauts are running around in the wild now.>>

"I see!" But moments after she exclaimed that, she muttered to herself, "No, what am I saying? He's not a starfish..."

It seemed that she hadn't just learned magic—she'd even gained the skill of going along with a joke before coming to her senses and giving me a deadpan response, as well as knowledge of echinoderms. I was rather impressed.

Jokes aside, why are there two dots? Did he make a mistake and cast the spell twice or something? Oh well, it's not that big of a deal. My priority right now is to promptly deliver the letter. <<Back to business, the two circles are adjacent anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem. We only need to pick one and tell the bird to fly there.>>

She nodded. "Good point. One of them must be Mister Naut, after all..." And that was when her footsteps halted. "Ah, we have arrived."

There was wire mesh that prevented birds from coming in and out, and beyond it were giant birds of prey. Jess opened the simple door and invited me in. She took me on a tour and merrily made introductions. "Goshawk, golden eagle, falcon, common buzzard... We even have owls here."

A massive white-tailed eagle—which looked big enough to eat this pig—stared at me from a perch above. Carefully avoiding its gaze, I huddled close to Jess's legs as I walked.

"They won't eat you, so don't worry. Which bird shall we use?" she asked, almost as if we were picking something out in the supermarket.

When I surveyed our surroundings, I noticed a snowy owl staring at me with cute, round eyes. <<If we're delivering a letter in a fantasy world, we've got to use owls,>> I declared. <<I think that snowy owl looks good.>>

"You prefer an owl, I see!" Jess approached the bird in question and gently stroked its fluffy white feathers. The snowy owl closed its eyes contentedly. *Hey, no fair, you cunning bird!*

With an impish smile, Jess showed the map to the owl as she said, "If you want me to stroke you, just tell me, Mister Pig."

According to her, the birds here had been magically trained to detect and understand *Trac* spells. Jess had a lengthy conversation with the owl as she did the necessary procedures. When she was done, she rolled up the letter she'd written earlier and began to tie it around the owl's foot.

<<Ah, one second,>> I spoke up, interrupting her. <<We need to leave something that'll indicate it's definitely from us.>>

She blinked. "But I wrote that it's from you, Mister Pig."

<<Anyone can write that. I want to prove that the sender isn't someone pretending to be me. And I have just the plan for that.>>

"What is it?"

I'd had a stroke of genius a moment earlier. It was a foolproof plan. <<Rub that letter against your thigh.>>

Bewildered, Jess's eyebrows lifted. "Um... Against *my* thigh?"

<<Yeah. That should be enough. Trust me.>>

"Oh... Well, if you say so..." Jess lifted her skirt slightly and pressed the letter against her absolute territory—the sacred stretch of bare skin between the hem of her skirt and her over-the-knee socks. "Did I do that right?"

<<Just a little higher up,>> I instructed.

Not even sparing a moment to doubt my words, Jess dutifully raised her skirt even higher and pressed the letter against an area almost at the base of her thigh. I stared at the letter solemnly. I repeat: I stared at the *letter* solemnly.



All according to plan. That cheeky owl can't admire this view from a perch, heh. What a shame, you pleb!

"Um, is this good enough...?" There seemed to be a faint flush on Jess's face as she spoke, and I came to my senses.

<<Sorry, it should be fine now. Go ahead and send it.>>

Hearing that, Jess fastened the letter to the owl and allowed it to perch on her shoulder as she walked outside the pen. The insolent owl had the nerve to playfully bite at Jess's ear *several times*.

"Oh, don't do that, little owl... That's ticklish."

Excuse me? That's so unfair. I wanna bite her too!

Once we were outside, Jess set the owl free. Its feathery white wings immediately melted into the clouds.

Jess gazed at the sky for a while after the bird vanished, then crouched in front of me. "Mister Pig... If it's just my ear, I don't mind." She leaned in and offered her ear.

Oh my. <<No, that's out of the question. Sorry. Really, don't mind the narration.>> I hurriedly turned down her offer.

Almost mischievously, Jess asked, "But, Mister Pig, from what I remember, you rather like sniffing my neck and looking at my legs, don't you?"

<<You've got the wrong idea. That was just the instincts of a pig taking over, and I couldn't stop myself...>>

"I see. In that case, it's bad manners, so please restrain yourself," Jess said curtly before standing up.

Huh? Wait, no, I can't go on like this... I whimpered in my mind.

Seeing me flustered, Jess beamed at me. Her smile was as beautiful as a flower blooming in spring. "Just kidding. I understand that you can't control your piggy instincts. I could never fully repay you for your help last night, so, um... If there's anything you'd like me to do, please feel free to ask."

Hmm? I lifted an internal eyebrow. *I'll hold you to that.*

Her ears reddened. “U-Um, of course, there is a limit to what I can help you with...” she whispered.

Ever the gentleman, I replied, <<Don’t worry, I’m not *that* much of a perv. As a pig, at the end of the day, nothing beats a good pat on my body.>>

“Ah, I see. Well then, if you’ll excuse me...” Jess quickly crouched again and began stroking my head.

Good, belly good.

My neck. My shoulders. My loin. My tenderloin. My spare ribs. My hams. Jess’s hands moved from one area to another on my body, stroking me gently. All strength left my body of its own accord, and I felt myself rolling onto my side with a flop.

She wasn’t done. My Boston butt. My raw pig heart. My pork belly. My liver. Before I knew it, I’d lost all my feral instincts, lying down on the ground and exposing my belly to the maiden before me. *Listen to this, my brethren. Have you ever laid bare before a beautiful blonde maiden and had the luxury of her stroking your entire body? Oh? You haven’t? Well, my apologies, but I have. I suppose you should reflect on your daily conduct and start thinking about why you haven’t earned such a privilege.*

I rolled over onto my back, and finally, my four limbs were sticking out into the sky slovenly. Jess chuckled at the sight. “Just stroking you makes you so happy. You are such a strange pig.”

<<I’m not always like this, you know. Usually, I’m not this overjoyed. It’s because you’re the one stroking me.>>

Jess inclined her head. “Huh? Because...it’s *me*?”

<<No, that’s not quite right. It’s not you specifically. It would be more accurate to say “a blonde girl,”>> I replied on the spur of the moment.

Hearing that, her stroking hand stilled. “Do you like blonde hair, Mister Pig?”

<<Yeah. It’s been a dream of mine since I was a child. I’ve always wanted a blonde girl to give me a full-body stroking session, you see.>>

The expression on Jess’s face was ambivalent as she stood up. It was hard to

tell whether she was convinced by that explanation. She puffed out her cheeks slightly and said, “So everyone is the same to you, Mister Pig.”

* * *

“Master! Master!”

A bouncy voice entered my ears. The next moment, Batt, who’d been fooling around outside, entered the tent. As for the rest of us inside—we’d been gathered around a battered, wooden table and holding a meeting in subdued voices—we narrowed our eyes at the sunlight that flowed in.

“What’s going on, Batt?” I asked. “We’re in the middle of a discussion here.”

Batt held some kind of paper up high. “When I was chatting with Lithis, a white owl flew over! There was a letter fastened to its leg, ya know, and when I took a look, I saw the name it was addressed to. Uh, who was it again...?”

While Batt squinted and read the name on the envelope, a girl with a braid poked out her head from behind his back. She looked like an identical twin of Nourris, the woman who’d saved me in the North. But this mysterious Yethma girl wore a soft expression, unlike the Nourris I’d known. By now, most of us referred to her as “Lithis.”

Finally, Batt lifted his gaze from the envelope and grinned broadly. “It’s addressed to ‘Mister Heckripon Killer Who Likes Older Women’ and...‘Degenerate *Lollicorn*’?” He frowned slightly, struggling with the last word. “Hey, Mister Heckripon Killer must be Master, right?”

I scowled. *Whoever said I like older women? Oh, whatever.* It seemed to be a letter for me. “I see. Who’s the sender? How did the owl find this place?”

“It says it’s from ‘Low-Life Swine,’” Batt replied.

Next to me, Sanon snorted hard. <Let’s read it. It’s probably a correspondence from the royal court. Now, I don’t quite understand what “Degenerate Lolicon” means, but I have a feeling it’s referring to me.>

Across from Sanon stood Ceres, who helped relay messages back and forth. Something seemed to be bothering her because she would take furtive glances at me occasionally—and just as I thought that, she frantically averted her

stealthy gaze and began stroking the black pig. The pig's curly tail swished slightly.

I approached Batt and accepted the letter before giving him a light smack on the shoulder. "Thanks. Head out and have a bit more fun with Lithis. Our meeting won't take too much longer." After watching Batt leave, I promptly opened the envelope and skimmed the contents.

From across the table, Itsune asked, "What's it about?"

After I finished reading, I showed the letter to Sanon while explaining, "That mophead's scheme bore fruit, and the royal court apparently changed their stance. They will announce an alliance to combat the threat from the North, so the swine wants us to agree. He promises that he won't let us lose out in any way. That's the gist."

"An alliance?" Yoshu furrowed his black brows.

Itsune scowled with displeasure. "No way. Not in a million years. What gives? Why should we join hands with the likes of the royal court?"

I'd expected such a reaction. To Itsune and Yoshu, the royal court was their mortal enemy. There was actually a chance that their resentment towards them was even much greater than mine. "Well, honestly, I don't want to go along with a plan like this either..." I trailed off.

"Right?" Itsune nodded. "Let's ignore this nonsense."

I understood where Itsune was coming from, but if it was the low-life swine claiming he wouldn't let us lose out in any way, it was worth considering, at least. I turned to the black pig. "What's your take on this, Sanon?"

Sanon replied, <I think we should agree to this alliance.>

Itsune glared at Sanon with fiery eyes. "Why the hell should we?"

<We won't last long at this rate. Even if we, the Liberators, have and are actively gathering the support of the masses, the reality is that only a fraction of them are fighting with us. Conversely, the Nothen Faction's military force seems boundless. If we keep fighting stubbornly like this, our forces will eventually be almost completely depleted. Then we will suffer another devastating loss like

the Battle of the Rocky Plains.>

Silence.

Eventually, Yoshu spoke up. “That’s a good point, Sanon. But it’s not like this is our only option. There are people with fighting capabilities among those who support us. Rather than collaborating with heartless scoundrels, we should turn to those supporters for help first, don’t you think?”

Sanon shook his head. <Remember the battle yesterday? Do you think the aid of ordinary folk would truly make a difference at all? Our forces barely suffered any losses because we had the backing of the royal court’s army and a mage. A glowing letter fixed to an arrow was what alerted us to the danger, and that was clearly delivered by magical means as well.>

He continued, <Mophead is a mage, and even after the incident on our ship, he saved us. Due to unknown circumstances, the powerful royal court is also proposing we work together. We can’t let this opportunity slip by.>

“This plan rubs me the wrong way,” Itsune said with her arms still folded. “The fact that the royal court wants our help means they’re in trouble too, right? If we leave them in the lurch, they might collapse on their own. That would save us a lotta trouble and time. Right, Naut?”

Hearing her prompt, I mulled over our situation. Frankly, thinking about complicated power dynamics really wasn’t my cup of tea.

“As long as we win in the end, that’s good enough for me,” I finally said. “For victory, I’m willing to bend down and lick mud if it’s necessary, and I’m just as willing to pretend to play nice with the royal court. If Sanon says we should agree to this alliance, I’ll abide by that plan.”

Roughly two months ago, Sanon had appeared before us with Ceres. We were young and naive in the art of war, but he had given us plenty of strategic advice and had played a significant role in the development of the Liberators. Even during the Battle of the Rocky Plains one month ago when we’d suffered a major defeat, he’d volunteered to sacrifice himself and carve out a path of retreat for us, suppressing our casualties to the minimum. Therefore, I had wholehearted faith in Sanon.

The black pig looked at me and nodded slowly. <Like Tsunnie said, there *is* a considerable chance that the royal court is facing times of strife. But now, I want everyone to mull over one question for a moment: what will happen if the royal court falls? The people who supported us might all end up being ruled over by the Nothen Faction. If that happens, the outlook is grim for us as well. Do you think there's a happy future for Yethma girls in a Mesteria ruled by them?>

He snorted before continuing, <What matters is the order in which we deal with our enemies. For now, temporarily, we'll join forces with the royal court. Then, after we annihilate the Nothen Faction, we can simply look for a way to exploit the debilitated state of the royal court. In my opinion, we should put emotional opinions and policies to one side. It would be smarter to collaborate with them for the time being.>

His argument was logical and extremely convincing. Though Itsune and Yoshu looked reluctant, they nodded. We had a plan.

However, this was when Sanon spoke up in an apprehensive voice, <But there's just one thing...>

"What is it?" I asked. "Go on."

<Everything I've said is based on the assumption that the letter we received is the real deal. The names it was addressed to and the contents were very characteristic of Mister Low-Life Swine. But if a mage is involved, they might be able to extract the information from him against his will and forge this letter. Therefore, judging by what I know about him, he should have used a method that's unique to him to tell us that this letter is genuine...>

Suddenly, Sanon seemed to realize something and began sniffing the letter. <Hey, can you call Ros over for a moment?>

I didn't even hesitate before I summoned Rossi by whistling with my fingers. Rossi, who'd been keeping watch outside, immediately entered the tent. I turned to Sanon. "What's bothering you? What do you want Rossi to do?"

<Can you make Ros sniff the letter?>

I was incredulous. *Why in the world is he making such a wild request?* Despite

my doubts, however, I offered the letter to Rossi, who sat in front of me.

The next moment, Rossi wagged his tail. He let out shrill yaps and shook his head enthusiastically as he began jumping up and down. It was a letter from the royal court—would it really have a lingering smell that made Rossi this hyper?

“Sanon, what did the letter smell like?” I asked.

<It smelled like the legs of a young girl.>

And why exactly does this man know that scent? I couldn’t help but frown for a moment. But either way, the mystery was solved. For Rossi to be this excited over the smell of legs, the owner could only be one person. “That means there’s a lingering odor of Jess’s legs on that letter, right?”

The black pig nodded. *I see.* It certainly seemed like a plan that low-life swine would cook up.

While Rossi celebrated in the background, I declared, “It’s settled, then. Let’s agree to the alliance.”

* * *

The morning after we posted our letter, the royal court put up public notice boards all over the nation acknowledging an alliance with the Liberators. With this announcement, the Liberators were permitted to live in the cities under the royal court’s rule. They could also openly purchase commodities distributed by the royal court, such as ristae.

The Liberators immediately accepted this alliance, and Naut was scheduled to come alone to the capital for an audience with the king in the evening. Apparently, such treatment was unprecedented—until now, no outsiders had been granted entry to the capital.

Shravis returned unscathed on the royal court’s dragon. He wasn’t even given the time to wallow in his grief over his grandfather’s passing, for Naut’s arrival followed hot on his heels. Together with Marquis, Shravis headed to the meeting’s venue: the Golden Cathedral.

As for Jess and me, we were given consent to secretly spy on the cathedral hall from behind a sarcophagus positioned along the wall. The light of the

western sun filtered in from the stained glass windows, illuminating an interior that I could never forget even if I tried. A small seed of unease sprouted in my heart, and I wondered about the purpose of this cathedral.

The grand hall was magnificent; whether it be the width, length, or height, everything seemed to be over a hundred meters. The floor was decorated with a geometric pattern put together with marble tiles in a variety of colors. In the center was a golden throne that stood in solitude.

The last time I'd been here, I certainly hadn't had the luxury nor heart to carefully observe the area. But now that I got a better look, several altars were lined up against the wall with a sarcophagus enshrined on each one. If you looked at the throne from the entrance, the altar on the other side of it was especially large, and your eyes would immediately be drawn to the sculpture of a young woman. Her left hand was against her chest, and her right hand was raised high into the air. It was Vatis, the founder of the royal court and the female mage who'd brought an end to the Dark Ages.

