

5th Bite



Author:  
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:  
Asagi Tohsaka



# Butareba

-The Story of a  
Man Turned into a Pig-





5<sup>th</sup> Bite



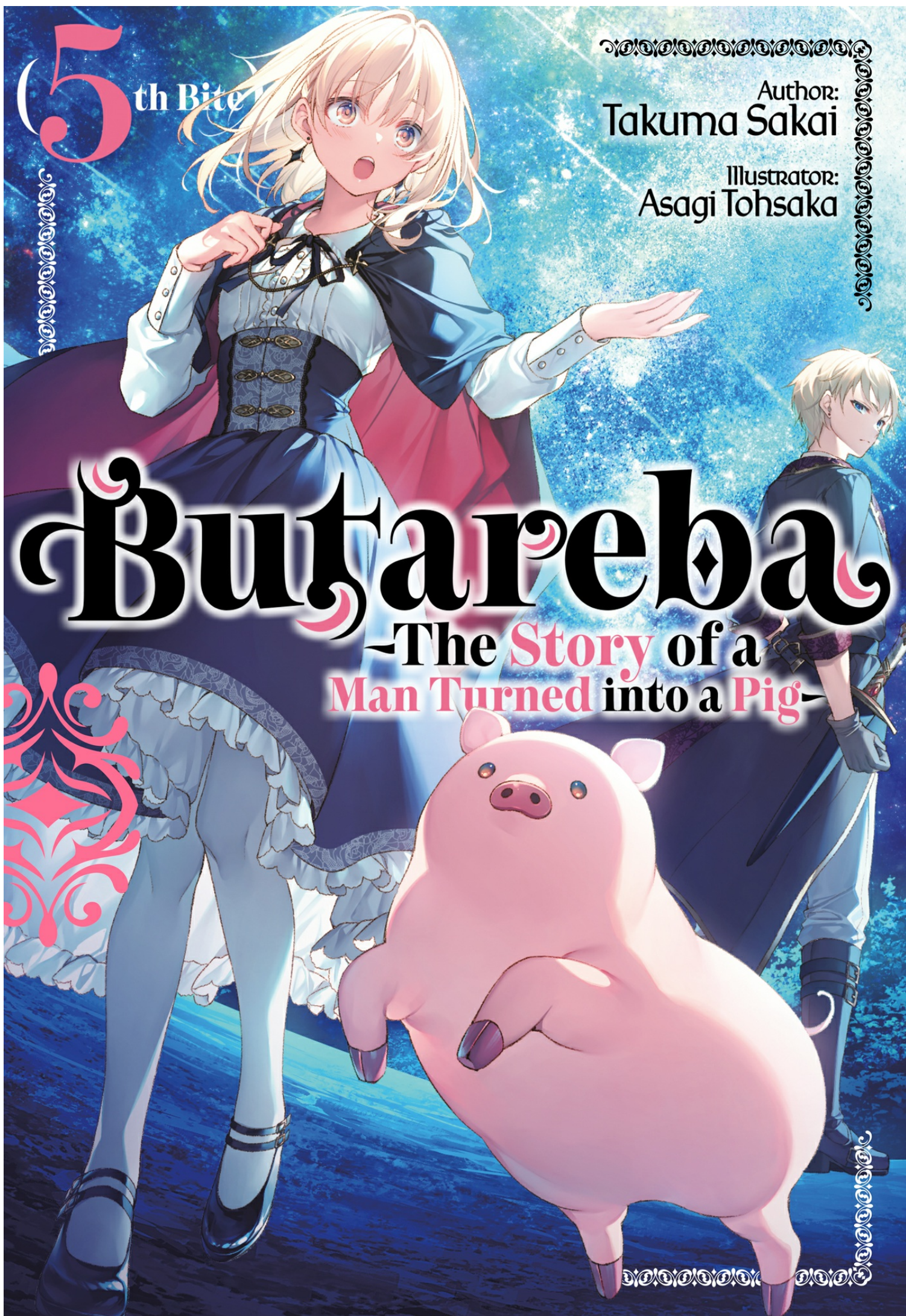
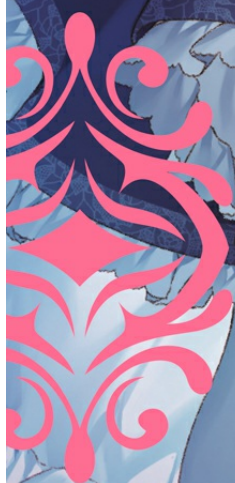
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[NAME]

Yoshu

profile

A Liberator. A level-headed youth who wields a crossbow that can be equipped with ristae. Itsune's younger brother.

[NAME]

Itsune

profile

A Liberator. A hearty woman who wields a greataxe that can be equipped with ristae. Yoshu's older sister.









Butareba

<<Jess, it  
can't be. Your  
boobs got...  
bigger?>>

*Tell me I'm dreaming.  
This cannot be happening.  
This isn't right.  
I liked her size just as it was!*





Contents

Butareba

The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig



In a Dark Room on One Certain Noon

Chapter 1: One Must Uphold Integrity Even After Becoming Invisible

Chapter 2: Don't Let a Virgin Grope Your Chest

Chapter 3: Even Death Can't Cure a Pervert

Chapter 4: A Lonely Flower Shatters in the Darkness

Chapter 5: Your Story Doesn't End Until Your Safe Homecoming

In a Bright Room on One Certain Night





Terminus Island



Mesteria

Butareba / MAP



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# Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Map](#)
4. [In a Dark Room One Certain Noon](#)
5. [Chapter 1: One Must Uphold Integrity Even After Becoming Invisible](#)
6. [Chapter 2: Don't Let a Virgin Grope Your Chest](#)
7. [Chapter 3: Even Death Can't Cure a Pervert](#)
8. [Chapter 4: A Lonely Flower Shatters in the Darkness](#)
9. [Chapter 5: Your Story Doesn't End Until Your Safe Homecoming](#)
10. [In a Bright Room One Certain Night](#)
11. [Afterword \(Fifth Bite\)](#)
12. [Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)
13. [About J-Novel Club](#)
14. [Copyright](#)



# In a Dark Room One Certain Noon

The most dreadful nightmare wasn't when I was unable to die but when I couldn't do anything except leave someone else to die.

For all my life, I had always, *always* been running away. I tried to run away from my own life but ultimately failed. I tried to run away from that girl's life and ultimately failed again.

Humans probably try to flee because we're weak, but our weakness is also the reason we can't fully escape from the clutches of our demons. That is the unreasonable world we live in.

I wanted to forget everything. If only it were all a dream. If only it all *stayed* a dream.

If I wasn't going to die, I should have never thought about killing myself from the beginning. If I hadn't tried to die back then, I never would've met *her*—I never would've been tormented for so long by my own guilt.

Someone who didn't even have the power to outrun my demons like me would never have enough strength left to take up arms and fight.

And so, I entrusted my wish to someone else—the three bespectacled heroes who chose to look adversity in the eyes and resist.



# Chapter 1: One Must Uphold Integrity Even After Becoming Invisible

*Ladies and gentlemen, may I present: A Ranking of the Best Daydreams That All Men Have Likely Fantasized About Once in Their Lives!*

Or, well, if such a list existed, I could confidently declare that gaining invisibility would be ranked remarkably high. Being called a pig by a beautiful, purehearted maiden sounded like it might even struggle to make it into the top one hundred, but that wasn't the case with fantasizing about becoming an invisible human and getting up to all kinds of naughty things. As a matter of fact, there was a chance that all youths in the world, without a single exception, had indulged in said fantasy.

So, in that sense, I'd fulfilled a sweet dream that every man had wished for.

But there is a tiny problem if you want to be in my shoes: You're a pig, Hairy. You're not an invisible human but an invisible *pig*. In fact, you're apparently something called a spirit, and as yet, you have no name—even worse, you don't even have a corporeal body.

In my situation, you didn't just enjoy the advantages that all men envy; you even had terrible drawbacks.

To begin with, the only person I could communicate with was my owner, Jess, a beautiful, purehearted maiden with blonde hair. Adding to that—and this was something that I'd just learned this morning—I could only be active while Jess was awake, and I was restricted to a certain radius around her. Whenever she was asleep, I was always off in dreamland. If I tried to get too far away from her, I'd find myself fenced in by an invisible wall.

In summary, despite having the overwhelming advantage of invisibility, it was a herculean task for me to evade Jess's supervision and do all kinds of naughty things.

"What a shame," Jess said in a frosty voice as she walked beside me.



*Let's add one more entry to the list of problems: your owner can even read your mind.*

"You've already thoroughly enjoyed Miss Ceres's naked form." Jess puffed out her petal-pink cheeks. "Surely you've had enough." Jess apparently still held a grudge about how I'd accidentally stared at Ceres's physique in that bathroom.

<<You can't blame me. She walked up right in front of my eyes. The matter was out of my hands.>>

"But you always avert your gaze from me right away..." Jess grumbled as she advanced down the narrow corridor.

The first light of a new year's dawn lit up her cheeks. Showered in the freshly squeezed morning sun, the splashing waves to our starboard glimmered like glitter. Jess's silky golden strands danced in the salty sea breeze.

Right now, we were on a ship. We were bound for the solitary island with precipitous walls that floated on the northern ocean.

Jess opened a door at the end of the corridor to reveal a cramped storage room. Inside, two young girls were sitting down while hugging their knees. Next to each girl was a beast; a black pig sat languidly next to a girl with a delicate silhouette while a petite boar perched quietly beside the other girl with long golden hair woven into braids, deferring to her. The ratio of beasts to maidens was one to one, creating quite a peculiar sight.

"My apologies for the wait, everyone," Jess announced as she shut the door. The next moment, the cramped storage room grew dim.

Jess settled down with her back against the door. *Now then, where should I put myself?* I was about to take up camp next to the dainty girl, Ceres, but I had second thoughts. Jess was watching—to avoid a scandalous misunderstanding, it was probably prudent to avoid approaching Ceres any more than I already had.

Thus, I chose the opposite side of her. Immediately next to me were the full-figured thighs of the girl with braids, Nourris, but that wasn't my fault. After all, I only happened to end up here as a result of avoiding Ceres!

Possibly because Jess looked at me with an unimpressed gaze, Nourris turned



to me with a perplexed expression. The eyes of a pure and honest maiden with freckles attempted to look at the invisible pig, but they stared into the void instead.

*That's right. I know I'm repeating myself, but only one person can see me right now.*

A valley—a construct that neither Ceres nor Jess possessed—peered out shyly from Nourris's unguarded chest area. I'd heard that she was fifteen, a year younger than Jess, but she was tall, and her chest was relatively ample. Coupled with her long limbs and the freckles that dotted across her nose, she gave off the impression of a country girl who'd practically shot up under a blazing sun.

Nourris was a Yethma who'd been subjected to forced labor in the North, but a tactic of the royal court had allowed her to escape before she was taken under the protection of the Liberators. A pair of siblings, executive officers among the Liberators, had taken a liking to her. Now, she was one of our traveling companions.

"My, are you here, Mister Pig?" Nourris asked in a sweet voice. She spread her long, slender fingers and aimed them in my direction, as if searching for me.

She was literally moving in the right direction, but unfortunately, I was a spirit possessing Jess. Nourris couldn't touch me. Her arms slipped through my body, and her chest happened to come right in front of my eyes—the perfect place.

Two soft spheres bounced in reaction to the changes in her posture. The forces they exerted on each other had a kind of beauty in the mathematical and physics sense, reminding me of Newton's cradle. I was completely mesmerized.

*On that topic, when I entertain such thoughts, I'd normally end up broadcasting them without any filters to the Yethma and mages, but this is when one of the privileges as a spirit comes in as well: others can't read my thoughts. Therefore, even if I entertain thoughts about all kinds of indecent things, I don't have to worry about Nourris or Ceres overhearing me.*

*Oh, I never knew how sweet freedom of thought tasted! Here, I can write anything I want into the narration. For example, I can ramble on about these artistic objects, which I can observe at point-blank range. Indeed, they are Nourris's boo—*



<I'm afraid that I can hear every word,> Jess admonished me with her telepathy.

Immediately, I pulled away. *Oops, that slipped my mind.*

For an innocent maiden, being forced to tune into the thoughts of a pervert like me twenty-four seven must be agonizing. *Seriously, there are so many things wrong with the world.*

The black pig snorted audibly. Nourris straightened her back and, regrettably, turned to him.

“I wanted to sit down and have a conversation about our plans,” said Ceres’s mouth.

I used this particular wording because Ceres wasn’t the original speaker. Right next to her, the black pig flapped his ears—he was the one who’d “spoken.” Residing within this pig was Sanon, a pervert in his thirties.

“Until now, we three pigs have invested every effort into making Mesteria a better place.” Once again, it was Ceres’s voice, but this unhurried manner of speaking belonged to Sanon. “And I am certain all of you will agree that we are currently facing the most pivotal turning point.”

Though Jess and the others could hear the thoughts of my pig comrades, I couldn’t because I was a spirit. And to inconvenience things even more, in my current state, I couldn’t even get Jess to broadcast the thoughts of the other pigs to me. That was how we’d ended up in this situation—the girl beside the pig would speak on his behalf so that even I could participate in the conversation.

There was a reason we had to organize this discussion in spite of such obstacles. Mesteria was facing a tumultuous time of change, and the three of us who’d assumed the appearances of beasts had to agree on our course of action. You could call it an epig—I mean, *epic*—three-way conference.

Borrowing Ceres’s mouth, Sanon continued, “This nation has been thrown into chaos and turmoil. The Clandestine Arcanist snatched away the body of the king with the most destructive power, giving birth to the most atrocious king of Mesteria. If we fail to bring down this king of horrors, all our efforts up until this

day will come to naught. Conversely, if we succeed, we will open the door to a rather bright future.’”

Sanon summed up the present state of affairs accurately. King Marquis, the self-professed mage with the most raw power in Mesteria, had been caught off guard by the Clandestine Arcanist who should have been sealed away. The elderly mage possessed the king and snatched up his body. Thus, the most destructive magic of Mesteria and the royal court had fallen into our enemy’s hands at the same time.

Ceres dutifully said, “I believe we should discuss and clarify our goal at the present stage. It would be rather troublesome if there were any discrepancies.”

That said, Sanon was a tactician who was even willing to get the jump on us if it was necessary for his own goal. I recalled the incident when Naut and the others had abruptly tried to assassinate Marquis, who’d refused to change his attitude of disdain toward Yethma’s rights. To bring down the most destructive king, who’d gone on an unstoppable rampage out of fury, Sanon had cooked up a plan to steal the Destruction Spear from Jess and me—and as a result, it’d led to a certain man’s demise.

The boar, who sat on the other side of Nourris from me, snorted. In a slightly deep voice, Nourris spoke on behalf of Kento. “I only have one ultimate goal. Nothing can change it from zero [the beginning] to infinity and beyond [the very end]. I want to release all the maidens [Yethma] from their collars.”

Kento was a high school student, and his official username was †DarKnightDeaThWaLtz†keNto. He was a responsible and clever youth, and his slightly peculiar speech was one of his defining traits. From time to time, I’d help clarify his meaning in brackets to make things easier.

Nourris scratched the boar’s chin and smiled happily. A blackened silver collar was still wound around her neck, looking oppressive and bulky.

Yethma collars were practically slave collars that would rob the wearer of their magic and suppress their self-interest. The king’s *Loc* spell fixed them onto these girls, and only his *Cæg* spell could release them. The problem was that the king, the literal key to all of this, had been possessed by the most atrocious mage possible. As if that wasn’t enough, the currently possessed king’s brother,



Hortis, an exception who had been able to force open the *Loc* with unofficial means, was no longer of this world.

After being released from their collars, Jess and Ceres had transformed from Yethma into mages. For Jess, she'd been released by the *Cæg* spell of the previous king, Eavis. As for Ceres, she'd been released by Hortis, the mage with the greatest technical skill in Mesteria. However, the remaining hundreds of Yethma girls in Mesteria, such as Nourris, were still restrained with their collars.

Ceres spoke up in Sanon's stead. "I understand. So, Kentie, your aim is purely liberating the Yethma and nothing else. That is the case for me as well. I want to transform this world into a place where the girls labeled Yethma and those who wish to protect them can lead normal and happy lives. That is my ultimate goal."

Sanon spoke as if he was in complete agreement, but he actually changed up the content a little, which was typical of the guy.

"What about Mister Lolip?" The black pig turned to Jess with shining eyes.

Jess said exactly what was on my mind, "I feel the same way." Hearing my words come out of Jess's mouth was quite disconcerting. "I wish to change this world to a place where girls aren't unjustly robbed of their freedom and constantly in danger of being killed just because they inherit the bloodline of mages. I seek their freedom and for peace to be restored in Mesteria'—*that, and Miss Nourris's thighs, I suppose.*"

It was as if the air itself froze.

Though I'd furtively leaned my nose closer to Nourris's thighs, I definitely hadn't communicated that last part, and I'd even marked it in italics as proof. Jess had tacked it on of her own accord. <<What in the world are you saying, Jess?! They'll get the wrong idea about me!>>

Naturally, my inner protests only reached Jess. She pursed her lips sullenly as she looked down at me. No one could hear my claims if she weren't willing to communicate on my behalf.

Next to me, the green fabric of a skirt turned over with a flutter. "Oh my, so you really are here. If my thighs can help you somehow, please do as you wish."

I looked up. Nourris had picked up the hem of her skirt and was smiling in my direction.

“Whaaat?! No, you mustn’t! That’s out of the question!” Jess pressed down Nourris’s hand and voiced her passionate objection. At around the same time, the boar began grunting and wheezing loudly.

“Oh...” Sandwiched between anger from both sides, Nourris returned the hem of her skirt and looked a little saddened. “So this is a bad thing...”

Ceres, who sat across Nourris, wore a troubled smile as she watched the scene.

The black pig snorted loudly. ““Yes, it is a bad thing,”” Sanon communicated through Ceres as he sneakily leaned against Ceres’s folded legs. ““Your appearance might not be that of a gentleman, but you should always be a gentleman at heart.””

*Look who’s talking.* I scowled, but then I paused. *I mean, the one speaking out loud is Ceres, but still.*

I requested the miffed and pouting Jess to pass on my words. ““I’m always a gentleman’—it doesn’t seem to be the case to me, though—‘but at any rate, let’s get back on track. Our goal is the liberation of Yethma and restoring law and order in this world. To do that, there’s one barrier we must overcome: the Clandestine Arcanist.””

Jess’s private message had ended up inside my statement, but I suppose I could let that minor detail slide.

I looked around me and saw that the black pig and the boar were nodding.

Through Nourris, Kento stated, ““Our priority is vanquishing the most atrocious king [the Clandestine Arcanist] to reclaim the royal court and Mesteria by extension. If we continue our relentless fugitive life, we won’t even have the time or resources to deal with the collars.””

““Indeed,”” Ceres said on Sanon’s behalf. ““Which is why our current operation must succeed no matter what it takes. For that, Mister Lolip, I am counting on you.””



The black pig stared intently at the area near Nourris's thighs.

Jess's voice expressed my opinion. "I agree. I'm ready to stake my life on it if necessary. Kento, Mister Sanon, let's fight to the very end so we won't leave with any regrets. We will rebel for these innocent girls, this country—and for my thighs."

The moment she reiterated the last part while mimicking my higher tone, Jess widened her eyes and whipped her head to face me. Then, she hurriedly tried to defend herself. "Ah, no, I wasn't the one who said that... Sheesh, Mister Pig, please don't complicate things!"

Since Jess had modified my statement as she pleased, I thought perhaps I could use that attack against her—specifically, sneaking in an embarrassing remark in her tone so that she'd sound as if it had been her statement instead. I'd done it on a whim, but lo and behold, Jess had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

I felt a touch of remorse. All because I'd become a spirit, I was causing a lot of unnecessary strain for Jess and the girls around us in terms of communication. That was why Jess had walked defenselessly into my evil scheme.

Seeing Jess blush, the two girls chuckled merrily. The black pig looked at Ceres while the boar looked at Nourris. Finally, I gazed at Jess.

A thought suddenly occurred to me. On the surface, it appeared as if we'd reconciled our opinions and reached an agreement, but truthfully, the three of us pigs had merely reviewed the greatest common divisor between us. Even if the direction we were aiming for was identical, the people by our side were respectively different. Naturally, the person we wanted to protect the most must be different as well.

Kento wanted to remove Nourris's collar. Sanon wanted to realize the aspiration of the Liberators. As for me... *I might sound like an idiot for saying this, but I want to stay by Jess's side.*

I'd only learned that I'd become an unstable, incorporeal existence last night. During the revelation, Jess had desperately said that she wanted to be with me—that I was the only one for her. Thanks to her, I'd finally realized my own feelings.

*I want to stay by her side. I want to go on a never-ending journey with Jess.*

But to achieve that, before all else, we had to reclaim Mesteria from that king of horrors.

We weren't the only ones on a quest. On board this ship was also a prince targeted by the royal court and the executive officers of the Liberators who were using their own lives as fuel to propel a change in this world. All of us must have been advancing north with some kind of wish or aspiration within our hearts.

Our gazes were set on the solitary island with steep walls, the Terminus Island. The supreme treasure of salvation and the realm shrouded in mystery on this island were significant trump cards in our war.

They were also the vital keys for Jess and me on our journey to restore our blissful, mundane life.

I overheard some kind of ruckus outside, and I went out onto the deck. Within the radiant morning sunlight, Yoshu leaned out from the lookout platform on the mast and yelled, "Hide the ship, now! I'm sure you can do it just like Hortis did, right?!"

A tall youth with a sturdy build hurriedly walked past us. It was Prince Shravis.

"What happened?" Jess placed a hand against her chest anxiously. Clearly, we were in a state of emergency.

"I see smoke! From over there!" Nourris pointed at the rear end of the ship and began running.

I attempted to follow her, but the next moment, my vision was smothered with a green color. To be more precise, there was green, two legs, and in the middle was a glimpse of white— *Ignore me.*

Nourris had collapsed right in front of me. She'd fallen over on the spot so dramatically that I could almost imagine the comical slipping sound effect. Perhaps her long limbs were somewhat unmanageable for her.

"Owww..." she muttered as she slowly sat up. "Please don't fuss over me. The



town has...”

Though I was intrigued by Nourris’s awfully tousled skirt, I only glanced to my side for a split second before racing to the ship’s rear. There, Shravis was spreading out his hands toward the South—toward Mousskir, the place of departure of our voyage—and was channeling some kind of magic.

I followed his line of sight and froze.

Mousskir, the port town we’d left at sunrise, was smothered by billowing columns of black smoke as it went up in flames. A black monster of a magnitude that could even be witnessed from the faraway ocean was spouting fire everywhere in the upper air above the town. It was the dragon King Marquis had created. The royal court’s property was burning down a town that should have been celebrating the beginning of a new year right now. Even though I shouldn’t have been able to hear them from here, it was almost as if their cries of agony were being delivered to our ship as the smoke waved with the wind.

With her greataxe on her back, Itsune caught up to us. “Looks like the cat’s out of the bag. That was faster than I thought.”

I ran as quickly as possible to the stern and was just in time to see the scenery in front of Shravis beginning to warp and distort.

“I’ve bent the light to hide the ship,” Shravis explained in a rational voice, his curly golden hair fluttering in the wind. “I’m not as skilled as uncle, but since we’re on the ocean with nothing in sight, it should at least serve the purpose of delaying our discovery.”

He made it sound simple, but bending light within pure air that had nothing else should have required a rather sophisticated technique.

The target of the royal court—the target of the Clandestine Arcanist—was Prince Shravis himself. Occupying the body of King Marquis and usurping royal authority hadn’t been enough for that elderly mage—he’d taken Queen Wyss hostage, intent on even slaughtering the “final” person with royal blood, Shravis.

“Those were innocent citizens...” The prince was biting hard on his lip, overwhelmed with shame and remorse. “It’s deeply vexing that I can’t offer a

hand of salvation. If only I had magic that could rival father—or at least uncle.”

No one was able to offer him any words of comfort. Itsune walked up and tapped his shoulder. “Let’s go. We can only run away while pressing forward. Our destination is right around the corner.”

Camouflaged by magic, our ship continued sailing north and was gradually approaching a landmass with a most peculiar shape: the northernmost island of Mesteria, the Terminus Island.

Before my eyes was a white rock wall, roughly a hundred meters tall, rising perpendicularly above the ocean. The island was surrounded by steep cliffs, making it look as if someone had thrust a lone column into the ocean. The raging waves of the open sea crashed against these cliffs and shattered. Judging by what I could see from my position, there didn’t seem to be anywhere we could fasten our ship to.

“We can’t get ashore with this. Well then, what’s the next step, Your Royal Highness?” The one who spoke was a youth with his coat fluttering in the sea wind. This was Naut, the hero of the Liberators. He had his signature twin shortwords attached to his hips.

Shravis’s gaze remained fixed in the rear direction to maintain the camouflage spell as he replied, “I’ll head up and scout out the situation. Could you hide the ship on the northern end of the island?”

“Sure,” was Naut’s clipped response before he returned to the helm.

The ship soon changed directions and began moving along the island’s cliffs. When Mousskir was no longer in sight from the stern, Shravis dragged out a long sigh. “We’ve evaded discovery for now, but we can’t afford to let our guards down. We should survey the island right away. Jess, can you come with me?”

Next to me, Jess looked startled. “Me?”

Shravis paused. “It’s more that I want to take the pig with me. We will need to solve a riddle to find the entrance.”

Hearing Jess’s agreement, Shravis put on the black robe that could negate attacks.



Our destination was the top of the cliffs. They were so lofty that even a human would get a sore neck from looking up at the summit.

“I’ll launch my body and yours into the air, Jess. Just in case, could you supply a constant force to keep me afloat? If anything unexpected happens, I’ll deal with it. Your magic will be our insurance that keeps me from falling.”

As Shravis spoke, he wound his rugged hands around Jess’s waist without a ripple in his expression.

“Um...” Jess’s ears turned a bright red.

The boorish virgin gazed at her with apathy. “What’s wrong? Put your arms around my shoulders. You’ve likely never practiced making yourself fly, yes? In the unlikely event that I dispel my magic, you might be the only one who falls, and I want to avoid that.”

“I see. Th-That’s a good point.”

*Yeah, it totally is.*

Jess reached out and put her arms around Shravis’s shoulders. It seemed that Shravis had finally realized that Jess’s head was at a more intimate distance than he’d expected because he turned away a little.

“Time to move.” That was all Shravis said before he bent his knees slightly and leaped up from the deck.

Almost immediately, Jess and Shravis began shooting up into the air with the help of magic. Together with them, my pig trotters also drifted up. As a spirit dependent on Jess, I was moving according to her change in altitude. Beneath my feet, the ship we’d been on moments ago rapidly grew distant, and powerful gusts of the open sea blew across the area. The fear I felt was like a bacon press squeezing my pork belly.

Meanwhile, Jess was practically clinging to Shravis’s neck. The virgin prince’s face was a bright cherry red. *He’s probably never been hugged by a girl his age before. You poor soul!*

In merely ten or so seconds, we arrived on the clifftop.

The island’s surface was perfectly flat, just like I’d assumed. Mysterious

statues littered the entire landscape—was what you might expect, but there was absolutely nothing, like a vacant plot of land. There were what appeared to be flimsy patches of soil scattered across the white rock ground, and short grass was growing on them.

When her feet touched land, Jess released Shravis with a look of relief before averting her gaze from him. “M-My apologies... It was higher than I expected, and I got scared...”

Shravis looked just as awkward as he replied, “No, I should be the one apologizing for my lack of consideration.” A pause. “Did the pig say anything?”

*Huuuuuuh?! How rude of you to assume because I haven’t said anything!!!*

Jess shook her head. “Nothing in particular...”

“Oh. That’s good to hear, I suppose.”

Shravis vigilantly surveyed his surroundings and observed the island. The flat ground was almost like a vast circular platform—if I forgot about the hundred-meter class cliffs along the circumference, I might even want to run around with a ball here.

I couldn’t spot even a single clue that we’d been looking for. <<Jess, what’s Ruta’s Eye doing? Let’s search in the direction where the Salvation Chalice should be.>>

Hearing that, Jess retrieved the eye from her bag. It was a grotesque eyeball floating inside a glass sphere embellished with gold and looked as if it had been gouged right out from a human head. This magical artifact acted like a compass pointing us to prehistoric treasures called Contract Stakes.

Right now, we were on a quest for the Salvation Chalice, which Vatis had likely created with one such stake. It was one of Mesteria’s supreme treasures. Legend said it had the power to save one life—any life.

The eye was looking down. To be more precise, it was looking slightly diagonally down.

“That’s clever.” Shravis approached and peered up at the artifact from below. At the base of his throat, I spotted a burn that had left behind a big patch of

cracked scabs. “The eye appears to be indicating the center of the island. Let’s move.”

We began walking across the rocky stretch. When I turned a little to my side, I could see inky black smoke rising into the sky as Mousskir burned down. The town we’d stopped by was being destroyed by fire, and likely, many people were losing their lives right now. Looking directly at the devastation took a toll on my mental state.

Jess and I had visited that town, and Shravis had gone there to pursue us. Just because of that, it was being razed to the ground unjustly. My heart ached as I recalled the beautiful sights during the New Year’s Festival.

*I must only look forward and march on. That’s the only thing I can do.*

The prince and his fiancée were walking ahead of me. Both of them were young and outstanding mages, and they were also cousins. However, Shravis didn’t know that Jess was his younger cousin who also had royal blood. The greatest secret of Mesteria’s royal family that Hortis had confided to Jess and me remained a secret between us.

Without warning, I overheard Shravis saying a line that made him sound just like the heroine of a rom-com. “I must admit that it’s a slightly peculiar feeling to walk around with you again like this, Jess.”

“U-Um... I see...”

Hearing Jess’s stiff reply, the prince apologized and explained himself. “My apologies... I didn’t mean anything by that. This reminded me of my time back in the royal capital. I should have been clearer with my wording.”

Two pairs of feet continued walking at a brisk pace. I lagged behind slightly and decided to silently listen to their conversation.

Shravis continued, “For quite some time now, I haven’t seen mother or father. Every day, I’m fleeing from the assassination attempts of the royal court’s army and ruffians. But when I’m with you, I feel this... How do I describe it... There’s the atmosphere of the royal capital on you, and I feel nostalgic.”

*He is an honest and direct guy,* I thought. He probably wasn’t making up anything and was only being candid with his emotions. But at the same time, I



felt it was slightly out of character for Shravis to suddenly bring up such a private matter. *Did something happen? Something that makes him miss the capital dearly?*

Gazing at Shravis's profile, which held a hint of melancholy, Jess gently pressed her hand against her chest. "Please forgive me for leaving your side. I was supposed to be your fiancée but wasn't there when you needed support."

Shravis shook his head slowly. "Don't take it to heart. I'm only saying that I'm glad I got to see you again. It's only a matter of time before our betrothal is abolished anyway. Now that our nation has been reduced to this state, marital relations are even less meaningful than a superstition."

*Huh.*

"Oh..." Possibly because she was avoiding Shravis reading her mind, Jess pressed on her chest and seemed to be holding something back.

Collateral families were taboo on the pedigree of divine blood. Or at least, that was what King Marquis had thought. If her status as Hortis's daughter was ever exposed, Jess would no longer have the protection of her current position. Losing her status as Shravis's fiancée would only make her situation more precarious.

The prince pressed on as he spoke wistfully. "The Liberators are all wonderful people. Despite knowing my background, whether it be Itsune, Yoshu, or Naut, they all treat me as an equal—as a comrade. They even promised to protect me from my assassins."

"Yes." Jess nodded. "They are very nice."

In contrast to Jess's ready agreement, however, a gloomy shadow fell over the prince's face as he hung his head slightly. "But even kind souls like them might abandon me one day if sacrificing me were necessary for their cause. They have that kind of aura to them—they are calculating, unified in their passion, and can ignore their past relationships, whether they be good or bad, for the future they want."

Jess looked a little taken aback by the sudden grim turn of Shravis's tone. "I...never realized."

“You see, I had a thought. Now that my mother has been captured, is there anyone who would take my side unconditionally? If I end up all alone and seek out help, will there actually be anyone in this world who wouldn’t forsake me?” The prince’s gaze turned to the blazing Mousskir, then to the bewildered Jess. “I’m aware that someone with divine blood like me mustn’t have such expectations. Yet I can’t help but think that... By some chance, you and the pig might be the exceptions. You two might be the only ones who would come running to save me even when you aren’t obliged to.”

He spoke in a low, steady voice. But heartbreaking loneliness oozed out from his words.

“Of course. I’ll definitely rush to you wherever you are.” Jess almost sounded like she’d replied on reflex. She paused. “Mister Pig, it’s the same for you, right?”

<<Yeah, I’ll go help him. Shravis’s my friend, and friends help each other.>>

Jess communicated on my behalf and finished with “That’s what he said.”

The tense contours of Shravis’s scarred cheek softened. “A friend, huh? I don’t think I’ve heard a word that makes me so happy in a long time.”





Jess let out a small “Ah.” and held up Ruta’s Eye. “Mister Shravis! This artifact is pointing straight down right now.”

“Is that so? So it’s just as I thought...”

We were standing right in the middle of the circular island. There wasn’t anything on the ground, however.

The prince crouched down and scrutinized the grassy ground beneath his feet. “The Terminus Island that we are on is said to have the entrance to the Abyssus and the Salvation Chalice. It’s a small island—this can’t be a coincidence. Perhaps Lady Vatis left the Salvation Chalice near the entrance to the Abyssus for some specific reason.”

<<So, if we want to go to the Abyssus, we only have to hunt down the Salvation Chalice, right?>>

Hearing that, Jess looked down at her feet. “That means the area right beneath us...”

“...must be the place we’re looking for,” Shravis finished for her. “Step back.”

The prince sprung to his feet and thrust his right hand at the ground. An orb of light manifested beneath his palm, reminding me of a miniature sun—it evidently contained a stunning amount of energy. Illuminated by the dazzling light, Shravis sent the orb to the ground with an indifferent expression.

There was a thunderous roar and a blinding flash, as if he’d thrown a grenade. When the dust clouds settled, a gaping hole in the ground—*didn’t* appear. The grass and soil had disintegrated, exposing white smooth rock. It appeared that the island was under the protection of powerful magic.

“Looks like simply digging isn’t the right answer,” Shravis noted. “Sure enough, what we need isn’t brute force but our heads.” He sat down cross-legged on the spot and took out a book from his inner pocket—which didn’t look as if it had anything inside—like a sleight of hand.

The book had a crimson cover. It was *Records of Soul Magic Development*, a book recording research on soul magic, a branch of taboo magic that was said to be one of the most enigmatic and dangerous of them all.

Even after Jess sat across from him, Shravis's hand remained still on the cover. He hesitated. "I just want to confirm. Do you two truly have the resolve to dive into the Abyssus?"

Jess nodded immediately. "Of course."

*What in the world is he hesitating for? That evil mage is closing in on us. Just like Itsune said, our only choice is to press forward. Stopping is no different from embracing death.*

"I don't want to lose either of you." Shravis stared at Jess with earnest eyes. "If we compare Mesteria to a gigantic life-form, then the Abyssus is akin to its inner organs. That was the description written in this book. By nature, it's a place that man should never have access to or have a chance to peer into—a world on the other side of ours, constructed by the desires of all the humans in this nation."

"I've read that description as well." With a dignified, steely gleam in her eyes, Jess looked back into Shravis's orbs. "I braced myself for the consequences long ago."

Conversely, Shravis still looked apprehensive. "The Abyssus is overflowing with spiritual energy that even mages can't control. Sources say that there is no distinction between body and spirit, or life and death, in there. It's a dangerous realm that we can't comprehend with the logic in our side of the world."

Jess closed her eyes briefly. "Yes. I'm aware."

As I listened to the pair's exchange, I recalled the explanation Jess had received from Shravis yesterday.

*"After transforming into ashes, the Clandestine Arcanist invaded father's body like a parasite and caused utter destruction. The ruler of the royal capital has the appearance and magic of father, but he is nothing like my father at the core—he is the Clandestine Arcanist in my father's skin."*

*"That's terrible! Would that mean... Your father is no longer in this world?"*

*"No, not quite. You can't invoke magic without the mage's heart and soul, which acts as the core. That elderly mage is wielding father's magic—the most*

*destructive magic of Mesteria. In other words, though father has lost his body, his spirit unmistakably still survives on as a prisoner within the Clandestine Arcanist."*

*"That sounds identical to how Mister Pig's spirit dwells within me."*

*"Right. Now equipped with the most powerful magic in these lands, we can't win against that mage in a head-on battle. But if we take what I just said into account, we have only one way of defeating him."*

*"What might it be?"*

*"According to Records of Soul Magic Development, the Abyssus is a place overflowing with spiritual energy. In there, even spirits can obtain a corporeal body. If we dive into that realm, it's possible to guide spirits trapped within someone's heart and help them break out from their prison, so to speak."*

*"Break out from their prison..."*

*"Yes. If we succeed at helping father's spirit to break out and detach him from the Clandestine Arcanist's heart, then that elderly mage will lose his source of mana immediately. He'll be reduced to a mere imitation of father in appearance alone. Therefore, we can handicap the Clandestine Arcanist without opposing him directly."*

*"So that's why you're heading to the Abyssus."*

*"Indeed. But it's not the only reason. If father's spirit breaks out, he'll gain freedom in the Abyssus. And if we succeed at returning to our world, there's a chance that both father and the pig will..." He broke off.*

To conquer the Clandestine Arcanist, someone had to enter the Abyssus—a second Mesteria that was constructed by human desires. It was a world shrouded in mystery, and this expedition would be extremely risky.

After listening to Shravis's explanation, Jess and I had voluntarily accepted that role.

Shravis opened the book with a sigh, snapping me back to the present. "All right. Pig, you take a look too. This is the page in question. Lady Vatis wrote



down the method to reach the Abyssus's entrance with somewhat cryptic wording."

In the center of the yellowing page were words written in bloodlike crimson ink.

*Surrender your body to the praying lips.*

*Search for your wish deep inside the womb.*

*The maiden's path will show you the way.*

And that was it—these sentences in neat handwriting were our only clue.

Apparently, *Records of Soul Magic Development* wasn't a book written for others to read but rather a notebook to keep a record. Furthermore, because the descriptions in the book were a little cryptic, the content wasn't very friendly to readers.

<<First, I want to get this straight. Our destination isn't on this island but *inside* the island—in other words, we want to go to the underground area. Are we sure about this?>>

Jess passed on my words.

Shravis nodded. "That's what Ruta's Eye indicates. We'll have to get inside this island from somewhere."

<<The description "deep inside the womb" is probably referring to that—the "wish" is literally inside the womb of this island. Since the riddle personifies the Terminus Island, the "praying lips" are likely referring to a specific place on the island too.>>

After Jess spoke on my behalf, she clapped her hands together as if she'd had a flash of inspiration. "In that case, searching the north side might be a good idea."

Shravis tilted his head. "Why?"

"The wishing star is in the northern sky. That's why when we pray, we look to the North. And since we're praying, our lips are also facing the North."

I didn't know whether fondness for making riddles ran in her family or whether I'd influenced her on our journey together as someone who loved solving mysteries, but Jess had become quite the detective somewhere down the line.

Shravis looked just as impressed as I was, and he nodded. "That makes sense. So, the island's entrance is in the direction of the wishing star... That said, what exactly would 'surrender your body to the lips' involve?"

Jess hummed in thought. "Surrendering your body to the lips..." I wasn't sure what she was thinking about, but a faint blush dusted over her cheeks.

Shravis asked, "Why are you thinking back upon the erotica novels you have read?" There was a hint of confusion in his completely serious expression.

I didn't know what was going on in Jess's mind, but as a mage, Shravis could get a read on Jess's thoughts to a certain extent. According to the naive, oblivious, and insensitive prince, it sounded like Jess was remembering the *erotica* she'd read before.

I purposefully repeated his question. <<Hey, why are you thinking back on the erotica novels you've read?>>

Interrogated from both sides, Jess's face turned bright red as she shook her head vigorously. "Oh, who cares about what I think?! Please ignore the narration! Come now, let's head to the cliffs on the northern end!"

Puffing out her cheeks adorably with indignation, Jess marched off ahead of us.

If I had a real body right now, I would definitely be exchanging a look with Shravis. He was walking behind Jess while muttering, "Narration...?" in a puzzled voice.

After some trekking, we arrived at the northernmost point of the island. The horizon line stretched as far as the eye could see. It looked as if someone had divided the landscape—the blue sky and the navy ocean—cleanly into a two-tone design.

Shravis made one sweeping motion with his arm, and an enormous mirror appeared out of thin air. The top half of the rectangular, flat mirror gradually

tilted in our direction, revealing the reflection of the lower part of the precipitous cliffs. I spotted the ship—which we'd been traveling in—circling the island like Shravis had instructed and waiting on the ocean.

The three of us stared hard at the mirror.

A vertical fissure ran from the top to the bottom of the northern cliff—just like a pair of closed lips.

I paid meticulous attention to the status of Jess's skirt as we made our way down. Then, we began steering the ship toward the fissure.

Naut scowled as he looked at where the stern was pointing. "You've gone mad. Not even a dolphin can squeeze into a gap like that."

Even if I were being generous, the width of the fissure along the cliff was around thirty centimeters at most. A human would have trouble swimming in, much less a ship.

Shravis, however, gripped the helm and fixed his gaze forward. "I prefer testing everything we can rather than wasting time on indecision. If our judgment is wrong and the ship turns into a wreck, I'll take responsibility and fix it with magic."

Naut frowned. "I get what you're saying, but... That thing doesn't look like an entrance to me at all."

"If the fissure is too wide, outsiders might get in unwittingly, thinking they can fit inside," Shravis explained. "Most enchanted entrances are like this."

Calm and collected, Shravis steered the ship forward. Steadily, the cliff drew nearer.

We were on a wooden vessel. If a high wave sent us crashing into the rocks stern-first, there was a chance the ship would be reduced to a pulp. Therefore, the entire crew was out on the deck, each gripping tightly onto the railing or pillars as they stared intently at the fissure. I secured my body by coiling around Jess's legs.

<Mister Pig, I don't think leaning against my legs is going to help you in any way...>



*Oh, who cares about the trifling details?* I declared in my mind. *Right now, we should concentrate on finding the entrance to the Abyssus.*

“Brace for impact,” Shravis barked out sharply, and we all fixed ourselves to the nearest support structure.

The ship’s bow was making a beeline for the fissure in the rocks. Thirty meters until collision. Twenty meters. Ten meters—

Without a sound, the world around me changed dramatically in the blink of an eye. The next thing I knew, I was inside a cavern filled with pale blue light.

Our surroundings were enclosed with white rock walls that drew a grand arch. Below them was an abundance of seawater that gently swayed as it glowed blue. The ceiling was high enough for our ship to easily travel inside, while the width was spacious enough for two ships to pass by each other at a wide berth. Our ship carved through the gentle water surface, advancing into this mysterious underground world.

When I turned around, I saw a fissure behind us that allowed a glimpse of the blue sky to seep through. We’d been right—it had been a magical entrance. Light from the outside world filtered in from the crack, bouncing inside the water countless times before illuminating the entire cavern with the blue of the sea.

“As we suspected, this is the island’s entrance.” Shravis turned around to face Jess with a look of satisfaction. “‘Surrender your body to the praying lips.’ That was an instruction to proceed toward the fissure while ignoring the possible risks, it seems.”

“Yes, it was.” For some reason, Jess’s tone was somewhat curt. Shravis tilted his head in confusion for a while.

Seeing my owner pursing her lips sullenly, I chimed in from the sidelines. <<Hey, Jess, where is Ruta’s Eye looking?>>

Jess raised the glass sphere she’d been tightly clutching until it was at her eye level. The suspended eyeball within was spinning and turning restlessly in all kinds of directions, as if it had gone berserk. “It won’t settle on one direction. The same thing happened when we entered the space inside the Encounter

Waterfall where the Contract Stake was stored.”

*Oh, right. And if memory serves, a middle-aged dude in his birthday suit was lying in wait for us back there.*

When Jess approached Shravis to show him the eye, the prince smiled at her. “Powerful mana permeates this cavern. I’m certain we’re in the right place.”

We pressed forward into the depths. After a while, the sunlight from outside gradually weakened, and our surroundings rapidly grew dark. Shravis summoned a sphere that flew about like a firefly to shed light on our environment. The rock wall surface was covered with creases, and it felt as if we were actually traversing inside someone’s internal organs.

At the end of the vast tunnel was an area where the water shallowed, providing a space to moor our ship. On the opposite side of the shallows was a small opening in the wall. Though small compared to the cavern, it was large enough for a human to pass through. *Does it lead to a path, perhaps?*

*“Search for your wish deep inside the womb.”* Following that guidance, we decided to explore further inside.

All the passengers disembarked from the ship, forming a line with Shravis in the lead. The cramped passage, reminding me of a drift in a mine, was an upward slope. So that she wouldn’t stray from our group, I carefully monitored Nourris’s legs as she walked in front of me with a precarious gait.

“Jess, do you have a moment?” My field of vision was smothered by a burnt umber coat. A nuisance—*ahem*, Naut, had come over.

“How may I help you?” Jess asked.

“I was just wondering a bit about something.”

The path gradually widened, and the incline abruptly turned steep at one point. All the members in the line respectively helped the people in front of and behind them as they crawled up the slope one step at a time. Nimble as a cat, Naut climbed onto a slanting surface angled like a cliff before grabbing Jess’s arm from above and pulling her up.

He continued, “His Royal Highness mentioned that the dead can appear as

ghosts in the Abyssus, right? Do you think that's actually possible?"

Jess scaled the steep rock slope and thanked Naut before shaking her head ambiguously. "I can't say anything for certain because it's an unknown world to me, but I *do* think there's a chance. That world is recorded as a place with deep connections with human souls, as well as life and death itself."

"Huh."

I didn't know what Naut had been anticipating, but after receiving that answer, he stopped talking.

I chose my footholds carefully as I followed Jess. Ceres and the black pig steadily stared at her as we climbed the slope. *Yikes*. Since I didn't have a corporeal body, I couldn't use myself as a shield to guard Jess's underwear from accidental glimpses. *I have to protect Jess from that depraved pig somehow!*

But after straining my eyes and observing the situation, I realized I'd been worried for nothing. The orb of light that Jess had summoned for herself illuminated the white rock nearby. Because of that, the inside of her skirt became rather dark in comparison. Even if someone tried to get a good look from below, they wouldn't be able to distinguish the dainty, pristine white cloth tucked away inside.

<Just a reminder that you don't have to distinguish it...>

<<No, you've got the wrong idea,>> I protested. <<I'm, uh, only trying to protect you, Jess...>>

Jess didn't even attempt to retort. She silenced me with a steady gaze.

We advanced to find that the upward incline had ended abruptly, transforming into a spacious, level area. The clearing was semicircular and unimaginably vast compared to the cramped path we'd traveled up so far. Even the dome ceiling was lofty. Though we were underground, the roaring of the waves echoed incessantly, and humid air filled the cavern with the salty smell of the ocean.

The source of the scent, as it turned out, was beyond the straight edge of the semicircle, which looked as if someone had sliced it off cleanly.

“That’s so cool!” the carefree boy, Batt, exclaimed as he peered down the edge on the other end of the clearing. The executive officers of the Liberators had taken a liking to him, and he was now accompanying them as an errand boy of sorts. “Master, this part’s a cliff!” By “master,” he was referring to Naut, who’d found him in the North.

“Hey, get back, it’s dangerous over there,” Naut warned. He grabbed Batt by the collar and dragged him away from the cliff edge. “You’re dead if you fall.”

<<I guess that’s a good place to investigate. Shall we?>> I turned to Jess.

“Good idea.”

Jess and I nervously walked up to Naut’s side. When I peered down the cliff, twenty or maybe thirty meters below us—roughly the height we’d climbed so far—was the inky black ocean rippling with foamy waves. Like the perpendicular walls surrounding the island, the white rock cliff beneath us rose vertically from the sea.

“There’s a cliff within an island surrounded by cliffs...” Jess muttered, intrigued.

From behind us, Shravis said, “I couldn’t find any other paths. Is this the place we’re looking for?”

Naut’s eyes scoured the clearing. “I don’t see anything that stands out. If I have to pick out something that looks out of place, I guess that rock’s the only thing I can think of.” He pointed at a rock along the edge of the cliff.

The top of the protruding rock was flat like a table. Nourris placed her hand against it and tried to peer down the cliff with childlike curiosity. A boar held the hem of her skirt in his mouth and dragged her back. It was understandable—it would be a disaster if she accidentally slipped and tumbled down the cliff, after all.

Jess and I approached the rock and scrutinized it. It was a slab of solid white rock. Jess looked around us. “I don’t see any other rock structures around. This slab is right in the middle of the semicircle’s diameter... Don’t you think it looks like some kind of landmark?”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<You mean that the Salvation Chalice is here?



>>

“Yes, I think so. It has the right shape to serve as a pedestal or altar.”

On a whim, Jess placed her hand on the rock surface. Almost immediately, there was a creaking sound—the sound of friction as the rock slab trembled. The rock slab continued to shake for a while before it stopped its motion as abruptly as it had started.

Naut fixed his gaze on the top of the slab. “The heck is this?”

Jess and Shravis were also staring at the slab’s surface with astonishment. Sadly, I couldn’t tell what they were looking at from a pig’s eye level.

I looked at Jess. There was a small hint of panic in her expression, as if she was thinking, *“I’ve gone and done it!”*

“This is...” Shravis whispered as he lifted the mystery item on the rock slab.

It was a chalice opulently decorated with an assortment of gems—a white porcelain goblet with a slender stem and a wide cup rim.

“Look at the middle of this cup.” Shravis turned the chalice over and displayed the inside to Jess and me. Right in the middle, poking out slightly from the stem part, was the tip of a pointed, transparent crystal. “I can sense a highly dense amount of prehistoric mana from this item. A Contract Stake is embedded within.”

“That must mean...” Jess’s eyes widened.

“There’s no mistaking it. *This* is the very Salvation Chalice that Lady Vatis crafted from a Contract Stake, which serves as the antithesis to the Destruction Spear that took away uncle’s life.”

Jess gulped audibly.

Shravis frowned. “But why did it appear at this precise moment?”

The prince’s question, coupled with Jess’s expression as she looked at him, clued me in on Jess’s fatal blunder.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Naut took this inopportune moment to point at Jess. “It’s probably ’cause she touched that rock or something. That was when

the shaking started.” He proceeded to pick up a large piece of cloth, red as blood, from the slab. This piece of cloth appeared to have been wrapped around the chalice as it had manifested.

Shravis looked like he’d noticed something as he scrutinized the rock’s surface. “There’s a symbol in the shape of a chalice... It’s similar to the symbol on the lid of Lady Vatis’s sarcophagus.”

The two symbols must be related. So far, symbols carved with fine lines had been present in both hiding places of Mesteria’s supreme treasures. On Vatis’s coffin, where the Destruction Spear had been stored, was the symbol of a spear. On the cave wall that had blocked the way to the Contract Stake was the triangular symbol of a stake. Both seals had been released by the royal family’s legitimate successor—Jess. In the case of the Contract Stake, Hortis had suggested we split up into two groups, so Shravis hadn’t seen the incriminating moment. *But now...*

And then Naut had to go and make things even worse. “On that topic, I think I saw one of these symbols in that cave behind the waterfall when we went to look for the Contract Stake.”

Shravis’s interest was piqued. “You did?”

“Yeah. It was on a wall that blocked the path. Only Jess and the pig were able to pass through it—I was left behind by my lonesome.”

*Uh-oh...* With this, all the necessary clues had been presented on a platter before Shravis.

Legend said that the legitimate successor of the royal court—or, more specifically, the youngest royal of Vatis’s bloodline—was the only one who could unravel the seal on the Destruction Spear. Then, there was Jess, who hadn’t just procured the Destruction Spear but even the Contract Stake. And moments earlier, the Salvation Chalice had sprung out of the rock slab that Jess had touched.

With Shravis’s wits, it was most certainly a piece of cake for him to arrive at a single truth based on all these pieces of information: Jess was a member of the royal family, which meant that she was Hortis’s secret child—his blood-related cousin.

Ever so carefully, Jess raised her head slightly and looked up at Shravis. The prince was staring at her—his expression couldn't fully conceal how shaken he was. *He's definitely dragged the skeleton out of the closet*, I thought with conviction and some apprehension, but in the end, Shravis didn't make any particular comments about this truth.

It might partly be due to the fact the others were gathering around us, but likely, the main reason was that he didn't know what to say.

"W-Well... Details aside." Shravis cleared his throat. "The question is how we should use this Salvation Chalice. According to Lady Vatis's accounts, the Salvation Chalice is a supreme treasure that can only be used once to save any life in existence. Meanwhile, the Contract Stake embedded within holds the power to neutralize immortality temporarily."

Shravis's unstated point was clear as day. Jess had gambled on the possibility that this supreme treasure might save my life and had gone on a quest to find it. However, the chalice's core was a Contract Stake, an artifact that could evoke an ecdysia.

Ecdysia could be likened to magical molting for mages. When undergoing an ecdysia, all spells and enchantments on the mage's body would be extinguished. This phenomenon, which could even erase curses, was a method that could allow us to take down an immortal mage once and for all.

We'd already consumed one Contract Stake to remove a fatal curse that Ceres had shouldered on behalf of Naut. A Contract Stake had also been used as the Destruction Spear's core, but even that one had vanished along with Hortis's life. Therefore, the Contract Stake within the Salvation Chalice was likely the one and only remaining tool that could help us kill the Clandestine Arcanist for good.

The problem was that if we removed the core, the Salvation Chalice would naturally be destroyed, losing its original power to save a life. Jess had come all this way believing the chalice could resurrect me, but we would have to tear it apart with our own hands.

I sucked in a deep breath. <<Jess, giving up on it is fine, right?>>

There was a moment of wavering before Jess nodded.

I recalled my conversation with Jess last night. After we'd heard Shravis's plan to break Marquis out of his prison, the two of us had been reading *Records of Soul Magic Development* in private.

*"I knew it, Mister Pig, look! Lady Vatis was able to return her husband, Mister Ruta, who ended up in the same state you are in right now, back to normal by going to the Abyssus! It's written clearly over here!"*

*"What about the Salvation Chalice? Weren't you planning on resurrecting me with that?"*

*"Well... The thing is, Lady Vatis was the one who created the Salvation Chalice, but it seems that she didn't use it when she restored Mister Ruta's body. If it's truly effective, wouldn't she use it immediately before trying anything else?"*

*"Good point. In the case of granting a body to a spirit, maybe what you need isn't a magical tool that can save a life, but instead to tackle the root of the problem somehow."*

*"And that method would be diving into the Abyssus... I think we've found a glimmer of hope!"*

Jess declared to our other comrades, "Please use the Salvation Chalice to bring down the Clandestine Arcanist."

There was a moment of silence.

Hesitantly, Shravis asked, "Are you sure you don't want to test it on the pig first?"

Jess shook her head. "I don't. I mean, I don't even know whether this artifact is effective on Mister Pig in his spirit form. Not to mention that if I dive into the Abyssus, I can give him back a body anyway."

Naut, surprised, echoed Jess's statement. "You can give him back a body by diving into the Abyssus?"

Jess nodded. "The exit of the Abyssus is apparently located at Send-Off Island.



According to Lady Vatis's records, spirits who gain a corporeal body in the Abyssus can retain this body when they return to our side of the world from that exit."

The method sounded like taking advantage of a bug in the world's system, but the point was, Ruta had unmistakably managed to return to his lifelike state with it.

Our mission was to enter the Abyssus, then come back safe and sound.

Whether it be coincidence or destiny, one step in the Marquis Jailbreak Operation happened to be entering the Abyssus. Therefore, Jess and I had accepted the duty of helping Marquis escape if we were able to locate the entrance of the Abyssus.

Naut looked convinced. "That's why you were so willing to agree to a risky task like diving into the Abyssus, huh?"

After a moment of consideration, Shravis said heedfully, "If it's possible to restore the pig's body, I'm certain that father, who's in the same condition, can come back to our world as well. That means we don't have to stop at breaking father out of the Clandestine Arcanist's heart—we might even be able to help him come back alive. Achieving this goal is killing three birds with one stone: We can handicap the elderly mage, procure father's abilities necessary for governing Mesteria, and obtain the *Cæg* spell vital for liberating the Yethma."

The members of the Liberators didn't have much of a positive reaction toward Shravis's speech. *I'll be blunt—Marquis's personality is as horrible as sewage. He never had any doubts about the Yethma system. The man didn't even try to empathize with the Liberators and almost killed them. He went on a thorough and destructive rampage, and as if that wasn't enough already, it took his blood-related brother's self-sacrifice for him to finally change his stubborn mind.*

Shravis's deep green eyes wavered, looking lost. "Helping father return alive...might go against everyone's wishes. I understand."

"No, that's not true." Jess tried to help from the sidelines, but Shravis stopped her gently by raising his hand.

"You don't have to worry about my feelings. I know father's nature better

than anyone else. He barely even cared for his lone son, and whenever I thought he was spending time with me for once, it always turned out to be training. Furthermore, during each training session, he tormented me while looking amused all the while. That's the kind of man he is."

In a primarily unconscious gesture, Shravis's hand reached up and rubbed at his own neck. He continued, "But without his powers, the royal court can't function, and without the *Cæg* spell, we can't remove the collars from Yethma. I hope you can understand my decision."

Everyone present nodded begrudgingly. An unpleasant silence took over the area.

Ceres's voice shattered it. "Excuse me... Mister Sanon says that he has a plan."

Sanon communicated his scheme, the Pincer Attack Operation, through Ceres's mouth.

The gist of the operation was as follows: Jess and I would head into the Abyssus as planned, find the Clandestine Arcanist's heart, and rescue Marquis's spirit. But it didn't end there—in the meantime, Shravis and the ones left behind would aim to capture the royal capital from the surface side of Mesteria. Basically, we would make a pincer attack from both realms.

If Jess and I succeeded at rescuing Marquis, the most atrocious king would lose his magic, leaving an opening for us to exploit. Shravis and the others would take advantage of this to utilize the Contract Stake and bring down the mage.

We would use our two secret weapons, the Abyssus and the Contract Stake, at once to vanquish the most atrocious king.

"Timing is the most vital part of this operation," Sanon stated through Ceres's voice. "If Miss Jess's side is too early, the Clandestine Arcanist might regain his composure before we can get to him. Naturally, if our side is too early, our valiant efforts will be unavoidably crushed by the most atrocious king's overwhelming magic. We can't be too early or too late. Ideally, we want to aim for the moment the king has been weakened on the surface side of the world."

Jess nodded. *“Records of Soul Magic Development* states that the geography and flow of time in the Abyssus is the same as the surface Mesteria. On both sides, our destination is the Clandestine Arcanist’s abode—the capital.”

The Clandestine Arcanist was apparently pretending to be Marquis, brazenly governing the nation from the royal capital. According to Vatis’s research, the location of one’s heart and soul was centered around where you lived. In the case of the elderly mage, it would be the capital.

Shravis placed a hand on his chin as he looked at Jess. “Since we can’t use the dragon as our transport, the quickest we could get to the capital would be a little over two days... Today is the first day of the month, so if we employ vehicles powered by magic, we should arrive in the capital during the daytime on the third.”

*Yeah, that calculation makes sense, but it’s supposing that everything goes smoothly.* I frowned. <<The problem is, our enemies are targeting Shravis, and Jess and I barely know anything about the situation in the Abyssus. Assuming we can arrive within the minimum amount of time might be detrimental to the plan’s success.>>

Jess expressed my opinion.

That was when Naut suddenly declared, “We’ll act on the morning of the fourth.” As ever, his decisiveness—or more like his willingness to take a leap—was impressive. “On the morning of the fourth, Jess and the pig will break out that bastard’s spirit, and the people on this side will kill the Clandestine Arcanist before the day ends. Both units will head to the capital at maximum speed. Adapt and adjust accordingly so that you’ll arrive before the night of the third ends, no matter what happens. If it doesn’t seem like you’ll arrive in time, *make* it happen by staying up all night. We’ve got one prestigious mage in each unit—it should be manageable one way or another.”

*Whoa, there, he’s like a bull at a gate!* In contrast to my doubt, however, Itsune, Yoshu, and Shravis had no objections. Even their tactician, the black pig, looked convinced.

Jess and I traded glances, then nodded. She communicated our collective opinion to the gathering. “In that case, I would like to go with the morning of

the fourth as well. However, we can't rule out the possibility that we might be late due to unforeseen circumstances. Please check on the state of the capital before you initiate the operation."

The corners of Shravis's lips quirked up. "We should be fine," the prince said. "In the unlikely event of an emergency, there are secret passages in the royal capital. We could hide in there or escape in the worst-case scenario."

Naut clapped his hands together. "It's settled, then. Sanon, does that sound good to you?"

The black pig snorted and bobbed his head in acknowledgment.

Fiddling with the red cloth in his hands, the huntsman said, "So far so good. That leaves us with one last problem"—he gazed at Jess—"the question of how you're going to get into the Abyssus. Have you found the entrance?"