Marquis reclined pompously on the throne while Shravis sat on a wooden chair next to him. Wyss soon appeared before the pair, and she brought Naut with her. Naut's attire was almost identical to what he'd worn when I saw him the day before yesterday. There weren't any visible injuries on him, and he looked fit and healthy. However, what looked like a black shawl was wrapped around his neck, which was new. As for his twin shortswords, he left them in Wyss's custody.

Jess and I held our breaths anxiously as we watched over the scene.

Marquis's voice echoed out from the throne. "I have been waiting for your arrival. I am not seeking any kind of special decorum from you during this occasion. Be at ease."

Naut, however, had been kneeling and stayed down, even lowering his head a little more. Though it could be interpreted as respect, it also seemed like a tiny display of defiance against Marquis's orders.

Jess gently placed her hand on my back and spoke to me telepathically. <So that's Mister Naut... It is my first time seeing him up close.>

<<He's handsome, isn't he? Is he your type?>>

Jess went silent. Her ears became bright red. *Ah, darn. That was sexual harassment. I went too far.*

<I-I'm not sure... I've only just gotten a look at him after all...>

I should've known. Jess isn't a girl who judges a man by his looks.

Marquis asked in a low voice, "I am well aware that you and your people despise us. Are your intentions of agreeing to an alliance genuine?"

"Our resentment and our wish for an alliance are both sincere," Naut replied, matching Marquis's tone. "It's only a strategic alliance against a common enemy. Against the Nothen Faction, we, the Liberators, are inferior in terms of fighting capabilities. We even lack information, and frankly, our prospects of winning are bleak."

He continued, "The royal court, which should hurry up and get rid of those guys already, is dragging its feet for some reason about starting a campaign against the Nothen Faction. Seems like you guys are kind of stumped, hmm? For now, let's put emotional opinions and policies to one side and work together to destroy the Nothen Faction. That's our proposal."

"Put emotional opinions and policies to one side," huh? Sounds like a sentence straight out of Sanon's mouth.

Marquis nodded with frosty eyes. "Your voice is heard. We have no objections. It seems that we have reached an agreement. Let us shake hands to commemorate our alliance." He stood up.

Naut seemed slightly wary, and his body immediately tensed up.

Marquis lifted a single eyebrow. "Oh? Do you think I am going to kill you?"

"Sorry 'bout that. Looks like my vigilance against you is still burning strong in the bottom of my heart."

Marquis scoffed in reply. "Relax. If I truly wanted to deprive you of your life, I could achieve that even if I remained sitting down at such a distance. Just like this." He sat back down on the throne and crossed his legs. Instantly, the marble tiles on the floor surrounding Naut were sent flying one after another, carving out a perfect circle around the huntsman. The crater left behind was

alarmingly deep.

Naut couldn't even move. He remained rooted to the spot.

"Did you like that demonstration?" Marquis's apathetic voice rang out. "Well, I suppose we can forgo the handshake. An honest conversation without any pretense or calculation is the best way to strengthen our trust in each other."

Naut furrowed his eyebrows, creasing his forehead as he sat cross-legged with a scowl. "The sentiment's mutual. For your information, though I'm sure you're aware, if you kill me, a good number of your citizens will start a revolt. A second leader will appear. A third leader will appear. Your population, which was greatly diminished thanks to you guys during the Dark Ages, is going to be cut down even more. Don't assume that you have an overwhelming advantage here." His fiery gaze pierced Marquis like swords.

<He's a very courageous man,> Jess said slowly.

<<Do you like him now?>>

<Yes. Just a little.>

Though I knew she didn't mean the "like" I was thinking about, I regretted making that joke.

"You are a man who does not submit in the face of adversity, I see. Fascinating. Well then, is there anything you would like to talk about?"

After a few seconds of quiet thought, Naut asked, "Is Jess in the capital right now?"

I felt the hand on my back jolt in response.

"Unfortunately, I cannot disclose any information related to the secrets of the royal court," Marquis droned.

"Hey, I'm just asking about what happened to my traveling companion. Surely it's not an unreasonable request," Naut said defiantly.

Marquis seemed to choose his words carefully before he said, "Have you fallen for that Yethma?"

Immediately, Naut's ears turned bright crimson. "What's this rubbish coming

out of your mouth? Who would ever—”

“Now, do not have such a quick temper. I know that your obsession lies with another Yethma. After all, I heard a rather passionate speech from you about that matter from the other side of the golden bars.”

Naut sucked in a sharp breath and whipped his head up. “No way... Are you the...”

While I couldn’t make heads or tails of their exchange, I was amazed by Marquis’s masterful conversational skills. If Naut probed deeply into Jess’s current situation, there was a chance he’d get an inkling of the relationship between mages and Yethma. By playing his cards skillfully, Marquis had diverted Naut’s attention from the undesirable topic.

<Mister Pig, do you know what happened between Mister Naut and me?>

Her question was a reminder that she had access to the narration. <<...I’ve heard a couple of things, yeah, but I don’t know the details.>>

<What did you hear about?>

<<...I only know that Naut played a small part in your journey to the capital. That’s it.>>

<I see... Please tell me more later on.>

Even while the two of us had our little chat, the conversation on the other side continued.

“That means...you must’ve cast the spell to keep tabs on my location back then, huh?” Naut observed. “As soon as I arrived at Nearbell, the mop-hair guy over there found my ship and even the Nothen Faction raided the place. Those can’t be coincidences. There must be some kind of magic that tells you where I am. That’s creepy. Could you remove it?”

Marquis recrossed his legs, as if impressed. “You are a perceptive one. Exactly. Right now, there are two *Trac* spells cast on your body.”

“Two?”

“Indeed. One is the spell I cast. As for the other, it is by someone unknown to me.”

The cathedral, painted in orange and red by the setting sun, was briefly filled with dead silence.

“...Explain yourself,” Naut demanded.

“Going through every single detail is somewhat tedious, but I suppose I must. Normally, *Trac* spells can only be detected by the caster and those they informed of the detection method. This means it is impossible for the Nothen Faction to identify your whereabouts through my spell.”

Naut hesitated. “That means they’ve got a mage on their side, doesn’t it?”

“Precisely. And I believe this mystery mage is the hidden mastermind pulling the strings behind the scenes. They united underground society as one, directed them to rebel against the royal court, and created the monsters known as ogurs. We currently refer to them as the Clandestine Arcanist.”

“Wasn’t the head of the Nothen Faction supposed to be Arrogan, the jewel merchant?”

Hearing Naut’s query, Marquis touched his own chin, as if something grated on his nerves. “I have already defeated Arrogan with my own hands. He is now nothing but ashes, alongside the Atypidae Palace.”

Utter silence.

Naut seemed to be struggling to comprehend what he’d heard. “You killed him? Wait. Their king died, so why is the Nothen Faction’s army moving around as if nothing happened?”

“Didn’t I just explain this to you moments ago? The true manipulator of the Nothen Faction is the Clandestine Arcanist. After your escape, I made an attempt on Arrogan’s life, but I discovered that he’d already died a while ago. Do you understand the implications of that?”

“He was only a puppet. No wonder he looked deadly pale.”

Marquis let out a clipped chuckle, but it was hollow and certainly didn’t reach his eyes. “That seems to be the case, yes. My blunder was the fact that I chose to burn down the entire Atypidae Palace with him, even though I hadn’t found any clues leading to the Clandestine Arcanist. That is why we are stuck in this

position here, seeking the help of you and your kind.”

Naut seemed convinced. He nodded slightly. “I see. In that case, oh great mage, could you erase the two so-called *Trac* spells on me first?”

Marquis gave him a tiny nod. “As a testament to our faith in you, I shall remove the spell I cast. However, could you wait a while for the second?”

“Oh, what’s this? You can’t deal with it?”

“Do not make light of me. If I wish to remove it, I can do so instantly. It seems to be a rather feeble spell by a coffin dodger.”

“Then why won’t you get rid of it now?”

As if he were introducing an investment proposal, Marquis lifted his index finger next to his face. “Think about it this way. We are pitted against an enemy lurking in an unknown location. Wouldn’t it be extremely convenient for us if they voluntarily show themselves?”

“...So you want to use me as bait, huh?”

“Are you afraid?”

Naut scoffed. “Never. But when we confront that so-called Clandestine Arcanist, there are some situations we can’t deal with alone. Now then, will you ‘noble’ mages show up properly in person to give us a hand on the battlefield, I wonder?”

“But of course. That is the purpose of our alliance, is it not? For our first battle as allies, I ask that you and your group participate in our conflict at the eastern front line. You will lure out the Clandestine Arcanist there, and we shall kill them together. How does that sound?”

For the first time since he’d arrived here, Naut grinned wide enough to show his teeth. “Not bad at all. Bring it on.”

Wyss led Naut out of the cathedral. Seeing that, Jess asked me to follow her before she slipped out of the back entrance and began running in his direction. Despite alarm bells ringing in my head, I ran after her.

The cathedral blocked out the evening sun, casting a shadow on the gloomy

cemetery nearby. It was next to this very cemetery where Jess caught up to Naut.

“Mister Naut!” she exclaimed.

Both Wyss and Naut turned to face us. I ran forward until I was next to Jess.

Wyss raised a hand and gestured at Naut to stay put while she said with surprise, “My, Jess. Is something the matter?”

Naut was etching a valley between his eyebrows with a frown as he stared at Jess’s uncollared neck. He seemed more interested in that area than her chest.

Since she’d been sprinting as fast as she could, Jess’s breathing was erratic, but her voice was clear and assertive. “Um...my apologies, Madame Wyss... There is something I...desperately want to ask...Mister Naut.”

Wyss assumed a slightly disapproving tone. “I believe it is best to avoid a conversation with an outsider in a place like this.”

“Please, Madame. I will not take long,” Jess pleaded, her eyes glistening with tears, perhaps because she was exhausted from running.

The rest of us stared at her with surprise. It was extremely rare to see Jess acting so determined.

“I see. You have my permission, then.” Wyss gave Naut and me a look. Her message was clear.

Jess looked at Naut and asked, “Mister Naut, did you travel with me?”

Silence.

Naut stared into the distance with a grimace on his face for a while. “Sorry, but I can’t tell you. This ma’am over here prohibited me from talking about the past with you.”

“But in the cathedral, I remember you clearly said I was your traveling companion.”

“Oh. You were listening in?”

It was awkward, and there wasn’t any way to turn the unfavorable tides. I could only remain a mere, useless pig next to Jess.

“I knew it. You must know something.” Jess stepped forward from my side and hounded Naut for answers. “Please, just a little is enough. Tell me, what happened?”

As if he was approaching the end of his patience, Naut clicked his tongue quietly. “Isn’t it clear enough? I can’t tell you anything, and that isn’t going to change. Actually, I have a question of my own. Right now, all of us have our minds and hearts fully focused on the present and the future. Why are you so hung up on the past?”

Bearing the brunt of Naut’s ruthless glare, Jess was speechless for a moment. But then, she whispered in a small voice, “Because...I have to know.”

Whoa there. Should she sign up to be the president of a Classic Literature Club or something with that undying curiosity of hers? <<Jess, I think that’s enough. Trying to regain your memories through shortcuts like these isn’t what Eavis would’ve wanted, right?>>

Hearing that, Jess gasped and placed a hand over her mouth. “Oh, right... I...I’m so sorry...”

Naut looked at me with a baffled expression. Unless someone acted as the router, my internal dialogue wouldn’t reach him. <<Jess, I have a request. I have a few questions for Naut. Could you pass on the words inside the double angle brackets?>>

Under Wyss’s watchful eyes, Jess nodded.

I said, <<Hey, Naut, for the sake of a better future, there’s something I want to ask about the past. You all right with that?>>

He paused. “What is it? I’ve got to hear it first.”

Hearing his prompt, I swiftly gathered my thoughts. Just like Jess, there was something I had to know—something that bothered me.

I recalled what Naut had said in the *Shattered Collars*. “*The blame is all mine. She kind of reminds me of the Yethma that helped me escape in the North...*”

Naut had mentioned that a Yethma had helped him escape in the North.

Then, there was Marquis’s statement yesterday morning. “*Not to mention*

that I was the one who helped Naut escape from that arena in the first place.”

Marquis had claimed that he was the one who’d helped Naut escape.

And now, if I considered their exchange about the *Trac* spell earlier, there was only one conclusion. <<So the Yethma who helped you escape from the arena in the North was actually the king in disguise, huh?>>

“Yeah. That guy called himself Nourris. You can’t ever let your guard down around a mage, hmm? How are you even supposed to keep an eye out for people who can change their appearance at will?”

Hearing a most unexpected name, my pork heart began pounding ferociously. My suspicion had transformed into conviction. Nourris was the Yethma who Kento had come across last time. She should have been collected as property and working at the castle in the North. *In other words—*

“Just for reference,” Wyss cut into my thoughts, “a spell that changes your appearance is not that simple. Based on our analysis of the *Trac* spell’s quality, the royal court’s concluded that the Clandestine Arcanist has not achieved such heights. Please rest assured.”

“I see. In that case, we only have to watch out for spies from the royal court, huh?” Naut spat maliciously. Was it sarcasm or his genuine opinion?

Wyss looked down at me and communicated, <I believe it is best to stop here.> It was a message warning me against telling Naut the truth I’d discovered.

<<Thanks, Naut. That was helpful,>> I said with Jess’s assistance.

Naut sighed. “Why didn’t you ask the king directly? Oh well, it’s not my problem. Okay then, swine, you take care of things here.”

Wyss nodded to Naut. It was a signal, and he dutifully resumed walking with her. Jess and I remained in place, watching over the pair’s retreating backs.

“Um... Mister Pig?”

I gazed at her. <<Yeah?>>

“Did you...notice something?”

I was torn about what to do, but after a while, I decided it was fine to discuss the matter with Jess. <<Yep. I figured out why there were two *Trac* spells on the map when we sent the letter.>>

“Why is that? I’m curious!”

Uhh... That line’s cutting it a bit close to a reference, but okay... <<When Marquis infiltrated the North, he disguised himself as a Yethma with magic. He helped Naut break out, allowing the Liberators to make a comeback, and now the two factions are even forming an alliance. You with me so far?>>

“Yes.”

<<Now, onto the information Naut provided. Marquis introduced himself as “Nourris,” right? The thing is, based on the information I learned through certain channels, there really was a Yethma known as Nourris who was collected as property by the castle in the North. That begs one question...>>

“Where did the real Miss Nourris vanish to?” Jess finished it for me.

She was a sharp one, which was a great help. <<Right. And I know exactly where she is.>>

“You do?” Jess blinked at me.

<<Yeah. In the *Shattered Collars*, when it was anchored in Nearbell, I met up with the members of the Liberators. Back then, Naut said there was a Yethma present who looked similar to the one who helped him escape.>>

I recalled Yoshu’s words.

“This girl lost practically all her memories and was wandering aimlessly in the vicinity when we found her. Her accent seems like someone from the North, but she’s a real Yethma all right,” Yoshu explained. “That’s why we decided to take her in. We don’t know her name, so sis is calling her Lithis.”

<<According to one member, the Yethma lost nearly all her memories. She didn’t even know who she was. Her memories were *erased*. And only mages are capable of that.>>

“That means King Marquis erased the real Miss Nourris’s memories and set her free, yes?”

<<Probably, yeah. If he allowed her to roam freely with the knowledge that she's Nourris, property of the castle in the North, there was the risk that his cover might be blown. That's why he erased her memories.>>

"And then, the members of the Liberators found her and took her in by chance..."

I sighed. <<I wish that was the case.>>

She blinked. "It's not?"

<<Yep. Now, let's return to our initial question: why did Marquis's *Trac* spell show up as two close dots on the map?>>

"Oh...!" Her eyes widened. "Is there a *Trac* spell on the real Miss Nourris as well?"

<<Must be.>> I nodded. <<I think Marquis deliberately set things up so the surviving Liberators would find the real Nourris. It's all so that he can track them down with the *Trac* spell on her.>>

"Then...erasing Mister Naut's *Trac* spell was only...superficial?"

<<Shravis was present, and perhaps partly because of that, Marquis claimed it was a testament to his faith in Naut. But it wasn't. Well, Naut and the others probably don't have any method of detecting magic to begin with, so even if he didn't remove it, no one would find out. Either way, he agreed so readily because he cast a *Trac* spell on the real Nourris as well.>>

Just like I'd suspected, Marquis didn't trust Naut at all. The king likely planned on milking the huntsman for every drop of value he had before forcing him to yield with raw power in the end.

Maybe I... Maybe Sanon and I steered the situation in an even more terrible direction, which we might live to regret.

Night fell. Naut returned to the Liberators' campsite while the three royalty—Wyss, Marquis, and Shravis—were swamped by administration and general tasks. After dinner, I was invited by Jess to a plaza with a large fountain. Rosebushes were arranged in calculated locations around the plaza, making the

area look like a charming, meticulously designed garden.

Apparently, among all the inner areas of the royal residence under Wyss's management, this was the coziest place. The chilly night breeze was halted by the brick buildings on three sides around the plaza. As for the one remaining side and the ceiling above, they were both opened up to reveal a cut-out section of the beautiful starry sky.

Jess sat on the edge of the reservoir surrounding the fountain and waved her dangling, non-bare legs as she said, "Just like I thought...Mister Naut knows me."

<<Yeah.>> I sat beside Jess, sitting just outside an area that would allow me to glimpse something I shouldn't see.

"If that's the case, is the bookmark in my memories left behind for Mister Naut after all...?" Jess sounded somewhat perturbed. "The late King Eavis told me that there was a certain someone who stayed by my side in my sealed memories. Is Mister Naut the person I bookmarked?"

Eavis said that? Despite being a little taken aback, I affirmed that theory. <<...Maybe he is.>>

There seemed to be a hint of disappointment on her face. "To tell you the truth, a very small part of me felt otherwise. I didn't have any evidence or anything, but...I thought that *you* might possibly be the person I bookmarked, Mister Pig." Her slightly tired eyes turned to me.

I frantically shot down that possibility. <<No way, that's crazy. Actually, can I ask you something? What in the world gave you that idea?>>

"Um... Like I said, I don't have any evidence. But...there's a small voice inside me telling me this." A melancholic expression took over her face. "If they were someone who stayed with me during my perilous journey—someone so precious to me that I left a bookmark to never forget them... I'm sure they will choose to be by my side even during the great upheaval in the present. Or so I thought."

...

"O-Oh, I'm sorry. This is just, um, my wild fantasy and selfish wish, isn't it?"

Please forget what I said.”

Jess, who denied her own words, was admirable, earnest, and so very pitiful. <<Maybe that person thinks you’re fine on your own now. Or perhaps they had something more important to them. There’s also the chance they’ve already passed away. Don’t get the wrong idea. I arrived here by pure chance. It’s a big coincidence that I’m here and staying by your side.>>

“Right. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed you were...” Jess faltered.

<<Remember what I said? I’m a human who came here from another nation. I even left behind a girlfriend there who’s super cute, has boobs that aren’t overly large, and has an angelic personality. I can help you out for now, Jess. But in the end, I’m just a pig who will eventually disappear and return to my original nation.>>

“Oh... I never knew...” Jess’s legs shuffled away from me slightly. *This is how things should be.*

Jess’s gaze was fixed on the ground slightly away from me. “I-I’m sure that your girlfriend must be a...very lovely person.” Was I imagining things, or was her voice a tiny bit strained and high-pitched?

<<Why do you think so?>>

“Because you are a very wonderful person, Mister Pig.”

That’s the furthest thing from the truth. <<Well then, here’s a question from me. If that...bookmarked person truly exists, what kind of person do you think they were?>>

After a short, pensive pause, Jess smiled. But it was a sorrowful smile. “That’s a good question... I’m sure they were a wonderful person as well.”

Huh...? <<Why’s that?>>

“They were willing to stay with someone like me, who doesn’t have any redeeming features, after all... They must be a very kind and wonderful person.”

<<No redeeming features? Don’t be ridiculous. In fact, I can’t even find a single flaw in you.>>

“You really think so? I think I have plenty though...” Jess tilted her head.

I felt as if my favorite idol was being insulted and ire welled up. <<If you’re so sure, give me a list. C’mon.>>

Jess gulped. “I...only pray in my heart all the time. I can never make a decision by myself.”

<<That just means you ignore your own wishes and prioritize the choices of others. Electing to not enforce your opinion on other people is a type of kindness.>>

“I’m a person who wants to know it all, and I can’t fight it.”

<<Curiosity is what spurs on learning. A drive to pursue truth and knowledge is noble. There isn’t anything bad about it.>>

“I don’t have friends either.”

<<I honestly think it would be weird if you managed to make friends under your past circumstances. If you’re not happy, I’ll be your friend.>>

“I’m very poor at magic.”

<<Only two or three months have passed since you began learning, right? To put that into perspective, a baby can’t even crawl at that point.>>

“And, and...even my chest is small!”

<<But I think it’s just right, and I like it that way!>>

“Huh?”

Uh.

<<Sorry... You weren’t asking about my preferences.>>

Jess’s cheeks were so flushed that I couldn’t miss them even under the pale moonlight. “Mister Pig, you keep praising everything about me.”

<<Well, I suppose we’re good rivals in that department.>>

“You know, we’ve only been together for two or three days, but for some reason...I feel as if you know me very well, Mister Pig. As if...we’ve been together for a long time...”

<<That's probably because I and my kind show up on the dining table every evening.>>

Jess looked at me and opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but in the end, she closed it and gave me a noncommittal smile.

<<In any case, the past doesn't matter. I'm a pig with complicated circumstances who came here under your fiancé's instructions. Nothing more, nothing less. I'll do my best and lend you as much of my knowledge as possible as well, Jess. So please, lend me your power in return—as my friend, that is.>>

She seemed convinced, and she nodded. "Understood. We're friends." Then, with an angelic smile, she said, "Glad to be acquainted with you, Mister Pig."

The Stonecrown Fortress was a robust stronghold built in Mautteau, a mountain village. Shaped like a crown, it also sat proudly on the summit of a rocky mountain surrounded by precipitous cliffs; both facts had apparently led to its name. Masonry towers that looked like rook chess pieces lined up at intervals, bridged with twisting and turning walls that reminded me of the Great Wall of China.

Shravis, Jess, and I had left the capital to make our way to the tallest tower of the Stonecrown Fortress, where we were now. It offered us a grand overlooking view of the extensive withered grass-colored bog beneath the cliff walls. This bog was the boundary that split the territory of the royal court and the Nothen Faction.

As for the weather above, it was an overcast, cloudy day. Though it was just before noon, it was so dark that there wasn't even enough light to cast shadows.

The Liberators, including Naut, were making preparations all over the defensive wall. The huntsman would serve as bait by taking advantage of being under a *Trac* spell. He would lure the Nothen Faction to this fortress where we would strike back.

The defensive side of a fortress siege usually had the upper hand. Since the Stonecrown Fortress was under the royal court's control, it was risky for the Nothen Faction to dispatch troops blindly; the mages of the royal court could

annihilate them easily. They would have to invest a sizable chunk of their forces or tools if they wanted to attack Naut. In other words, there was a high chance that the hidden mastermind, the Clandestine Arcanist himself, might make an appearance. That was what we predicted and were counting on because once they appeared, we would crush them.

Notably, Marquis stayed behind in the capital during this operation as we wanted to cut the risks down to a minimum. If the mage, by some chance, ended up cursed like Eavis, the royal court would be in danger of collapsing altogether. Or at least, that was what I'd heard. While Shravis was deployed here, he was ordered to hide away in the deepest recesses of the fortress unless he had reason to leave.

“Only show yourself when you have learned all the trump cards up the opponent’s sleeves. The Clandestine Arcanist is likely a feeble coffin dodger. As long as you evade their curse, you should be able to take them by surprise and kill them immediately.” Those had been Marquis’s instructions.

Meanwhile, Jess and I were present as mediators between the royal court and the Liberators in emergency cases. Our role was to prevent them from killing Shravis.

The stage was set. Now, we were only waiting for the last actors—our enemies—to arrive.

Despite having been banned from coming into contact with Naut by Marquis, Shravis proceeded to do exactly that, with Jess and I as his companions.

We found Naut in a plaza with cobblestone paving on top of one section of the fortress walls. He was sitting on a stair step and gnawing at an apple. Itsune and Yoshu were sitting on either side of him. Naut was armed with his twin shortswords, Itsune had her greataxe, and finally, Yoshu was accompanied by his crossbow. They were dressed and ready to fight at any moment. Even now, Naut had a black shawl wrapped around his neck.

Shravis walked up in front of the trio. “I suppose I should thank you for your ‘hospitality’ a while ago.”

Both Shravis and Jess were wearing the maxed out defense robes like last time. I was stark naked.

Taken aback, the siblings flinched slightly, but Naut chewed on his crunchy apple without a care in the world. After unhurriedly swallowing a piece of it, he finally opened his mouth. “Look who’s here. I was under the impression that the oh-so-noble mages were going to be a no-show.” He spared a fleeting glance at Jess and me. “Why are those two here?”

“They are my emergency food and his caretaker,” Shravis replied indifferently.

Hm? Oy, I dare you to call me that again.

Naut scoffed. “Well, it’s none of my business. What do you want?”

Shravis was holding a hemp sack—roughly the size of a plastic shopping bag—in his hand, and he put it in front of Naut. “Open it.”

Naut proceeded to widen the sack’s tight drawstring opening. Yoshu, the guy with his bangs in the long introvert style, peered inside and let out an impressed “Woow.” The sack was filled with colorful jewels in every size imaginable—they were ristae.

“They are the highest grade ristae available,” Shravis explained in a clipped voice. “Use them generously in our upcoming battle. Do not be stingy. As for the leftovers, take them back with you.”

Itsune unwound her folded arms and took a yellow rista from the sack. “Hey, are the ones with a lighter color along the edges like this one defective?”

It was an almost transparent rista. Its center was dyed a vivid yellow, but the area around it was nearly colorless.

“Those,” answered Naut, not Shravis, “are ristae that can release one explosive burst of mana instantly. If you used one on your greataxe, even you’ll be nothing but dust after unleashing its tremendous mana.”

Shravis looked a bit surprised at that. “I didn’t expect you to recognize them. From what I remember, these are only distributed inside the capital.”

“I received some directly from your king,” Naut said as he focused on gathering all the red ristae he could find.

After letting out what seemed to be a sigh of satisfaction, Shravis approached

Yoshu, who was acting like a stereotypical introvert. “Hey, are you good at aiming?”

Hearing that, Yoshu peered at Shravis from behind the curtain formed by his bangs. His slender finger reached out quietly and indicated Shravis’s right eye. “I won’t miss next time. That’s a promise. My bolt will pierce your eyeball and drill a hole into your brain stem.”

“I see. Good. Lend me a few of your bolts. I’ll enchant them with magic.”

After a moment of indecision, Yoshu pulled out a single bolt from the quiver strapped to his waist.

Shravis gazed at the bolt. “Is that all?”

“You’re going to lure out a dangerous and crazy fellow by using Naut as bait, aren’t you? One bolt is enough to finish off that menace. I want to avoid relying on the power of a mage as much as possible.”

Itsune grinned. “Hey, what if two nutjobs showed up? C’mon, it won’t hurt to make him enchant a few more.”

Yoshu, however, was firm in his determination. “One. No more, no less. Okay then, what are you going to do?”

Shravis replied, “You can choose between freezing, lightning, and an explosion.”

“Freezing, then. As for the other effects, my two allies over here will suffice.”

“Understood.” Shravis clenched his hand around the bolt and shut his eyes for an instant. “That should do it. It’s useless if it doesn’t strike an area with moisture. Don’t miss.”

“Didn’t I just say that I wouldn’t?” Yoshu accepted the bolt, returning it haphazardly to his quiver. *Uh, will he be able to tell that bolt apart from the others?*

Shravis’s expression was unchanging like a statue throughout the entire conversation. Whether it be a calculated move or a heartfelt one out of goodwill, he was displaying a cooperative attitude towards the rebels. Unlike his father, he didn’t weave threats and dominance into his demeanor, nor did he

assume a haughty and belittling approach in front of the Liberators. The prince was blunt, but he was a man who stood by his own beliefs and an honest guy who wasn't two-faced at all. In my mind, I readily admitted that, surprisingly, he might turn out to be a good husband.

On a whim, I looked to my side and saw Jess gazing at me with a hint of displeasure in her eyes. Farther to the side of my vast field of view, I saw a white silhouette flying in our direction from almost directly behind us.

Watch out! But I didn't even have time to finish that thought before a white, fluffy clump of fur pinned Jess down. There was intense, erratic panting.

Unlike me, Jess certainly didn't see this coming. "Huh? Um, no, you mustn't... Excuse me, ah...!"

It was Rossi. The perverted dog licked everything above Jess's neck before shoving his snout into the hem of her robe. Then, he began to sniff her absolute territory passionately.

I'm so jea— I need to teach that dog a lesson! Being a beast isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card that permits him to do anything he wants!

I marched up to the dog and tried to shove him away, and his bushy tail that wagged enthusiastically began to lightly slap at my snout.

"Rossi, that's enough," Naut called out. "Come here."

The beast finally pulled his head from his position between Jess's legs and trudged reluctantly towards his owner.

Shravis asked, "Is that dog your pet?"

Hearing his voice, Rossi seemed to take an interest in the young prince.

"Yeah, he's my good buddy—" Naut cut off. For some reason, Rossi was sniffing Shravis's legs tentatively. "Hey, what are you doing? Come." With a huff, the dog returned to Naut's side at long last, and the huntsman scratched the bottom of Rossi's chin. "Now that's rare. I don't often see him take an interest in a man's legs."

Bruh, don't you think that doge of yours is lacking some urgent training? I've never, ever, heard of beasts that show an unhealthy interest in women's legs.

He is a pervert that'll go down in history! <<Are you okay, Jess?>>

<Yes... I was just a little startled. My face must be delicious!>

<<Uh... Dunno, I gotta have a taste before I can give you an answer.>>

Slightly aghast, Jess stood up and wiped her drool-slicked cheeks with her sleeve. <Um, that was just a joke, so...you don't have to taste it.>

While we were busy being silly, the fateful hour had arrived—the sun fell below the horizon.

The chirping of birds wasn't what roused us, but a bell signaling an enemy attack.

"I'll support the battlefield from the shadows to minimize losses of our troops," Shravis said. "You guys keep an eye on Naut from here. If anything happens, smash this glass sphere." After leaving behind said glass sphere, which was around the size of a wind chime, Shravis promptly rushed out of the room.

It was the dead of night. Only Jess and I were left behind in the room at the heart of the fortress. We should be able to see Naut, who was below us, from the window, but the height of my head was way too low. But just as I thought that, the sleepy-eyed Jess carried a desk of a suitable height and placed it under the window.

<<Thanks. All righty then, what's going on with Naut?>> I muttered as I climbed onto the desk.

From my new height, I could see Naut standing motionlessly with crossed arms at the plaza where Shravis had found him during the day. Itsune was sitting at a slight distance from him. Yoshu and Rossi were nowhere to be found. They were probably hiding in wait. If I looked beyond the pair, far below on the murky bog, there were numerous flickering torches. The clatter and rattling of countless suits of armor echoed out from afar.

"Oh, Mister Pig, what do we do...?" Jess asked nervously.

<<For now, as long as we stay here, we'll be safe. Clam done—I mean, calm down.>>

Even though an overpowered isekai protagonist was with me, in most cases, I was utterly powerless during crises like these—I'd felt this way during the naval battle as well. Ceres and Sanon were likely taking cover in a safe place, just like us. Our job wasn't making a difference by being on the battlefield—our fight was outside the battlefield.