I scanned our surroundings. There wasn't anything resembling an entrance in this area. The only things in the environment were an extensive clearing, a rock slab where the Salvation Chalice had been sealed, and a precipitous cliff that fell right into the ocean.

But I'd already figured out the mystery of the entrance. "*The maiden's path will show you the way.*" The Salvation Chalice had been wrapped up in a crimson cloth for a reason.

*I'll give you a hint: think of the legend of Aneera and Marta in the northernmost town of Mesteria.*

Just in case, here's a recap.

It was the tragic story of Marta, a maiden plagued by an illness, and Aneera, who earnestly prayed for Marta's recovery for a long time. At long last, Aneera's prayers were answered, and she obtained the magical wishing star that could grant eternal life. But by then, it was already too late—Marta's life had been snuffed out. In the end, Aneera chased her best friend into the afterlife and threw herself off a cliff. Legend said that the wishing star Aneera had found was still hidden somewhere within Mousskir to this day.

In this story, Aneera concealed the wishing star by wrapping it in a red cloth. That was apparently why the wishing star, which glowed in the northern sky

even now, was crimson red.

Through the riddle, Vatis was making a connection between that legend and our location. The maiden's path was the right way forward—in other words, we had to follow Aneera, who'd jumped off a cliff.

There was no time to waste. Under the Clandestine Arcanist's command, the royal court's wicked influence had even reached Mousskir, a town not far from Terminus Island. Jess and I marched forward until we were side by side along the cliff edge.

Jess looked like she had no doubts about jumping off the cliff or diving into an unknown world. *Is it because both are linked to saving me?* I wondered in the back of my head. Right next to a girl with a steely and touching determination, I stood steadily on my four feet.

This wasn't just a battle to reclaim the royal court from the most atrocious king possible—this was also a battle to recover the precious, mundane life that Jess and I yearned for. Failure wasn't an option. We had to see our operation through to the end, no matter what perils might await us.

<<Ready?>>

"But of course."

My gaze locked with Jess's. The maiden before me was someone willing to jump off a cliff for my sake. Someone who had pledged to stay by my side forever. Someone who'd be upset whenever I looked away from her undressed form.

<I don't think the last sentence has any connection with the other two.> Jess's lips curled into a tiny smile. It was her first smile of the year.

I didn't know whether it was out of displeasure or anxiety, but ever since the new year dawned upon us, Jess had refused to aim a smile at me. *That's a good omen*, I thought.

Jess accepted a black robe from Shravis and put it on. With this, even if we didn't manage to enter the Abyssus by some chance and ended up slamming against the ocean in vain, the prince had said that Eavis's enchantment should



protect Jess. He'd gone on to say that he was all right because he had another one, earning a weird look from Itsune.

"We'll go over the plan one last time," Shravis slowly said as he looked each of the people present in the eye. He had the aura of a dependable prince. "Our goal is to overthrow the Clandestine Arcanist, who has possessed father's body. All of us will make our way to the capital at full speed—Jess and the pig will go from the Abyssus while we will travel from the surface Mesteria. In three days, we will carry out our pincer attack operation."

Jess gazed into Shravis's eyes. "On the morning of the fourth, we will help King Marquis break out from the Clandestine Arcanist's heart," she announced.

The prince nodded solemnly. "With that, the king in the capital will return to a feeble mage who only wears the appearance of my father."

Next to him, Itsune stroked the handle of her greataxe. "And that's where we'll come in, offing that guy with the Contract Stake on the surface Mesteria."

Such a wild operation must be unheard of, but when we laid it out like this, I somehow felt like it was feasible.

With her back to the cliff, Jess looked at her comrades. "After everything ends without incident, we plan on traveling through the exit in the Send-Off Island and returning to the surface world with King Marquis."

Shravis nodded. "Right. We'll also vanquish the Clandestine Arcanist at all costs and head over to fetch you, Jess." His big, rugged hand reached out to shake Jess's petite one. "I pray for your welfare from the bottom of my heart."

Following Shravis's example, our other comrades took turns to bid Jess farewell one by one. The exception was Naut—he seemed to have something on his mind as he stood near Jess silently with his arms crossed. In my opinion, he ought to have enough emotional intelligence to at least say a few words during an occasion like this. But then again, this was in character for Naut.

"Please stay safe, everyone." Jess responded to their greetings with a deep bow.

We were in a race against time. I approached Jess's feet and looked up at her face. <<Jess, it's about time we leave.>>

“Got it.”

At the exact same time as Jess’s reply, I heard Naut say something rapidly in one breath from nearby.

The next moment, Jess and I jumped from the dark cliff. The sensation of weightlessness during a free fall made all my internal pork organs seize up. *Is Jess doing all right?* I glanced to my side. Together with Jess’s fluttering black robe was a burnt umber coat flapping in the wind. *Wait, don’t tell me...*

Before I even had time to think, I was sucked into the icy water. The next moment, I sank soundlessly into the inky black ocean.

## Chapter 2: Don't Let a Virgin Grope Your Chest

"How much longer are you planning to sleep, you swine?"

A forceful smack against my barbecued pork ribs roused me. I opened my eyes. The sky was a vivid red, as if it had gone up in flames. *Is it early evening right now?*

I found myself lying on a beach where countless white rocks were scattered about. A chilly breeze swept in my direction from the ocean, but for some reason, the air felt slightly warm. My environment was startlingly quiet—the only sound was the murmuring of the waves filling the vicinity.

And finally, right before my eyes was Naut, drenched from head to toe. <<So I wasn't seeing things. Naut, you really—>> I cut myself off and shut my mouth. Naut's eyes were wide with surprise as well.

*I scream, you scream, we all scream when the pig talks, and you're not in a dream! This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill. Cue internal screeching here.*

My body was still that of a pig's, but for some reason, I could *talk*! I wasn't letting out noises like "oink" and "grunt." Instead, my windpipe was vibrating and working cohesively with my grilled pork tongue to form coherent human words.

As someone who'd only engaged in mental conversations for a long time, this felt extremely peculiar. *Is it the influence of the Abyssus?*

I swished my head around and surveyed the vicinity. Jess was present nearby too, and she was slowly sitting up. *Thank goodness. She came over safely too.* I breathed a sigh of relief. *At any rate, provided that this isn't a dream after all, it should mean we've overcome our first trial. This world we are in now should be the Abyssus.*

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

Jess swiftly approached me and reached out hesitantly. Her hand, edging forward gingerly, gently touched my braised pork cheek. My skin dipped by a

small margin.

“Wah! I can touch you!” The next moment, Jess threw her arms around me and hugged me so tightly that I thought I would suffocate. Something soft pressed against my front legs. “Mister Pig...! You’ve gotten your body back!” she whispered shakily.

She released me and gazed at me with moist eyes. Then, she hugged me tightly once again, as if I were a giant stuffed toy. At first, her body was cold from being drenched with seawater, but Jess’s warmth gradually became vivid against my skin as I stayed in her embrace.

<<Looks like I have. I’m so glad it worked out in the end.>> Feeling the gentle heat of a maiden with a significantly encompassing bosom, I relished in my joy. I could touch Jess again. I nuzzled my cheek against her slightly, and Jess replied in kind by leaning her head against me.

That was when I heard awkward coughing behind me. Jess’s arms pulled away from my frame. “Mister Naut...?” She sounded surprised. It appeared that she hadn’t realized Naut was present until this very moment.

Her reaction was understandable—the swordsman shouldn’t be here. Only Jess and I were supposed to come to the Abyssus, but Naut had jumped off the cliff with us for some reason unknown to me.

Naut folded his arms. “You’ve got an important job you can’t afford to fail. Leaving it up to only the two of you is a risky gamble. So, I’ll take up the role of your bodyguard just like back then.” When Jess stared back into his eyes unblinkingly, Naut averted his gaze and looked up at the sky. “That aside, what’s up with this place?”

We were currently on a long, narrow beach that traced the contours of white cliffs. In the distance, I could see the rectangular silhouette of Terminus Island on the ocean.

I was pretty sure that this area should correspond to Mousskir on the surface Mesteria. To be more specific, it should be the cliffs that Jess and I had visited on our quest to solve a mystery. There wasn’t anything particularly strange about the location itself.

What *was* uncanny, like Naut implied, was the sky above. The entire visible stretch of the sky was a stark crimson, as if it was ablaze. Furthermore, the dazzling sun wasn't in the West or the East—it was hanging above the cliffs, which meant it was in the South.

I frowned. <<It should be noon according to the sun's position, but the sky's red.>>

Jess's eyes widened. "Wait... Did you just talk out loud, Mister Pig?" She finally made that belated realization.

<<It might be because we're in the Abyssus. Well, it's more convenient if I can talk, so I'm thankful.>>

"Huuuh... Your voice hasn't changed at all from your internal monologue," Jess commented.

I wriggled an imaginary eyebrow. *It's a captivating, attractive voice, isn't it? Impressed?*

Despite being a pig, I could talk and communicate with Naut without Jess's help. If I described the surface Mesteria as a world of swords and sorcery, the Abyssus would be a wonderland of marvels. *Maybe we'll meet grinning cats one of these days.*

A talking pig. A red sky at noon. We'd only just arrived, but there were already two anomalies.

According to *Records of Soul Magic Development*, the Abyssus was a second Mesteria constructed by human desires. That must be the cause of these curiosities. *Hmm, is there anything else that's different?*

I scrutinized my surroundings as if I was tackling a spot-the-difference puzzle. And that was when I noticed yet another difference—no, a mistake. The blood drained from my face instantly.

This was a fatal discrepancy that was *completely out of the question*.

It was the epitome of tragedy and despair—we were facing the most critical situation that I could ever imagine. <<Jess, it can't be. You...>>

Her clothes were drenched and clinging to her skin. I gazed at her body.



In a shaky voice, I spoke up. <<Your...boobs got *bigger?*>>

After I'd pointed it out, Naut seemed to have noticed it too, because he also looked at Jess's chest. Right now, her dignified bosom was so ample that she was on equal footing with Blaise, a girl whom we'd traveled with for a very fleeting period in the past.

"Wha?!" The naive youth who had a fondness for huge breasts was at a loss for words. As if he'd been bewitched, Naut repeatedly looked back and forth between Jess's face and chest. It was hard to make out under the crimson lighting, but I was willing to bet that his cheeks were as red as the sky above.

Jess looked as shaken as we were. She cupped the bottom of her large bosom with her hands and slowly massaged them as if checking their weight. Two hefty spheres bounced gently.

*Tell me I'm dreaming.*

*This cannot be happening. This isn't right.*

*I liked her size just as it was—her natural body was already perfection itself. How can there be such a travesty?*

In my peripheral vision, my sluggish mind registered that Naut had finally taken his eyes off Jess. After clearing his throat a few times, he muttered, "Are you...really Jess?"

*Hey, I think that's going a bit too far. Surely you could choose a more courteous wording...*

Jess pressed her lips together. "Yes, I'm Jess. But...how in the world did this happen?"

I recalled the information I'd heard. The Abyssus was a realm constructed by desires. *If we put it another way, could it be a realm where desires take shape, meaning that all our wishes are granted here? Assuming that's the case, did Jess's chest grow bigger because someone wished for that?*

*I'm sure you're well aware, my brethren, but I would never wish for Jess to gain a bountiful chest. Of course I wouldn't. It's not that I dislike big boobs or anything, but a connoisseur like me would never approve of Jess's divine golden*

*ratio suddenly transforming into a voluptuous silhouette!*

*Therefore, the culprit is either Jess herself, Naut, or possibly someone else—*

Flustered, Jess interrupted me. “I-It’s not like I would... I-I’ve never hoped that my chest would grow bigger or anything, okay?!” It appeared that she could still read the narration in this world.

<<But if that’s the case, then it doesn’t add up. Wouldn’t that mean someone out there is so desperate for you to have giant breasts that they’re even overpowering my yearning for your natural figure?>>

“Is that the right assumption to make?”

I wasn’t too sure about how things worked on that front. Other than the information we could glean from the *Records of Soul Magic Development*, we knew practically nothing about the Abyssus. Actually, it wasn’t like we’d come across a “Welcome to the Abyssus!” sign, so if I were to be fussy, we didn’t even have confirmation that we were truly in the right place.

That said, it wasn’t a valid reason to be apathetic toward the laws of this world.

The well-endowed Jess and I stared at each other for a while before simultaneously turning our heads to look at Naut.

“What?” Naut scowled. Sadly for him, he was doing a poor job of hiding his embarrassment.

I lifted an imaginary eyebrow. <<If memory serves, you have a thing for huge breasts, right?>>

“Hah? Why the hell would I?” Feigning nonchalance, Naut averted his gaze. But he had trouble keeping his gaze away because Jess kept massaging her own chest—maybe she liked the feel of it—and he subconsciously stole glances in her direction.



I stared at him, appalled. <<Dude, you're way too easy to read... Are you a virgin or something?>>

"Y-You—" Naut looked scandalized. "You've got the wrong idea. It's not that I'm interested in Jess or big boobs." Jess fixed her gaze on the youth, and he cleared his throat several times. "No amount of staring is going to change the truth. C'mon, time to get a move on."

Turning his back to us, Naut marched off with water still dripping from his clothes. Jess watched his retreating form for a while—I wondered what she was thinking. Suddenly, she let out a surprised "Oh."

When I turned around to face her, I was just in time to witness her chest deflating before my eyes. Almost like air rushing out of a balloon, it turned back in the blink of an eye. Jess's silhouette had regained the curves drawn by a divine numerical formula.

"It's already turned back..." she muttered softly. "That was fast."

<<You sound like you're disappointed.>> I looked at her and tried to gauge her reaction. <<...Be honest with me. You actually want a bigger chest, don't you?>>

Jess shook her head profusely. "I-I don't! I just kind of found the texture fascinating, that's all..."

<<Oh, it was?>>

"Yes. Their elasticity and weight are nothing alike." She sighed. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—I should have gotten you to feel them too before they shrunk."

Naut, who'd been walking ahead of us while squaring his shoulders, tripped over a rock and almost fell over.

<<Uh, I don't think it's a very good idea to let other people touch your boobs...>> *Especiallly if the other party is a virgin.*

"A-Ah, right," Jess stammered. "In my mind, I didn't associate them with myself, and I wasn't thinking... Um, please forget that..."

Naut stopped at a slight distance from us and turned around. "Stop talking

about nonsense. For now, we'll head for Mousskir. Does that sound like a plan?" He reached out his hand and pointed at a path that led away from the coast and up the cliffs.

However, I was worried about something. Together with Jess, I faced Naut. <<Wasn't Mousskir being attacked by the royal court?>>

"In the surface Mesteria, yeah." He nodded. "But listen carefully."

Underneath the white cliffs that seemed to stretch on forever, the three of us basked in the crimson daylight as we strained our ears. I couldn't hear any noises that reminded me of battle. In fact, it almost sounded like we were the only ones here. All I could pick up was the murmuring of the waves—it was as if we'd come to a private beach on an uninhabited island.

"Sounds like things are different on this side," Naut announced as he drew his twin shortswords with practiced ease. Dazzling flames lit up the blades. "It's always better to be safe than sorry, but I think our best bet right now is checking out what's there."

My eyes were drawn to his swords. Ornaments of gold and silver drew simple curves as they decorated the hilts, which encircled bones yellow with age. These were two-of-a-kind swords made with the bones of a girl called Eise, and only Naut could wield them to their full potential.

"Hm?" Naut muttered out of the blue. Something seemed to be bothering him because he swung one shortsword at a distant cliff.

As his gleaming blade danced through the air, the crescent-shaped arc of flames he drew swept forward like a gale. The fire crashed into the cliffs and erupted, carving a ferocious slash into the white rock. One segment of the cliff was sliced off cleanly like tofu. Rumbling out sinisterly, the giant block of rock fell apart as it crashed into the ocean.

Naut frowned. "The flames are abnormally strong for some reason. I'm pretty sure I haven't used that much mana."

Jess approached Naut and examined the rista with great interest, using her hands and eyes. "You're right... The mana reserves inside the rista have barely decreased at all."

“You can tell how much’s left?”

“Yes. With the necessary training, you can measure the mana reserve and even replenish it. Recently, I’ve become skilled enough to estimate the rough amount of mana and other properties without the help of dedicated instruments.” Wearing a somewhat triumphant look, Jess looked back and forth between the shortswords and the deformed cliff. Then, she frowned. “As for your attack just now... I’m afraid that the amount of power behind it doesn’t add up, even if I take Miss Eise’s bones and the royal court’s technology into account.”

The bones of Yethma—or more precisely, mages—allowed ristae to achieve feats that exceeded their highest effectiveness when in the hands of people intimate with the owner. That was what gave Naut’s shortswords their literal edge. Furthermore, Naut, Itsune, and Yoshu’s weapons had been damaged during the assassination attempt on Marquis. As a gesture of peace, the royal court had repaired and enhanced these weapons with their unique technology.

Excluding the property of the royalty, these three Liberators’ weapons could be deemed the most powerful weapons in Mesteria. However, the force of the attack had surpassed even their original threshold—which meant that the change in environment was likely the root of the cause.

<<Maybe things to do with magic are strengthened in the Abyssus,>> I suggested.

“Interesting.” Jess hummed in thought. “Magic has a close relationship with desires. That could be possible in a world constructed with desires.”

As she spoke, she manifested a bright, blazing fireball above her hand. She flung it at a cliff close to us, and it exploded like a grenade, producing yet another spectacular landslide.

She nodded to herself. “You might be right. I feel like it’s a little easier to cast stronger spells here.”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *Bruh. You two like destroying the terrain way too much.*

Jess smacked her fist against her palm as a thought occurred to her before



taking out something from the inside of her robe. “Oh, right! I bought anklets for you too, Mister Pig!” She held out two small silver anklets. Wasting no time, she equipped them on my two front legs.

These magical artifacts had three ristae each—red, yellow, and blue. I’d worn the same ones during our campaign to the Send-Off Island.

After they were fitted on me, I did a trial by approaching the sea and freezing the water. Lo and behold, it froze over so effortlessly that it was almost as easy as breathing. When I’d worn the anklets last time, I’d felt like I was controlling a magical artifact, but here, it was as if I was wielding magic itself. *I suppose that’s the best way to describe it.*

If Jess’s inflated chest was indeed the influence of Na—*ahem*, someone’s wish, then the enhancement of ristae and magic shouldn’t be an independent phenomenon. There should be some kind of mechanism in this world leading to these observations. For example, I could interpret the boosted magic as a result of our wishes taking effect more readily.

*Now then. If that hypothesis is accurate, wouldn’t it imply that if I wished for something, it might actually come true before my eyes? Which means—*

Suddenly, Jess interrupted from the sidelines and gave me a skeptical look. “Mister Pig, you’re entertaining indecent thoughts, aren’t you?”

I denied her accusation with a straight face. <<Of course not. We’re in the middle of a solemn mission right now—how could I?>> *Say, for example, wouldn’t it be wonderful if Jess suddenly grows horse ears and a tail?*

“That’s not going to happen.”

*If her perked up ears might twitch and move as she speaks, she would definitely be killer cute.*

A sigh. “You’re not listening, are you?”

I looked at Jess with hopeful eyes, but she didn’t seem to grow ears or a tail. *Hmm. If wishes are truly realized here, then what are the conditions for it to happen? I ought to thoroughly investigate the matter.*

*They all say that the Abyssus is a mysterious land of perils, but it might turn*

*out to be a surprisingly fun place!*

Jess dried her clothes with flames before we walked up the path Naut had found, aiming for the clifftop. After we scaled the steep uphill trail, we found ourselves inside a sparse forest. The scarlet sunlight filtered in from the gaps of the barren trees and showered on the soil, painting crisp patterns of black and red on the ground like papercut art. A breeze swayed the trees and the forest rustled, sounding as if people were whispering to one another.

“I don’t sense anyone around. Guess we should look for buildings.” With his hands still on the grips of his shortswords, Naut surveyed our surroundings.

Just like how she’d removed the anklets from the inside of her robe, Jess also fished out *Records of Soul Magic Development*. I hadn’t even realized she’d stored it there until this very moment, and the book wasn’t wet at all. Judging by that, the robe Eavis had crafted seemed to have something like a 4D pocket instead of a traditional breast pocket.

Jess gave us the information she had. “I’ve read through *Records of Soul Magic Development*, and there were barely any accounts of people appearing in the Abyssus. It’s mostly filled with peculiar events instead... On top of that, almost all these events feature mystical creatures—nonhumans. There’s a chance that no other humans are within the Abyssus.”

<<That might make things easier, actually. It’ll save us a lot of trouble.>>

She looked a little worried. “I’m not quite sure about that...”

Utilizing her astounding reading speed, Jess had finished looking over the second part of the duology in one night after borrowing it from Shravis yesterday. Since the most knowledgeable one among us looked uneasy, my anxiety also began creeping up. <<You mean...there’s going to be problems?>>

“Hmm... I can’t make any conclusions. How do I put this... The content of the book is somewhat unbelievable? Or maybe nonsensical and inconsistent? Even if we set aside its erratic narrative, what’s there is still wild...”

I swallowed. <<For instance?>>

“Like how Lady Vatis made a long descent down an uphill slope. Or how

there's water blazing like flames... I think the imagery is symbolic, or the author is using some kind of poetic style. But at the very least, I think it's safer to brace ourselves for the unexpected."

<<Yeah, agreed. Your chest got bigger earlier, after all.>>

"And you're talking just like a human too."

That was when Naut abruptly stopped in his tracks and gestured for us to halt with his hand. "I dunno anything about those convoluted books, but taking the writer's word for it might do us good."

In the absence of our footsteps, I heard the distant murmuring of waves and the whispering of wind as it darted across the forest.

I narrowed my eyes. *Wait a minute.*

The trees were swaying with the wind and rustling from the friction. So far, so good. But for a moment, I had thought I'd heard the actual voice of a person mixed within. It might have been a trick of the wind, but at the same time, my instincts were telling me that someone's gaze was fixed on me from somewhere out there.

That was when a noise reached my ears.

*"Thha. hhAAAaaa. aaaT..."*

A shiver ran down my back fat.

It was like a multilayered ensemble of jarring, dissonant sounds. As if air was leaking out from someone's throat—or a thin piece of paper was quivering and crackling.

Naut's hands were against the hilts of his shortswords, ready to pull them out at a moment's notice. I'd described the swishing of the trees as similar to people whispering to one another, and as it turned out, it had been literal whispering—by someone or *something*.

*"ThaaaGGHhh hUhuhur...tHAAGhh...sooo mu..."*

Though it wasn't forming coherent words, this "voice" clearly wasn't an innocuous product of nature. From every direction, the whispers—no, more like groans—were echoing out like a chorus. It certainly didn't sound like it was

giving us a warm welcome.

*“ttthhhhAAAat huuuHUUhu shoo muuuuc...”*

Jess gingerly placed a hand against my marinated Boston butt. The voice didn’t even give us time to get into a battle-ready stance as it amplified and morphed until we could hear it loud and clear.

*“ThaAat muSH huuHUUHHUR...”*

*“tHAAttt muuusht hurrirt So muc...”*

**“that muST hUrt so mUcH.”**

The voice was crisp. It came from right behind me.

Two things happened almost simultaneously—no sooner had we turned around than an arc of flames smashed the tree immediately behind us. Naut had already unsheathed his swords.

“Step back,” he barked sharply and stood in front of us like a shield.

<<Wasn’t that voice...coming from right behind us?>> My voice was shaking.

“It was.”

Jess looked around nervously. “There doesn’t seem to be anyone here though...”

The only thing in front of us was a grand, ancient tree. There was a wide, gaping gash on the timeworn, rugged bark—it was the place Naut’s attack had struck. The acrid smell of scorched wood, which almost had a sweet hint to it, was wafting over from there.

And then that *mouth* opened wide.

*“gETher... Weee...”*

The voice reminded me of a baby talking gibberish in their sleep. The gash on the tree moved like lips in sync with that voice. Within lips of cracked bark was an ocher oral cavity that looked raw and grotesque. A clear liquid—was it water or sap?—dribbled down from this mouth.

“That doesn’t look good,” Naut muttered as he got into a stance with his shortwords—one was in a high position while the other was low. The blades

glowed red hot, preparing for an attack.

Even while we were edging backward step-by-step, the bark, which should be stiff, was moving flexibly, disregarding the laws of physics. The stream of clear fluid gushed out more rigorously like drool.

Without warning, that mouth opened alarmingly wide—if it had a jaw, it would have been dislocated now.

*“tOOOGeeettteeeEEERrr...”*

A shrill voice overlapped with a hoarse one, resulting in an angry, ghastly holler that was otherworldly. Pelted by the great tree’s shriek head-on, the three of us ran for the hills.

This action must have provoked it somehow because the trees surrounding us swayed their trunks, twisted their branches, and opened gashes even though no one had cut them. They sputtered somewhat warm liquid everywhere as they began howling.

*“THat that mUst huRt hurT so Much.”*

A commotion abruptly overtook the forest as it began speaking in a deafening, uncanny chorus. Despite the intimidating quality of each scream, the tone and wording sounded just like a small child. Furthermore, I might just be imagining things, but the words themselves sounded like they were trying to console or cheer someone up.

*“ItSCh ohoh ohKAaaay.”*

We were showered in tree saliva from head to toe as we ran as fast as our legs would carry us through the forest.

*“WeweWEEEe’re toGEther.”*

Unbelievably flexible branches flung in our direction like whips. Trees and shrubs, which twisted their bodies, blocked our way countless times. However, the flames sweeping out from Naut’s shortswords cleared them away immaculately.

We managed to break through the cluster of trees and enter a clearing with a neatly trimmed lawn. Wheezing, I turned around. Even now, the trees were

swaying like seaweed, shouting something in unison, but it seemed like they weren't going to chase us to this area. For the very first time in my life, I thanked nature for designing trees to have roots.

After putting plenty of distance between ourselves and the forest, we stopped to catch our breath.

"Damn it, what the hell was that?" Naut sheathed his shortswords, placed a hand on his hip, and sucked in a big lungful of air. His clothes had already been damp from the seawater, but now, they were sagging heavily with the fluid spouted by the trees.

I shook my entire body vigorously like a dog to fling off the water. <<Surely you can tell after seeing them. They're moving, talking trees.>>

"Guess I can't argue against that."

The sky remained a vivid, flame-like crimson—it was as if someone had melted blood into the sunlight as it rained down on us. If I didn't crack a joke or two to ease up, this abnormal environment might drive me insane.

Jess heaved, trying to catch her breath as she hung her head and wrung her wet hair. "That... That was so..." There was the hint of a tremble in her voice.

<<It must've been scary,>> I gently said.

But what she said next took me by complete surprise. "No, I mean... That was so, so interesting!"

I blinked blankly. *Come again?*

After she finished squeezing her hair, Jess whipped her head up enthusiastically. She balled her hands into fists in front of her petite chest and looked thrilled. "Why in the world were the trees moving?! Why do you think they talked to us?! Did someone wish for it? If so, who?" She fired off one question after another in my direction, not caring about the fluid dripping from her clothes in the slightest.

The sequence of events had been taken right out of a horror movie, but our resident maiden's burning curiosity ruined the creepy atmosphere beyond repair. Jess moved her feet restlessly, as if she wanted to run right back into the



forest.

<<Hey, don't even think about going back, okay?>> I warned.

“Oh, I don't have any plans to do that...” She beamed at me. “But I must say, it's so exciting when I think about what might be waiting for us down our adventure! Don't you agree?”

I shook my head. <<Nope.>>

Jess swished her head left and right as she surveyed this new area. “The accommodation we originally planned to stay the night in should be ahead of this path. How about we head over and see whether anyone's there?”

The drenched Naut had grimaced at Jess's exhilaration, but eventually, he nodded minutely. “The most important thing is checking whether other humans are around in this world. Our plans from here on out will depend on the answer.”

Jess summoned a fire behind us before calling up a wind to blow in our direction, fanning us with warm air. It appeared that the fluid the trees had sputtered out was nothing but plain water—in fact, it had even helped us out because it washed away the salt content of the seawater.

We only walked for a few minutes before we arrived at a familiar gate. The towering iron railing was so tall that even humans—not just a pig like me—had to crane their necks to see it fully. On the other side of the iron railing gate were uniform rows of pruned garden trees, and at the end of the straight path between the greenery stood a magnificent, extravagant residence.

*You might remember it as the hotel where I ended up in the middle of a ham sandwich in the bathing area.*

I felt Jess's chilly gaze stab into me as I spoke up. <<I don't see a single soul. There should have been gatekeepers at this hotel.>>

Naut peered into the premises from the gaps between the iron railing. “But who's caring for the garden if there aren't any humans here?”

By now, the shouting of the trees had grown distant. Only the swooshing of the breeze enveloped us peacefully. There was stillness in the residence—it felt

deserted to a bloodcurdling degree.

“It’s locked.” Naut marched up to the lock that fastened a chain, which coiled around the gate, obstructing our entry. He showed it to Jess. “Can you open it with magic?”

“Yes, I think so.” She paused. “Please take a step back.”

Looking puzzled, Naut fell back. It was written on his face that he didn’t understand the reason for this instruction. After checking that Naut and I were far enough, Jess also took a few steps back and thrust her palms forward at the lock.

Not a moment later, a deafening explosion resounded in the area, as if someone had shot a cannon. The iron railing gate went limp and folded like melted cheese. Naut and I were still recoiling as the second “shot” was fired. As if a procession of elephants had run over it, the railing was crushed and flattened, retaining none of its former shape.

“Seriously?” Naut sounded incredulous. “Can’t you be a bit more graceful about it?”

“My apologies...” Jess hung her head. “I’m afraid I’m still unskilled with magic that requires finesse...”

“If the landlord comes marching out, you two are in charge of the compensation. Leave me out of this.”

I chimed in. <</if there’s a landlord, that is.>>

Jess must have chosen a destructive method because she’d deduced that no one was likely present. This was the Abyssus—a world steeped in unreality from head to toe where pigs talked, trees raged, and above all else, where Jess had even grown a large chest.

We stepped across the flattened gate and advanced on.

But that was when the iron railing *stood up* vigorously.

“Eep!” Jess let out a startled yelp, and her skirt fluttered next to me. I felt something constricting my body tightly.

The gate had behaved like a shape memory alloy—the iron railing crushed by

Jess had returned to its original shape in the blink of an eye. Since I'd stepped between the iron bars as I'd walked, I had been dragged in brutally, ending up wedged between the bars that had straightened up again.