<<It's not a good idea to stay too close to the window. Let's use a mirror to peer at the view below while we stay back and watch at a safe distance.>>

I indicated where Jess should position the mirror, then instructed her to adjust it so we could watch over Naut while sitting down. And so, we plopped down on the bed and waited obediently in the dark room. Jess put on her maxed out defense robe.

"Mister Pig, um... May I shuffle closer to you?"

I looked at Jess. She had a case of slight bedhead, and locks of her hair sprung up ador— *No, focus.* <<Sure, but keep it at a level where Shravis won't get mad at me.>>

Jess moved over. She was so close that her hips almost dug into my bone-in pork ribs as I lay down on the bed. Her hand stroked my back anxiously.

<<Everything will be all right. You're fine, so you don't have to come *this* close...>>

"Sorry... But, um, I'm...scared." Her voice grew smaller and smaller as she spoke.

I see. Well, fear is irrational. I can understand. <<Have you ever heard of the suspension bridge effect?>> I decided to change the topic to divert her attention.

She placed a finger on her chin and began pondering. "Hmm, I've read in a book about an efficient way to destroy suspension bridges by using their resonant frequency..."

Uh, no, why are you trying to destroy them? <<That's not what I'm talking about. I'm referring to a psychological phenomenon. When your heart is racing from fear and someone is next to you, you might mistake your pounding heart as a sign of romantic feelings, and this misattribution makes you fall in love for

real with the other party.>>

Good examples of such situations are being on swaying suspension bridges or inside a fortress under siege.

“Ah, is your heart racing, Mister Pig?”

Well, yeah. Any virgin would suffer from heart palpitations if such a beautiful maiden pressed her body against his... But that's not the point! <<No, you dummy, I'm talking about you. Make sure you never fall in love with a pig like me, okay? I mean it.>>

“Huh? Ah, um... You were referring to me? I-I won't. Don't worry.” After a moment of silence, Jess muttered in a barely perceptible voice, “So you are a virgin, I see...”

I am! I'm a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who's been single since he was in his mother's womb! My age in years is equal to the time I've been without a girlfriend! What, you've got a problem with that, huh?!

“N-No, I don't have any problems or issues with that at all.” Jess shook her head. “I mean, I'm also—”

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“Ah, my apologies...” She frowned slightly. “But, Mister Pig, didn't you say that you had a girlfriend who's super cute, has boobs that aren't overly large, and has an angelic personality?”

Oh. Right. <<We only started dating recently. Technically, you're right, but if we round down to the unit of years, my age is equal to the number of years I've been without a girlfriend, which is also nineteen years. Don't mind the details.>>

There was no response. I looked at Jess, and her honey-brown eyes stared intently into mine. <<Can I help you?>>

“Ah, um, I'm not doubting your answer or anything, but...” Her eyes were still trained on me. “I assumed you were someone who cared a lot about details, Mister Pig.”

<<You make me sound like one of those lone wolf-type inspectors at the Metropolitan Police Department who can't advance higher in the ranks because they're eccentric or stubborn... I'm surprisingly sloppy, ya know.>>

She didn't look convinced as she whispered "I see..." before smiling at me. "In that case, you're a sloppy Mister Virgin, hmm?"

My thoughts froze for a moment. *Did you really have to link those two together?*

A while into our silly conversation to pass the time, I spotted two red lights reflected in the mirror. Immediately after, they sliced across the air. Naut moved—he dodged.

Not even having a moment to analyze what had happened, something that looked like a fireball flew in our direction at a horrifying speed and crashed into our room.

A bright flash. Stone crumbled and collapsed. Smoke and clouds of dust rose into the air. My environment instantly transformed from paradise to hell.

"Mister Pig, are you all right?!"

Relief washed over me the moment I heard her voice. All I could see was total darkness. Something soft pressed against my back. <<Yeah, I'm fine, but what in the world just happened?>>

"King Eavis's robe protected us."

The darkness cleared away from my vision. Jess had lain on top of my body and shielded me with her robe. Fragments of rock tumbled down her back. We were supposed to be indoors, but when I lifted my gaze, I could see black clouds stained red as they reflected the light of flames. The splintered bed was scattered in a mess around us.

<<I don't owe thanks to that robe. You're the one who protected me, Jess.>>

A small frown knitted her eyebrows together. She looked taken aback. "I'm afraid I don't quite agree..."

Oh well. <<Let's figure out our situation while we evacuate. If our enemies

possess weapons with such fearsome firepower, high ground is actually more dangerous.>>

Jess and I cautiously walked between the gaps of the rubble and pressed on until we arrived at an area where the stairs were still somewhat intact. Hastily, we headed down. There didn't seem to be any signs of follow-up attacks.

<<I have to ask, what was that attack just now?>>

As she ran, Jess took a fleeting glance at me. "I believe it is an explosive artillery powered by mana extracted from Yethma collars. Ristae and gunpowder can't produce such devastating effects. And...based on King Eavis and King Marquis's analysis, the Clandestine Arcanist should only be able to wield feeble spells when it comes to offense."

I recalled the conversation I'd heard once upon a time. There was a specific reason why Yethma collars fetched a high price—why numerous Yethma girls were beheaded ruthlessly. Just thinking about how the Nothen Faction had accumulated their military power made all my hair stand on end. <<I see. That was very informative. Thanks.>>

We ran down the twisting and turning fortress corridors on the brink of collapse until we eventually reached ground level. The surrounding masonry was in ruins, and dotted from pillar to post were blazing remnants of the fireballs.

That was when my ears picked up the sound of footsteps on the other side of a damaged wall.

<<Someone's there.>> I marched forward and stopped in front of Jess, blocking her path forward. Judging by the sound, the other party had also halted their footsteps. *Who is it?*

"Miss Jess...!" a whispery voice rang out.

Tension melted out of my body. It was Ceres.

A girl with a slender frame appeared from the other side of the wall. She wore the exact same hazel dress, which was now slightly wrinkled. Next to her feet was a large black pig.

The black pig snorted loudly, and Ceres covered her mouth with a gasp. “I-I’m so sorry!” she whispered to Sanon.

Jess approached the younger girl. “Do you...know me?”

“No, um, ah, I-I don’t...” Ceres stammered.

She should never consider being a professional liar. I fought the urge to sigh.
<<Jess, she’s Ceres, an acquaintance of mine.>>

“Miss Ceres...” Jess muttered.

I took a sidelong glance at Jess before asking Ceres, <<Hey, Ceres, where’re Naut and the others?>>

“I was taking refuge with Mister Sanon, and I lost track of them...” she explained nervously. “I’m certain they’re in an open area with a good view, but I’m not quite sure where that would be...”

Okay, so they mustn’t be too far from their original positions in that plaza. Well, we’ve met up with Ceres, but the question is, what should I do now?

I snapped out of my thoughts when I noticed Sanon was snorting heavily with his nose while approaching Jess. *Yikes! I gotta protect Jess from this degenerate and perverted pig!*

After requesting Ceres be our wireless router, I said, <<Mister Sanon, no can do. Don’t lay your finger on—well, your snout—on *my* Jess, please.>> I stood in his way like a mountain and mustered up my most threatening presence possible.

The black pig stopped in his tracks and looked up at Jess. <Oh dear, pardon my rudeness. She was such an adorable girl that I simply could not resist. But please rest assured. I am a good Mister Pig with restraint, you see.>

“My Jess...” Jess repeated slowly.

And that was when I realized my slip of tongue. <<What I was trying to say was *my* precious owner. I didn’t mean it in a weird way, not at all.>>

The suspicion on Jess’s face cleared. “I see,” she said as she lifted her chin. “Y-Yeah, I figured that was the case. It’s all right, I understand.”

Ceres fixated her stare on me the whole time. I took note and stared back at her. <<What?>>

A tiny smile curled her lips. <So we're the same, Mister Super-Virgin.>

I harrumphed, as if to say I had no idea what she was talking about, before I addressed everyone. <<Well, it's nice seeing you guys, but going around in a big group isn't the best idea. Ceres, you're heading off to assist Naut and the others with Sanon, right? Sorry, but my duty is to distance Jess from any and all possible dangers out there. Let's part ways for now.>>

The black pig seemed to share the same opinion, and he nodded at me. <May all of us stay safe and sound.>

<<I hope so too. Please don't die in a place like this.>>

Giving me another nod, the black pig prodded Ceres before advancing in the direction we'd come from. Ceres trailed after him.

<<Since those two headed in the opposite direction, we should be safe if we keep going forward. Let's go.>>

"Okay..." While displeasure seeped out of her words, Jess nodded.

As we walked, I asked, <<Hey, what's wrong? Did something upset you?>>

Jess puffed out her cheeks with indignation and looked down at me. "Mister Super-Virgin, what did Miss Ceres mean when she said you two are the same? I've been suspecting this, but you're hiding something, aren't you?"

My mind stuttered for a moment. <<Please don't call me that. You know what it means, and when you're the one saying it out loud, you're acting out of character...>>

"You're going to avoid the topic?" Her eyes narrowed by a fraction.

I was struggling to find an explanation, so I decided to run for the hills. <<I'll tell you one day, so let's focus on the present for now. The enemy soldiers haven't advanced as far as where we are, but we mustn't let our guard down.>>

As I spoke, I noticed we'd ended up right next to the plaza in question before we knew it. I peered around the corner warily and spotted two red lights. Immediately, I stopped walking and huddled as close to the wall as possible.

<<This isn't good. Looks like we headed in the wrong direction.>>

I squinted. In the dark plaza, a swordsman with two glowing crimson swords was squaring off against something or someone on the cobblestone paving. The shawl that had been wound around his neck had come undone, fluttering in the night breeze.

"Just like I thought, *you're* the mage who's been manipulating the Nothen Faction from the shadows," Naut spat.

His opponent was a shadowy silhouette. An ashen robe wrapped around their lanky frame, and the fabric was scorched and torn in several places. They held a slender greatstaff that seemed to be made of metal colored similar to brass.

A deep, frosty voice rang out from a distance, but it was clear and sonorous. It sounded as if someone had weaved a winter night's gust into the speaker's every word. "We meet again, brat. You certainly seem to be in good health."

Naut fixed his eyes on the shadowy silhouette as he removed the *ristae* from his twin shortswords with his left fingers before tossing them onto the ground. With fluid movements like a magician, those fingers fit new *ristae* into his weapons.

"Your personal grudges seemed to have an awfully significant impact on my treatment, and now, it makes sense. *You* were the one controlling the king. What a shame you didn't manage to kill me once and for all, you old geezer. I'll make sure to pay you back double for your torture."

Ah. Naut mentioned a torturer who attended to Arrogan directly. I see, so he was the Clandestine Arcanist.

The stare-down wasn't finished. *Why isn't Naut attacking?* I thought anxiously, but then, I looked at the mage's robe and had an inkling of what had happened. The holes and the scorched parts were likely Naut's work. His attacks weren't effective at all. Realization suddenly dawned on me, and I cursed in my mind.

<<That's the Clandestine Arcanist, right?>>

<It seems so, yes.>

<<If he's a mage, he might overhear our conversation. We need to get out of here right now.>>

<Right, we should head back and call for reinforcements—>

A chilly voice echoed out. "It seems that you have troops lying in ambush, hmm?"

I felt pig bumps rising on my skin. My gut was telling me that the voice was directed at us.

The mage continued, "Oh? What if I say that I am indeed directing my speech at you?"

Jess placed her hand on the back of my neck. *Fudge. He knows we're here.*
<<I'll head out there. Run.>>

<But...>

<<Don't worry, I'm not a fighter. That's someone else's job.>>

I left her with those words and broke into a run. Jess's fingertips parted from my neck with a fleeting brush.

When I arrived by Naut's side, I finally gained a glimpse of his opponent's face, which had been hidden by the hood that was level with the mage's eyes.

He was an elderly man. A hooked nose and deep creases were the most prominent features on his terrifying face, which was framed by long white hair. Almost as if he'd bleached it, his skin was morbidly pale. Oddly, the outline of his silhouette was faint and hazy, and he gave me the impression of a shadow. Illuminated by the fireball fragments, only his golden eyes gleamed blindingly. The marks of time on him suggested that he was a man who'd witnessed many years of history, but at the same time, he also looked like he was brimming with vitality. I wondered how old he was.

The man read the narration as he pleased and gave me an answer. "I suppose I can tell you that much for reference. I am the same age as Vatis."

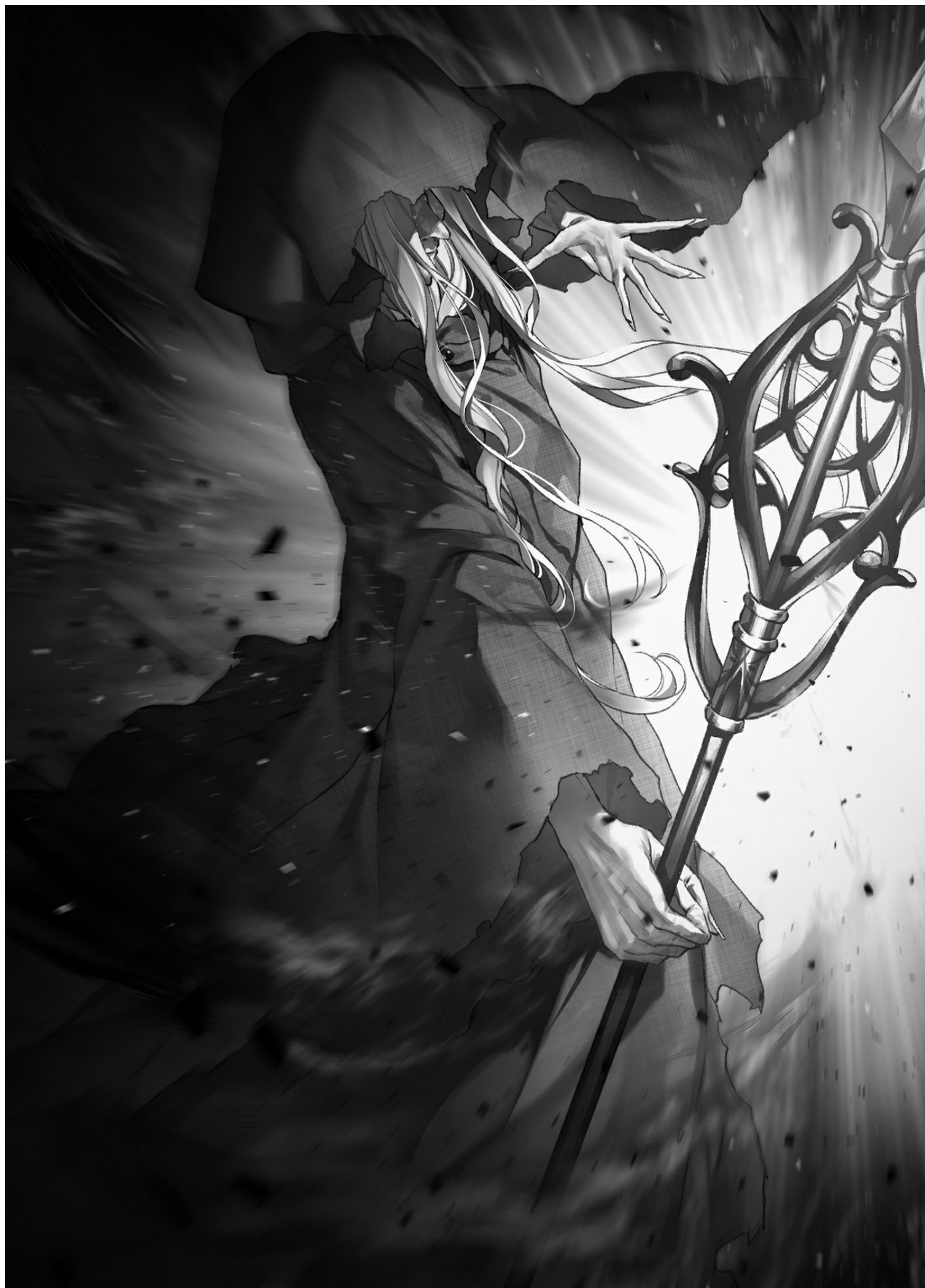
No way. That can't be true. But at the same time, it also made sense. Rather than the scenario that a mage unknown to the royal court had appeared from out of thin air, it was more natural to theorize that a mage had escaped Vatis's

magic seals and had survived to this day.