My roasted pork ribs were fixed in place inside the cramped opening, and the metal's merciless hardness constricted my pig entrails. Iron railings were naturally designed so that humans couldn't fit between the gaps. Therefore, it was extremely relentless on a pig's rotund form. Elevated off the ground, my front legs were suspended in the air while my back trotters were barely reaching the ground. I might have suffered a few broken pork bones as well. My blood flow appeared to be cut off because I was already losing sensation in my hind legs.

"Ugh, that stings..." Naut must have evaded the ambush with his agility because he hadn't ended up stuck in the iron railing. Instead, he was lying down on the lawn while pressing down on his shoulder. He'd dodged in the direction we'd walked from.

<<Jess... Where are you? Are you okay?>> I croaked.

My impression of her wasn't a girl with exceptional reflexes. Since she'd been right next to me, I highly doubted she'd managed to evade this accident. I turned my head and looked for Jess. I couldn't hear a response from her. *Don't tell me...*

The moment I looked up, my mind went blank. *No. This can't be happening.*

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. In my shock, my line of sight was frozen in place. Faced with the sight thrust right in front of my eyes, my brain short-circuited.

Jess turned out to be right next to me. Her leg, stretched out at an alarming angle like a Y scale, was caught between the iron bars and fixed in place.

When I shifted my head by a margin, the tip of my snout prodded Jess lightly.

"Huuuh?!" Jess yelped. "Mister Pig, excuse me? Where in the world are you touching?!"

Though I couldn't see Jess's face, hearing her energetic voice reassured me. As I looked up, most of my vision was filled with Jess's legs at my three and nine

o'clock, as well as the inside of her skirt, which was draped around them like a curtain. My nose was pressing against the dainty piece of cloth in the middle.

<<Are you hurt anywhere?>> When I spoke with my grilled pork tongue, the tip of my snout would inadvertently rub against Jess.

"Mnn! Um... Please don't talk right now, okay?"

*My deepest apologies. It's all the railing's fault...*

I turned my head downward and stared at Jess's shadow that had been cut out of the scarlet sunlight. Stuck between metal bars, one of her legs was raised vertically like a figure skater. At this miraculous angle, her crotch was pointing directly at my face.

<<The spectacular way you got stuck is just like a princess from Planet Deviluke...>> I muttered before I asked her again, <<Are you hurt anywhere?>>

"No, I'm all right. What about you?"

In my peripheral vision, I spotted Naut's feet walking over. Judging by his shadow, he was holding up his shortswords. He swung them so quickly that his shadow didn't even leave an afterimage, and with several loud rattles, he dissected the iron railing. Released from our restraints, Jess and I tumbled down onto the side of the gate where Naut was.

Jess, who was lying on the ground next to me, placed a hand on my back fat. The first thing she did was fuss over me. "Mister Pig, are you all right?"

The pain was gone, and I was regaining sensation in my whole body. I tried moving, and everything seemed fine. <<I think I'm okay.>> As I stood up, I called out to our savior. <<You really saved us there, Naut.>>

Beside me, Jess bowed gratefully.

"You don't need to thank me. I only did what anyone else would have done." His twin shortswords, sharp enough to even slice through iron, returned to their sheaths with a metallic click. "As long as you give me a hand when I'm about to die, we're even."

Collectively, we turned around to face the gate. We were just in time to see the sliced metal bars, which had been lying on the grass, returning to their

original place like magnets. After a series of low, ominous sounds of metallic friction, the gate was restored to its original state without as much as a scratch.

I frowned. <<It looks like we're not welcome here.>>

"I think so too," Jess agreed. "If we just want to check whether there's human life, we should be able to form a conclusion by heading down toward the port."

"Let's go, then. We've got no time to waste."

Deciding against infiltrating the magnificent residence, we trod across the meadow and aimed for the port. When we'd peered through the gate, I didn't remember spotting anyone inside, but now that I'd turned my back to it, I had the inkling that someone was monitoring us from inside the building. However, when I turned around, I still didn't see a single human.

But something akin to my sixth sense was still picking up an invisible gaze on me. A creepy, disturbing sensation prickled at my ham.

I looked up at Jess, who was walking by my side. *What a wonderful view.* <<Jess, do you also sense someone looking at you?>>

"Yes. I can sense someone peering up my skirt." She sighed.

<<Wait, there's a scoundrel like that around here?>> I scanned our surroundings but couldn't see anyone performing such an action. *She must be imagining things.* <<I don't mean inside your skirt, but someone looking at you from behind.>>

"From behind?" She paused. "Well, now that you mention it, I think I do?"

Naut turned over his shoulder. "You're probably being paranoid. When I was a huntsman, similar things happened to me many times. Your anxiety that something's after you escalated into a delusion that someone's watching you. That's all."

*Huh, that makes sense.* After all, a gaze was visual information. It would be strange to perceive it with my butt. Therefore, even if I openly stared at Jess's *Les Panties* like this, she couldn't possibly notice.

"I'm afraid I can hear your thoughts though," Jess retorted.

That said, it was already too late to stop my tendencies after all this time, so

she chose to keep walking and ignore me.

After a short while, the townscape that should have been white entered my vision. I described it as “should have been” because the red sunlight from above made the town appear as if it’d been completely dyed crimson. We went down the slope that was paved with cobblestone, approaching the port.

Underneath the vermilion sky, I couldn’t spot even the hint of illumination inside the rows of houses. Only a gloomy darkness peered out at us from the windows. The world of the Abyssus felt like it belonged in a horror game.

“I still don’t see anyone around here...” Jess whispered apprehensively.

<<I mean, to be honest, we don’t even know whether there are survivors on the surface Mesteria’s version of this town.>> I sighed.

“Right about now, the royal court’s troops and the hoodlums of the North should be scouring all over town for His Royal Highness.” Naut shrugged. “Even if the residents aren’t around, those guys likely should be.”

I mulled over his words for a moment. <<In that case, I guess we might be the only ones in the Abyssus, just like we suspected.>>

Jess nodded. “Even in *Records of Soul Magic Development*, there were only accounts of Lady Vatis communicating with spirits.”

“I see. In that case, the best place to go is—” Naut abruptly cut off. “What was that?” He looked upward.

<<Did something happen?>>

He frowned. “There’s water.”

I didn’t even have a chance to ask him where he’d seen the water because a large clump of it—the size of a water balloon—fell from a nearby roof and directly struck my face.

I shook my head to fling the water away before I craned my neck. Right before my eyes, the house roof was—

<<What in the world?>>

I’d thought that I was getting used to the weird and wondrous events in this



world, but the scene before us proved me wrong. Even trying to describe this situation sounded ludicrous.

A house was on fire. The flames, however, weren't fiery hot particles producing photons of light. Instead, transparent water was imitating the shape of flickering flames. The house was "burning," engulfed by flame-shaped water.

When I looked down the path, I realized numerous houses were blazing with water in town, and the port was at the center.

"Water burning like flames..." Jess muttered in awe. A surreal reality was presented immediately before our eyes. "My goodness... How in the world does it work?! This is very interesting!"

Jess took a step forward to touch the flame-like water, and I hurriedly detained her. <<It might be dangerous. I don't think touching it is a good idea.>>

Looking slightly disappointed, Jess chewed on her bottom lip and stepped back.

There wasn't anyone around to explain the inner workings of this world to us. We could only rely on the cryptic writing in *Records of Soul Magic Development*. I couldn't make heads or tails of anything, whether it be the scene before us or the hollering trees from earlier.

And the unknown was more terrifying than anything else in the world.

What in the world could make such phenomena possible? If my interpretation of the Abyssus being constructed by desires was accurate, was someone wishing for these things? Even after I'd hoped for horse ears and a horse tail, they hadn't come into being, but trees had yelled out of their own accord.

*I don't see the logic in all this*, I thought, but it wasn't like I could turn a blind eye to what I was seeing with my own eyes. <<This is a world where our common sense doesn't apply. Unless absolutely necessary, it's better to get out of here as soon as possible.>>

Still facing forward, Naut nodded. "We've got no idea what kind of dangers lie ahead. We should hurry." He then turned around to face us. "Come to think of it, there's one thing I want to ask for reference." After a moment of hesitation,

he spoke up. “The Abyssus is meant to be a world of human desires, right? What’s gonna happen to us if we die here?”

Jess gingerly placed a hand against her chest. “Though it’s a world made of desires, we managed to enter it while bringing along our physical bodies... In the surface Mesteria, materials manifested with magic are no different from natural ones. Similarly, this world is tangible and corporeal. I believe that dying here is just as final as dying in the reality we are familiar with.”

For a while, Naut didn’t speak a single word.

I empathized with him—this world was where screeching trees attacked humans, broken iron railings abruptly restored their original form, and water blazed like fire. Simply being pursued by the royal court’s army sounded like it had a higher survival rate than this.

Finally, Naut shrugged. “Well, we’ve just got to avoid dying, that’s all. Back to business. Our mission is to go to the capital and help that bastard break out of his prison, right? Gimme a rundown on our plan from here on out.”

The moment he finished his speech, Naut began descending the cobblestone path down to the port. We followed him.

Along the coast, an assortment of ships in a wide range of sizes were floating on the water. If we used one of them to travel down the rivers, it would make our journey to the capital much easier.

As we walked, I explained, <<To set Marquis free, we need to enter the Clandestine Arcanist’s domain.>>

“Enter his domain?” Naut echoed quizzically.

Jess nodded. “Yes. In her books, Lady Vatis didn’t just write down a method to grant a corporeal body to the spirit possessing herself. She also recorded a way to separate a spirit ensnared by someone else—in other words, making a spirit break out from their prison—through the Abyssus side of Mesteria.”

She proceeded to recite the text in *Records of Soul Magic Development* from memory.

*The palace of the heart is hidden within the owner's residence.*

*Unblinking vessels guard the gates without hesitation.*

*In the innermost recesses sleeps the fortress's prisoner as evidenced.*

Naut grumbled, "Why does this Vatis lady keep writing stuff so tediously?"

<<Likely because it sets the right mood.>>

Hearing my statement, Jess smiled with wry amusement. "Lady Vatis is apparently a woman of secrets. She's the distinguished founder of the royal court who left all sorts of written records. But almost everything about her is a mystery, including how she perished."

I blinked. <<Oh, really? That's news to me.>>

Naut gestured at Jess from the sidelines, and the maiden got back on track. "In terms of rescuing a spirit, I can't really make sense of the excerpt I recited earlier. However, there are two things I'm certain about based on the writing right before it."

She lifted two fingers and made a V-sign with her hand. "To find the spirit, we must approach the location of the person that harbors them. To rescue the spirit, we must enter the possessed person's domain."

<<In our case, that means we've got to go to the royal capital where the Clandestine Arcanist is residing, head into the "innermost recesses" of the so-called palace, then help Marquis break out from there.>>

I spotted Naut skeptically quirking up his eyebrow. "You think that's actually doable?"

I'd had my doubts in the beginning as well. Barging into enemy territory unprepared in a world we barely understood sounded like a failure in the making. <<That's why I'm thinking about making a small detour on our way and doing a practice run first.>>

Jess nodded. "Let's find a suitable ship and go to Fairy Creek."

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It took a good while before Cece finally managed to stop crying.

Even when she was sobbing and shedding tears, she was extremely adorable, just like an innocent baby deer. It was to the extent that I'd almost wanted to hug her close without thinking. But I was a black pig, so I'd decided to devote myself to the role of a huggable animal instead. As I sensed the girl's weeping against my back, I realized exactly how frail her slender arms were as they clung to me tightly. *How do I put this... It spurs a kind of paternal instinct within me.*

After Nattie had fallen—no, jumped off the cliff with Miss Jess, the rest of us left behind had stood in a stupor for a long time. Even when we tried peering down from the cliff edge, we could only see foamy waves steadily sweeping the ocean surface. There was neither hide nor hair of the two humans.

Normally, there should be vigorous bubbling above the area someone had plunged into. Therefore, the natural conclusion was that our two teammates—and likely Mister Lolip—had hopped over to the other world through some kind of phenomenon beyond the laws of physics.

From our perspective, we couldn't see the invisible Mister Lolip. This meant that in Cece's eyes, Nattie had disappeared alone with Miss Jess.

Even as someone with less than zero experience in matters of romance at the age of thirty-three, I could easily imagine how shocking the scene must have been to her.

Erratic hiccuping broke up Cece's breathing as she told me through telepathy, <Mister Sanon, you have the wrong idea, I, um... I don't think of Miss Jess in that way...>

I knew that she must be telling the truth. Cece was still too young to recognize her feelings as romantic jealousy.

At a small distance from us, Tsunnie and Yoyo were talking to the prince with troubled expressions. You could say that it was just like Nattie to suddenly throw a wrench into our established plans, but frankly, I hadn't expected him to do that at the very beginning of a significant operation.

Next, Batbat went up to the trio and talked to them. It appeared that Nattie had entrusted him with a message at the very end. According to the boy, these

were Nattie's words: *"I'm trusting you guys with the plan on this side."*

What had motivated him to do such a thing right before a majestic plan to reclaim this country? Unfortunately, he'd already embarked on a journey to a dangerous world without even giving us an answer.

It had been a vital turning point—it could be the last time I ever saw the youth in my life, though that could be said for any partings in a world like Mesteria. In my opinion, he should have given us a proper explanation in a situation like this. He could have, at the very least, stroked the head of a girl who'd knowingly shouldered a fatal curse for him—I believed he owed her that much.

Then again, that was what made him Naut, our infallible hero who knew no surrender.

Cece seemed to have regained a little bit of her energy after Nonnie, the girl with braids, comforted her. Liberated from my body pillow duty, I went to the prince with Kentie.

Now then, it was time for a war council.

"Boink!" I snorted audibly before switching to my thoughts. <<I suggest we leave this island at once. We would be done for if they surrounded us on the sea.>>

The prince stared down at me with solemn eyes. "Right. Let's follow our original plan and invade the royal capital as quickly as possible."

Tsunnie distanced herself from me a little before she made her statement. "Since the royal court's got their troops and the heckripons, we'll want to avoid going by land. Approaching Mousskir right now is also asking to be killed." It appeared that she still held a grudge about how I'd sniffed her undergarment once upon a time.

Meanwhile, her younger brother Yoyo stroked the back of the approaching boar while lifting the index finger of his free hand. "So that means we've got to travel by sea, huh? If we have to choose between a western route or an eastern route, I'd say east is better. Nearbell's relatively close to the royal capital, and we've still got many of our comrades on that side."

Due to the royal court's recent "change of policy," the Liberators had no choice other than to disband. Now, they were scattered across the land in hiding, but our reliable comrades in arms were still willing to give us a hand when necessary. We were practically isolated with no reinforcements in sight, so it would be silly if we didn't make use of these connections.

The prince looked convinced. "Very well. Due to some past events, I have a detailed understanding of the facilities of the royal court's army in Nearbell. It should come in handy for us to capture the place. Kento, I assume you don't have any objections either?"

The boar nodded slowly. As he spoke, I clarified his somewhat cryptic wording in the back of my mind. <We don't stand a chance against our enemies in might [military strength]. We should prioritize stealth and safety above all else.>

And so, we returned to our ship. The medium-sized ship, which had taken us to the island, remained anchored at the other end of the cramped passage just like we'd left it. Not letting our guard down, we checked that everything was safe before we boarded it.

I glanced at my companions. The Salvation Chalice—the supreme treasure we'd obtained that could save any life—was in the prince's careful possession. Our mission was to use it for a purpose it hadn't been designed for—not to save a life, but to vanquish the king.

After boarding the ship, we began sailing in the direction of the light at the tunnel's exit. There was only one way out. We had to go back how we'd come in. Through the slender crack that served as the exit and entrance, I could catch a glimpse of the northern sea.

I climbed onto a small boat, which we'd equipped on the ship for emergency use, and observed the outside world. I could only see a tiny slice of it, but there were no signs of enemies. But, well, since this island was the northernmost tip of Mesteria, it was only natural that our adversaries hadn't deployed their ships farther north. The place we should be vigilant about was the southern side of the island.

After safely getting outside from the crevice that a ship should never fit through under normal circumstances, the prince bent light with a spell that

reminded me of a mirage as we scouted out the situation in the south—in the area facing Mousskir.

“Uh-oh,” Yoyo reported from the lookout platform. “They’ve sent ships our way.”

Though it was faint, I could make out what was happening as well. A handful of naval ships—the type with sails—were advancing toward our part of the ocean from the smoky town of Mousskir. Judging by the red flags, they must belong to the royal court’s army. The most atrocious king had rendered the disciplined military into his puppet and was making it search for the prince in a frenzy.

We *had* expected this turn of events. We must shake off the surveillance of these ships somehow and head farther south on the ocean.

<<There is one solution that might help us,>> I communicated to the prince at the helm. Right now, the island was offering us cover and concealing our ship from hostile vessels, but sailing east would be risky even if we had magical camouflage. It was most certainly safer to prepare a countermeasure in advance, just in case.

But then, a crisis that surpassed any of my expectations took us by surprise—a dragon.

A colossal dragon, which looked like it could smash any ship with a single swing of its tail, had concealed itself in the blue sky by lighting up its abdomen for counter-illumination. It was the royal family’s monster that had been personally crafted by the destructive king we’d failed to assassinate. Now, it was at the beck and call of the most atrocious king.

Having discovered our ship, the dragon made an abrupt descent at a speed faster than free-falling.

The scene would be almost comical if it weren’t nonfiction. We never stood a chance from the beginning—our medium-sized ship was crushed into pieces in the blink of an eye.

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Having the luxury of choice, we picked out the cream of the crop among the



small boats moored at the port. The particular specs we judged were speed, durability, and comfort.

We chose a stylish boat that looked like functional beauty at its finest, the fruit of someone's diligent research. Its sharp silhouette reminded me of a sword, coupled with a serpentine bow resembling a snake raising its head. It had a shallow draft, and five pairs of oars thrust out onto the water from the boat's gunwales, which Jess could move systematically with magic.

To reach our destination, Fairy Creek, we had to go south down a canal and a great river before navigating into a tributary branching off from the great river. My voyage from there with Jess had taken one day and one night before we'd arrived in Mousskir, but according to Naut, we should be able to arrive at sunset if Jess used her magic continuously. The two humans sat on a plank across the deck while I curled up beneath their feet. I admired the scenery that rushed past me at an astounding speed.

If we only looked at the world from the boat, it was the picture of peace. If you ignored the crimson sunlight and the talking pig, there weren't any particular supernatural phenomena to be seen. Sporadic landscapes in the towns along the river looked like a game's visual bug, such as a church floating several dozen meters above the ground or a hill so tall and pointed that it pierced the stratosphere. But Naut and I feigned ignorance to maintain our mental stability.

Meanwhile, Jess was half leaning out from the boat and enjoying her game of spot the difference, just like a child who'd purchased a picture book featuring a man in a red-and-white-striped shirt.

I heard her excited commentary in the background.

"Oh, Mister Pig! The castle over there is missing a wall on the east! That's quite strange."

"It's supposed to be winter, but the red salvias are in full bloom!"

"Please look at that! The flags are fluttering all over the place. It seems that the wind isn't blowing in one direction."

"Mister Pig, can you tell what's wrong with the spire on that building? Come

on, indulge me, please!”

*Is this what they call innocent and cute? She’s adorable!*

Frankly, witnessing one absurd scene after another took a toll on my psyche, but going along with the merry Jess wasn’t bad at all. I looked at the spire Jess was pointing at after challenging me and began my analysis. <<Hmm... I don’t see anything strange about it, though.>>

She huffed. “There is! That spire is meant to be Gothel style, but the roof is golden!”

I looked at her blankly.

Jess explained in one breath, “Gothel architecture is defined by its celebration of the beauty of form and shapes, putting the colors of modest stone to good use. So roofing its buildings with gold would go against its style, and I highly doubt that someone who built such a wonderful spire would make such a mismatched decision that defeats its purpose.”

*I guess I learned something today.* I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<You’re very knowledgeable about the topic.>>

“I’m an otaku just like you, after all.”

Jess began excitedly admiring the scenery outside the boat again. I watched her in my peripheral vision as I turned to Naut. On both sides, invisible rowers moved the oars at an inhuman speed and ferociously propelled the boat forward. The handsome hunk, fanned by the wind from the front, was narrowing his eyes the entire time, even while he was watching our surroundings vigilantly. Perhaps he wanted to avoid seeing things that were bad for his mental health.

There was something I didn’t need to ask him but wanted to. <<Hey, Naut?>>

“What, low-life swine?”

<<What’s the situation between you and Ceres?>>

Abruptly, Naut began a spectacular coughing fit. “Ahn?” he hissed menacingly like a provoked beast.

<<Uh, no, don’t “Ahn?” me, I’m asking you a question.>>

He muttered, “There’s no situation to speak of.”

I noticed Jess had stopped admiring the scenery and seemingly nonchalantly focused on us. Just like before, Naut fixed his eyes on the waters ahead.

Naut had suddenly changed his plan and had come along on our journey. He’d already proven himself to be a great help, and he was an extremely reliable ally to have around, but one thing bothered me: Ceres.

Near the start of my second teleportation to Mesteria, I’d heard Ceres’s feelings directly from the girl. Ceres had been bullied when she’d first come to Baptsaze, and she fell in love with Naut, the local hero. Ever since, despite knowing that his affections weren’t aimed at her, Ceres had always wished to share Naut’s destiny with him, saying that simply being by his side and being helpful to him was enough.

Nevertheless, Naut hadn’t stayed behind in the surface Mesteria where Ceres was, instead embarking on a journey to the Abyssus without telling anyone in advance. Furthermore, both sides were filled with trials that might be fatal.

A devoted girl adored him and had confessed her feelings for him countless times. She’d even put her life on the line to protect him, but Naut had jumped off a cliff without a proper explanation and disappeared from her life. His attitude was disparaging, in my opinion, and I couldn’t let it pass. *I’m sure that you feel the same way, my brethren.*

He must have noticed Jess’s unblinking stare on him because Naut turned his head slightly and defended himself. “Ceres is—” he began but faltered. “It’s better for her to start distancing herself from me. She mustn’t get any closer. The only thing I’m good for is chasing a ghost, and I could never give her happiness, not in my entire lifetime.”

The word “ghost” likely referred to Eise, his deceased crush. She was Jess’s older sister and Hortis’s daughter—a Yethma who’d perished after Yethma hunters kidnapped her when the reigning king, Marquis, burned down the convent.

Jess voiced her opinion. “As long as you are by her side and in good health, I’m sure that’s enough to make Miss Ceres happy.”

Perhaps he had trouble ignoring the words of a beautiful maiden because Naut spared a glance in Jess's direction. "I'm resigning myself to this fate since I can't do that. Ceres is a mage. There's no need for me to stick by her side anymore. She can use her own powers to obtain other forms of happiness."

I sighed. *You know, that statement sounds just like the rehash of a certain super-virgin's speech.* <<I'm thankful that you're coming along with us. In fact, if you weren't around, our journey might have ended prematurely in Mousskir. So, I won't comment on that, but allow me to make one statement.>> He glared at me with eyes as sharp as daggers, but I didn't quail by any means as I continued, <<Ceres is the one who should decide what's necessary for her. After you go back, make sure to apologize properly and be nice to her.>>

After a moment of silence, a sardonic smile lifted the corners of Naut's lips. "If I get back safely, that is."

*Please don't do fatal foreshadowing like that...*

Jess frowned. "Make sure to go back no matter what happens and give Miss Ceres a big hug."

Naut scowled and ignored Jess's words this time.

*I mean, I get where he's coming from. Ceres is cute and loyal. From a bystander's point of view, they're a well-matched couple, but if Naut doesn't like Ceres in that way, it's cruel to pressure him into such expressions of affection. Especially if a love from the past still lives on within Naut's heart...*

<<Just asking, but do you possibly not like Ceres, Naut?>>

Faced with verbal prompts from two directions, Naut's bum fidgeted—he looked a little put on the spot. "She's something like a little sister to me. It isn't about like and dislike when it comes to her."

*Excuse me, but this is the relationship red flag police! Treating a woman who adores you as a younger sister and leaving her hanging without going out with her is a crime! Raise your arms and kneel, you scoundrel!* <<"Like" a little sister? But she isn't actually your little sister. So I guess her chest wasn't big enough for you.>>

My sentence seemed to be a more effective weapon than I'd expected as the

flustered Naut objected while stammering, “Wha?! Don’t speak nonsense, you low-life swine. Isn’t this the case for you too? You think of her like a little sister, right?” He stuck up his thumb and indicated Jess from across his shoulder.

He took me completely off guard, and for a while, I was flabbergasted. I noticed Jess staring at me, and I tried to be my own lawyer. <<I’d like her even if she *were* my little sister, so it doesn’t matter in my case.>>

Naut looked at me skeptically. “What the hell are you saying? You’re creeping me out.” His direct manner of speaking was one of his charms, but he struck a sore spot this time. I’d received similar scathing opinions from time to time in Japan as well, but I didn’t get it—what was so wrong with falling in love with your younger sister?

“Well, *sorry* for being so much like a younger sister, ‘big brother.’” Jess folded her arms and turned away from me with a huff. She was likely sulking, but if I were being honest, I found it simply adorable.

Though the sun was red, it didn’t become even redder at sunset. The sun, which had showered crimson light on the sky for the entire day, slipped underneath the horizon line. The sky that had been tediously cherry red abruptly changed into the darkness of night without a struggle.

However, this night sky wasn’t just any normal starry sky either—an insane number of stars filled it to the brim, as if someone had accidentally tipped over an entire bottle of salt. An abundant number of shooting stars flitted about like a gunfight, and I couldn’t help but get worried that they might collide with the other stars on their way.

Beneath the busy starry sky, our boat gently glided across the peaceful surface of a stream and steadily led us to Fairy Creek. It was darker than daytime, but the countless stars were so radiant that we didn’t need any illumination.

Rumors said that a fairy resided in our destination, Fairy Creek. The cause of the speculation was that the apple trees bore fruit and disappeared into thin air despite not appearing to have any caretakers.

But in reality, we knew that a lonely elderly man called Arle was caring for the

apple orchard. Even after losing his wife and daughter during a drowning incident, Arle continued rearing apples for them. As for the fruits he harvested, he would toss them into the creek where the pair had lost their lives and allowed the water to carry the apples away.

On our way to the north, Jess and I'd had the opportunity to meet Arle in person. And I'd also met his wife, Ferrin—the woman who'd lost her life alongside her daughter in the drowning incident.

Naut had been listening to our explanation while nodding slightly at times. "So the gist is, a female ghost named Ferrin possesses that elderly man, Arle, right?"

Jess nodded. "Yes. Their situation is similar to the connection Mister Pig and I used to have, as well as the current connection between King Marquis and the Clandestine Arcanist."

<<And so, before we help Marquis break out from his prison, we'll rehearse here and try to come into contact with a spirit.>>

That was when Naut tilted his head, puzzled. "I don't know what's going on, but, uh... Is that Arle guy a mage? You need to use soul magic to make spirits possess you, right?"

*Oh, he's right.* I looked at Jess quizzically, and she averted her gaze slightly awkwardly. "Not quite... Of course, Mister Arle isn't a mage. Soul magic appears to be a more primitive system than magic... Simply fulfilling several requirements close to what we deem legitimate soul magic is enough for you to achieve similar results."

"Hm? What are those requirements?" Naut asked with pure curiosity.

Jess slurred her words somewhat. "Um, how do I put this... If you take a part of your target's body or blood and— No, please pretend I never said anything." She seemed embarrassed by something since, as she hung her head, everything above her neck was flushed a vivid red.

*And? What are you supposed to do with a part of the target's body or blood?* I wondered.

Jess had tied my spirit to this world before detaching me from her own spirit

to help me gain independence. However, I hadn't been aware during that entire time, so I didn't know what she'd done. Since she was keeping it a secret, it must be something that made her feel considerably guilty or ashamed. *Did she possibly eat me raw without cooking me properly?*

She cast her eyes down and clenched her two hands into tight fists. I couldn't hear what was going on inside her mind. But she seemed somewhat pitiful, so I decided not to press her. <<Well, moving on, we want to look for Arle's domain inside Fairy Creek and confirm a way to contact Ferrin's spirit. Going in with just Vatis's cryptic writing makes me feel a tad anxious.>>

Naut shifted his gaze from Jess and faced forward again. "It's always better to be safe than sorry, especially in a nonsensical world like this."

As we advanced down the creek, the boat slowed down. The oars that moved with Jess's magic had also switched to fluid motions that made the least splashing sounds possible.

It was a silent night. The creek that tiptoed across the gloomy forest was like a mirror, reflecting the dense, dazzling clusters of stars that shone above the tip of the trees. At times, I would overhear incoherent whispering and groaning from inside the forest—sometimes even sounds I'd never heard before. We paid meticulous attention to our surroundings as we progressed.

"Oh, Mister Pig. Look," Jess said in a hushed voice as she gently placed her warm hand on my braised pork shoulder. Her free hand was pointing at the creekbank—or, more specifically, the solitary white tombstone that stood there. Under the illumination of a ridiculous number of stars, it even looked like it was emitting a bluish-white glow.

<<That's Ferrin's grave,>> I whispered. <<Let's moor the boat.>>

The oars quietly stopped moving before paddling in the opposite direction for a short while until the boat came to a standstill.

"The water's shallow," Naut observed, his breath creating a white fog as he spoke. "Is walking to shore the only path we've got?"

The air had been somewhat warm in Mousskir, but now, it was chilly to the bone. Ignoring the resident pig, it probably wasn't a wise idea for the two



humans with shoes to get their feet wet.

“I can freeze it,” Jess said.

Before I could even ask her for clarification, Jess leaned out from the side of the boat and quietly held her palm above the water’s surface. She didn’t look cold at all as the water began freezing over with a layer of white ice with her hand as the epicenter. Flowers of ice bloomed one after another, crafting a walkable bridge between the boat and the area right next to the grave.

<<You’re a lifesaver. Thanks.>>

“Let’s get off this thing,” Naut declared, taking the lead to step onto the bridge. We followed his example.

Jess manipulated the rope connected to our boat and tied it around a willow tree along the bank. The entire time, Naut placed his hands on the hilts of his shortwords, ready to act whenever necessary.

Soon, the three of us were standing in front of the stone slab. “So this is the grave you were talking about,” Naut muttered. The white, square stone slab had been significantly weathered down the last time we’d seen it, but over in this world, it looked as if it was brand-new.

*Ferrin Pommy*

Just like I’d expected, there were two names engraved on the surface—the names of the mother and daughter who’d drowned in this creek. Furthermore, a single, bright red apple was left on top of the tombstone.

<<If we head upstream from here, we should find the log house where I met Ferrin. That place should match the description of Arle’s residence. Let’s try heading there first.>>

Even as I spoke, I had the nagging feeling that someone was watching me from somewhere, and I couldn’t shake it off.