“Ah, you are the pig in question, I see. I failed to kill you at Baptsaze, but this should be our first meeting in person, I believe. Though I would like to finish you off right away as well...” There was a moment of pensive silence. “Well, I suppose it will provide entertainment to some degree. Die.”

What should I do? How is he going to attack me? Extreme tension seized my body, and every single strand of hair on my body bristled up. I stared intently at the elderly man.

The enemy raised his greatstaff. Without a moment of hesitation, I began running to evade whatever was going to come my way. At the edge of my wide pig field of vision, I saw him thrust his weapon into the ground.



I let out a piercing howl. Acute pain stabbed my stomach, and I tumbled onto the ground. I looked back, and with one of my eyes, saw the pointed tip of the elderly man's greatstaff sticking out of the cobblestone paving like a bamboo shoot. Using my other eye, I saw the body of said weapon lodged far away in the ground in front of the mage. *Hey, a long-range attack like that isn't fair!*

The next moment, Naut was on the move. He aimed for the mage while the latter was stuck in the middle of his attack animation. Naut bent forward and ferociously swung his left shortsword down at the Clandestine Arcanist. Flames lashed out from his left hand in a grand crescent arc. The inferno gushed like a waterfall and gobbled up his opponent in the blink of an eye. It didn't stop there; Naut's weapon continued its descent and shredded the cobble paving below before flashily destroying the parapet behind the man.

"Mister Pig, are you all right?"

The next thing I knew, Jess was right by my side. Pain pinned me down on the ground, and as I lay on my side, I looked up at Jess. <<Don't come here. It's dangerous.>>

"If he can attack like that, I'm in danger no matter where I go."

Her argument was flawless. I couldn't even come up with a way to refute it. <<Could you take a look at my stomach? I can't really see it.>>

"...There's a puncture wound. It's all right, I'll try to heal it." Jess placed her hand on my stomach. I felt the pain washing away. Then, she frowned, looking puzzled. "But...what is this black mark?"

I took a sidelong glance at her as I stood up. Though there was some lingering pain, it was at a level I could endure.

The Clandestine Arcanist was engulfed by flames for a while, but eventually, the blaze died out. He remained in his standing pose. His skin was charred black, exposing his white bones. *Well, that was quick. That was enough to take him down?*

Unfortunately, such an outcome was too good to be true.

Ashes flew up in a frenzy around the elderly man and gradually returned to

their original positions. Before my eyes, the lanky body regenerated. Fine ashes linked up with each other in the air and transformed into fibers, then cloth, and finally, the shape of a robe that settled down around the skinny frame.

We could only watch in a daze. In less than thirty seconds, our enemy had regained his original form. “My body has incorporated hundreds of fruits,” he said, rotating and exercising his neck. “It will not perish that easily.”

Fruits? Are they Devil Fruits or something?

Naut changed to new ristae as he addressed the elderly man. “You know, you’re quite the chatterbox. I wonder...what are you buying time for?” He slowly crossed his arms in front of his face. Immediately after, he swung his shortswords and sent an X-shaped fire in the mage’s direction. It was his signal.

The elderly man parried the flames with his greatstaff; that was when Rossi leaped out from the darkness and clamped his jaw down on the scruff of the enemy’s neck from behind. Loud crackling rang out from Rossi’s mouth, and sparks darted across his teeth. The villain in his grasp stumbled.

Rossi kicked him hard and leaped backward. Simultaneously, a sound that reminded me of a whistle echoed out, and the next thing I knew, an arrow sank deep into the enemy’s eye. His body crumpled onto the ground. Frost began covering his head. The enchantment on the arrow had taken effect.

The attack didn’t end here—a shadow brandishing a greataxe fell from a tree above, and in one fluid motion, the weapon swooped down on the elderly man’s head. Not a moment later, there was a blinding flash and a powerful impact like lightning, transforming all my visual information into a white canvas.

After my eyes adjusted, I took in the scene before me. The ground, which should have been cobblestone paving, was gouged out ruthlessly, exposing the soil beneath. The charred pieces of a human were scattered carelessly inside the pit. Naut threw three metabolic balls—each around the size of a walnut—into the pit in one go.

A roaring explosion followed.

When the smoke cleared, I peered into the pit. The only thing that maintained a semblance of its original form was the greatstaff. Nothing else was left.

“Is it over?” Itsune rested her greataxe on her shoulder as she spoke.

Naut didn’t sheathe his twin shortswords. Without a word, he stared into the pit.

What happened next sent chills down my spine.

Something moved. There was uncanny rustling, as if a swarm of cockroaches were crawling as they pleased. Naut summoned crimson flames with his twin shortswords and used them to illuminate the pit. It revealed an unbelievable sight. Charcoal remains and ashes were gathering in one place, as if they had a mind of their own.

“Stay away,” Naut commanded, and everyone present obeyed.

A silhouette stood up from the pit. Cinders swirled and twirled as they assembled and were molded into a human shape. It was as if a three-dimensional shadow was projected into the air before us.

The shadow gazed our way, but eventually, it flew outside the fortress walls. Soon, it disappeared into the distance.

Within the pit that Itsune’s lightning strike had dug out, only a lone, metal greatstaff was left behind.

A voice echoed out from behind us. “He escaped alive.”

I turned around. Shravis was standing there, unscathed.

Naut, irritated, clicked his tongue. He was seething with murderous rage. “Why didn’t you back us up, huh?”

Shravis didn’t even bat an eyelash as he approached Naut in a composed manner. “Can’t you tell? That ruffian marched into this place alone. Yet, he didn’t even try to kill you. Instead, he wasted his time by doing nothing. The reason for that should be clear: you and your group are no longer the Clandestine Arcanist’s target. His aim is the royal family. He likely planned on luring me out and killing me on the spot. That was why I didn’t show myself.”

“You sure about that? Because in my opinion, you were just being a coward.” Naut scoffed. “If we had a certain somebody’s assistance, maybe we really could’ve finished that guy off.”

“Are *you* sure about that? At the end of the day, my attacks are physical. We are against an opponent who can regenerate even if he has a hole in his brain or if lightning turns him into powder. My help would be pointless. The elderly man likely counted on that fact, which would explain why he willingly walked into a trap.”

There were no rebuttals. Shravis looked down at the bog from the gap in the damaged parapet. He continued, “It seems that the Nothen troops are retreating. For now, let’s leave this place in the hands of the royal court’s soldiers. We should withdraw as well. After such grave injuries, I’m certain the Clandestine Arcanist won’t return all that quickly.”

“If that’s what you say.” Naut shrugged flippantly. “We’ll head off to get some rest.”

And with that, Naut left with Itsune. Rossi kept glancing back at us as he trotted after his owner. Only Jess, Shravis, and I were left behind in the plaza that was on its last legs.

“Um, Mister Shravis...” Next to me, Jess called out in a strained voice.

“What is it?”

“Mister Pig has... His stomach has a...” she stammered.

In brisk strides, Shravis approached me, crouched down, and observed my stomach. “This pattern is...” He scrunched his eyebrows together.

<<Is there something special about this pattern you’re talking about?>>

“There’s no mistaking it. It’s the curse that killed grandfather. This black pattern ate away at his entire body, and he passed away.”

Shravis manifested a metallic disc in his hand and held it next to my eyes. In its reflection, I saw a black pattern with a design that reminded me of brittle stars spreading on the pig’s flank. The pattern already took up an area bigger than a human palm, and even as I observed it during this very moment, it was gradually expanding. The area affected began protesting by throbbing with an unpleasant, icy ache, as if I’d caught a fever.

<<Is there...no cure?>> I asked slowly.

Shravis cast his gaze down. "...Grandfather was killed by this curse," he repeated the same conclusion.

I knew what he was implying. This was a curse that had defeated the unparalleled mage of Mesteria—how could anyone stand a chance?

"No, that can't be... This can't be happening, I..." Jess slumped onto the ground weakly. She placed a hand on my back and pleaded with teary eyes.

I still couldn't believe what was happening either. It felt surreal. *Am I going to die? Am I going to die in a place like this?* <<I can bear the pain. Is it possible for you to dig out the areas with the pattern and regenerate my flesh afterward?>> Immediately after I made my proposal, intense pain seized my body, but it vanished right away. However, the icy throbbing didn't vanish with it.

"It's futile, Jess." Shravis shook his head. "If such a method was effective, grandfather would have amputated his right arm."

"Mister Shravis, please," Jess begged in a choked-up voice. "Please save him."

Shravis chewed on his lip. "If it were within my power, I would. I want to save him too."

My mind was blank. There was silence—no one spoke a word. The night, which had just begun reclaiming its tranquil hush, began to be filled with echoes of Jess's sobbing instead. Just listening to it made my heart clench.

<<Come on, Jess, don't cry,>> I coaxed gently. <<Look, I'm just a random pig. Why are you so hung up—>>

"Of course I am...!" She was heaving with sobs, and her voice was shaky with tears. "You're my first friend, Mister Pig."

<<A girl like you can easily make a million friends as long as you have time. Don't worry.>>

"That's not... It won't be the same. It's not..." She sobbed. "You're special, Mister Pig. You're always by my side, and you always place me first no matter where or when... It's not the same..."

It's only natural for me to do that. I'm her fan, after all.

The ache didn't stop. It only magnified as seconds ticked by. Eavis seemed to

have lasted for a good while, but my curse progressed rapidly. I wondered whether the difference was his magic. By now, the pain already crept up to the base of my neck.

“Mister Pig, didn’t you have a super cute girlfriend with boobs that aren’t overly large and an angelic personality? If you died, she would definitely be really sad. So... So, you can’t die like this...”

A maiden who was super cute, had boobs that aren’t overly large, and had an angelic personality was shedding tears before my eyes. *Yeah. If I had a girlfriend like her, she’d mourn me for sure.* <<Did I forget to tell you? If I die in this world, I can return to my original world. Therefore, if I die here, I’ll get to see her faster.>>

Jess’s eyes widened with surprise. “Oh...”

<<See? You don’t have to be so sad in her stead. Everything’s fine.>>

“But...I’m very sad.”

<<You’re a kind girl.>>

“I’m not, I just...don’t want you to leave. I can’t control it. My heart is saying that I don’t want you to leave, and it hurts.”

Even just standing became painful, so I bent my knees to lie down on the ground. The pain began assaulting my limbs.

“Mister Pig, no!” Jess threw her arms around me. In the corner of my vision, I saw Shravis’s feet suddenly turn away from us. “Please, I’m begging you. Please don’t snatch away someone precious to me... Not again...”

Her voice didn’t sound like it was aimed at me. It almost felt as if she was directing it somewhere in the distance—perhaps at the boundless starry sky on the other side of the bulky clouds.

The next thing I knew, the sky lit up. Clouds parted, and the scarlet light of the morning sun flowed in from afar.

The pain was gone. *No way, could it be...?*

Jess released me. Shravis, who was standing in front of me, was still facing away from us. <<Shravis! Can you lend me the mirror from earlier?>> I

exclaimed as I stood up.

Shravis turned around. His eyes grew wide. “Jess!” he yelled, his voice shaky and taut.

Frantically, I turned around. Behind me, Jess was collapsed on the cobblestone paving, her limbs tossed around carelessly. Limp. She closed her eyes and placed a hand on her stomach. Her breathing was labored and pained.

Sucking in a sharp breath of realization, Shravis tugged up Jess’s clothes to expose her stomach. What I saw there was...

My mind stuttered.

What I saw there was a dense, murky black mesh pattern covering her skin.

Did... Did Jess transfer my curse to her own body...?

This time, it was my turn to panic. <<Jess, get a grip!>>

Muffled groans wrested out of her throat like an injured little critter. Her eyes cracked open a little, and she gave me a feeble smile, only able to lift the corners of her lips. “Oh... I’m so glad... You’re all better now, Mister Pig...”

This can’t be happening. Oy. Come on. Someone tell me this isn’t real. This doesn’t make any sense. After such a sequence of events, anyone would predict that I was supposed to die here, tying up the story. That’s what was supposed to happen. Why is Jess... She can’t be... Someone wake me up...

<<No, don’t do this to me, Jess... You can’t die here...>>

“You’re a kind person, Mister Pig.”

No. That’s not the point. Don’t say such silly nonsense. <<Didn’t you have someone precious to you? You wanted to remember them, didn’t you? Are you really fine with dying before you regain your memories?>>

The pattern of the curse spread as if it were a fire burning through a piece of paper. Soon, it crept onto the bottom of her neck. It reached out, hungrily aiming for Jess’s petite chin with its wicked tendrils.

Shravis was flustered. He looked lost, and his gaze darted back and forth. I was just as lost, standing motionlessly next to Jess.

“There is someone by my side when I die, and he is even mourning for me. That is more than enough. I’m happy.” Jess’s eyelids fluttered shut. Fragile tears slid down the sides of her face and shattered on the cobblestone below. “I’ll go back to my initial guess, Mister Pig. Let’s just say that you’re my precious someone after all.”

The black mesh pattern crossed over the contours of Jess’s chin and began eating into her face. The curse refused to stop, sinking into and staining her slender arms, then her legs that used to be so beautiful and pristine.

This can’t be happening. If I knew it would come to this, I should have worked up the courage earlier, even if it was just once. <<Jess, listen. I’m—>>

And that was when, ever so slightly, Jess’s eyes opened. They were bright, as if a realization had sparked to life. <I finally know why the key is so big.> I was the only thing captured in her gorgeous, honey-brown eyes.

What?

She closed her eyes with joy, and her eyelids pushed out more tears that trickled down and traced her face.

The black pattern didn’t falter. It expanded without rest until it swallowed Jess’s body whole.

I was powerless.

Her petite, clenched hands, covered with the obsidian black mesh pattern, gently went limp and fluttered open like a butterfly.

Fragment 5: My Precious...

The pretty stars of the night sky were looking down at me. I clasped my hands together and shut my eyes.

Please. Heading to the capital alone is a daunting task. I cannot do it. I really can't.

I am so lonely, so very scared, that it is unbearable.

So please, I am begging you, please.

O stars, please guide someone to my side. Someone who can leave on a journey with me. Someone who will save me.

After praying and making the most selfish wish possible, I opened my eyes.

An unbelievable scene unfolded before me.

One, two... Ten... Twenty... Countless shooting stars began blazing trails across the sky all at once.

And then, the next day, I—

Chapter 5: When the Amnesia Trope Is Involved, Love Remains Unrequited

The funeral's atmosphere was so oppressive that even the air felt heavier.

Inside the great expanse of the Golden Cathedral lay a solitary coffin. The only humans present in the cathedral were parents and their child—Marquis, Wyss, and Shravis—and among their midst was a single, intruding pig. However, I couldn't afford to be absent from this funeral. I owed too many things to the person in the coffin. I had to be here.

King Marquis indifferently led the proceedings. He didn't make any particular displays of emotion. The funeral was over in the blink of an eye.

According to Shravis, just supervising the management of Mesteria was already a tough job, but now the royal couple also had to worry about threats such as the invasion of the Nothen Faction or the attacks of an immortal mage, which meant that they were so awfully encumbered by work that he feared they would tear their hair out and turn bald. Therefore, they hadn't had much choice; they had to cut down the funeral to minimal procedures.

The affair was held on the evening of a beautiful, fine day. I recalled my first farewell in this place. Just like that fateful day, the bright light of the westering sun filtered in from the stained glass, projecting vivid images on the floor of the dim cathedral. After observing it thoroughly, I realized something for the first time. The stained glass depicted a kind-looking woman ascending to heaven.