Naut casually reached out toward the apple placed on the grave. I glanced in its direction. That was when realization struck me. Unfortunately, the scene was

so uncanny that it rendered me speechless, and my warning for Naut came out much too late.

The *apple* was staring at us.

Right in the middle of its scarlet skin was a single human eye. Its eyelid was wide open, and the moment I laid my eyes on it, the eyeball rolled until it faced Naut.

<<Don't touch it!>>

Two things occurred almost simultaneously: my warning shout and Naut's fingertips making contact with the apple.

It happened instantly. My vision was stirred up into a chaotic mess, as if I'd fallen from a waterfall and was being jostled about by water, before my entire world rotated. I could feel Jess winding her arm around my stomach. All sense of balance was tossed out the window, and I couldn't even tell up from down.

The scenery within my vision shook violently and swirled in whirlpools as it gradually transformed from a dark night lit up by stars to a gloomy green space.

The next thing I knew, I was lying in an orchard with well-organized rows of apple trees. A sweet, overly saturated fragrance overwhelmed the pig olfactory epithelium in my nasal cavity.

The source of the fragrance turned out to be apple flowers. White, cherry blossom-like flowers were blooming on all the trees as far as the eye could see—and to my shock, they were blooming at a density ten times that of a typical apple tree in full bloom.

Next to me, Jess climbed to her feet while whispering, "It's beautiful..." The apple trees with overabundant blossoms that exceeded the accepted norms of ecology were a breathtaking sight—it looked as if they were covered by flowery snow. Moonlight drenched the dark orchard, and the trees appeared as if they were glowing faintly.

"What in the world is going on?" Naut's voice rang out. "What happened to the sky?"

Intrigued, I looked up. The numerous stars that had filled the sky to the brim only moments ago had returned to a number that conformed to our common sense.

I began contemplating. <<I can think of two possibilities: either the stars suddenly decreased, or we've ended up below a different sky... No matter which it is, I'm pretty sure it was all triggered by that strange apple.>>

Naut frowned. "Strange? What are you talking about?"

<<Didn't you see? There was an eye on that apple.>>

He blinked. "An eye?" He still looked like he didn't quite follow, but he shrugged. "Oh well, whatever." If he were shocked at a mere apple with an eye in this world, he'd probably die of a heart attack sooner or later, so his quick acceptance was understandable.

Jess called out, "Mister Pig! Look at this!"

Under her ushering, I looked at the nearby tree. Beneath the white apple flowers blooming in profusion were red apples peering out shyly from within. Now that I had a better look, there were many fruits on every tree that were secretly hidden away by the flowers.

Jess tilted her head in confusion. "Um... Do apple flowers and fruits ever appear at the same time?"

<<No, they don't.>> I shook my head. <<Apple flowers bloom all at once. Their fruits only ripen a few months after that.>>

It probably didn't sound convincing from a talking pig, but it was absolutely impossible for apple flowers and fruits to appear on the same branch.

There was buzzing all over the orchard, reminding me of honeybees. The sounds were oddly harmonious, as if someone was performing chamber music tuning.

"This gives me the creeps. Let's head back to where we came from." Naut looked at me.

I nodded. <<We should start by going back toward the creek. We'll leave the orchard and make our way to the forest.>>

Engulfed by a chokingly sweet fragrance, we wandered around the dim orchard. The white flowers that hung over the entire space like a veil seemed to glow pale blue under the moonlight.

Though I'd suggested aiming for the creek, I didn't know which direction to go. As I walked, I realized something. <<Arle told Jess that rearing fruits here was Ferrin's dearest wish. He also mentioned that his daughter, Pommy, liked apples too. Don't you sense the wish of their entire family in this place?>>

"Yes." Jess nodded. "It's a very lovely place."

Indeed, it was gorgeous. It had a beauty that transcended the laws of nature—such ethereal, extraordinary beauty was harrowing instead.

I didn't know what was happening, but I strongly felt Arle's wish in this area. If we followed Vatis's description, perhaps this was Arle's domain. We were steadily approaching our destination—or maybe it was my wishful thinking speaking as we searched aimlessly for the path along the creek.

Eventually, we managed to leave the apple orchard and travel into a clearing in the forest. A familiar scene welcomed us. On the opposite side of the clearing was a log house identical to the one we'd seen during our last visit—Arle's abode.

Luck appeared to have smiled upon us. Our search for a path of retreat had instead led us closer to our destination.

However, there was one problem. A gigantic creature I'd never seen before was blocking the way to the log house.

"Step back," Naut commanded in a voice that was barely even a whisper.

The monster noticed us. It reared its head, which was large enough to rival a crane truck.

I sucked in a sharp breath. The creature was a gorgeous dragon covered with white scales from head to toe. Every single scale rose up from its skin, creating depth while looking as if apple flowers were blooming copiously all over its body.

Its eyes were crimson, reminding me of albino animals, and its long neck

moved fluidly, possibly because it had countless vertebrae. The shape of its forearms reminded me of bat wings, and they came equipped with white claws that could chop down large trees in one swoop. Thin needles protruded from its long tail like extremely coarse sandpaper. If it ever scraped me with it, I would likely be transformed into coarsely ground mince in the blink of an eye.

The dragon easily reached several dozen meters long. I didn't even know how I'd overlooked this magnificent beast. There was a chance it had manifested out of thin air in this clearing.

We slowly edged away, but the dragon abruptly opened its maw right before our eyes. A captivatingly pink oral cavity pointed at us, and I heard a shrill, piercing screech. The next moment, cold water enveloped my entire body before I could even comprehend what was going on.

<<Huh...?>>

Manhandled by water pressure that reminded me of a raging stream, Jess and I were blasted away together. The two of us were pushed back until we collapsed inside the cluster of trees. When I raised my face, I saw Naut holding his twin shortswords, which glowed crimson as he leaped up onto the dragon's head.

Scarlet arcs flashed across the air. The swordsman's body flew toward the dragon's forehead like a bullet—Naut could use the ricochet of the shortswords' shock waves to make aerial maneuvers. Possibly because he received a buff in the Abyssus, Naut's movements were several levels faster and sharper than the last time I'd seen them.

I lay chest down with my drenched body while Jess and I watched Naut.

Naut made his first strike. Accelerated by more flames, his sword hit the dragon's forehead directly. His attack's recoil accelerated his body even more. Spinning horizontally, Naut added a second strike against the dragon's neck. Flames also enhanced his follow-up attack, and its kickback boosted him further as he made a third strike on its neck.

Like a wheel shrouded with flames, the swordsman rolled down the dragon's back, leaving countless slashes on its body. His movements were spectacular, almost like a certain squad captain. For the finish, he leaped high into the air

from the tip of the beast's tail and speedily left its attack range.

"Wow!" I heard Jess gasping in admiration beside me.

Naut had unleashed a flurry of numerous attacks within less than ten seconds. However, all he'd achieved was leaving behind faint scorch marks on the dragon's white scales.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. His shortswords had managed to slice a cliff and had even cut through an iron railing as if it were a doughnut, but they hadn't even left a dent this time!

"Mister Pig, we must flee!"

At Jess's suggestion, the two of us ran deep inside the forest. We managed to meet up with Naut right away.

I turned around and looked through the gaps between the trees at our rear. There, the dragon's red eyes were blazing. It effortlessly knocked down thick tree trunks as it charged in our direction. My liver clenched and felt like ice. It was as if we were lying down on a railway track where a limited express train was approaching at an alarming speed.

Jess thrust her hand at the dragon and summoned a colossal burst of flames. Oil adjusted to the right volatility clung to the standing trees and instantly transformed into a dazzling wall of fire.

"We'll retreat for now," Naut announced, and we broke into a run.

But that was when I heard a shrill screech. Not a moment later, a jet stream pierced through the flame wall and slammed the ground nearby with absurd force. Dirt and muddy water were violently thrown up into the air.

The dragon easily overcame the wall of fire and resumed its charge. The ferocious beast's aggression didn't even know how to settle down. Jess's life was in danger, and a chill ran down my spine.

That was when I recalled the anklets Jess had equipped on my feet. She was counting on me. I couldn't leave all the fighting to Naut. I was a man too. I had to make my stand.

I stopped and swiftly turned around before focusing on my two front feet.

Fire didn't seem effective, but another element must be, or so I theorized.

Everywhere, Puddles littered the ground. I controlled the water while imagining a vertical stabbing motion from underground.

I clenched my legs. Towering blades of ice tore through the ground's surface right in front of the looming dragon and pierced the sky one after another. I was picturing building a fence of ice in my mind. Since the pointed ends of the ice blades aimed at the dragon, even if I couldn't wound it, it should be enough to buy some time.

"Mister Pig, hurry!" Jess yelled out at me from behind. I'd intended on protecting her but instead caused her to stop.

However, I still had one small job left on my itinerary. <<I'll catch up right away! Go ahead of me!>>

The dragon came to a stop. But it then straightened its torso—which reminded me of heavy machinery—before easily smashing the ice fence into pieces. I didn't let that opening slip away, activating the mechanism that I was actually counting on.

Ice blades smeared with mud were positioned around the dragon. I summoned the highest voltage I could and sent it toward the ice from beneath my feet.

Pallid sparks, which threatened to burn my eyes, coiled around the dragon. The dragon flinched as if it had been shoved before letting out a piercing howl. Even if it hadn't suffered much damage, I'd been able to stop it for an instant—and just as that thought crossed my mind, crimson eyes glared at me immediately. *Fudge.*

An explosion of dizzyingly bright flames burst out in front of my eyes. For a moment, I didn't know what was going on. But then, Jess walked up next to me. "We must run."

In the end, Jess's magic came to my rescue. Fire and smoke created a barrier between us and the dragon, but it was only a matter of time before it overcame this obstacle as well. Together with Jess, we sprinted toward where Naut was waiting for us.



<<It seems that electricity is a bit effective,>> I said as I ran. <<Can you attack it with lightning like Shravis?>>

Jess knitted her eyebrows together apologetically. “I’m sorry. Magic over electric currents is sophisticated, and I’m not at that level yet...”

Soon, we caught up with the swordsman. “I guess we might as well try,” Naut declared as he exchanged the ristae in his shortswords with practiced ease. Within the light of the fire, I saw him equipping one of the shortswords with a yellow rista.

A shrill screech resounded within the forest once again. A jet stream as vigorous as a waterfall blasted through the flame wall and struck the wrong spot. That was because we’d changed course under Naut’s guidance.

As soon as the jet stream appeared, Naut had used the kickback of his slashes to leap high into the air. He was now poised with his shortswords so that they were level with the face of the dragon as it charged through the fire. Pale sparks exploded violently before the creature’s slender snout. As if dancing in the air, Naut swung his shortswords and used the recoil to return to our side. He landed with a heavy thud.

“I missed its eyes, but it seems more effective than our earlier attacks,” he declared.

The dragon didn’t seem to have any conspicuous external wounds but shook its head with evident trepidation. We used that opening to take cover inside the darkness of the forest.

<<It’s going back,>> I commented.

It didn’t choose to pursue us relentlessly. Instead, it appeared that the dragon was returning to its original station.

“Is it running away because Mister Naut’s lightning attack worked?” Jess wondered.

“What’s the plan? Do we chase it and finish it?” Naut asked.

I shook my head. <<No, there’s no need for that. Watch.>>

I turned around to look at the log house from between the gap of the flames.

The dragon had returned to the initial clearing and slowly moved its neck, observing the flame wall warily.

<<That thing isn't trying to attack us specifically,>> I concluded. <<It's protecting that log house.>>

Naut raised an eyebrow. "But don't you guys want to go to that log house?"

I nodded. <<Can we put our faith in your skills, Naut? We don't have to fight it head-on.>>

The swordsman looked into my eyes and flashed a toothy smirk. "Don't underestimate me. Who do you think I am?"

*A handsome blond super-virgin, I guess.*

The drenched Jess looked between the two of us. "Huh? Um... What in the world are you planning?"

Naut concisely explained my aim. "We're gonna split up. I'll be the decoy and buy time. As for you guys, go ahead of me."

Naut charged at the dragon without a sliver of hesitation and attracted the creature's attention by harassing its face. He effortlessly dodged the beast's heavy attacks while masterfully directing the dragon's attention. He was slowly peeling the giant creature away from the log house. I had nothing but praise for his brilliant skills.

Meanwhile, Jess and I took a detour in the forest and approached the log house from the rear side. By the time we reached the entrance, the dragon and Naut had already moved all the way to the distant apple orchard.

I briefed her on our plan. <<Naut's stamina is only going to deplete with time. Let's immediately withdraw if we can't find anything after a quick check. But if we manage to encounter Ferrin, we'll focus solely on obtaining info that'll help with rescuing Marquis and nothing else.>>

"Got it." Jess swallowed audibly. Clenching her jaw with determination, she knocked on the front door.

We waited. There was no response.

After glancing in my direction, Jess placed her hand on the handle without

faltering. A low creaking sound resounded as she gradually swung the door open.

The familiar interior that greeted us was dim. Moonlight poured in from the windows and painted one section of the house white. Within this slice of moonlight sat a single woman. She was facing Jess and me, as if she'd been waiting for us the whole time. "Oh my, so you two are my guests." The woman looked on the cusp of her forties. She had long black hair and a kindly gaze. It was Ferrin.

*We found her!* I was beginning to think that we were the only ones in the Abyssus, but at long last, I came across a human I'd met before.

"Um... Hello." Jess gave Ferrin a courteous bow. I followed suit and dipped my head.

Ferrin remained seated next to the window as she returned our gestures with a benign nod. "It's been a while since I've last talked with other people. Goodness, I certainly hope I haven't forgotten how to speak." She somehow gave off an otherworldly aura as she spoke mildly inside the dark house.

<<You are alone here, ma'am?>> I asked politely. <<Where is Mister Arle?>>

"I believe my husband should rest for the night soon. It's getting quite late, after all."

She beckoned me with her hand, and I walked over to her feet. Her slender fingers softly stroked my head. In one corner of my wide pig's field of vision, Jess puffed out her cheeks with a huff and placed a hand on her hip.

"That means Mister Arle must be here too, yes?" Jess asked, a tiny thorn of jealousy hidden within her tone.

Ferrin shook her head slightly. "This *place* is my husband."

Neither Jess nor I had expected this answer. For a while, both of us were at a loss for words.

I was the first to find my voice. I looked up at Ferrin as she stroked my chin. <<Could you clarify what you mean by that?>>

Time was a limited resource. We had to make use of the little we possessed to

gain as many hints as possible for Marquis's rescue mission.

"This place is my husband's heart itself." She paused. "You could liken it to a cage that has trapped me for decades."

It took me some time to interpret her words. *Arle's heart itself?* In the back of my mind, I recalled Vatis's description. "*The palace of the heart is hidden within the owner's residence.*"

Would that mean this place was the "palace of the heart"? Jess and I traded glances.

Gingerly, Jess spoke up. "We are currently in the Abyssus, is that correct?"

"Abyssus?" Ferrin inclined her head quizzically. "I'm afraid I don't know the complicated details. I'm also not sure what you visited this place for, but I would advise you to run away before my husband harms you."

I frowned. <<Run away? Sorry, but I don't think I quite follow.>>

"It's human nature to protect your own heart, you see." Despite the two of us pestering her with questions, Ferrin's patience and kindness never ran out. "To be blunt, you and your companion are foreign substances here, and I doubt that my husband's heart would welcome you with open arms. I'm certain that a dreadful fate awaits you if you stay."

*Honestly, I feel like we've already encountered relatively dreadful things so far, but that aside...* <<Missus Ferrin, would it be all right if you could pass on a word to Mister Arle to let our visit slide?>>

The woman shook her head as she emphasized, "This place is my husband's heart itself. And a human heart, I'm afraid, isn't something that can be dictated easily by outside influences."

Within the ensuing stillness echoed the piercing shriek of a gigantic beast from outside. We had to hurry. <<My apologies. I know we barged in without any prior notice, and I know I'm not in a position to say this, but there are a few things we would like to ask you. We would be grateful if you could provide any information.>>

Ferrin nodded genially with a soft smile. "Ask away. I've wanted to support

the two of you since quite a while ago.”

Deciding to take her up on her kind offer, I got straight to the point. <<Well then... Knowing that this is Mister Arle’s heart, even if we invade it like we’re doing now, Mister Arle can’t see us here. Is that assumption accurate?>>

She inclined her head ambiguously. “No, he won’t be able to see you, per se. I’m sure that you haven’t ever peered inside your own heart before either.”

Shravis’s words floated to the surface of my mind.

*“If we compare Mesteria to a gigantic life-form, then the Abyssus is akin to its inner organs. That was the description written in this book. By nature, it’s a place that man should never have access to or have a chance to peer into—a world on the other side of ours, constructed by the desires of all the humans in this nation.”*

Considering that description, it was only natural that people in the surface Mesteria couldn’t “peer into” hearts, which we could access and see from the Abyssus’s side.

“That said...” Ferrin looked outside the windows with worry in her eyes. “My husband’s heart is astir because of your visit, and I think his conscious mind might sense the unrest.”

*Interesting. So, if the dragon goes on a rampage inside his heart, he might perceive it as something like a bad premonition. If we apply that to our rescue mission, we’ll likely be able to avoid a direct confrontation with the Clandestine Arcanist. But at the same time, we must make it as swift as possible so that the elderly mage doesn’t sense that something is amiss.*

I had the feeling that the commotion outside the windows was gradually closing in.

While I was organizing my thoughts, Jess voiced a question. “Excuse me... I’m only saying this as an example, but would it be possible for us to take you out of here, Missus Ferrin?”

Ferrin slowly exhaled. “Oh. I never knew that there’s also the concept of

outside here.” Her statement heavily implied that she hadn’t left this place for a long, long time.

“There is.” Jess nodded. “We have traveled across a place called the Abyssus to come all the way here.”

Hearing that, the woman gazed outside the windows once more. “I see... If you were able to enter this place, I’m sure that you are capable of taking me away as well. The only thing stopping me from breaking free from this apple orchard is that terrifying monster detaining me, after all.”

She must be referring to the white dragon. The monster belonged to Arle’s heart, judging by her wording. That dragon wasn’t just guarding his heart from intruders like us but also standing watch so that Ferrin didn’t escape from this place.

Jess looked shaken. She placed a hand against her chest. “That’s awful... I’m not sure whether I have this right, but it sounds like you’re being imprisoned here against your will.”

Still smiling, Ferrin nodded. “I *am* a prisoner—a prisoner of my husband’s dreams and regret for as long as I can remember.”

Her wording rang a bell. In Vatis’s *Records of Soul Magic Development*, she’d also used the word “prisoner.” “*In the innermost recesses sleeps the fortress’s prisoner as evidenced.*” A fortress was a place designed to defend itself from outside attacks. Ferrin, who’d been trapped inside the deepest part of Arle’s heart, fit that description perfectly.

From the very beginning, our goal was to help Marquis “break out of prison.” The same principle likely applied to Ferrin. *If that’s the case, then I’m also—*

Jess abruptly had a coughing fit before she cleared her throat. “Missus Ferrin, have you told Mister Arle about this? That you’re trapped here with no way out even if you wanted to leave?”

Within the dim, pale moonlight, I spotted a hint of resignation on Ferrin’s face. “I think you’ll understand if you give it some thought.” Her white, delicate hands gingerly reached out toward Jess. “There’s nothing you can do about your own grief—I’m sure that’s the case for you two as well. Similarly, even if I

tell my husband about my plight, there's nothing he can do. That is simply the nature of this place. I've already forgotten how many times I've appealed to him about how I wish to leave this place and go where my daughter is."

As I listened to her story, something bothered me—something that didn't quite add up. It was a fundamental problem. According to her, this place was Arle's heart. If that were the case, who in the world was the Ferrin I'd come across in Fairy Creek? And if Arle wasn't here, how was she able to communicate with her husband?

<<Sorry to interrupt, but when we visited Fairy Creek a while ago, you were with Mister Arle, yes? Would that mean that back then, you weren't here in his heart?>>

She answered readily. "I wasn't. Whenever my husband bakes pie, he summons me over, even though I can't eat..."

*Summon her over?*

I mulled over her statement. Ferrin's spirit wasn't always inside Arle's heart. Therefore, the Ferrin I'd encountered in the surface Mesteria wasn't in the same prisoner state as she was now. <<Just for confirmation, are you implying that, like how we see it, this place is a completely different realm in your eyes to where Arle is?>>

Ferrin nodded, making me even more confused. When I'd traveled around the surface Mesteria in my spirit state, I'd never seen the Abyssus like Ferrin had. Neither had I ever sensed something like a summoning. After all, I'd had the assumption that I'd been in the surface Mesteria the entire time with Jess. What in the world was this difference between the two of us?

Thoughts still jumbled, I continued my inquiry. <<And so, have you been traveling back and forth between these two realms?>>

Instead of replying to my question, Ferrin stood up from her chair with a start. The house had begun shaking and rattling. "You must flee at once. It seems that my husband is in a stormy mood."

Not a second later, the windows shattered into tiny fragments, and a human in the fetal position crashed inside. After rolling on the floor a few times, he

swiftly climbed to his feet and looked at us. “Sorry, but time’s up.” It was Naut. Parts of his clothes were tattered, and blood was seeping out from a gash on his face.

Without a moment’s delay, a sound that reminded me of a shriek rang out, and a ghastly amount of water flowed in from the broken windows. Jess and I didn’t even have the time to brace ourselves before the water swallowed us whole. It was freezing—possibly literally because it felt as if someone had somehow liquefied ice.

We couldn’t even put up a fight against the raging torrent of water. There was loud cracking and snapping as the walls broke down. The next thing I knew, we were thrown violently into the firewood storage area outside the lodge.

“Mister Pig!” Jess exclaimed. “Are you all right?!”

<<Yeah. What about you, Jess? Naut?>>

“Yes, I’m fine,” Jess replied.

“I can still move. We’ve got to hurry up and get out of here,” Naut barked.

The log house was in ruins—it didn’t even retain any of its former shape. Ferrin was nowhere to be seen either.

I stood up and realized something. A pair of vivid crimson eyes were glaring in our direction.

No—what was red wasn’t just the eyes. The dragon’s scales, which should have been white like the freshest snow, had transformed into a deep, grotesque, bloodcurdling red. Its front arm, raised high in the air, was poised to tear us into shreds any moment now. Sharp claws swung down like the Grim Reaper’s towering scythe.

Chilled by cold water, my pork flesh wasn’t as responsive as I wanted it to be. *Yikes.*

“I’ll take us up!” Jess yelled and gathered me into a tight embrace.

I could feel a soft chest pressing against me through wet fabric, but this wasn’t the time to focus on such details. The ground beneath our feet exploded, and the sensation of a brutal acceleration hijacked all my senses. The



three of us flew—no, we were launched high into the air, drawing the start of a parabola across the sky. Our departure had been so fierce that I even felt as if I'd left behind all my internal organs on the ground.

My body eventually stopped ascending and shifted into a descending motion. Flames flashed nearby, and I could make out Naut fixing his stance in midair. Meanwhile, Jess and I were doing a spiral dive as we gradually slowed down with her floating spell. Though Jess's mana was potent, she wasn't skilled enough to accurately manipulate objects when they were falling while spinning in the air.

In the end, we crashed into an apple tree, sending a flurry of petals and a few fruits into the air as we fell to the ground. I was lying chest-up, and I could feel some warm and soft things sandwiching my face. It didn't take me too long before I realized the "somethings" were Jess's thighs.

"I-I'm so sorry!" Jess yelped, practically tumbling off me before she adjusted her skirt. "I didn't mean for that to happen." Numerous white petals were stuck to her drenched body. *Is it just me, or have "unfortunate" incidents like these happened more frequently since we came to the Abyssus?*

<<Don't worry about it. It's been a dream of mine since I was a child. I've always wanted to become a beautiful maiden's chair.>>

Jess looked like she had one or two objections on her tongue, but when she saw the twin shortswords lighting up with fire and lightning beside her, she stood at the ready. Even as Naut staggered onto his feet, he was glaring fiercely at the dragon that we should have managed to escape from moments earlier.

A colossal body shrouded by maroon scales dragged itself across the ground, swaying and twisting as it weaved between the gaps of the apple trees, rapidly closing the distance.

I had to back Naut up. Even stalling it for a few seconds was enough. Thinking that, I focused on my anklets and used transmutation to create a barricade of ice on the ground once again. However, the water likely wasn't as abundant here because the blades of ice were thin. In fact, I could even see the maroon dragon through them.

The dragon howled with a sound that threatened to split my eardrums as it

spouted out a copious amount of water from its mouth. My flimsy makeshift barricade crumpled into nothing under the intense hydraulic pressure.

*It's so fast!* I thought with alarm.

Not even giving us time to flee, the cold torrent engulfed us. The water heaved up mud as it moved, and it viciously robbed me of my breath, vision, and sense of equilibrium. I didn't even know where Jess and Naut were. It was so freezing that I felt my pork rapidly seizing up and contracting. At this rate, it was going to turn me into frozen mince.

Even after I was released from the jet stream, I could only lay down listlessly on the ground that had been transformed into a swamp. The cold was killing the sensation in my body. I sorely missed Jess's warm thighs.

Heavy, rhythmical thumps of feet tipped me off to the fact that the dragon was closing in without mercy, and I knew I was cornered. Games that involved monster hunting had never been my cup of tea. I'd long lost track of how many times I'd been sent back to camp after facing the relentless onslaught of attacks by giant berserk beasts. If it finished me off here, the consequences I would face were likely not as harmless as that. I wondered—would Naut rescue Jess if I died? Perhaps the better question was, were the two of them still alive?

My eyelids were heavy and numb, but after much struggling, I barely managed to lift them.

What I spotted immediately in our vicinity was a human back shrouded by a purple robe. On the other side of this person was the dragon, its maw opened wide. A raging stream of water gushed out without delay. However, as if it had hit an invisible wall, the water was redirected right back to the sender without wasting a single drop, pushing the dragon backward instead.

Long silvery hair fluttered freely in the wind as the mysterious silhouette spread both arms wide. Countless tiny spheres floated up from the trees of the vast orchard. Even under the moonlight, I could see that these spheres were dyed a bright red identical to the dragon's fearsome color.

Indeed—thousands of apples were suspended in midair. They all began moving along one spiral path like a vortex. With the dragon at the eye of the storm, the vortex gradually shrunk, and accordingly, the density of the apples

increased.

I didn't know what it was thinking, but the dragon was still, as if it was confused. Gradually, silence returned to the orchard.

"Mister Pig! What in the world is—" The muddy Jess, who'd rushed over to me, stopped when she saw the silhouette that stood tall with dignity. Naut was nearby too. Both of them were frozen like I was, unable to process the unbelievable scene we witnessed.

A myriad of apples were flying about, surrounding a crimson dragon inside the moonlit orchard. A tall human silhouette stood before the fantastical scene, spreading their arms wide like the statue of Christ in Rio de Janeiro.

What followed was the hoarse but majestic voice of a man. "My goodness, such oversight isn't characteristic of you three at all. The dragon knocked down trees inside the forest but avoided the trees in the orchard—couldn't you grasp the reason behind that? This creature cannot damage the apples. Therefore, if you create a wall of fruits, it won't be able to break free."

The swirling apples slowed and began piling up one after another around the dragon to construct a circular wall. It rose up until it was taller than the dragon's head, meticulously crafting a beautiful dome with an accuracy that would even bring King Khufu down to his knees. Meanwhile, the dragon had gone quiet, almost as if it had disappeared into thin air. All we could see was a systematically stacked hillock of fruits.

The shadowy silhouette lowered his extended arms. He turned around, and when I laid my eyes upon his visage, something more volatile than a shiver ran down my back fat.

Naut was supporting his own shoulder with a hand. Scowling, he asked, "Oy, old geezer. Who the heck are you?" Considering the courtesy that the elderly man deserved, this greeting would be rated with a perfect score of negative one hundred out of a hundred.

"Courageous young man," the elderly man addressed, dipping his head in greeting. "I shall overlook your blatant impudence toward the previous king, but only this once."

I could never mistake his voice and appearance for anyone else. He was none other than Eavis, the deceased unparalleled mage of Mesteria.

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We searched for a new vessel [ship] in a convenient port and forsook our small, cramped boat.

Mister Sanon's scheme had borne fruit spectacularly. We had collectively boarded an emergency boat, daringly using the ship we'd been on as a decoy. While that vessel burst into flames after the havoc that the monster [dragon] unleashed, we turned tail on our small boat camouflaged with magic.

The craft didn't have much space to offer since it was for emergency use, but the new ship we had "borrowed indefinitely," so to speak, was spacious and comfortable. I basked in the salty sea breeze on the deck while admiring the aesthetically pleasing coast of Mesteria.

Since pigs weren't flying, the laws of nature dictated that the sun would set in the western land area while we cruised [sailed] on the eastern sea. When I narrowed my eyes in the dazzling evening sun, I could faintly discern the pointed outline of our distant destination [the royal capital].

"If you stay out for too long in the sea breeze, your fur will become all matted, you know?"

I felt long, slender fingers stroke my chin. It was Nourris. I twisted my body to avoid her fingers. But the next moment, Nourris clutched me tightly in her arms and began tickling my body while muttering, "Kitchy-koo!" in a bubbly voice.

<<Spare me from such infantilizing treatment, please,>> I protested.

But the maiden only smiled. She didn't stop her game. "Aw, but you're so adorable."

A wide, toothy grin was right in front of my eyes. Cheeks dusted with freckles. Downturned eyes that always held the glimmer of a smile. Beneath them was a stifling silver injustice [collar] with a dull gleam.

At a distance that was unthinkable for a man and woman with a wholesome relationship, Nourris was fussing over me, a boar. Her awareness about such

matters was generally somewhat lacking, but to make things worse, I felt her chest gently melt against my body like a toasted marshmallow.

Unlike Mister Pervert [Lolip] and Mister Hopeless Pervert [Sanon], I wasn't the type who saw this as a lucky benefit of my new form. Before anything else, Nourris was fifteen years old—one year younger than me. I sincerely hoped she would stop treating me like a child.

I rolled over to dodge her tickle attacks until I was facing her. With her hands propping her up against the floor, she faced me. Her collar was wide open, and from the opening, I could— *Ahem*.

"What was that 'ahem' for, hmm?" The cheery girl approached me on all fours, and I looked away on the spur of the moment.

The next second, leather boots appeared under my nose. "My apologies for disturbing you while you're in the middle of something." It was Mister Shravis.

<<W-We didn't have anything going on here, though.>> I stammered. Right next to me, still on her hands and knees, Nourris also craned her neck to look up at Mister Shravis. Perhaps he'd been right when he'd said we were a little busy.

Mister Shravis was used to Nourris's innocent antics. Wearing a no-nonsense expression, he said, "Could we discuss our plans for after we arrive at Nearbell? I've already talked with Sanon, but just in case, I want to hear your opinion too, Kento."

The evening sun illuminated the deck, but it was already growing dim. I couldn't spot Mister Sanon or any of the others around. Only the three of us were present. <<If you called me over, I would have gladly participated in the conference as well.>> This statement was also an indirect question asking why they hadn't done everything in one go.

Mister Shravis scratched his head a little awkwardly. "Sanon is a skilled tactician, but as the prince, I'm the commander. I wish to have the final say when making decisions. If I hold a war council with everyone present, I feel that Sanon's opinions will end up overrepresented no matter what measures I take."

*I see.* I could understand where Mister Shravis was coming from. Mister

Sanon had outstanding intellect—despite his looks—but at times, you couldn't read what was on his mind. I'd heard that if you traced Mister Super Hopeless Pervert [Hortis]'s death at the hands of the Destruction Spear all the way to the source, it had apparently begun with one of Mister Sanon's machinations. The prince must have deemed it too risky to rely on my pig accomplice alone.

<<What was Mister Sanon's opinion on the matter?>> I asked.

Mister Shravis averted his gaze slightly and cleared his throat. "How about your companion stop crawling on all fours before we start?"

I gazed to my side. Nourris was still looking up at Mister Shravis while facing me. I saw her chest area drawing chainette curves [catenaries] under the influence of gravity and felt a sense of apprehension and worry. <<Nourris.>>

I didn't know how she'd interpreted my call, but Nourris sat down while leaning against me and stroked my body. *Well, I suppose this is acceptable.*

Mister Shravis looked at us with a wry smile before continuing, "First, could you tell me your opinion without the influence of Sanon's input? What do you think is our best course of action once we arrive in Nearbell? Should we wait and survey the situation? Or should we hurry onward to the capital?"

Feeling Nourris's weight against me, I fell into contemplative silence. This was a critical decision. On land where the royal court's troops and ruffians awaited, even the smallest errors of judgment would lead us to our downfall.

<<This is just my opinion, but it's still too premature [early] to start adjusting our arrival to fall upon the morning of the fourth. The closer we get to the capital, the better—that's what I believe. I highly doubt that our hour of attack [opening] will last very long after the moment the king is weakened. The one scenario I want to avoid is where the operation on the other side [Abyssus] succeeds, but we lag behind and allow our chance to slip away from us.>>

There seemed to be a hint of reassurance on Mister Shravis's face as he smiled. "I see. Sanon said the same thing." Then, he crouched down and stroked me briefly. "Your opinion was very valuable. Thank you." That was all he said before he turned on his heel and left. He stopped at the helm, made a few minute adjustments, then sat on the railing and gazed at the capital [his hometown] under the sunset in solitude.

<<Looks like commanders have it rough too,>> I commented on a whim.

Nourris placed her chin on my back. “He’s feeling anxious.”

An unexpected word had reached my ears. <<Anxious?>>

“Yes. He finally reunited with Miss Jess and Mister Pig, but he went separate ways from them a second time, didn’t he? Once again, the prince’s true supporters have vanished from his side.”

I hesitated. <<But he has us, doesn’t he?>>

I felt Nourris shake her head on my back. “We may be allies, but to Mister Shravis, I think we aren’t his unconditional supporters and friends in the true sense of the word.”

<<But...why?>>

She paused. “The Liberators’ original goal was to take down the royal court, after all.”

I gave it some thought. Indeed, I wasn’t taking up arms for the royal family’s sake either. I returned to Mesteria for a single girl whom I’d failed to rescue once upon a time—to wipe away every last injustice that viciously swooped down on Nourris from the world.

With her chin still propped up on my back, Nourris began humming to herself. When I looked at Mister Shravis, who was alone in the wind at a distance, for some reason, I felt that he was a little pitiful. Now that the royal court [his home] had fallen into the clutches of evil, where in the world would the prince find his true sielter—a place where he could rest and depend upon?

Before I knew it, dense, gloomy clouds had taken over the western sky.

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In the night forest, Eavis led the way and talked matter-of-factly like an elderly professor giving a lecture. “In the Abyssus, strength is useful to a certain extent, but it is utterly meaningless after you reach that threshold. For you see, the way to conquer human hearts—to conquer Labyrinas—isn’t by force but by using your wits.”

He continued, “Apples were a favorite of his beloved daughter. Arle’s heart

could never trample on them heedlessly. That is precisely why I could seal that dragon away with a wall of apples. Naturally, if you wish to escape from a Labyrina, it will require your logic and wits.”

I had a thousand burning questions on my mind, but before all else, I couldn’t make sense of his jargon.

“Excuse me...” Jess spoke up meekly. “May I ask what a Labyrina is?”

A smile quirked Eavis’s beard as he turned around to face us. “The Abyssus is a world developed by human hearts. Traveling in this land means that, at times, you might wander into the hearts of those who are still alive. I have named these palaces of the heart ‘Labyrina.’”

Palace of the heart. That was a term in Vatis’s writing as well. I spoke up. <<So this place is Arle’s Labyrina. I understand.>>

“Precisely. His memories, desires, attachments, love... They are the ironclad rules that control this realm.”

Even though she was talking to a man who was supposed to be dead, Jess eagerly asked him another question. “‘*Unblinking vessels guard the gates without hesitation.*’ That was written in *Records of Soul Magic Development*. Am I correct when I say that we entered Mister Arle’s Labyrina because Mister Naut touched the apple left on the gravestone?”

Looking pleased, Eavis nodded to Jess. “Correct. It had a single eye on it, didn’t it? That’s the sign to look for. Human hearts take on a form that represents them as they lurk within the Abyssus. I suppose we could call them Econs. If you carelessly approach one of these spiritual vessels, you will be whisked away into the Labyrina.”

Naut looked away with chagrin and muttered, “But thanks to it, Jess and the swine got to see the woman you wanted to, so it worked out in the end.”

I stared at the man in the lead. I’d witnessed Eavis breathe his last in front of my very eyes. But now, the same man was alive and kicking. Even the pattern of the curse was missing from his skin.

*We’re chatting away as if all of this is normal, but I think it should be okay if I address the elephant in the room now. Right? <<Sorry, but are you really—>>*



“Now, now,” he interrupted me in an admonishing tone. “Rather than contemplating the identity of an insignificant elderly man, you should focus more on yourselves. You will never reach the capital if you remain trapped in this Labyrina. Your goal is the Clandestine Arcanist’s Labyrina, is it not?”

I nodded. <<In that case, could you please enlighten us about the method to leave this realm?>>

Eavis didn’t give me a clear yes or no. “This is Arle’s Labyrina. The exit is where his heart wishes to go. Well then, where is his heart heading toward? What do you need to do for Arle’s story to reach its ending? Think, young man.”

Even though this should be a touching reunion, Eavis didn’t look joyous in the least. In fact, his tone sounded as if he’d reunited with an unwanted traveler by chance, but at the same time, he was compelled to give us a helping hand despite his reluctance.

Jess hummed in thought. “The ending of his story—the story of Arle, who’s obsessed with his apple orchard. That’s the exit of this Labyrina, yes?”

Eavis reserved a warm smile for Jess alone, almost like a grandfather looking fondly at his granddaughter. “You’ve got it. It isn’t necessary for you to directly confront the curse of this apple orchard—you only have to look for a way to escape it.”

“But...how?” Jess frowned.

“Give it a think. A form of logic that can convince his heart will be your sole key to finding the exit.”

Naut grimaced, as if he’d swallowed something bitter and unpleasant. “That means anything goes. How are we supposed to figure out what’s the right answer without asking the dude?”

“Use your imagination.” That was Eavis’s clipped response before he faced forward again and resumed walking.

We continued our trek and came all the way to the bank of the creek. For context, it was probably just slightly upstream from the grave. A large moon stared at us from the dark sky above the water.

During my thought process, I muttered out loud, <<Arle's dearest wish is—no, *was* to lead a happy life in this apple orchard with his wife and daughter.>>

Jess followed my example. “It’s because that’s out of his reach that he ended up detaining Missus Ferrin’s spirit in this Labyrina while he harvested apples every year on the other side... What in the world would help Mister Arle find contentment?”

I hadn’t a clue about where to even begin. Eavis gazed at the moon’s reflection on the creek and seemed to be waiting for something. Naut must have thrown all thinking out the window because he was silently stroking the hilts of his shortwords.

It happened without warning.

Orange blotted out the night sky in one sweep, just like spreading wildfire. In the blink of an eye, the scenery around us transformed into the evening. A chilly gust blew away fallen leaves.

“It seems that Arle has finally fallen asleep. He is likely having a dream,” Eavis said at length before shifting his gaze upstream.

From that direction, a man who only held a wooden oar came sprinting, his black hair flying about in a frenzy. “Pommy! Ferrin! Answer me! Please, talk to me, I’m begging you!” He cried out in a grief-stricken voice as he ran past us. He didn’t even seem to pay us any mind at all.

“Mister Arle...” Jess whispered as she began chasing his retreating figure. I ran with her.

By the time we caught up to him, Arle had walked into the creek and was kneeling in the shallows. What he clutched tightly in his arms were drowned corpses, unmoving like wax dolls—his daughter and wife whose skin had already gone pale. Almost as if it were trying to flee from Arle’s heartbreaking screams of raw emotion, a single oar drifted downstream.

The scene transformed so smoothly that I couldn’t even make out the transition. The next moment, Arle was dedicating a red apple by placing it gingerly on a gravestone at the same place. I couldn’t read his thoughts, but Arle proceeded to walk into the creek until he was almost completely

submerged. He collapsed face down in the crystal clear water. The transparent liquid smothered his entire body.

Arle surrendered himself to the currents for a while but eventually started coughing. Frantically, he moved his hands and feet to get ashore. His face was dripping wet—Was it because he'd drank a lot of water, were they tears?—as his shoulders heaved with sobs.

Just as abruptly as the sky had brightened, our environment returned to a moonlit night. We found ourselves standing in front of the grave crafted with white stone. A single apple was placed on top of it.

This time, Naut observed the apple cautiously. "It's pretty clear by now. That man only has one choice—he's got to die. If he doesn't, this world that's no different from a prison won't end."

Eavis nodded. "The question is, how do we die?"

Jess's eyes widened. "Whaaat?! We have to die?!"

The late king shook his head. "No, that's not necessary. If the end of his story is the way he perishes, you only have to imitate the method itself."

*Imitate his manner of death... If he wants to follow his deceased wife and daughter into the afterlife, then—* <<That means we'll have to throw ourselves into the creek.>>

I could interpret the snapshot of Arle's memories earlier as the moment his suicide had failed. In this creek where both his wife and child had drowned, Arle had tried to follow in their footsteps by ending his own life. But he'd been unsuccessful. That was why he'd imprisoned Ferrin's spirit inside the cage, which was his heart, for the longest time while harvesting apples and tossing them into the creek. And likely, all the while, he'd stared intently at where the many fruits were carried to.

I cast down my eyes briefly and let out a shaky exhale.

Jess looked at me before she gazed at the creek with anguish in her eyes. "Ultimately, walking into the creek and letting the current carry us away is how we leave this Labyrina. Is that right?"

“That’s ridiculous,” Naut said incredulously. “We’ll catch a cold.”

*That’s the one thing you pick to be worried about?* I raised an imaginary eyebrow.

In contrast to Naut’s misgivings, Eavis nodded. “Have faith in Jess’s imagination. I have the gift of foresight.”

Beneath the clear, moonlit winter sky, Eavis walked into the creek without hesitation. Jess and I traded glances before we followed him. Frolicking about in a creek in winter sounded like it should be the punch line of a joke instead of reality, but that was what we were doing. The water was as frosty as ice.

Naut didn’t look convinced, but after a short delay, he entered the creek too. “I certainly hope we’ll get out of here alive,” he called out doubtfully in Eavis’s direction.

“Do not fret.” The previous king ended his reply with a question. “Who do you think you’re addressing?”

*The strongest wise man in the world with silver hair and a tall stature?*

“I am Eavis,” he announced, “and that is the name of the unparalleled mage of Mesteria with an intellect that transcends everyone else in this world.”

The next thing I knew, I found myself on a boat. Still lying down on my side, I peered up at the night sky with one eye and soon regretted that decision—the blinding starry sky, which looked as if someone had compressed the Milky Way until it was a hundred times its original density, burned my retina. Right beside me was the sleeping Jess, who had wound one arm around my smoked pork ribs.

Meanwhile, on the other side of my body was Naut, who was sluggishly sitting up. “Looks like we’re finally back on the boat. That was a rather taxing journey.”

I stood up as well. Jess’s arm hit the floor with a thump, and she let out an unintelligible “Arrphmn.” as she came to.

Eyes narrowed, Naut shifted his gaze forward. “Looks like that pompous old geezer’s gone.”

Realization dawned on me. *Oh, right, we escaped from Arle’s Labyrina and*

*returned to the Abyssus. We probably can't hope for the deceased to accompany us on the rest of our journey.* <<I guessed as much. The way overpowered characters work is that they only show up at critical moments to give us a hand.>>

A voice rang out from behind me. "That is incorrect."

I whipped my head around. There, Eavis was calmly sitting while resting his hands on his knees. *Whaaa?! It was a feint?*

He continued, "The overpowered old geezer is right here. There are just a few more details I must relay, you see."

Naut bowed. "Sorry about my attitude." I followed his example and bowed.

"Your Majesty, um, I..." Jess, who'd gotten onto her feet, placed a hand against her chest. She looked like she wanted to say something to him.

However, Eavis raised a single palm in her direction to stop her. "There is nothing you and your companions ought to tell me. I am the one who must say what should be said." Though his wording was enigmatic, his tone was final, not leaving room for any objections. After a pause, he slowly said, "I'm afraid I can't keep you company for long—for I am death itself."

The previous king stood up and made his way to the bow. The small watercraft we'd appropriated in Mousskir glided across the creek soundlessly, bound for an unidentified destination.

Naut, for some reason unknown to me, was staring intently at Eavis's back.

"I believe you're heading to where my pitiful son is, yes? Though I can't accompany you, I suppose I can give you some advice in the little time I have left." Eavis turned around to face us. His expression was the picture of peace, and simply looking at it gave me a vague sense of warm reassurance. "I'm aware that each of you has come here with different intentions, but I can't deny the fact that you have made the perilous journey to the Abyssus to aid the royal family. You have my sincere gratitude."

"I can't even put food on the table with something like 'gratitude.'" Naut was sitting cross-legged and looked up at Eavis, who stood with dignity. "Frankly, this world doesn't make any sense at all. Trees can talk, and the sky's red even

during noon. If you're one of the residents of this *wonderful* world, could you tell us the rules and strategies to achieve what we want?"

Naut's disrespectful tone didn't even earn as much as an eyebrow twitch from Eavis, who explained, "I'm not a resident of this place. I'm not a resident of any place. Nevertheless, if I use my extensive knowledge and mighty wisdom, I can interpret the mechanisms of this world." Unhurriedly, Eavis looked up at the sky—the literally blinding starry sky where an infinite number of stars raced against one another without rest. "The Labyrina you were in earlier was inside the heart of a single human. Conversely, the Abyssus is a depository of chaos crafted from the thoughts of humans from all over the world entangled in one messy clump. Though there are no meaningless events, it would likely be almost impossible to interpret individual phenomena straightforwardly."

Naut was gaping at the previous king, utterly bewildered. "Unfortunately, I'm an uneducated village boy, so complicated things will only fly over my head. Long story short, are you saying there aren't any rules or strategies we can use?"

Eavis shook his head. "Not quite. Though it's a much more complex structure, the basic laws of this world are the same as Labyrinas. If you wish to conquer it, you mustn't rely on power but your wits and critical thinking. I suggest you solve mysteries wherever you go—the mysteries of this world."

As if he'd suddenly recalled something, he added, "And be warned. Avoid the entrances of Labyrina—the Econs—as much as you can. Entering someone's heart means a mighty force will attempt to eliminate you."

Hearing that, my mind immediately went to our plans. Judging by how Jess was anxiously placing her hand against her chest, she must be thinking the same thing.

Our goal was to break Marquis's spirit, a prisoner of the Clandestine Arcanist's heart, out of captivity. Now, if we took Vatis's writing and Eavis's explanation into the equation...

*The palace of the heart is hidden within the owner's residence*—The Clandestine Arcanist's Labyrina was hidden within the Abyssus's version of the

royal capital.

*Unblinking vessels guard the gates without hesitation*—We had to search for the mage's Econ, which served as the entrance.

*In the innermost recesses sleeps the fortress's prisoner as evidenced*—Then, we had to explore the Labyrina, find Marquis, and escape with him like we'd done earlier.

At the same time, we would have to fight against a powerful, outrageous enemy like the nightmarish dragon in the apple orchard.

Jess leaned forward nervously. "Excuse me, Your Majesty. If we are in a situation where we must enter a, um, Labyrina at all costs—"

Eavis gently interrupted her with a gesture of his hand. "It's precisely because this is a world full of unreasonable things that you must stubbornly force your logic upon it no matter what it takes." There was a weight to his words that I could almost feel against my skin. "When up against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent, your only choice is to use your rationality as your weapon—to use your critical thinking and fight back with it thoroughly. After all, if you abandon all thoughts and fight with brute force, everyone knows the stronger one will win."

Those were the words of the previous king, who was one such overwhelmingly mighty individual as the once unparalleled mage of Mesteria.

"It sure sounds heartfelt coming from a *great* king like you." Naut scoffed defiantly.

<<Hey, he's being nice and explaining things to us. Don't try to pick a fight,>> I warned.

Eavis shook his head slowly. "There is no fault in his actions. It's an indisputable fact that our royal court has ruled over Mesteria for generations with absolute and totalitarian power. For over a century, we have enslaved other mages and oppressed our people with hollow deception, claiming that we have divine blood. I'm not about to deny the truth after everything that has happened."

He then turned around and faced the ship's heading again. From my perspective, I could only see his back. "And that is precisely why—the fact that we have been governing our society with force ever since Lady Vatis is precisely why we kings must be wiser, stronger, and more absolute than anyone else."

But that wasn't the case. A curse felled the previous king while the current king had lost control over his own body.

The world as we knew it was steadily marching toward ruin. If so, where in the world was our boat sailing soundlessly toward during the witching hour? That, however, was a question we didn't have the answer to.

For some reason, irresistible drowsiness weighed heavy on my eyelids. Only Eavis's voice reached my mind clearly. "What I can give you is a guarantee, for I am a man with the gift of foresight."

*You know, it's been on my mind for a while, but I've got to say, he's got a lion's heart and confidence in spades to declare that about himself.*

He continued, "Owing to your efforts, the monarchy of Mesteria, which has thrived for over 129 years since the twilight of the Dark Ages, has been devastated beyond recognition. However, everything has a conclusion. What's important is *how* it comes to an end."

I overheard Jess adorably mumbling "Mnyah..." next to me.

"I have witnessed countless failures, but this one time, it will be an exception. Or at least, I'm confident that it will be. This world will change without a doubt—no, it will finally find its chance to transform in your hands."

Naut's head, which had been rocking gently back and forth, finally hit the boat's hull with a thud.

"Have faith in your own will, all of you, and keep advancing down the most ideal path possible, which you have paved."

I couldn't put up a fight against the onslaught of drowsiness. Like Naut, I lay down with my eyes cracked open just a sliver. Against the starry sky, Eavis looked like a cutout shadow.

Moments before I fell asleep, I felt like I heard a brief statement.



If I wasn't mistaken, Eavis said, "My dear granddaughter... This time, I must bid you an eternal farewell."



## Chapter 3: Even Death Can't Cure a Pervert

The three of us opened our eyes at a completely unknown riverbank shrouded in fog. Our boat had been moored tidily at a harbor. In our case, the second time was the charm—Eavis was nowhere to be seen. Of course, he hadn't left any notes behind either.

*Hmm...* I could recall everything up until an irresistible drowsiness caused all three of us to doze off during Eavis's speech. Would that mean the previous king had personally steered the boat all the way here?

Eavis, who should be dead, had appeared before us to offer a remarkably timely helping hand before disappearing without even giving us time to thank him. He hadn't even left any clues behind—we could only blindly guess what had happened while we'd been asleep.

As he got off the boat, Naut addressed me. "That pompous old geezer was supposed to be dead as a doornail long ago, right?"

<<Yeah.>> I nodded. <<We cremated him and stored his remains in a coffin.>>

"I guess that makes this place the underworld, then," Naut speculated.

I frowned. <<But don't you think it's a little too unpopulated for that?>>

Jess swished her head back and forth to survey our surroundings. "Not just a little. It looks like it's completely deserted..."

The cobblestone streets were blanketed by a thick and chilly fog, so much so that we couldn't even see ten meters—or roughly a dozen adult steps—ahead of us. We explored but didn't sense a single soul in the area. It was as if we were touring a movie set.

We pressed on for a while. When we reached the middle of an intersection in the main street, Naut stopped and crouched down. "Looks like we're in Lyubori." His finger pointed at the writing engraved into a noticeably large piece of paver. The town's name, Lyubori, and directions indicating where each path led were on it. For some reason, one of the signs was a jumbled string of

characters that I couldn't decipher.

The chaos instantly got my attention. <<What's supposed to be in the direction of this weird thing?>> I asked, thinking I wanted to avoid it at all costs.

Jess raised her face and was kind enough to inform me, "Judging by all the landmarks and the direction... It's likely a path that leads to the capital."

I sighed. *Yeah, I had a feeling that was the case.*

Naut turned to face the path utterly smothered with murk and narrowed his eyes. "Lyubori's the closest place to the capital from Bellell River. Seems like that old geezer actually put some thought into the place to moor our boat. From here on out, we'll travel by land."

We decided to search through the uninhabited town for some time for any kind of vehicle available. The main street was reserved for our exclusive use as we wandered around.

That was when Jess mentioned this. "It would be nice if we could find something like a carriage. Even if we don't have horses pulling us along, I can use magic as a substitute."

*Hmm...* That got me thinking. Were there any other options that were a little better? <<Hey, Jess, could you turn into a horse—>>

"That's not going to happen." She shot that suggestion down right away. "I'm not going to grow ears or a tail."

*Aw, that's a shame.* I put my silly thoughts behind me and got down to business. <<This place is the busy main street—I don't think this is where you'd park your carriage. How about we search closer to the outskirts or suburbs?>>

"Oh, that's a good point." Jess nodded.

"Seems like we can get to the outskirts if we keep going forward." Naut peered into a back alley that sliced between buildings. A dense fog had snuck into even this cramped crevice, reducing our visibility to the extreme, but there seemed to be a bright, open area on the other end. "If we're looking for a path that a carriage will probably take, I'd say it's this one."

With Naut in the lead, we weaved through the narrow path while fumbling for

obstacles with our hands in the darkness. When we reached the end of the back alley, we found ourselves in a cemetery. Gravestones of a variety of shapes lined up within the mist. I could only determine what was nearby, but judging by how spacious the surrounding land appeared, it was likely quite vast.

“Oh dear... Looks like we’ve come to the wrong place,” Jess observed, and I turned around with her.

My eyes widened. I was utterly speechless.

Jess blinked. “Huh?”

“Something the matter?” After a moment’s delay, Naut turned around as well.

What filled our vision was more of the graveyard and nothing else.

“Sheesh, all bets are off in this place, huh?” Naut spat in a low voice.

I distinctly remembered squeezing through a back alley between buildings to come here. However, no matter where I looked—front, back, left, or right—the only thing I could see was the extensive cemetery enveloped by white fog, throwing off our sense of direction.

<<Did we end up in someone’s Labyrina again?>> I looked at the other two, and they were both inclining their heads quizzically.

“I don’t think I touched anything that stood out,” Jess muttered.

“Me neither.” Naut shook his head. “I didn’t experience that spinning sensation, so it’s probably not a Labyrina, in my opinion.”

<<That’s true. In that case, I guess we can rest assured for now.>>

However, crossing off that possibility didn’t improve our situation. We’d been dumped in the middle of a foggy graveyard somehow—so far, so good, but the problem was that we had no idea where the exit was.

We could only stand there at a loss, wondering what to do. And that was when, gradually, I began picking up the subdued murmuring of people within the silence. It wasn’t from the other side of the haze—it was from beneath our feet, *under* the soil.

I lowered my gaze. I was just in time to witness a ribbon of red slither up and out from the dirt.

<<Aaaargh!>> I shrieked, hopping away on the spur of the moment. Naut noticed it too and jumped away as the color drained from his face.

Unfortunately for us, the unknown red object wasn't avoidable.

Every patch of soil within my vision bulged up, and the summits began crumbling down to reveal something bright red—something freakish and unfathomable. These things shot up eagerly until they were knee-height and bloomed flowers in a flash.

“It’s so pretty!” One person had a different energy from everyone else present—Jess, whose eyes lit up as she laid eyes upon them. “Those are opium poppies!”

In the blink of an eye, an alarming number of vivid crimson opium poppies had blossomed and carpeted everything within my vision, filling every nook and cranny between the gravestones. Before us was a sea of round flowers in full bloom, each dotted with a blackish color in the center. They looked no different from the countless eyeballs that had us surrounded.

I could still hear the low murmuring that reminded me of incomprehensible voices. They were coming from between and below the flowers.

<<They’re pretty all right, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to lounge around here for too long,>> I replied warily.

A peculiar, intense fragrance wafted our way from the chilly fog. It felt as if the fragrance was metaphorically fogging up my thoughts, as if my consciousness was spreading wings and flying away from this world—

Jess sucked in a big breath. “Now that’s an interesting aroma.” She grinned broadly at me, and her face was oddly contorted.

<<No, that’s not it...>> I snapped out of it. <<Avoid breathing if you can. The smell isn’t from the flowers.>>

Naut covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve. “It’s opium—an anesthetic. Let’s get out of here. You’ll die if you inhale too much.”

Our warning came a little late. Jess's gait grew unsteady, and she looked like she might fall over any moment now. Naut made a snap decision and carried her on his back. I wasn't much better—before I knew it, I couldn't even tell which way was forward. <<We should go back the way we came...to where we were,>> I muttered deliriously.

“Don't speak nonsense,” Naut retorted. “Or have you already forgotten that the way we came disappeared?”

With Jess on his back, Naut marched ahead of me to somewhere. My vision warped like a fish-eye lens, and the pair suddenly seemed so distant. Apprehension seized me the next moment. Were they going to abandon me here like this? Possibly advance just by themselves?

*“Mister Naut, I want to have you all to myself just like this. Let's go.”*

*“That doesn't sound half bad.”*

Deep inside my foggy mind, I suddenly began hearing strange hallucinations. *No, that's ridiculous.* I shook my head and frantically chased after the other two so that I wouldn't get left behind. Not even paying attention to the flowers, I trampled on them as I commanded my trotters to move. The cemetery of blooming scarlet opium poppies seemed like it had no end. There was no exit. Laced with alkaloids, a thick mist stagnantly hung in the air and tenaciously robbed me of my visibility and conscious thought.

Even Naut, who was walking ahead of me, was staggering like a drunkard, swerving left and right as he marched forward. He almost dropped Jess several times. However, he refused to let her go, his determination never wavering.

No matter how far we got, I didn't even see a hint of an exit. I could tell that my brain was gradually going numb. *Are we going to breathe our last like this? In this graveyard in the Abyssus?* I thought with a hint of despair.

But then, an abrupt, gentle breeze brushed my cheek. My dispersing consciousness latched onto the direction it came from.

Upwind from us, a single woman was standing beyond the murkiness. She seemed to be looking at us. But due to the obstruction of the mist, she appeared as a shadowy silhouette, and I could barely make out the contours of

her form. I could only tell that she had long hair and a very ample chest.

“You’re...” I heard Naut whisper. He was tottering but still heading in her direction with a resolute will.

The silhouette didn’t wait. She went jogging ahead.

I didn’t know whether she was a threat or an ally. But what I did know was that if I continued to stand still here, certain death awaited. Desperately, as if clinging to the only strand of hope in a bottomless pit, I ran after Naut.

A frosty wind jolted me awake. We were lying down on a deserted farm road. The murk was ever-present and thick like before, but neither the cemetery nor the opium poppies were anywhere to be seen. A bare-bones carriage without horses had been abandoned nearby.

<<Hey, Jess, Naut!>> With my snout, I prodded the pair who were nestling up to each other on the ground. <<Are you all right?>>

Jess had taken a big whiff of the stuff while Naut had carried her for a long time in the smog. I was anxious—I hoped that we’d made it in time before the drug could leave lasting effects or possibly lethal damage.

Jess replied by mumbling aloud in her sleep, and I breathed a long sigh of relief. Naut sat up vigorously, bringing a fist against his forehead as if he had a nasty headache. “Where is she?” The first thing out of his mouth was a perplexing question.

I inclined my head, puzzled. <<Who’s “she”?>>

“I’m talking about the woman who showed us the way.” He staggered onto his feet.

Even after scanning our surroundings, the three of us were the only ones I could see. <<I didn’t get a clear look at her... Do you know who she was?>>

There was no answer. Naut was still straining his eyes and peering into the gloom.

Possibly because of the opium, my memories were hazy, and I couldn’t recall the details. Who in the world was that woman? The contours of her chest had



been large enough for me to make out even from afar, so I could rule out Jess and Ceres at least.

“What in the world do you mean by that?” A voice cut into my thoughts from beside me, and I turned around. Jess was staring intently at me while puffing out her cheeks—she’d woken up while I’d been distracted. *And by the way, that was narration, ma’am.*

<<Ignore that.>> I shook my head and changed the topic. <<By the way, we came *this* close to dying. I didn’t expect there to be such a trap waiting for us.>>

This time, Naut joined the conversation. “If it was something straightforward like a monster attack, even I could deal with it, but it’s out of my hands if the entire environment around us transforms. I certainly hope our resident mage will keep her guard up.”

“You’re right...” Jess went from miffed to dispirited with remorse. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t vigilant enough.”

He made a good point. If Jess hadn’t been out of commission due to the drug, she might have had ways to deal with it, such as summoning up a strong gust or manifesting oxygen. That said, for Jess to react instantly, my warnings and advice were likely necessary as well. I had to be more aware of our surroundings than Jess.

<<I should have paid more attention too,>> I apologized. <<Now that I think about it, knowing that this world is constructed by human desires, a place like a graveyard should ring a lot of alarm bells—it’s an outlet for intense and violent emotions. Somewhere overflowing with strong desires likely also invokes more extreme phenomena.>>

Jess placed a hand on her chin. “That makes sense. When we end up in such a place again, let’s keep our guards up next time.”

It appeared that I’d skillfully dodged the bullet.