After returning from the funeral, Shravis said in an impassive tone, "Apparently, they could not find any method to erase the marks left by the curse. They will cremate the remains and leave only bones behind."

Shravis and I were walking up a grand, long staircase made of white marble. Carvings and sculptures decorated it.

The capital was a city of stone that covered a mountaintop. When I turned around on the staircase, I had a broad overlooking view of the grayscale

cityscape and the vast, dark-green Needle Woods far below the mountain.

<<...Does that mean you don't usually do cremations?>>

"Indeed. When I was young, I once had the opportunity to see Lady Vatis's remains during a ritual, and..." He paused. "I remember it clearly. It hadn't dried nor decayed. It retained her noble visage almost perfectly—to a terrifying degree."

Shravis's speech was more hurried than usual. Perhaps he was trying to avert his contemplation from the topic of death. I decided to go along with him.

<<But she's someone from roughly a century ago, isn't she?>>

"Yes. However, at times, powerful sorcery can even conquer death itself... But of course, there is no precedent of the dead resurrecting. Other than you, that is."

Shravis was kind enough to add that tidbit, maybe because it was just after a funeral.

<<There are spells that can prevent people from dying, right? Just like how we couldn't kill that Clandestine Arcanist?>>

"That seems to be the case. Though I hear that we still haven't a clue about what kind of spell he used." With a sigh, Shravis continued, "That said, we gained invaluable knowledge: the abilities and traits of our enemy. That elderly man is under some kind of magical protection, and physical damage cannot kill him. As for his curse, its range is relatively short. After we analyzed the greatstaff left behind, we learned that the only enchantments on it were spells to enhance it physically and a simple transformation spell."

He explained, "In the cobble paving and ground of the Stonecrown Fortress, we discovered a tunnel that had been dug out by the greatstaff. His attack back then hadn't ignored distance and space itself. Unless he makes contact with his target through some kind of medium, he can't cast his curse. In other words, it is fatal if it hits, but it's possible to prepare countermeasures."

Though he seemed to be talking to me, his gaze was fixed on something in the distance ahead of us as he spoke. He seemed to be organizing his thoughts through this exchange. *He's a solemn and serious guy*, I thought. <<So, at the

end of the day, that elderly man's aim wasn't Naut, but the mages of the royal court, huh?>>

"I believe so, yes. Our enemy is invulnerable to physical attacks, and to him, a mere human like Naut doesn't even pose a threat. If he wants to kill Naut, he can do it whenever he wants to. Clearly, his top priority is to steadily eliminate the royal court's pieces one by one." Shravis turned around to face the cathedral. "And he has already found success."

<<I see.>>

Silence.

Finally, Shravis turned his gaze to me. "Pig, could you head to Jess's room for a moment with me?"

<<But she's—>>

He cut me short. "It's fine. There's something I want to show you."

Under Shravis's lead, I headed to Jess's room. The living room, which featured a writing desk, was deserted. The windows were open, allowing a breeze to breathe in quietly. On the other side of the living room was a door that led to Jess's bedroom.

Inside, Jess silently slept; the only sound was her subdued breathing echoing out.

<<She still won't wake up?>>

Shravis briefly glanced at Jess as he replied, "What happened was unprecedented. No one knows when she will rouse."

The pattern of the curse was no longer on Jess's cheeks.

Frankly, it had been a miraculous coincidence. Moments after the curse had overtaken Jess's entire body, she had undergone ecdysia, a phenomenon that was also referred to as molting for mages. All spells and enchantments—including the mage's own magic—would be wiped away, returning to a clean slate. The fatal curse with a countdown had dissipated pathetically during her ecdysia, unable to even put up a resistance.

"I don't think it was a coincidence though," Shravis commented.

<<Excuse me?>>

“I’m referring to your narration. Ecdysia happens abruptly to young mages when their magic undergoes rapid and extreme fluctuation. Likely, Jess’s magic was stimulated as death loomed over her for one reason—because *you*, of all people, were there with her. She was convinced that her sealed memories were moments she shared with you, and she had the powerful desire to recover them, even if it was for a fleeting moment before she perished. Her desire caused a powerful movement of her magic, which was intent on releasing grandfather’s seal. That was why she underwent ecdysia at that precise timing.”

Oh. So that’s what happened. <<Wait, don’t tell me...did your gramps anticipate such a future and do everything knowingly...?>>

“Who knows? He has already taken the truth to the grave. And soon, it will become nothing but ashes.”

Shravis and I returned to the living room. The prince shut the bedroom door. He cast his gaze down, and after a moment of hesitation, he muttered, “But knowing grandfather, I suppose that possibility isn’t far-fetched.”

Mesteria’s previous king had been a man with superior foresight that no one could hope to match. His death marked the reemergence of turmoil, and this nation had been plunged into chaos once again. However, it was also the first step forward on our path to overwrite the ways of this disfigured world with our own hands.

<<Okay then, what did you want to talk about again?>>

“Well, take a seat first.” Shravis pointed at the floor while he settled in Jess’s office chair. *Bruh, is he a super sadistic prince by nature or something?*

After I obediently sat on the floor, Shravis pulled out a book from Jess’s desk. It was bound with burnt umber leather and was roughly the size of a *bunkobon*—a paperback that was slightly larger than a pocket notebook.

“You can read our language, right? Take a look.” He opened the book to the first page and placed it in front of me. Thanks to Jess’s magic, using Mesterian was a breeze for me.

On the cream-colored paper was a neat, beautiful script written with a black

pen. It seemed to be a diary.

Royal Year 129, Seventh Month, Seventh Day

Memories are very unreliable things. I wanted to leave my recollections in a place where they would stay, which is why I began writing this diary.

I felt like I had woken up for the first time this morning. One shock came after another, and my thoughts are still a mess. The only facts I know for sure are that I somehow arrived at the capital and even learned how to use magic.

The greatest surprise, however, is that I've been welcomed into the royal bloodline as the fiancée of the noble king's grandson. I'm overjoyed by such an unexpected honor. But for some reason, I feel like I'm forgetting something important. It's as if I left a bookmark in an unknown place inside my head, and the thought plagues and nags at me to an unbearable extent.

The noble king told me he sealed away my memories for a reason he can't disclose.

Shravis used his magic to flip over a few pages without using his hands.

Seventh Month, Fourteenth Day

Today, I managed to move items with magic for the first time ever. It's simpler than I assumed.

I still can't recall a thing about my journey, no matter how hard I try. I only remember that I mustn't forget those memories, but I've forgotten what I should remember. It's very painful. King Eavis is a thoughtful and exceedingly kind man, so why is he doing something so cruel?

He turned more pages.

Eighth Month, First Day

Starting this month, I will learn spells that will allow me to create and manifest things. To do that, first, I have to study how things are constructed.

When I thought about how difficult the structure of this world must be, I felt a little dizzy.

I nodded off during my self-study session and had a strange dream. In it, I was inside a dark forest. Someone was right by my side, and they promised we'd be together until the bitter end. I was so happy, and while choosing my words of gratitude, I woke up.

I was alone, reading a book.

Many pages turned over at once.

Eighth Month, Twenty-Eighth Day

I succeeded at creating oxygium today. Just like what I'd learned, when I added oxygium winds to a flame, the fire became rather bright. The way my body survives by breathing oxygium seems somehow similar to how flames burn by consuming it. Is there a connection between the two? I'll investigate tomorrow.

When I looked up at the beautiful night sky, I started spontaneously shedding tears. My intuition tells me I won't find the reason no matter how much time I spend researching it. Why do I feel that way?

A few pages flipped over.

Ninth Month, Third Day

During today's lesson, I continued practicing my control over water. I'm struggling because of how elusive it is.

I felt a little vexed and stuck, but Madame Wyss took me to the summit of the capital, which has a wonderful view. Apparently, the dragon Mister Marquis created would take off and land here. The scenery was gorgeous indeed.

While looking at the mountains in the direction of Kiltyrie, I started shedding tears for no apparent reason again. Lately, I've been crying all the time. I should

start toughening up already. I must become a stronger person.

Dozens of pages flew by at once.

Tenth Month, Ninth Day

I wasn't able to write anything during my visit to Nearbell. Today is the first time in a while that I have had a chance to write a diary entry. A lot of things happened. I could never hope to fit everything inside here, so I'll only note one thing.

Yesterday, Mister Pig abruptly appeared in front of me. Though he's actually a man, he somehow turned into a pig, according to him. He's a mysterious person. His knowledge is vast, and my intuition tells me that he knows me in some way. Well, he denied that possibility though.

During the battle at Nearbell, Mister Pig desperately protected me. I had the honor of riding on his back during the incident, but for some odd reason, my tears brimmed over there as well. It was a curious sensation—just like how I felt when I looked up at the night sky and those mountains.

Mister Pig said he'll continue to stay by my side from now on.

Shravis took away the diary in front of me and returned it to its original place. "On some pages, she only wrote about the topic of her lessons, but as you can see, most of her diary is filled with you. Her dedication is admirable and moving, isn't it?" Long legs recrossed in front of me. "...Who in the world would want to take such a girl as his bride?"

Hearing the sigh mingling in his voice, I lifted my head. <<Do you plan on calling off your betrothal?>>

He shook his head. "It was never official in the first place. But...considering Jess's situation right now, if I want the best for her, then I have no intention of ending this relationship. Now that grandfather has left us, the verbal promise of our union is the only thing connecting Jess to the royal court."

<<Then why did you show me the diary?>>

“Just like Jess, I’m a lonely person. Surely you won’t mind sparing a moment of your time indulging and chatting with me for a bit.” Below his thick brows, Shravis’s eyes weren’t smiling, but the clumsiest of smiles attempted to lift the corners of his lips. I realized he was forcing himself and trying to lift the mood with false cheer.

<<I see. You don’t know how you should interact with Jess from now on, and that’s troubling you, isn’t it?>>

“Precisely.” After a pause, he continued, “To be honest, if I had the opportunity to be with a woman like Jess, I would happily take it. Someone responsible, passionate, and withholds such a beautiful personality is few and far between.” He hesitated. “Plus, her chest isn’t overly large.”

Huh? What was that? I gaped at him, eyes wide.

Shravis’s face gained a tint of scarlet. “That was a joke. You were supposed to laugh just now.”

He should never consider becoming a comedian. For a moment there, I was celebrating, thinking I had found a kindred soul!

After clearing his throat, Shravis announced, “Let’s return to serious business. I want to talk about Jess and her future. There’s a decision we have to make.”

<<Go on.>>

“It’s about her memories. The ecdysia that Jess underwent dispelled the Clandestine Arcanist’s curse, but the final seal grandfather cast on her memories was removed along with it. The next time Jess wakes up, she should have regained all her memories.”

I see... Yeah, he’s right. <<Is there a problem with that?>>

“When that happens, are you...are you and Jess truly fine with how things are? Do you think it’s acceptable for Jess to remain my fiancée?”

My mind stuttered for a moment.

<<During his last moments, Eavis told me to go back. He asked me to stay by Jess’s side until the right moment, then return to my world during that meaningful moment. If I don’t, I’ll never have a chance to go back to my world

again. I can't stay by Jess's side forever and ever.>> After a moment of hesitation, I declared firmly, <<After I disappear, I want to leave Jess in your hands. So please, let things stay this way.>>

Shravis's eyes seemed to be wavering. "I see. In that case, there's a proposal from father." Once again, he recrossed his legs restlessly and heaved a great sigh. "Sealing memories is a highly sophisticated spell that only grandfather could use. In the present, no one can hope to achieve the same effects. But...*erasing* memories is something performed daily on Yethma and the capital's other citizens. Father, mother, and even professional capital citizens are capable of doing so."

My heart skipped a beat. Pig bumps rose on my skin. <<You mean...you want to erase Jess's memories?>>

"I'm just saying it's one of our options. Her memories with you are too significant—too *heavy* a burden to shoulder for the rest of her lifetime. If you're going to disappear, I'm sure that she'd be better off without them. Between your departure and the seal on her memories, Jess was practically in a vegetative state. Erasing her memories means that she would be spared from the same suffering."

Shravis let out a slow exhale. "But unlike a seal, wiped memories will never be restored. Even if you end up regretting your decision, it's out of our hands. Unlike the seal, she won't even recall the fact that something had happened—that she's forgotten something."

Jess's speech about the bookmark flashed through my mind. *"If memories were something like a book, my present condition is like this: the pages starting from my departure up to my life in the capital are drenched and stuck together. But there's a bookmark sticking out, and I'm left with the strong desire to read the section again, even if I can't remember anything else..."*

If I used the same metaphor, erasing her memories was something like tearing the pages out and trashing them. The bookmark within would be thrown away with those pages, so Jess wouldn't be tormented by it anymore.

My mind went to Jess's diary. On the one hand, I was happy that I was such an important part of her world. But on the other, the fact that I hadn't—

couldn't stay by her side, despite how much she'd needed me, was like a stake impaling my pork heart.

Returning to Japan would mean that her pain would haunt her until the day she died.

If that's the alternative...I almost wish I could turn back time and stop it all from happening.

Maybe it's better if Jess and I never met in the first place.

And now...I have that opportunity.

It was almost like an act of true love trope in a moving romance novel. I could've never predicted that I'd come across such a choice in my life, not even in my wildest dreams.

There was only one right answer. I hadn't come to Mesteria to enjoy fluffy days with Jess before turning around and heading straight home. *Of course not. Isn't that obvious? I returned here to protect Jess's happiness. I'm here to take care of lingering regrets.*

Hardening my resolve, I turned to Shravis. <<Please erase them. Erase...all the memories that Eavis sealed away.>>

"I see," Shravis whispered before his tiny smile grew wider. This time, it was a smile from the bottom of his heart. "Hearing that brings me relief. I fully understand the extent of your resolve and your feelings for Jess. I will make sure to advise father to refrain from erasing her memories at all costs."

That evening—well, more like morning—as the sky began growing bright just before sunrise, Jess's eyes opened. Her soft, drowsy groan was what woke me since I had curled up and slept next to the bed. Inside the dimly lit room, Jess, in her nightwear, stood up from the bed without a word. She then walked away before returning with a small silver chest and a large golden key in her hands.

With a noncommittal expression, Jess stood in front of me. "Um... Mister Pig," she began hesitantly.

<<Yeah?>>

“Can you hold this key in your mouth and insert it into the keyhole on this small chest?” She knelt and leaned forward slightly as she offered the key to me. Her filmy white nightgown swayed with her movements, and just looking at her made my heart leap into my throat with anxiety. If we were in a brightly lit room, this scene might’ve not made it past the censors.

<<Uh... I’m very close to seeing a bunch of...things I shouldn’t be seeing, so could you get changed before we continue?>>

She shook her head. “This can’t wait. Please.”

If she leaned forward any farther, I would be in great trouble. Alarmed, I frantically accepted the key with my mouth. Compared to the tip, the head had a rather large design, so even my pig mouth could hold it easily. In fact, it almost seemed like a key specifically designed so that even a pig could carry it.

Jess’s words back when she’d shouldered the curse in my stead echoed in my mind. *“I finally know why the key is so big.”* When she’d embraced the possibility of death, this key had been on her mind.

A young maiden in a state of undress and tousled hair was holding out a small chest in front of her body, waiting for me. I tottered over to her and looked at her face. Her serene, honey-brown eyes stared directly back into mine.

“Please,” she whispered. “Come on, put it inside.” Jess turned the chest until the keyhole faced me and held it farther forward, ushering me.



I took a step forward and awkwardly positioned the key.

There was an odd sense of tension in the air.

Gingerly, I slotted the key in. With a soft click, the chest opened.

Jess carefully lifted the lid and immediately took out the contents. What the chest had held was a folded-up light green scarf and a glass pendant. She held up the pendant and allowed light to filter through it. Her moist eyes reflected the image of a pig and a girl. With trembling hands, she placed the pendant around her neck. The glass that held our crystallized memories pressed against the tender skin beneath her collarbones.

“I...remember everything now.” A tiny voice rang out. “King Eavis gave me this chest and key during our last conversation. He told me that only a certain someone heavily involved in my sealed memories could open it.”

<<The seal’s gone, huh?>> I asked as I placed the key on the carpet. Eavis’s kindness must be the reason he’d deliberately designed it for a pig.

“Um... I really...I really don’t know what I should say during moments like these...” Jess clasped the scarf tightly as she spoke in a voice so faint that it almost melted into the air.

Same here, actually. I’d love to say something slightly tasteful or sensible, but asking her “Please don’t eat me, ma’am!” probably isn’t quite right.

And so, I decided to speak my mind honestly. <<It’s nice seeing you again.>>

Jess’s eyes grew misty. She nodded silently. <Sorry. It’s just that if I speak out loud, I think I’ll end up crying.>

<<Me too. If I speak out loud, I think I’ll end up crying like an animal.>>

Hearing the joke that had the worst timing ever, Jess grinned wide enough to flash her teeth. The sounds that made it out of her throat weren’t laughter, however, but choked sobbing.

“Mister...Pig...” Her hands cupped my pork cheeks, and she pushed her forehead against mine. Before my eyes, tears glistened on her long lashes like dew. Subdued hiccupping shook her frame, and I could feel her sobbing within my very bones. “I knew it... You were right beside me all this time.”

Her voice was shaky. Fragile. And I had to fight back tears as I said, <<Well, I just felt that our farewell was a little too soon.>>

Tears fell from the tip of her eyelashes and shattered on my snout. “You’re awful...” Her voice was strained, like she’d wrung it out of the back of her throat. My body froze, as if I’d been possessed by sleep paralysis. “Why...? Why did you leave me?”

The direct question struck me like lightning, and for a moment, I was at a loss for words. <<I... Didn’t I explain back then? With Eavis around, that was my only choice.>> My answer was the furthest thing from direct, unlike her.

“You always supported me, Mister Pig. You never gave up on me... So why did you...” Sobbing broke up her voice.

I couldn’t find a reply. It was my fault.

Jess rubbed her forehead against my hard cranium. “I thought I’d never see you again for the rest of my life. Do you even know how painful that was for me?”

<<Sorry...>>

“And even after we got to see each other again, you...you pretended I was a complete stranger... How could you be so cruel? You should have known how desperate I was to remember you. You should have known how I felt...”

My circumstances tied my hands, wasn’t the reply I should—no, *could* offer. Everyone had their own justifiable reasons for their decisions. What she was questioning was whether I would choose to use mine as an excuse.

<<The blame is all mine. I prioritized my own convenience over your feelings, Jess. I’m sorry.>>

“That’s right, it’s your fault, Mister Pig. It’s all your fault. All this time, I’ve—”

I never got a chance to hear the end of that sentence. Jess clutched my cheeks, continued to press her forehead against mine, and began bawling loudly. I felt Jess’s fragrance envelop me as I relished the moment—we were finally and truly reunited, and the only reaction I could offer was the silent tears trickling down my cheeks.

Jess finally regained her composure after breakfast, and she took me on a tour around the laboratory. It looked like a cave dug out of a rock wall.

The lab was split into two rooms—one displayed a wide range of items on shelves, while the other was a simple room with only stone chairs and tables. The light flowing in from the small windows and the illumination of the magical lanterns hanging on the walls faintly lit up the rudimentary interior.

“During the three months you were absent, I practiced magic here.” Jess touched one stone table. She’d already changed into her everyday outfit. Her hair had been arranged neatly, and her state of dress was prim and proper. “Hmm? Are you implying something, Mister Pig? Would you prefer I wear my nightgown?”

<<Oh, I could never think that. I’m not a pervert... Also, don’t read the narration.>>

Melodious chuckles flowed out of her mouth as she placed the glass cup she’d been holding on the table. “I’ve wanted to show off for the longest time. I can do so many new and exciting things, and I wanted someone to watch. Could you be my special audience, Mister Pig?” she asked in a bubbly voice.

I nodded. <<Of course. I’d love to watch, actually. Especially spells that don’t involve spraying fuel everywhere and making explosions.>>

“Um, just putting it out there, but that’s technically the spell I practiced the most...”

I detected a slightly sullen note in her tone, which intrigued me. <<Why did you practice that spell so hard?>>

“I...wanted strength.”

Uh... Hey, you’re not a shonen manga protagonist.

She continued, “There was a faint voice inside my mind. I felt as if someone once told me to find happiness with my own power. That’s why I focused on powerful spells that would help me protect myself. I practiced lots.”

<<...Oh.>>

Who in the world had the gall to tell her to find happiness with her own power in a world full of injustice like this? Sheesh, he must be an outrageously irresponsible bastard.

Merrily, Jess placed her hand over the glass cup. A transparent and colorless liquid welled up from the bottom. “This is water.” When she lifted her palm, the cup drifted into the air and moved until it was right above me. “As you can see, I’ve even mastered moving things without touching them directly. Controlling matter that has a distinct shape isn’t too difficult.”

I had an ominous premonition. Not a second later, Jess inclined her hand slightly and turned the cup upside down directly above me. The water that had filled the cup rained down, and I shrunk back my ears—but to my surprise, the water stopped just above my snout, swirling as it was suspended in midair.

“I can also control things that don’t have a definite shape. Just a little though.” Jess spread out her hands, and the swirling water transformed into thin streams that began rotating around her in a spiral. The maiden shrouded in a veil of water stood on her tiptoes and did an elegant turn like a ballerina. Her fine, silky golden locks fluttered in the air. The water transformed into tiny droplets before dissipating into nothing.

“Mister Pig, I think you forgot to close your mouth,” she said mischievously. “Couldn’t take your eyes off me?”

I shut my gaping mouth. <<Amazing... Breathtakingly beautiful.>>

“Thank you. There’s even more. Please watch me.”

Like an excited child, Jess demonstrated all kinds of spells to me. A spell that could heat water and boil it in the blink of an eye. A spell that burned alcohol—or to be more specific, ethanol—to form orange flames. Then, a spell that burned a substance between water and alcohol—likely, she was referring to methanol—to create dark blue flames.

“Here’s an interesting fact about this dark flame. If I mix in salt and saltlike things, I can transform it into all kinds of colors.” She explained this almost as if she was conducting a hands-on science lesson while she proceeded to transform the several burning flames on the table into colors like red, yellow, green, blue, and violet. The colorful flames flickering inside the dim lab were

reflected in her honey-brown eyes, making them shine like jewels.

<<Downright gorgeous... What an amazing spell. Is learning magic fun?>>

Jess gave me an enthusiastic nod. “Yes! This world is wonderful. There are proper rules and structures to everything, even the smallest parts, almost like someone had decided on the regulations beforehand! The more I learn, the more rules I can apply and use to my advantage.”

Watching Jess eagerly give an impromptu, passionate speech affirmed one conclusion in my mind. Just like I’d thought, this maiden had boundless potential—it wasn’t right for her to waste it on a life as an oppressed slave. My initial assessment that she’d become an impressive scholar was likely on the mark.

<<If you keep working hard, I have a feeling that you’ll become an independent and accomplished mage in no time.>>

She relished those words, giving me a shy but joyful smile, then shook her head slowly. “No, all the things I’ve demonstrated are only a small first step into the world of magic. Some things in this world require more than one lifetime to finish learning. In the library, just the books about magic are numerous enough to bury me alive... Not to mention that there are apparently concepts and realms in this universe that can’t be explained by any existing theories.”

I felt as if it had been a long time since I’d seen Jess in such high spirits. <<That’s great. You seem like you’re having a fulfilling life. I can breathe a sigh of relief.>>

“Yes. Studying is very fun,” she replied enthusiastically. Then, the tone of her voice grew lower and a little more solemn. “Um... I was being extremely unreasonable earlier, but in my mind, I’m aware of the truth. I know that I owe all the happiness I have now to you, Mister Pig. And...I know your decision to leave Mesteria was necessary if I wanted to stay here.”

Jess put out all the flames and looked directly at me. “Please allow me to voice my gratitude again. Thank you. Thank you very much.” She bowed. “And...I’m so sorry. Earlier, I lost my composure slightly just now, and I...”

The abrupt thanks and apology took me by surprise. I wasn’t sure how to

react. <<Nah... It's fine, really. In fact, I'm happier when you express your feelings to me directly like that. As an otaku who hasn't undergone professional training to learn the ways of a woman's heart, unless you tell me clearly, I won't get the message.>>

"Is that so...?" Jess muttered before she approached me. She knelt on the ground until she was at the same eye level as me. "In that case, there's one more thing I want to say."

<<Okay...>> I braced myself. <<Go on.>>

"You don't have to worry about me anymore. Just like you asked me to, I'll find happiness with my own power, and I won't go back on those words. I'll work hard so that I can lead a respectable life, even if I don't cling to you, Mister Pig."

<<...I'm glad to hear that.>> My heart had skipped a beat out of anxiety, but after hearing what she had to say, I felt relief wash over me. *Good. With this, once my duty is over, I won't have any qualms about—*

Jess's arms were suddenly thrown around my body. She hugged me tight. "So please, Mister Pig, I'm begging you... Don't leave me behind ever again."

The lab door opened, shattering the silence. "Oh my... I didn't mean to intrude." The gaze directed at the embracing girl and pig belonged to Wyss.

Flustered, Jess released me. "S-Sorry, um, we were just..."

We hadn't done anything wrong. At least, I believed we hadn't, but I still felt an odd sense of guilt. The prince's mother aimed a smile at me. Her unsaid message seemed to be, "You are fortunate that you are in the form of a pig."

Then, Wyss turned to Jess. "I have been looking for you."

"Sorry, I just wanted to, um, practice magic for a bit..."

Wyss's noncommittal gaze shifted to me.

<<She's telling the truth. We honestly haven't done anything out of line...>>

Placing a hand over her mouth, Wyss chuckled gracefully. "I know. Though you might assume otherwise, I didn't come all the way here to reproach the

two of you for staying in the lab.” Her expression schooled into a solemn one as she looked at Jess. “Possibly as soon as tomorrow, King Eavis’s sacred remains will be cremated. You didn’t have the opportunity to attend the funeral, Jess, so if you wish to bid farewell to him, I suggest you head over before the end of today.”

Jess and I decided to go along with Wyss’s proposal.

We headed to the Golden Cathedral. The sacred building, where the royal family’s ancestors were enshrined, was located at the end of a long flight of stairs nestled a little deeper than Jess’s private quarters. It was a gigantic cathedral built with black stone and embellished with gold ornaments—you could never miss it.

The two of us were the only ones present. The citizens of the capital were usually prohibited from entry, based on what I’d heard. Beneath the towering dome ceiling, Jess clasped her hands and dedicated her prayers to Eavis in his coffin. Next to her, I lowered my head as well.

For a long time, Jess shut her eyes and prayed silently.

Finally, she opened her eyes and said, “Shall we take our leave now?” She began walking to the front entrance of the cathedral. Jess’s unhurried footsteps and the tottering of a quadrupedal pig echoed inside the stillness of the hall.

“King Eavis was a rather curious individual, wasn’t he?”

<<He really was.>>

“I think he foresaw many, many things about the future.”

I looked up at Jess. <<For instance?>>

“The most significant one is my memories. He refused to tell me his reason for sealing them away, but when I was under the influence of that curse, you tried to reveal your true identity moments before my death. I used the key King Eavis gave me as a hint and arrived at the conclusion that you were the person I bookmarked, and as a result of me making every effort to release the seal, I underwent ecdysia... If all of this was planned, it means that I am alive right now because of him.”

<<That's a good point. Knowing him, I wouldn't be surprised if he calculated that far.>>

"Yet... Someone with such foresight and wisdom chose to uphold and approve of the Yethma system."

Hearing that, I began pondering. Eavis definitely wasn't a man who lacked imagination and creativity. He'd even possessed great power to realize his plans. Despite all that, after thorough calculation and consideration, he'd chosen to preserve the race known as Yethma in Mesteria. Should I be terrified of this nation's structure? Or should I be terrified of...the world itself?

I recalled Eavis's words. *"But I assume that is true for your society as well. As long as humans exist, there will always be sacrificial lambs who draw the short straw."*

<<Hey, Jess. What's your opinion on this nation's society?>>

Jess cast her eyes down slightly. "I think it mustn't remain the way it is. But..."

<<At the same time, it's hard to judge whether destroying the current structure is the right thing to do, isn't it?>>

"Yes. Perhaps... There isn't a right answer."

<<Maybe. But that's why it's probably important to always doubt the status quo and never give up on thinking about an answer.>>

We arrived at the front door. Jess placed her hand on the bulky, metal doors. She turned around one last time to face the coffin before looking down at me and smiling. "Right. I hope we can make this world into a better place, even if just a tiny bit."

Jess mentioned wanting to show me something else while we were here and led me to the vast cemetery next to the cathedral. It was still morning, and the area was vacant. As the invigorating sunlight generously poured down, the autumn winds, which had begun taking on a chillier note, stroked the ground. On the open turf of blended greens and light browns, tombstones of white, black, and gray were systematically arranged.

Jess slowly walked down the path of stepping stones. “Um, Mister Pig, may I ask a weird question?”

A weird question? <<What is it?>> I asked cautiously.

“Well... You mentioned that you recently got together with a super cute girlfriend with boobs that aren’t overly large and an angelic personality. Is that true...?”

Oh, that. I gazed at Jess. <<How can it be anything other than a blatant lie? Such women are hard to come by, and even if she did exist, never in a million years would she ever end up with a scrawny super-virgin with four eyes.>>

“I see...” Perhaps she discovered I was looking at her because Jess quietly lifted her left arm until it was right in front of her chest. “Ah, it’s over here.” Her gait came to a stop, and she pointed at an impeccable white tombstone. The epitaph was carved in golden letters.

Here Lies Yelise

84 - 124

Wife of Cassi and Mother of Eise and Jess

“I found my mother’s grave,” Jess explained.

Hold on a Hot Pink Pig Second. You’re— <<Jess, you’re Eise’s younger sister? >>

“Huh? Eise... Oh!” Her eyes widened.

Right. Her memories about Eise were sealed between her discovery of this grave and today. It makes sense that she never made the connection.

Eise. She was a woman whom Naut would admire and adore for all eternity—a Yethma killed five years ago who apparently looked somewhat similar to Jess. I doubted this was a mere coincidence. <<No wonder Naut nearly fell in love with you for real. Who would’ve thought that you two were sisters?>>

“This is...unbelievable.”

<<What about Cassi? Did you find your father?>>

“No...” She shook her head. “I looked into it, but I couldn’t find anyone who matches all the criteria.”

<<I see. That’s a shame.>> *That means we can’t find concrete proof that the Eise mentioned here is the same person as Naut’s special someone. There’s a chance that they are different people with the same name, but...* <<Hey, Jess, the calendar used here is the Royal Year, right?>>

“Yes. In Mesteria, we use the Royal Year starting from the year Lady Vatis united this land as one.”

<<It’s supposed to be 129 now, isn’t it?>> I wasn’t going to tell her where I’d seen that specific number though.

She blinked. “Yes, it is...”

<<Your mom, Yelise, passed away in 124—five years ago. The woman Naut admired, Eise, was also killed five years ago.>>

“That means mom died the same year Miss Eise was killed. I see...”

<<Exactly. Of course, we can’t rule out the possibility that it’s all just a coincidence, but...>> *If it’s true, this is crazy news.*

I recalled Shravis’s words. *“He’s both impulsive and extreme, an unfortunate combination. My father is a man who would even burn Baptsaze’s convent to the ground.”* Did Jess know that the convent was—

“Yes, I have heard that King Marquis was the one who burned down the convent.”

For a moment, I was speechless. <<Are you...okay?>>

She tilted her head. “About what?”