She cleared her throat. “Now, as for the topic of my chest, let’s have a good and long conversation about that later.”

I hadn’t. *Yikes.*

After a pause, Naut muttered, “Assuming that the swine’s theory is right, it means that the most dangerous part of our journey is still later down the line.”

I blinked. <<What makes you say that?>>

He scowled, creasing his eyebrows. “We’re going to the capital, remember? That means we’ve gotta go through the Needle Woods.”

Jess swallowed audibly.

Wasting no time, Naut promptly checked over the carriage while saying, “It’s a place where countless Yethma were massacred over time. I’m willing to bet that a cemetery’s still much more preferable to the situation there.”

The horseless carriage dashed forward with a momentum that threatened to tear it apart—in fact, if we hadn’t reinforced it beforehand, it would have almost certainly fallen into pieces in the middle of our journey. It was a simple outing carriage with no sides, just a roof covering the two rows of seats for the driver and passengers.

Jess sat at the front and pulled the carriage along with her sorcery. I was next to her, while Naut sat one row behind us. He was shrinking into himself at the lashing of the harsh winter wind, vigilantly checking for any threats around us.

A while later, the mist cleared, and a bewitching purple sky hung over us like an all-encompassing canopy in its place. *Does this color count as dawn here?* I wondered.

Perhaps owing to our speed that rivaled a modern car, we arrived at one corner of the Needle Woods that evening. Just like before, the night sky was crammed with stars, as if someone had scattered icing sugar all over the place, but the Needle Woods themselves were shrouded in an eerily deep darkness.

Before we braved the woods, we disembarked our carriage at a clearing and strategized.

“If we don’t wanna bump into any weird events, cutting across it at full speed’s all we have to do,” Naut said.

Jess and I were in complete agreement with his suggestion. As a first step, we

got Jess to give the carriage an extreme upgrade with her magic. She cleared away the roof—which would likely get caught by tree branches—before attaching a metallic plate bench at an acute angle at the front, mimicking the structure of a snowplow train. We planned to push aside minor obstacles with brute force. After the major upgrades, our carriage’s new appearance reminded me of an armored combine harvester.

She also reinforced the wheels and axles, which had started to wear out, with metal before coating them lavishly with lubricant without holding back at all. As for the obstacles we couldn’t avoid on our journey to the capital at top speed, it was agreed that Naut would deal with them with his twin shortswords.

It was already late at night when we finished a test-drive and all our preparations. Under the blinding starry sky, we rested in our upgraded carriage. Right now, it was the night of the second day of the month. Our mission was to rescue Marquis before the morning of the fourth, so we still had leeway in terms of time. Since we collectively decided that it was probably better to journey through a dangerous place during the day rather than at night, we would nap and wait for the sunrise.

Unlike our previous journey, we were no longer accompanied by Rossi, who’d stand guard for us. Though it was a short night, we would take turns resting. I was in charge of guard duty for the first half. As for Naut, who would take over in the second half, he was out like a light the moment he lay down on the carriage seat—perhaps he was exhausted after the eventful day. Jess was the most vital piece in our strategy due to her mage status, so we arranged for her to rest as much as possible.

I exited the carriage, sat on the turf, and gazed up at the starry sky absentmindedly. Soon, I felt the chilly ground warm up just a tad. It was Jess’s magic. This was an opportunity for her to get some rest, but instead, she chose to come by my side and sat down.

<<You sure you’re not going to sleep?>> I frowned. <<You must be tired.>>

Jess shook her head slightly. “I’ll sleep when you sleep, Mister Pig.”

A loud snore reached my ears from the carriage—it was Naut. Perhaps this was a good opportunity for the two of us to talk in private.

Jess stared at the sky jam-packed with stars before slowly saying, “I know it’s obvious by now, but I have to say that this is a very curious world.”

A faint voice echoed out from the Needle Woods. It sounded like a prayer or a song.

I nodded. <<Right. Dead people show up, and a pig can talk.>>

“And my chest became bigger too...” Looking somewhat self-conscious, Jess placed her hands on her chest attachments. They were around the size that even her small hands could cover completely—or at least, that was what they appeared to be, but I knew they were relatively respectable without her clothes covering them.

She narrowed her eyes. “You do?”

*Um, that was narration, ma’am.* <<I know I’m repeating myself, but I think you’re great as you are,>> I declared. <<I swear I wasn’t responsible for your episode of large melons.>>

Jess gave me a doubtful look—was what I thought would happen, but surprisingly, she nodded with a smile. “Yes. I know that, of course.”

<<You do?>> Frankly, I hadn’t expected her answer, especially not in a tone filled with conviction for some unknown reason. *She hasn’t even identified the culprit yet, though.*

“I know you as a Mister Pervert who prefers violets that quietly bloom on the side of the path, after all.”

*...Yes, I am. You’ve got me there, ma’am.* <<That aside, assuming this is truly a world where desires manifest and take shape... I’m having a hard time figuring out the requirements for that mechanism.>> I frowned. <<For example, I gained the ability to talk, but it’s kind of lackluster. It’s not like I turned back into a human or anything.>>

Jess fell into contemplative silence. Finally, she spoke up. “That’s a good point. I would’ve been delighted if you became a human.”

*Is that really what she thinks?* Jess had gained a voluptuous chest for some mysterious purpose while I remained a pig. A shred of doubt nagged me after I

recalled those facts.

“I really think so!” Jess protested. “I mean, if you become a human, there are a lot of things you’ll be able to do.”

<<A...lot of things?>> I echoed reflexively.

Jess furtively averted her gaze. “No, um... It’s nothing, please ignore me.”

A dust of pink showed on her cheeks as she fumbled for the right words. I stared at her and thought about it. Assuming that Jess wished for me to become a human, what about me, the actual person involved? *Do I want to turn back into a human?*

I couldn’t even understand my feelings, but I had a suspicion. Perhaps a part of me would rather remain a pig in front of Jess. Being treated like a lowly pig by a purehearted, beautiful maiden who was perfection personified always brought me delight, and above all else, if I didn’t become a human, then there wouldn’t be room for disappointment.

Jess peered into my profile. “Um... I know I’m repeating myself too, but I’ll never be disappointed in you. Even if you’re a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin who’s been single since he was in his mother’s womb, I wouldn’t mind at all.”

<<I hope that’s the case.>> Against my better judgment, a cynical tone unintentionally wormed its way into my words.

Anyone could make that claim—a kindhearted person would definitely make such a statement even if they didn’t truly believe in it. I wasn’t a mage, so I didn’t know what Jess actually thought at the end of the day. Of course, I wanted to believe she was speaking her mind truthfully.

“Then believe me,” Jess answered firmly before her volume shrank a little as she continued, “If I were lying, I would have never come all the way to somewhere like this in the first place.” She looked down, as if pouting.

*Ugh, darn, there goes my bad habit again,* I cursed myself. I was a gloomy, pessimistic guy, so my self-deprecating tendencies would always take over right away. *Listen up, me. The girl you like says she’s willing to accept you unconditionally, no matter what or who you are. Woo-hoo! Fluffy romance for the win! What a wonderful world! Accept it like that without making it so*

*complicated! That's good enough!*

I cast my eyes down. *But look at what you just did instead, ruining everything.*

Suddenly, Jess chuckled. She turned to face me and stroked my head. Her response to my narration was short, but it was more than enough to unravel the heavy knot in my heart. “But you know, I really like that troublesome part of you too, Mister Pig.”

Night gave way to a silent morning that didn't even have birds chirping. As you would expect, there was no orange morning glow. Believe it or not, the sky was a bright lime green. But, well, at this point, I couldn't even work up a sliver of astonishment about this discovery.

Bracing ourselves for the worst, we climbed onto the carriage, fully prepared physically and mentally. We started at a distance from the Needle Woods to gain momentum before charging right in.

And that was where we immediately ran into our first unforeseen situation. The moment we crossed the boundary, it became night.

I distinctly remembered witnessing the light of day before we'd entered the woods, but now, there wasn't even a fragment of sunlight on the ground. The inky black needles of the coniferous trees already obscured the sky. As if that wasn't enough, I couldn't even spot a hint of the sun on the other side nor catch a glimpse of the nauseating green sky. Instead, pale blue light—reminding me of moonlight—peered out between the trees, leaking through the leaves like spotlights.

“Well darn,” Naut cursed with a smile curling his lips. It was a battle-thirsty, derisive sneer—his eyes had no humor. “Looks like sleeping until the morning didn't help us at all.”

I'd quailed at the sudden turn of events, but his smile kindled a spark of courage within me. <<For now, we'll stick to the original plan, avoiding as many obstacles as possible. Even if we're under attack, running away is our first choice of action. The goal is to press on to the royal capital at full speed.>>

“Understood!” Jess, who propelled the carriage forward, tugged firmly on the

handle. The carriage's body, which had bounced up after running over a tree root, softly landed on the ground with the aid of magic. Immediately after landing, the metallic plate at the front smashed young trees into pieces and sent them flying.

Naut brandished his twin shortswords gallantly, and the thicket in the far distance ahead of us went up in flames.

I frowned. <<What happened? Did you notice something?>>

For some reason, Naut exultantly declared, "Let them eat fire. It's brighter now, right?" He sounded like a controversial cliché attributed to a certain queen.

My mind recalled Naut boasting that he'd burn the Needle Woods to the ground once upon a time. This was the final—and most lethal—obstacle in the way of Yethma running for their lives, seeking a peaceful haven. Numerous Yethma hunters infested it like maggots, causing countless maidens to perish unjustly.

The testament to the innocent girls killed here was the glowing mushrooms. As the ground rushed past us swiftly, scattered sparsely across the soil, colonies of mushrooms emitted a faint, pale blue light. Mushrooms that had absorbed Yethma blood—mage blood—soaking into the earth were releasing the mana within it into the light.

Every glowing mushroom colony represented a girl who'd reached a fatal end in this land—no, there should be even more innocent lives lost than the number of colonies. Looking at them, I could empathize with Naut's desire to raze this place with painful clarity.

I cast my eyes down. *That and...his deep-seated hatred for the royal court.*

I relinquished myself to the turbulence of the revamped carriage racing wildly across the woods while reminiscing about Blaise, whom we'd encountered on our journey to the capital. A dark underground prison had been in a small church near the outskirts of a bustling commercial city. There, we'd found Blaise, a Yethma girl of few words. When we'd rescued her, her wound had already festered. By the time we'd approached the boundary of the Needle Woods, it had been too late to save her. Despite that, she'd prayed for our

safety until her last moments, even throwing herself in front of Jess as a shield and losing her life in Jess's ste—

I was interrupted by Jess's hushed "Ah!"

The carriage charging forward like an unstoppable bull hadn't avoided running over one cluster of glowing mushrooms. What looked like sparkling dust was tossed up into the air.

<<Don't mind it. Just focus on going forward right now,>> I said.

"Got it." Jess kept her solemn gaze trained on the woods ahead of us. Naut got into a stance with his twin shortswords and prepared for a clash with unexpected enemies, but we'd been worried for nothing. Instead, I could sense an inexplicable power around us—the carriage began accelerating.

I frowned. <<What's wrong, Jess? It's better to be more cautious—>>

"It isn't me!" she exclaimed. "The carriage sped up by itself!"

Wondering what had happened, I leaned out of my seat and scrutinized the wheels. My eyes widened. The wheels and the axles were glowing pale blue—the dust scattered from the shining mushrooms had clung to the carriage.

The berserk carriage proceeded to run over another glowing mushroom colony. Refined grains of light flew into the air, and before my very eyes, they stuck to the wheel as if attracted by static electricity. The wheels produced a faint glow as they accelerated even more, rushing through the woods full of bumps, pits, and obstacles.

*The mushrooms are speeding us up?* For a moment, my mind almost went on an unnecessary tangent about racing karts, but I was pulled back to reality by the revamped carriage that was completely out of control beneath my trotters. I had to think quickly and figure out an explanation for our current situation.

And that was when it hit me. <<Hey, I know that only unpleasant things have happened to us since we came to the Abyssus, but there might be a chance that not every phenomenon is bad here.>>

Naut raised his voice. "What do you mean by that?" Due to the furious jolting of the carriage, he was clinging to the railing with one hand.



I wedged into the crevice between the seat and the bottom of the carriage to secure myself. <<This is a place where human desires take shape, not malice. My guess is that these grains of light are Yethma prayers.>>

The wheels were spinning at an alarming rotational speed while emitting phosphorescent light. Possibly because of gyroscopic motion, contrary to what you might expect, it actually started stabilizing. The carriage advanced, not even inconvenienced by the tree roots lying in its way, instantly tearing them into pieces.

My theory was that these glowing mushrooms were traces left by girls like Blaise, who'd wanted to reach the capital but had been powerless before their cruel destiny. Their prayers were what gave the carriage an extra push forward.

I exhaled slowly. <<They didn't manage it, but at least hoped that others would arrive at the capital in one piece. It wouldn't be strange at all for such wishes to give us a helping hand, right?>>

The carriage ran over yet another mushroom colony. Gleaming magical dust covered the vehicle from head to toe, making it faintly glow as it reached what I classified as a horrifying pace.

Jess held the seat's back between her arm and her torso, firmly clinging so she wouldn't be flung off. "That means the Yethma are supporting us on our journey, yes?!"

It was an enchanting scene. Within the dark woods, our carriage pressed on while sparkling like a jewel.

Naut placed his right hand against his chest, briefly shutting his eyes when he exhaled. "I guess we don't have to go against this phenomenon, huh?"

<<I do have to remind you that unless it's a strategic kind of assistance, there's naturally the chance of accidents. We've got plenty of driving force, so let's instead focus on clearing away all the obstacles in our path so we don't crash into anything.>>

"Understood!" Jess chimed.

By this point, the carriage could already move without Jess's magic. Jess secured the left half of her body to the seat while she raised her right hand

toward our momentum, tidying up whatever blocked our way. Naut also swung his shortwords to cut down trees. As for me, I observed our path intently, giving them directions on where they should aim.

At times, I felt that I'd heard distant screams and rumbling in the ground, but we left them in the dust, along with the landscape that flew by in a blur. Enveloped by the prayers of Yethma in their final moments, our carriage rushed straight to the capital. Oddly, I had an ungrounded conviction that absolutely no human or object would hinder us.

The only problem on our hands was how we were going to stop. Towering, perpendicular cliffs surrounded the capital. When Jess and I had first arrived here, the entrance had opened for us after we'd appealed to a heckripon, but we probably couldn't hope for that this time.

Soon, we detected the presence of a steep cliff ahead of us. What seized our hearts wasn't relief but trepidation that we might crash into it at full speed.

"Hey, you dummy, slow it down!" Going pale, Naut yelled to Jess.

"I can't!" Jess's forehead was slick with anxious sweat as she exclaimed, "Magic isn't working!"

Our carriage was heading straight toward the rocky cliff with a vigor that rivaled a runaway steam train. Within the gloomy forest that was dark as night, I couldn't get an accurate gauge on the distance between us and the cliff, but judging from the patch of sky ahead of us that didn't have any moonlight slipping through, we should reach our last stop anytime now.

<<We'll abandon the carriage!>> I shouted.

"But how?" Jess's apprehensive gaze was directed toward the trees rushing by at a staggering rate. If we jumped down thoughtlessly, we'd likely crash into a tree or the ground while maintaining the momentum of a runaway train. It would be no different from going through the first few steps in a pork cutlet recipe—and we were the blocks of meat.

"I can jump off just before the crash," Naut replied as fast as he could. "But I ain't got the skills or energy to carry you guys while I'm at it."

I narrowed my eyes. <<Jess, can you float us into the air with magic? You'll

add a small push in the opposite direction of our movement, and we'll slow down in midair.>>

She inhaled shakily. "I've never done it before, but it looks like we don't have any other options."

The glowing carriage swept across the dark forest floor without any signs of losing momentum. And that was when a question flashed across the back of my mind. Right now, the woods were as dark as night for some unknown reason, but it should be daytime in the Abyssus. When we reached the forest boundary, which stopped just slightly before the cliffs, what would the sky look like?

As it turned out, this time, I *wasn't* worried for nothing.

The forest's edge sprung up on us without warning, and dazzling sunlight burned our retinas. When someone suddenly moved from a dark place to a bright one, their photoreceptors needed some time for light adaptation. In my head, I dutifully calculated that we'd likely crash into the cliff before then.

But that was when something abruptly tugged on my body, sending me flying high into the air. For only an instant, my eyes captured a view of the world. Within the lime green sunlight, I caught a glimpse of a pristine white...

I'd braced myself for a collision into the cliffs, but the next moment, I somehow ended up next to a towering waterfall. The incessant, low roar of flowing water echoed in my ears.

Beneath the azure sky were trees with luscious emerald canopies. I recognized this broad waterfall—it was the Encounter Waterfall where we'd tracked Hortis down to find what we'd assumed was the last Contract Stake. Fine water droplets sparkled like glitter, cooling my skin pleasantly under the clear, sweltering summer sky.

The scene completely threw me off. I couldn't find Jess or Naut nearby. *Wait... Did I actually crash into the cliff and kick the bucket? Am I in heaven?*

Feeling a refreshing wind against my body, I scanned my surroundings in a daze, as if I were daydreaming. Inside the plunge pool filled with aquamarine water were two shadowy silhouettes. What appeared to be a man and woman

were facing each other while huddling intimately, and they were floating with only their heads above the water.

I felt as if a sharp talon was crushing my liver. *No way, are they...?*

I jerked my body forward, leaning so hard that I might dive into the plunge pool at any moment. Now that I'd gotten a better look, I learned I'd been overly paranoid. The woman had golden hair, true, but the man had black hair. Due to the distance, I couldn't get a clear look at them, but both seemed to be around the same age as Jess and Naut.

Within the sound of splashing water, I picked up a faint noise that reminded me of a sobbing voice. If I wasn't mistaken, it belonged to the girl floating in the plunge pool.

Then, I heard the youth's voice. However, he was speaking in a foreign tongue. It wasn't the language in Mesteria, and of course, it wasn't Japanese either. But for some reason, I understood what he was saying.

*"It's all right. You're not alone anymore."*

The girl's sobbing grew louder. The youth gently placed his arm around her shoulder to offer comfort. His whispering resounded within my mind with clarity—the roaring waterfall didn't drown it out at all. *"Together, we have the power to change the world. Let's put an end to these dark times once and for all."*

The next second, the world suddenly turned black, as if someone had switched off a TV's power supply.

*"Looks like we've ended up in another bizarre place."*

My ears picked up Naut's voice, and I opened my eyes. At some point, I'd somehow ended up lying on a soft carpet. I checked over my body as I slowly stood up. Jess happened to be sitting up next to me at the same time. Warm reassurance washed over me. *Thank goodness. No one ended up as flat as a pancake.*

"Now what in the world do you mean by that?" Jess placed a hand against her chest and narrowed her eyes at me.

Flustered, I hurriedly added, <<I'm not talking about boobs. I meant that I'm glad none of us smashed into the cliffs at the speed we were tossed out from the carriage.>> *And by the way, that was narration.*

"Oh..." A dust of pink appeared on Jess's cheeks. "That was what you were referring to..."

Honestly, I was probably the one to blame in this situation—I'd rambled too much about chests recently.

"Save the idle chitchat for later," Naut barked. "Do any of you recognize this place?"

Under his ushering, I checked over our current situation. We were inside a luxuriously spacious room with gorgeous and opulent furnishings. Sunlight filtered through the lace curtains while a gilded lamp gently shined within the room, shedding warm light on our surroundings. The refined interior had a theme of white and gold, finished off with a red carpet on the ground. At the center of the room was a large canopy bed.

I didn't recognize this room.

"This is..." Jess trailed off, swishing her head as she looked around her environment before her gaze finally settled on the windows that offered a rectangular cutout of the blue sky. She immediately rushed over to them at full speed. "I knew it! This is Madame Wyss's bedroom!"

Naut pulled open the curtains and peered outside. "We're inside the capital, huh?"

From a pig's point of view, I could only see the cloudless sky, but the other two likely had a view of the capital's cityscape.

I'd thought I'd crashed into the cliffs, but I'd then become the audience of a confusing and cryptic scene before I'd somehow warped into the queen's bedroom. *What in Mesteria is going on?*

I hesitated. <<Hey, I think I was at a plunge pool briefly earlier, but was I imagining things?>>

Hearing that, both Jess and Naut turned around to face me. "Yes, I saw it

too,” Jess replied.

“Same here,” Naut said at the same time.

Their voices overlapped, and the two traded awkward glances.

<<What even *was* that?>> I wondered out loud.

Naut gave Jess a prompting look. The beautiful maiden placed a finger on her chin. “We’ve visited that waterfall before, right?”

<<Yeah. It’s the Encounter Waterfall, where we found a Contract Stake.>>

Folding his arms, Naut looked at us. “Who were those two people floating in the plunge pool? Why the heck were we forced to watch them?”

A girl with golden hair and a youth with black hair. That combination reminded me of the Oath Chamber I’d visited with Jess and Shravis. It was a place where royalty went to “exchange marriage oaths,” and on the walls were paintings depicting the encounter and intimacy of Vatis and her spouse, Ruta. Vatis had been depicted with blonde hair while Ruta’d had black hair—which matched the pair I’d seen earlier.

Jess must’ve read the narration because she looked at me and nodded. “Yes, I think those two were likely Lady Vatis and her husband Ruta. I heard that the Encounter Waterfall was named as such by Lady Vatis because it’s where they first met each other.”

Naut furrowed his eyebrows and didn’t even try to hide his contempt. “So basically, we had to watch the sickly sweet encounter of the accursed old hag who founded the royal court, huh?”

Vatis was the woman who’d obtained absolute magical powers by systematically hunting down every single Contract Stake in Mesteria. She’d used her supreme powers to end the chaotic warring era where mages fought against mages. At the same time, she was also the very person responsible for initiating the inhumane Yethma system. I’d actually be surprised if Naut had a good impression of her. Getting him to hug Marquis would be way easier in comparison.

I mulled over what I’d seen. <<Assuming that the black-haired man was

Ruta... He mentioned something like “Together, we have the power to change the world.” What did he mean by that?>>

Jess shook her head. “I’m not quite sure either. Considering how they truly managed to end the Dark Ages and transform the world, perhaps he meant that if they’re together, they can carry out the method necessary to achieve that.”

I tilted my head. <<Was he talking about gathering the Contract Stakes?>>

Seeing that the two of us had begun picking at minor details, Naut cleared his throat. “Does that even matter right now? If it’s got nothing to do with our task, then let’s hurry up and get a move on,” he declared before cutting across the spacious room and approaching a wooden door. It appeared to be the only entrance and exit to this fancy bedroom.

Jess and I decided to stop theorycrafting about the mysterious scene and focused in the door’s direction as well.

Naut placed his hand on the doorknob and carefully tried to open it. There were a few metallic sounds of clicking and clacking. “It won’t open.”

“Is it locked, perhaps?” Jess ran over to his side and began inspecting the knob. I approached it too.

“Step back a bit,” Naut instructed, unsheathing a sword as if that was the obvious response before swinging his fiery crimson blade through the gap between the door and the wall. He began fiddling with the knob again, but the door still didn’t budge.

I had an ominous feeling in my gut. << Naut, the window’s made of glass. Could you try smashing it?>>

“That’s a piece of cake.” And with a fluid motion, Naut swung the single shortsword—which he’d tried to force open the door with—in the direction of the window. A crescent arc of flames struck the glass and splintered into sparks.

The sparks soon fizzled out, leaving behind a completely unharmed window in their wake.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<Looks like your piece of cake was carved out of diamonds.>> While I was speaking, Jess lifted a golden lion ornament from a

small shelf. Her arms were trembling, so it must have been rather heavy.

<<What are you up to?>>

“Since this is the Abyssus, hopefully, no one will condemn me for this.” She adjusted the golden lion in her arms and aimed at the window. A moment later, the ornament shot off with a deafening and surreal sound, as if someone had cracked a giant whip. It crashed into the window at supersonic speed.

There was a noisy bang. Just like I’d expected, the lion ornament fell onto the ground, flattened like a pancake. The window lattice had even left vivid imprints on the ornament.

It didn’t take us long before we arrived at an extremely straightforward conclusion: we were trapped.

We’d gotten into the capital. That was good. But we couldn’t even step outside the queen’s bedroom. This was bad. It was as if someone was telling us to sleep here and do nothing for the rest of our lives. The comfortable bed, which was nothing like the threats we’d barely escaped from until now, was sitting in the middle of the room with dignity.

I narrowed my eyes. <<Hang on, is this one of those? Is it...a ‘can’t escape this room unless you have XXX’ trope?>>

Next to me, Jess tilted her head quizzically. “XXX?”

For various reasons, I’d specifically separated this word from the sentence and enunciated it in a language from my world. But it seemed that my censor had backfired on me because it had caught Jess’s attention. <<It’s nothing, ignore me.>>

Jess wasn’t about to back down. “XXX is a word from your world, right, Mister Pig?”

I knew that Jess had the ability to understand any word within my mind, no matter what language I thought in. But it sounded like she couldn’t understand foreign languages when I converted my words into auditory information. Realizing that I’d unknowingly made her repeat an inappropriate word, guilt suddenly welled up in my heart.

<<It’s unimportant, really, so you can totally forget about it.>>



Even Naut was looking at me with confusion. “What in the world is XXX?”

*No, it’s seriously nothing worth your attention, so please let me off the hook already!*

Jess placed a finger on her chin. “Are you saying that if we have or do this thing called XXX, we can escape from this room?”

<<Uh, no, you’ve got the wrong idea.>>

Naut nodded to himself. “I suppose we’ll try out that XXX thing, then.”

*Bruh! It isn’t something you can do as casually as if you’re picking out groceries at a supermarket!!!* I screeched internally. This experience had taught me a painful lesson that I mustn’t joke around in a serious situation, especially not inappropriate jokes. <<No, it’s not worth trying out at all. Don’t do it, it’s a bad idea.>>

Jess clenched one hand into a fist with determination. “But if there’s even a small chance of it working, I think we should try!”

*Seriously. I’m sorry. Forgive me. Please.*

“Come on, Mister Pig!” Jess beamed. “Let’s have XXX!”

My brain practically blue-screened.

Seeing that I’d gone quiet, Naut clicked his tongue quietly. “What a waste of time. Don’t bring up stuff you can’t even do.”

*Well, sorry for saying something none of us can do!* <<My comment was a joke. I didn’t mean it. It’s definitely not the right method, so let’s think about a proper solution without horsing around.>>

“A solution?” Naut raised an eyebrow. “What are we supposed to even think about?”

True, we weren’t given any puzzles or questions like an escape room game, and we’d already tested brute force. <<First, we’ll think about what we need to think about.>>

“You’re right.” Jess nodded.

If we wanted to conquer the Abyssus, what we needed wasn’t power but our

critical thinking and logic. That was what the unparalleled mage, Eavis, had told us. *Logic, hmm? The thing is, this world forces all kinds of rules on us without even giving us a manual. How are we supposed to find logic in it?*

I was deep in thought as I stared at the outside world, which we were locked away from, on the other side of the windows. The sun had already risen high up into the sky, and the blue canvas was growing increasingly—

*Wait a minute.* <<Jess. Did you see what color the sky was the moment we left the Needle Woods, just before we crashed into the cliff?>>

Jess touched her forehead and tried to pull up the memory. “Um... Well... I think it was green back then...” Her eyes widened. “Oh!”

Her words gave me the confidence I needed. I’d been distracted by a certain pair of *Les Panties*, but the sky back then had definitely been green. But now, an azure sky stretched outside the window—just like how the abnormal number of stars had returned to what we were used to when we’d entered Arle’s Labyrina.

If we went with this theory, it would also explain the scene with the plunge pool earlier. But if it were accurate, it would mean we were in a lot of trouble because we still hadn’t reached the capital.

Suddenly, a voice rang out from behind us. “Correct. You’ve come to the wrong place.” The three of us whipped our heads around at once. “This isn’t the royal capital—it’s the Labyrina of the royal court’s founder, Queen Vatis.” It was a smooth, affable voice brimming with confidence. I recognized it.

A middle-aged man with curly golden hair reaching his shoulders steadily approached us. And he was *stark naked*.

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Together with Cece and the others, we’d visited various towns on our journey to the capital, but the village we passed by right before reaching the Needle Woods was in a significantly more awful state than the rest. Ever since the Clandestine Arcanist had taken over the royal court, the king’s tyrannical rule wreaked havoc across Mesteria. In addition, unscrupulous thugs, so to speak, were also left unchecked.

I didn’t know what had happened, but we couldn’t even spot a single resident

within the village under the noon sun. Injustices of every kind—such as purposeful destruction, robbery, and homicide—left their mark inside the ruined settlement. If we didn't do something about Mesteria's present situation, such decay might spread to every corner of this nation. We must avoid that at all costs.

I was already used to seeing corpses, but it seemed that wasn't true for Cece. When she noticed the rotting remains on the path were looking in our direction with a face that exposed its skull, she let out an adorable "Eep!" before clinging to me. In my opinion, I'd been earnestly in need of a little sister like her for a long time.

"Welp, sounds like the villages in the South were probably peaceful with no corpses lying around." Batbat, the mischievous munchkin, addressed Cece. The content of his speech sounded like a snide remark, but he likely didn't say it with any ill will. In fact, his tone implied that he felt genuine admiration and longing.

I'd heard that Batbat had hailed from North Mesteria. The Clandestine Arcanist's influence had been strong there, and for a time, he'd even reigned over the region. With his sisters and mother taken hostage, Batbat had been coerced into labor at the arena when Nattie had rescued him from his oppressive environment. Idolizing Nattie as his teacher, the boy had followed us all the way here.

Batbat asked, "Are you scared of corpses, Ceres?"

Cece nodded meekly. The boy casually touched her shoulder, invading her personal space. He continued, "Nah, you've got it mixed up. What you're scared of is people dying. Corpses are no different from fallen leaves—they're only things that'll turn into dirt one day. You think you're scared of them because you don't wanna face the fact that people can die."

His eyes locked with Cece's gaze. "So when you're spooked around corpses, looking at the eyes of someone alive will help."

As if the tension had left her shoulders at once, Cece smiled back weakly. "Thank you. I think I feel better now."

"Right?" The boy grinned with satisfaction before sheepishly rubbing the

bottom of his nose with his index finger.

Occasionally, I would suspect that this boy had romantic feelings for Cece, who was close to his age compared to the others. *Now that is simply scandalous. It's outrageous—completely out of the question.*

Batbat casually continued, "I've been burying corpses for my job since I was a toddler. But I definitely didn't do it alone. I'd team up with my siblings or the Yethma who was older than me. We always did our work in pairs. 'Cause if you confront death alone, it will swallow you whole."