<<I mean... If this is the Eise we’re thinking about, then it means that your older sister died because of Marquis. There’s even the chance that he played an indirect role in the death of your mother.>>

Jess gave me a troubled smile. “But I don’t remember a thing about my family. Getting mad and indignant after everything that has happened...doesn’t

seem quite right.”

<<You really think so?>>

“I really do.” She nodded firmly. “Of course, I know Mister Naut will likely never forgive King Marquis for his actions though...”

The alliance had been established due to quick thinking on Shravis’s part and mine, as well as the presence of a common, powerful enemy in the form of an immortal mage. Such factors were the supporting pillars that led to the two factions joining forces, but we mustn’t forget the lurking likelihood of a disastrous collapse.

The royal court was fighting to preserve a government where mages ruled supreme, and the Yethma system was its foundation. Meanwhile, the Liberators were fighting for the freedom of the Yethma. Furthermore, the death of Naut’s beloved was caused by the reigning king, Marquis, who’d burned down the convent. Right now, the alliance was a fragile one—we were practically pushing two repelling magnets together with brute force, and if we let our guard down for even one moment, they would snap away from each other.

<<Would be nice if we could find a peaceful solution.>> I sighed. <<If only there was a way for the royal court and the Liberators to stay on friendly terms for a long time.>>

“Oh!” Jess gasped as the breeze tugged playfully at her hair. “That reminds me, I heard that King Marquis has a brother called Mister Hortis.”

<<Really? Hmm...does he have some kind of connection with the Liberators?>>

“I’m not sure. I don’t know too much about him, but...I learned that Mister Hortis opposed King Eavis and King Marquis’s policies and disappeared from the capital five years ago. If he were still present, he might have become a heartening ally who could help bridge the gap between the royal court and the Liberators...”

Wait. Five years ago? Could it be...?

“Yes.” She nodded. “I believe the incident with the convent must be the cause.”

<<Do we have any leads on that guy's whereabouts?>>

“Unfortunately not. He might have already passed away or changed his appearance because he hasn't appeared in the surveillance network of heckripons at all. From what I heard, the royal court doesn't have any information about his current location.”

Hold on...

Suddenly, there was a most peculiar connection between two unresolved mysteries. *Have you noticed too, my brethren? There's one deduction that would explain things a little too perfectly to write it off as pure chance.*

Let's start with a fact: some spells could transform humans into the appearance of animals.

“But during the Dark Ages, over a century ago, back when mages were still at war with each other, I hear that they could use their powers to turn humans into animals. Sometimes into white-headed vultures that could act as spies for them, or into chubby seals and punish them in that form.”

Then there was what Ceres had said a while ago. *“I heard Mister Naut met him during the journey to take Miss Eise back five years ago. It's quite a curious story, isn't it?”*

Five years ago, Naut had a miraculous encounter with a certain someone who stayed by his side without fail, becoming his closest friend. This certain someone was excessively clever and humanlike. And, for some reason, this certain someone even displayed an interest in Shravis, of all people.

It might be a simple coincidence, but I had to check—I couldn't let this opportunity slip by. <<Jess, looks like we've got a new mission.>>

“What is it?” Jess crouched in front of me, curiosity burning in her eyes.

As I looked at her *Les Panties*, I felt a strange sense of confidence welling up. <<I might know where Hortis is. Let's go and find our suspect—that perverted dog, Rossi.>>

Afterword (Second Bite)

Hello, it's been a while. Takuma Sakai here. It's been five months since the first volume. I know I've kept you waiting, but fortunately, I had the honor of publishing volume two without incident. I'm blessed with the opportunity to continue this story thanks to all of you, my wonderful readers, who read *Butareba*, spread the word, and gave me your warm support. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I was granted four pages for the afterword this time, and I want to begin by recommending six books. My account will be very biased.

The first is *Seiyuu Radio no Ura Omote (Voice Actor Radio: On-Air and Off-Air)* by Ko Nigatsu-sensei, a super thrilling novel set in the workplace. Two high school voice actresses with terrible chemistry—one's an outgoing fashionista while the other's a withdrawn introvert—suffer the misfortune of being stuck together as the hosts of a weekly radio program. This duo is either arguing or on their way to an argument as they face the reality of working as professional voice actresses. Just reading the verbal back-and-forth between the two girls is already the height of entertainment, but it even gets your blood pumping when you watch them invest their heart and soul into their jobs, nurturing their own secret dreams and yearnings. I can't overstate how much this novel brightens up my day. I highly recommend this series.

The second is *Konnya, Sekai kara Kono Koi ga Kiete mo (Even If This Love Disappears from the World Tonight)* by Misaki Ichijo-sensei, a young adult novel that will make you emotional without fail. A girl who loses her memories each day enters a fake relationship with a boy who selflessly cares about others...or at least, that's how it seems at the start, but it isn't your typical love story. Be prepared for all your expectations to be turned upside down. It's a tender but heartbreaking journey, and I couldn't stop myself from bawling as I read it. (I'm not kidding, it's a real tearjerker. So I would suggest avoiding reading it in public, like on a train.) It was also a heartwarming novel that made me want to

cherish the present after reading it. I also highly recommend this one.

The third is *Soshite, Igai ga Inanaku Shisha-tachi no Tegami* (*And Then the Dead Howls: Letters from Beyond the Grave*) by Miyuki Sakaba-sensei, a war novel with sharp, snappy writing that'll hook you in. The protagonist is a young soldier whose duty is to return mementos left behind by soldiers who died in battle to their families. As he repeats his duties, the story dives deep into the topic of humanity and death to an almost excruciating degree. Though it's a novel, I felt as if I was watching a movie as I read it. It's a work that will leave a lasting impact on you—your heart will be stirred and shaken, and the emotions you experience will transcend the definition of sadness and sentiment. Surprise surprise, I also highly recommend this one.

The fourth is *Kowareta Sekai no Mukougawa Shoujo-tachi no Dystopia Seizonjutsu* (*Other Side of a Broken World: Girls' Ways of Survival in a Dystopia*) by Retsuka Rikudo-sensei, a cute dystopian novel. A lonely girl who learned how to survive through educational programs on the radio and a mischievous girl whose identity is shrouded in mystery attempt to escape their circumstances in this relatively horrifying world. The protagonists are downright adorable, but the world-building is incredibly grave and solemn. I feel like it has many things in common with *Butareba* (though it's extremely impudent of me to say this), and its passionate message struck a chord in my heart. I super highly recommend this one.

The fifth is *Shoujo Negau ni, Kono Sekai wa Kowasubeki Tougenkyou Houraku* (*A Girl Wishes for the Destruction of a World That Deserves It: The Collapse of Paradise*) by Kotei Kobayashi-sensei, an action novel with a very intricate and exciting fantasy setting. It's set in a world that is so unique and peculiar that I can't even write a brief summary of it here. But I can offer my personal opinion, at least. I like the protagonist. He's a pervert to his core and so upfront about it that it's refreshing. (And for some bizarre reason, he's occasionally stark naked.) Furthermore, we even have a tsundere heroine with fox ears, so there's no way that won't spark something. The battles are cool and exciting, and the comedic parts are entertaining. Reading it was a blast. I highly, extremely, recommend this one.

The final work is *Overwrite—Bristol no Ghost* (*Overwrite: Bristol's Ghost*) by

Akiya Ikeda-sensei, a mystery novel with overflowing passion. The story revolves around graffiti (the art kind), and our stage is England. The characters, who dedicate their entire lives to art, are incredibly charming. Especially the heroine; she's killer cute. The main theme is "to overwrite," something that has a deep, inseparable connection with the character in question, and it's wonderful as well. The mystery part involves deciphering graffiti, which is really intriguing and well paced. I highly recommend this one with all my heart.

These six books, like *Butareba*, are winners of the 26th Dengeki Novel Prize. That means you have to add a fluffy fantasy story with a pig protagonist to this lineup, and wow, what remarkable diversity. I hope you will continue to support all the works and authors that win the Dengeki Novel Prize in the future. (Uh, I mean, I recognize I'm not the person who should be saying this, but you know...)

By the way, there's another reason I added this list of recommendations to the afterword. Those who have a keen eye for detail might have noticed.

I ended up using more of the allocated space than I expected to recommend all these books. This might be rather late, but to close things out, I would like to write something a little more fitting of an afterword.

Right around the time *Butareba* Volume 1 was published in March 2020, a great stir began shaking the world as we knew it. Within the tumultuous mayhem where life and death were on the line, all kinds of people expressed all kinds of opinions, and even now, there are conflicts on a scale that involve nations. That's already rough enough, but the malice lurking in our everyday life and the ever-present natural disasters don't seem like they have any intention of taking a break—or giving us one.

I know that I'm repeating myself from once upon a time, but in such times, there is a limit to what each of us can do alone. Changing the great tides is never a simple feat. But at the same time, I don't think it's necessarily right to say that we can't make a difference at all.

Of course, *Butareba* isn't a novel that's trying to tell you what you can do during times of strife. At the end of the day, it's a slightly ecchi, fluffy fantasy

story. However, when I depicted Mister Pig with no special powers blazing a trail in a world of swords and magic in my work, I experienced countless moments when I thought that his journey wasn't all that unrelated to my life in the end. And that's because like him, in the real world, I'm a powerless wimp.

Pascal has a famous quote where he said, in summary, "Man is a thinking pig." (No, he didn't. Don't make things up.)

I believe that we humans display our true worth by thinking—by never giving up on questioning and thinking. It's because we never stop thinking and imagining that we can even enjoy a lovey-dovey life with beautiful maidens in another world.

Now then, I wonder... What's in store for our Mister Pig, who never stops thinking about indecent things?

Their story is filled with twists, turns, and ominous premonitions. I will be really happy if you are willing to follow their journey for a while longer.

Takuma Sakai—July 2020

Author: Takuma Sakai

Illustrator: Asagi Tohsaka

(2nd Bite)



Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-



“Um, is being called Super-Virgin by a woman a good thing?”

«I must say, I am a bit jealous.»

«Um, of what, may I ask?»

«Your nickname, Scrawny Four-Eyed Super-Virgin, Mister Lolip.»

«I’m afraid it’s an awfully regrettable nickname that stuck because I keep referring to myself as such... Why in the world would anyone be jealous of it?»

«I mean, it’s not every day you get the opportunity to be called “Super-Virgin” by purehearted girls, is it?»

«You see, there are some breeds of otaku out there who feel joy when women humiliate them.»

[NAME]

Pig

Profile

A scrawny four-eyed super-virgin.

[NAME]

Ceres

Profile

A thirteen-year old Yethma residing in Baptsaze.

[NAME]

Black Pig

Profile


An otaku friend the pig encountered during an IRL meetup. His alias is Sanon.

[NAME]

Rossi

Profile

Pervert dog.

A blonde anime girl with blue eyes is sitting and reading a book. She has long blonde hair with a braid on the right side. She is wearing a white long-sleeved blouse with a black bow at the neck and a dark blue skirt with a white lace waistband. The background shows a window with light streaming in.

Today's lesson was
about fire magic.
It was my first time
using dangerous
magic, so my heart
beat a little faster
than usual.

[NAME]

Jess

Profile

The girl whom the pig is
hopelessly in love with.
Currently studying
magic in the capital.

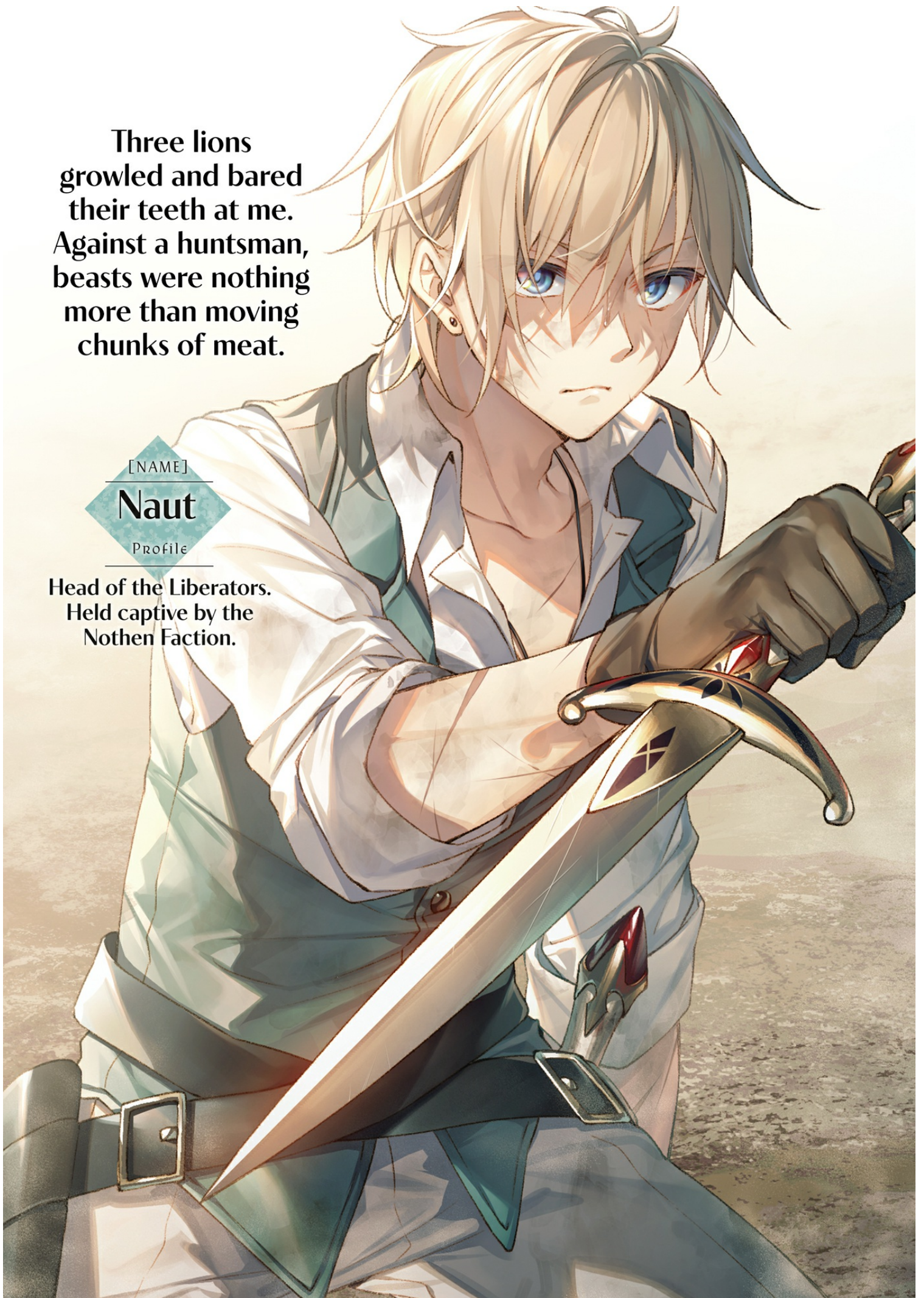
Three lions
growled and bared
their teeth at me.
Against a huntsman,
beasts were nothing
more than moving
chunks of meat.

[NAME]

Naut

Profile

Head of the Liberators.
Held captive by the
Nothen Faction.





"I'm sorry,
I'm still quite
inexperienced..."


«No,
I don't mind,
but, uh... Your
magic is ridicu-
lous.»

"Do you
mean...
it's really
weak?"

«You know,
you sound just
like an isekai
protagonist
right now.»

I was *this* close to
becoming roast pork.

Jess makes an
explosive entrance
as an oblivious,
overpowered mage
with maxed-out
stats!



[NAME]

Shravis

Profile

Eavis's grandson.
Seemingly Jess's
fiancé...?

[NAME]

Wyss

Profile

Shravis's mother and
Jess's teacher.

[NAME]

Eavis

Profile

The King of Mesteria
who is hailed as a
"peerless mage."



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Butareba -The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-Second Bite by Takuma Sakai

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