This was news to me. A job that involved burying corpses—had he possibly been working for an undertaker? Or was his job something more questionable?

As I mulled over the new information, my ears picked up Cece's suppressed sobbing.

Batbat frowned worriedly. "Oy Ceres, what's wrong?"

"I'm so sorry... It's...nothing..." Cece harshly wiped her tears with her sleeve.

I knew the cause of her sorrow: Nattie. This young girl knew very well that Nattie had stared death in the face all alone for the longest time.

The boy must have realized it as well because he smiled awkwardly. "It's not like master's already gone beyond the stars. I'm sure that you'll see him again."

Cece did her very best to work up a smile. Seeing that, Batbat nodded and jogged forward, catching up with Yoyo and the others who walked ahead of him. Perhaps he had some business with them. Now that Batbat had overtaken us, we were at the very tail of our procession. I put my wide porcine field of vision to good use and watched over both our rear and Cece's legs.

The sun was still high up in the sky. As I walked, I absentmindedly recalled our travels.

The evening of the day before yesterday, we'd stealthily disembarked from our ship near Nearbell and spent the night in a cave along the coast. We'd switched between carriages, ships, and traveling on foot to adapt to the path and evade possible perils, making our way to the capital at top speed. Midway, we'd camped in a cave to rest for another night. Now, it was the early

afternoon. There was still half a day and one night before the morning of the fourth—the time we’d agreed upon with Mister Lolip and Miss Jess.

On our end, the only thing left to do was cut across the Needle Woods, so we should make it in time unless something extreme sprung up on us. And, of course, we had to be vigilant even with the luxury of time because the defenses on the outskirts of the royal capital were the most intensive.

*Hmm...?* I felt someone was looking at me, so I casually turned over my shoulder.

I spotted something moving in the vicinity of the corpse we’d left behind long ago. It was a large animal. Crooking its long neck, it examined the corpse, and possibly because there was no portion it could eat, its head slithered around to look at us.

By the time realization hit me, it was already too late.

The animal began swinging its body like a pendulum. But its bald head was still, as if a thumbtack had fixed it in the air.

It was a heckripon.

“On hon hon hon!” I hurriedly made a loud noise. Tsunnie—who’d been walking ahead of us—pulled out the greataxe on her back in the blink of an eye and started dashing toward the heckripon with a swiftness and agility that reminded me of special forces.

Heckripons were essentially the surveillance cameras of the royal court. They’d transmit the scenes they witnessed to the capital through magical means. And the capital was where the most atrocious king lurked, watching like a hawk for an opportunity to kill the prince.

When she rushed past us, I saw that the skin on Tsunnie’s bare legs was transforming into what looked like black scales—they became the muscular legs of a dragon. The female warrior held her greataxe at the ready, leaped high into an altitude normal humans couldn’t hope of reaching, and spun in the air while closing in on the heckripon with her weapon. Not only did electricity shroud her axe—it even coiled around her body as she hunted down the heckripon at lightning speed.

I'd been flabbergasted when I'd first witnessed this scene, but by now, neither Kentie nor I were surprised by the siblings' superhuman abilities.

"Oopsies. I think it saw us," Yoyo commented as he gazed at the heckripon cleanly sliced in two like tofu.

The prince, who'd been walking in the lead, rushed over to us. He wore a grave expression. "This doesn't look good. Let's change our course."

We began diverging from the path while jogging. According to the prince, he said that he couldn't determine whether that heckripon's witness report had reached the capital. If we were lucky, we'd killed it just in time. But if we were unlucky, it meant that the most atrocious king had discovered our whereabouts.

The clattering of armor echoed out from two directions, as if to catch us in a pincer attack, informing us that we'd lost our gamble. The roar of a dragon rained down from the upper air.

There were two escape routes: advancing into the Needle Woods or distancing ourselves from it.

Currently, it was the afternoon of the third, so if we left the Needle Woods, it would lower our chances of making it in time for our deadline on the morning of the fourth. As a member of the Liberators, the most important mission right now was to bring down the king without fail.

After a moment of thought, I addressed the prince. <<We don't have time. It may be earlier than our plans, but let's enter the Needle Woods. Inside the dark coniferous forest, we have a better chance of running away and even have the option of guerrilla warfare against a large army.>>

Sweat trickled down the prince's forehead as he nodded. He summoned a magical smoke screen and yelled to us, "This way!"

The lone straggler, Yoyo, caught up and began running alongside us. "Sanon, Ceres, no matter what happens, don't stray from the rest of the group."

We stepped into the boundary of the gloomy, chilly Needle Woods. Near the smoke screen, I heard the sound of something exploding. It seemed that our pursuers were slowly but surely chasing in our direction.

However, we couldn't afford to give up here. Until we killed the king, we mustn't lose our trump card—the prince of Mesteria.

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“Hortis...?” Naut said in a daze, as if the word had slipped out subconsciously.

The pervert in his birthday suit smiled at us. “It looks like my owner's in a bit of trouble, so I popped over to help you out. Let's break free of this Labyrina at once. The sooner you reach my brother, the sooner my nephew will be freed from a life of constant danger.”

Despite dying in the most valiant way possible before our eyes, this man had appeared stark naked without even greeting us. I seriously wondered how in the world his mind functioned. Thanks to him, the sentimental mood was smashed beyond repair.

Hortis then inclined his head. “By the way, Jess, why are you hiding your face? Please let me see your cute features.”

I turned to my side. Jess was burying her face in her hands. I raised an imaginary eyebrow as I turned back. <<I think that's probably because you're completely naked, sir...>>

Hearing that, Hortis looked down and stared at his own body for a long while. “Oh, I see. So I need to wear clothes in this place.” He swiftly spread out his arms, and a white cloth manifested from thin air like flowing water before it wrapped loosely around his toned body.

By the time Jess finally showed her face, Hortis was already turning his back to us. He promptly walked over to the bed. “Though this room has been used as the bedroom for the queen consort of each generation, its initial owner was a man. I'm sure you know why. The first sovereign of Mesteria was Queen Vatis, and she was the one who used what became the current bedroom of the king.”

Like tourists following the guidance of our tour guide, we trailed after him. Hortis crossed his arms and stared at what seemed to be an empty place next to the bed. He continued, “Before I left the capital, I dropped by for fun in my sister-in-law's bedroom from time to time—oh, of course, it wasn't an affair or anything like that—and back then, there should have been a dressing table

here. But it's missing now."

*You know, I really think that one line was a bit unnecessary...* <<What does that mean? Can you please tell us?>> I urged him to get to the point.

Hortis sent a playful wink in my direction. "To put it simply, this place isn't the royal palace in the present. It's the bedroom of the king consort from over a century ago—the bedroom within Vatis's memories. Just like I mentioned earlier, the three of you have accidentally wandered inside Vatis's Labyrina."

"A Labyrina is that thing, right?" Naut muttered. "It means we're inside her heart, huh."

Hortis nodded. "You're very knowledgeable."

Naut furrowed his eyebrows, mystified. "But you should be able to stay away from a Labyrina as long as you don't touch something with an eyeball in it. Wasn't that how they were supposed to work? That was what the pompous old geezer said."

"Father has moments when he makes the wrong judgment, but when it comes to knowledge, he's always accurate." Hortis touched the white wall adorned by intricate golden decorations all over. "My owner, you must be referring to what we call Econ, right? Indeed, as long as you don't touch an Econ, you won't accidentally enter a Labyrina. But what if the three of you *did* touch one?"

Jess seemed to have a flash of inspiration. "We should have crashed into the cliffs surrounding the royal capital... But we didn't. Does that mean the entire outer wall of the royal capital itself is Lady Vatis's Econ?"

Hortis smacked a fist against his palm. "Got it in one! That's why you didn't end up as flat as pancakes when you ran into the cliff. Instead, you entered this dream realm and strayed into this room."

*I see...?* I frowned slightly. *That makes sense, but weren't Econs supposed to look like a symbol that embodies the owner's heart?*

Hortis didn't even acknowledge the confused tilt of my head as he continued, "For you to enter the real capital within the Abyssus and locate the Clandestine Arcanist's Econ, you must leave this Labyrina first. You have to sneak out from



the heart of the merciless, totalitarian queen who put an end to the Dark Ages.”

Jess spoke up meekly and cautiously. “Um... Are you going to tell us the way out, Your Highness?”

Hortis made an indescribable expression, conflicting emotions flickering across his face. I was also painfully aware of the agony that came with Jess treating me as if I were someone she barely knew. “No, the only thing I can do is give you a hand. You’ll have to find your way to fight against this place by yourselves—that’s how things work here,” he said dispassionately.

But then, a smile abruptly softened the tension in his features. “However, knowing you three, I have full confidence you can achieve it. I believe you know the general strategy to conquer a Labyrina. What you need is a convincing line of logic.”

<<We’ve got to look for the end of Vatis’s story...>> I muttered to myself.

Next to me, Naut folded his arms with displeasure. “There’s no story here. It’s obviously just a bedroom we can’t leave.”

“Have you made sure to explore every nook and cranny?” Hortis prompted. “Can you truly declare that there aren’t any clues around?”

At that, Jess surveyed the room. It didn’t have that many furnishings. If anything stood out, we would have noticed right away, but that hadn’t been the case.

When I approached the bed, I narrowed my eyes. *Hmm?* I detected a faint, metallic smell drifting over from somewhere. <<That reminds me, I don’t think we inspected the bed.>>

Jess approached it and turned over the duvet. But she ended up releasing it prematurely before covering her mouth. “Wha...?!”

The metallic odor became more pungent. *No—it’s not metal.* There was also something rotting and organic about it, which meant I could cross off that possibility.

I recognized it. It was the scent of blood.

Clambering onto the bed, I followed Jess’s line of sight and looked at the

source. Fresh blood of spectacularly vivid crimson was splattered on the large white pillow. It was a copious amount—accidentally staining your bed with a nosebleed couldn't even compare. However, it didn't sully anywhere other than the pillow and was contained within a relatively small area. There was no corpse, no nothing, other than the fresh bloodstain itself.

Hortis grinned as he gazed at the blood. "I'm sure our resident Mister Virgin has a thing for stuff like this—Who was responsible for such a scene? What did they do? And how did that lead to this? If you deduce those questions one by one, I'm sure you'll naturally start piecing the end of the story together."

*Uh, I mean, I like mysteries, sure... Interesting. Is this what he and Eavis meant when they called it a "story"?*

"Mister Pig, let's give it a try!" Jess exclaimed enthusiastically.

And I could never turn Jess down. <<Looks like it's finally time to use my little pink cells,>> I declared. While scrutinizing the bed meticulously, I voiced everything that came into my mind. <<The bloodstain is concentrated on the pillow. Unless they were bleeding while striking a considerably unusual posture, the source of the bleeding was likely around the head. This amount can't be a nosebleed, and the splattering doesn't look like they'd coughed up blood either, so it's likely a hemorrhage from an external wound. But this amount of bleeding isn't lethal. Which means that the wound likely wasn't on their neck.>>

Jess placed a hand on her chin. "In that case, it has to be either their face or head..."

I felt that I was already starting to grasp the answer vaguely. Just like before, Hortis was merrily grinning as he silently stared at us. *Does he already know?* Meanwhile, the pitiful Naut was kept out of the loop, and he watched over the situation with a hand on his hip.

<<The first question that comes to mind is: Who does this blood belong to? We learned that this is the bedroom of the king consort—specifically Ruta, Vatis's husband. Therefore, it should make sense if it's Ruta's blood, but...>> I trailed off.

Though I felt somewhat reluctant about it, I forced myself to approach the pillow and get a whiff. A pig's nose wasn't only good at detecting scents—it was

also excellent at differentiating smells from one another. There were two distinct odors: one that seemed masculine and one that seemed feminine. The masculine odor was quite strong. It appeared that the owner of this pillow was likely male.

“What did you smell?” Naut asked from the sidelines. “You can identify the culprit with one sniff, right?”

I climbed down the bed. When I sniffed Jess’s legs, just like I’d expected, she had the pleasant, reassuring aroma she always had—an aroma unique to beautiful maidens.

“Um, my legs aren’t what you’re supposed to smell...” Jess sounded exasperated.

*Oh, they aren’t? Oops, I misinterpreted that.* <<We should be right—the blood must belong to this bed’s owner, Ruta. The other scent I detected belongs to a woman with permission to enter this room, so it should likely be Vatis’s.>>

The two scents I’d detected from the bed had vaguely similar compositions to the aroma of Jess’s legs. Though far removed, they were still her ancestors at the end of the day.

Jess’s eyes widened. “Huh? But... Wait. Wouldn’t that imply that Lady Vatis killed her own husband?”

In the scene at the plunge pool earlier, Ruta had encouraged Vatis, saying that she was no longer alone. Eventually, the two of them were even blessed with children. If their relationship had reached an abrupt end like murder after all that, it would have been a heartbreaking tragedy. *That said...*

Seeing Jess’s worried face, I shook my head. <<It’s too early to come to that conclusion. In fact, managing to kill someone with only this much bloodshed would be next to impossible. If it’s only an external wound on the head, I doubt his heart would stop on the spot. Even if we consider the opposite scenario where the wound is small, he would end up losing a significant amount of blood before his body finally gives in. Now, I suppose there’s a chance that someone moved the corpse before he bled out, but we should see bloodstains in places other than the pillow. There aren’t.>>

As he listened, Hortis nodded and hummed in agreement.

I looked everyone present in the eye one by one. <<In other words, this isn't the actual murder scene.>> *Huh. I sounded just like an ace detective.*

I could practically see an imaginary question mark appear above Jess's head. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow..."

<<After seeing an unnatural amount of blood staining the bed, the first thought that appears in anyone's mind would be murder. And yeah, that makes perfect sense.>> I paused. <<But there are a lot of things that don't add up if this is a murder. Why is there only this relatively small amount of blood? Why didn't she kill him more masterfully? Above all else, why would the queen kill her husband to begin with?>>

Jess furrowed her eyebrows. "There was bleeding, but he wasn't killed... What in the world does that mean? Was he injured here?"

<<There's practically nothing on this bed—do you really think he could have sustained a wound that bled so profusely? The fact that there's only blood on the pillow implies that he lay down while leaving his wound to bleed. Then, while lying down obediently, he stopped the bleeding somehow. This is a slightly improbable situation.>>

And above everything else, it didn't form any coherent narratives—it didn't suffice as a story. This scene left an impression on Vatis, so something must have made it memorable.

<<Let's think of a more straightforward scenario for being injured here...>> I narrowed my eyes. <<Say, what if Ruta was dead from the beginning?>>

For a moment, deafening silence dominated the bedroom.

I continued, <<Being dead would explain the strange amount of bleeding here. After all, his heart, which pumps blood into his head and body, would have already stopped.>>

Jess finally managed to find her voice again. "But... That doesn't make sense! Why would Lady Vatis deliberately harm the deceased Mister Ruta's body?" She looked like she didn't want this scenario to be true. Doing something this egregious to the person you swore to love forever in marriage was too, too

cruel.

*However...* <<What if she took out something necessary from his corpse?>>

Hearing that, shock filled Jess's face. "It can't be. Do you mean...?"

She took out Ruta's Eye—the single human eyeball suspended within a glass sphere embellished with golden ornaments.

Hortis clapped. "Impressive. You managed to arrive at the answer instantly... I should have expected nothing less from you, Mister Virgin." Then, he leaned down until he was closer to the blood on the pillow. "Do you know how Vatis systematically collected the Contract Stakes and gained the most powerful magic in Mesteria?" His gaze shifted to Jess.

"Um... It was because she used Ruta's Eye from what I've read," Jess replied.

I certainly remembered reading something along those lines when I'd deciphered the history text with her.

But to my surprise, Hortis lifted a single index finger and waved it from side to side. "Hey, that's a misinterpretation of the history text. Think about it. If you had a husband one day, would you gouge out his eyeball and use it as a tool? Above all, do you really think you'll suddenly activate a power out of nowhere after prying it out?"

Jess gasped. "Oh, I see! Mister Ruta's eye had such a power from the beginning!"

"Precisely." Hortis nodded. "The text said that she used Ruta's eye to search for the Contract Stakes, but it likely wasn't referring to the artifact you're holding right now. What it actually meant was that the young man Ruta, who would become Vatis's husband, had the power to see the location of the Contract Stakes."

*I suspected as much.* I'd indeed been wondering about it for a while—why was the name of Vatis's husband attributed to an artifact that pointed to the supreme treasures? What I hadn't predicted, even in my wildest dreams, however, was that I'd learn the reason after accidentally wandering into Vatis's Labyrina.

“He had such an ability...?” Jess whispered with wonder before she raised her face. “But if that’s true, the earlier scene at the plunge pool also makes sense now. ‘Together, we have the power to change the world.’ They can use Mister Ruta’s ability to collect the Contract Stakes and transform Lady Vatis into the strongest living mage, giving her the power to end the Dark Ages.”

Hearing Jess’s theory, Naut smiled. But it was more of a derisive sneer. “So Vatis’s divine power passed down through the royal family for generations isn’t so sacred after all. She only happened to meet someone who could point her to prehistoric treasures before hoarding all of them.”

Scalding fury bubbled beneath his voice, as if to say, “This world was forced to suffer so many injustices because of a sham like that?”

Hortis nodded. “It’s exactly as you say, my owner. For the sake of something so shallow and fraudulent, brother—” He abruptly cut off and went quiet for a moment. “No... I don’t think this is the right place to discuss this.”

Clearing his throat, Hortis got back on track. “By gathering the Contract Stakes with Ruta, who had this special ability, Vatis accumulated power and became the final victor of the Dark Ages, a time when mages were rampant across the land. Along her journey, she had a son, who went on to become my great-grandfather. Her life seemed filled with glory and flourish—until tragedy ambushed her midway. And that’s the tragedy you have deduced from the scene.”

“The death of her beloved husband, Mister Ruta...” Jess whispered somberly. “But why?”

Seeing that, Hortis crossed his arms. “If you’re curious about Ruta’s cause of death, you can probably deduce it to a certain extent from the situation here.”

*Oh, really?* I mulled it over. <<With Vatis’s magic, she should have been able to heal Ruta no matter what injury or illness he had. Which means that Ruta either suffered a sudden death or perished during Vatis’s absence...>>

Jess added her own piece. “Since there isn’t any blood other than the stain on the pillow, the injury scenario seems unlikely.”

We considered all the facts in my head, and soon, a certain possibility

surfaced. Jess and I traded glances.

<<In that case, then...>>

“Did someone possibly...kill him with magic?” Jess spoke up nervously.

Hortis gazed at her with solemn eyes. “This is only my analysis, but if you go around reading all kinds of records, you’ll start to discover a consistent development across them that you can’t write off as a coincidence. Initially, Vatis treated her allied mages as friends—definitely nothing lesser than that. But after a certain point in time, she abruptly changed her policy altogether and began controlling them with collars and blood rings. This is what began the Yethma system.”

“Is that point in time possibly...?” Jess trailed off.

Naut didn’t have her reluctance—he announced it from the sidelines. “Was it when that Ruta guy was murdered? She was betrayed by her allied mages, who killed her man, and couldn’t believe in anyone in the world anymore. So, she collared all her friends. Is that what you’re saying?” Anger was oozing out from every word.

Hortis shut his eyes, as if accepting his wrath willingly. “Precisely. The period of Ruta’s sudden death and the time when Vatis developed the collar match up perfectly. The cause of his death wasn’t recorded anywhere, but if it were the trigger that incited her to start neutralizing other mages, it would be quite a persuasive explanation.” His tone was calm and mild, but his words were bloodcurdling.

“Am I getting this right?” Naut’s eyes widened with disbelief. “Are you saying that the Yethma class was born out of petty vengeance because her man got killed?”

The older man slowly exhaled. “I’d say it’s more distrust in other people than petty vengeance. After Ruta’s murder, Vatis could no longer believe in anyone else. She should have executed every single suspect, along with their entire families and supporters. Nothing was left in written records, but traces definitely remain even today. When you have time, you could look for them. The remains of seemingly executed mages are still pilloried as public warning trophies in the capital.”

I was speechless. *It all started because of a single murder? A single murder was what led to the injustice called the Yethma system that caused suffering for over an entire century?*

*So many maidens suffered and died because of it. How are they supposed to even rest in peace after knowing that? How is this fair at all?*

Jess seemed shaken. She walked forward in silence and cast her eyes down at the bloodied pillow. “I thought that gouging out the eye of the person you love is overly vicious, even if it was to preserve a useful ability. But now...”

I sighed. <<When you consider the despair and madness that drove her to such extremes because her husband was murdered, it’s heartbreaking.>>

A tragedy had led to the birth of the magical artifact called Ruta’s Eye. And the story of this room was a snippet of that tragedy, specifically, the moment when she’d extracted the eyeball that became the artifact’s core.

This was when I suddenly remembered what we were supposed to be doing. We’d been trying to find the end of this story and escape from this room. <<In conclusion, this is the scene where Vatis’s husband, Ruta, was murdered. It led to her madness, and she plucked out his eyeball. Okay then, how are we supposed to end this story?>>

On a whim, Jess’s gaze landed on Ruta’s Eye, which was in her hand. “Oh!” She appeared to have noticed something because she held the artifact up and showed it to us. The pupil of the eye was aiming directly at the pillow. When she moved, the pupil and iris moved accordingly, constantly fixating itself on the pillow. It was as if Ruta’s Eye wished to return to where it had been removed.

Jess tried placing Ruta’s Eye on the pillow. The next moment, the bedroom around us swirled like a vortex and disappeared, making way for a dim area. This time, it was a place I recognized. It was the royal library where Jess and I had searched for the history text.

Bookshelves lined up in cramped rows like a dense forest. In contrast to the bedroom, there was no natural lighting from the outside—only the red lights floating on the ceiling cast their eerie glow on the books. Ruta’s Eye, which had just left Jess’s hand, was already nowhere to be found.



“Pretty dark in here,” Naut commented and moved to unsheathe his twin shortwords mercilessly, but Jess gently pressed down his hand before summoning magical orbs of light. Though we were in the Abyssus, perhaps she still felt it was wrong to manifest fire in a library.

“All right then...” Hortis was still behind us. “As you can see, you’ve solved the challenge of an inescapable bedroom without incident. I suppose the question now is, are we in the Abyssus’s capital, or are we still inside Vatis’s Labyrina?”

I mulled over his words. <<I think we’ll know if we investigate the shelves. Finding books published after Vatis’s death will prove that this place isn’t part of her memories.>>

“Right.” Jess peered at a nearby shelf. Immediately, her cheeks flushed bright red.

<<Did something happen?>>

“Um... Well...” she stammered.

For some reason, Hortis was sporting an especially big smirk. There was a bad feeling in my gut, and I looked at the shelf. I read the writing on the spine immediately next to me.

### *The Gorgeous Sisters Next Door Keep Taking Turns Seducing Me*

It appeared that Mesteria had a rather *unique* taste in erotica titles. Furthermore, this was even printed onto fancy leather binding with gold foil stamping, which made it rather amusing. Whether it be coincidence or fate, we happened to have appeared in front of the erotica bookshelf.

Hortis’s hand appeared from one corner of my vision and reached in front of me. “The gorgeous sisters, hmm? You’ve zeroed in on a good old classic, Mister Virgin. The plot near the end is the cream of the crop. The protagonist, who has been forcibly torn away from the older sister who became his beloved, sees reminders of her when he looks at the younger sister—”

Naut cut Hortis off, sounding disgruntled. “I’m gonna beat you to a pulp if you go on.”

I didn't think Hortis deserved such a bloody beating. Still, I did think that strong words like these were necessary for a literally perverted old man who enthusiastically began a speech about erotic novels in front of his own daughter.

Still smiling from ear to ear, the depraved pervert held his tongue in the background. Meanwhile, I proposed, <<Jess, how about we look for *ImoMachi*?>>

She nodded profusely. "O-Oh, yes, that's a great idea!"

*ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?* was a sensational novel written roughly fifty years ago. It was a book that fulfilled two conditions: it was written after Vatis's death without a doubt and should also be available in the royal library in the present.

A few minutes later, after thoroughly checking countless description-like titles, we concluded that *ImoMachi* wasn't on this shelf. According to Jess, she hadn't found any other recently published books either. The question of why Jess was so knowledgeable about recent erotica aside, it was clear that we were still within Vatis's Labyrina.

"We've just gotta look for that thing you call the end of the story, right?" Naut shrugged. "I'm counting on you guys, then."

Jess got the ball rolling. "Considering what happened in the bedroom earlier, would this library also be a setting for some kind of memory snippet?"

<<Must be. Adding to that, this snippet must be impactful to Vatis somehow, enough to leave a lasting impression.>>

Ruta's Eye, which we'd used as a hint earlier, was gone. Our only option was to search for the logic in this place from scratch again.

I continued, <<We must search for the traces left behind by some kind of incident. Let's explore this library. To be on the safe side, it's probably better to stick together as a big group.>>

We wandered around the gloomy library. When we came across the door that should be the exit, we tested it just in case, and to no one's surprise, we

couldn't get out from there. This meant that the "story" had happened within the bounds of the library.

On the sides of the narrow aisle were numerous rows of towering bookshelves. The calming fragrance of paper and ink drifted from the densely packed books. We walked in a line with Jess leading us and looked around for anything that seemed off.

Within the silent library, Jess abruptly held her breath and whispered to me, "Mister Pig, look!" Her hand was stretched out, pointing at an antique desk at the end of the narrow aisle. It was a wide reading desk surrounded by cushioned chairs. An enchanted lantern was placed on the middle of the desk, illuminating only the desk's surface with a warm light. Along one edge of the surface was a transparent glass bottle.

<<Let's check it out.>>

Not a moment later, we encircled the desk. I couldn't see the tabletop from my pig's eye level, but Jess was kind enough to give me a description. "It looks like an inkwell. The cap has been left off, and the ink has completely dried up. I can see a pen nearby."

<<Are those our only clues?>> I asked. <<Does anything stand out about the ink?>>

Jess hesitated. "Is it all right to touch this bottle?"

*She's an excellent detective as ever—she even thinks about preserving the crime scene.* <<I doubt the position of the inkwell is that significant. Should be fine.>>

Having received my encouragement, Jess lifted the bottle. Dried ink was clinging to the bottom of the transparent glass bottle with thick walls. Using magic, Jess made her fingertips glow with a white light and began looking through the bottle base under this illumination. "It seems to be...red ink." She then held it down so that I could see it as well.

The dried ink was a deep, crimson. I sniffed it a little and smelled the pungent scent of ink mixed with the metallic smell of blood. <<It's the same scent as the blood staining the pillow—Ruta's blood.>>

Jess gasped. “He added his own blood into ink?”

<<Seems like it...>> I frowned. <<I don’t know why he did it though.>>

Thinking it might yield a lead, I tried smelling the chair’s seat. <<Vatis’s body odor is on the chair. She sat here and used the ink with Ruta’s blood to write something. Since the cap has been removed long enough for the ink to dry... She likely stopped writing midway or has already finished writing what she wanted to.>>

Eyes widening with realization, Jess took out a certain book inside her robe. It was a book with a crimson cover—*Records of Soul Magic Development*. “Come to think of it, the text in these books is written in red ink, isn’t it?” The second part of the duology then also appeared from her personal 4D pocket.

*Somehow, this feels way too convenient... As if something or someone has seen right through us and is even manipulating us to do what they want. Hang on, I might have an idea...* <<Hey, the item we used to leave the bedroom earlier wasn’t an item inside the bedroom but Ruta’s Eye that we brought into this world, right? Could it also be the same case here?>>

Jess furrowed her eyebrows. “Do you mean the *Records of Soul Magic Development* is the key to leaving this library?”

Hearing the doubt in our voices, Naut interjected from the sidelines. “Well, you’re lucky you had all the items by chance. If you didn’t bring them along with you, we would’ve probably ended up living in this Labyrina for the rest of our lives together with that depraved pervert.”

“Now, what’s this about a pervert?” Hortis played dumb and looked around him curiously. “Is there someone else around?”

I gave him a skeptical look. *Your innocent act isn’t fooling anyone.*

Tangents aside, an escape room game that required specific items that the participants had coincidentally brought as keys? Wasn’t that way too unfair? Our clues heavily suggested that the *Records of Soul Magic Development* duology was the right answer, but were these two books truly the way out?

*Have we made a mistake somewhere? Or...* <<Oh well, overthinking isn’t going to help. Hey, could you let me smell that quickly?>> With my sharp pig

snout, I inspected the pages of the books. *Interesting. It's the same smell as the ink in the inkwell.* <<Looks like we were correct when we guessed that the book was written with this ink. For now, let's try hunting for a clue inside this book.>>

"Hmm, which part of this book should we use as a clue though?" Jess wondered out loud.

I said the first thing that came into my mind. <<The last page of Part Two. Since the ink has been neglected to the point that it's dry, it's more likely that she isn't in the middle of writing it during this scene—she's already finished writing. What's written on the last page?>>

Jess plopped down onto the floor and opened the book before my eyes. From the opening of her collar, a gently sloping valley— *Ahem*, only one line was written with the blood ink on the final page. The handwriting was notably shaky and somewhat clumsy.

*This is farewell. I should have never come to this place from the very beginning.*

"I've actually been wondering about this line." Jess placed a hand on her chin. "What does it mean?"

Narrowing my eyes, I pointed out, <<Wait, don't you think the handwriting here's different from the other pages?>>

Jess flipped through the book. All the other parts were handwritten using the same ink, and the writing was all over the pages, but the script itself was neat and dignified. The last page starkly contrasted all the others; the messy characters looked as if someone had used their nondominant hand.

"You're right. It looks as if someone else wrote this line," she agreed.

<<Now who would that be...?>>

Jess turned away from me slightly. "This could be a message from Mister Ruta."

I hesitated. <<What makes you think that?>>

“Oh, it’s not that I have any basis for this. It’s just that in these books, Lady Vatis records everything that has happened until she resurrected Mister Ruta. The events up to the stage where she separates the spirit possessing her body are in Part One, while her journey in the Abyssus that ends with his spirit regaining his corporeal form is depicted in Part Two...which happens to be the exact same path I’ve been imitating.”

Therefore, Vatis had written these records after Ruta’s safe return to the world of the living. And at the very end of the second book were those words of farewell. Jess’s anxious eyes were drawn to the clumsy handwriting as she continued, “Lady Vatis should have succeeded at resurrecting Mister Ruta, but he doesn’t appear in any of the texts written after that period.”

I considered the cryptic sentence. *“This is farewell. I should have never come to this place from the very beginning.”* If Ruta had been the writer, it could be interpreted as follows: Ruta had been successfully resurrected with Vatis’s persistent efforts and had returned alive from the Abyssus, but he’d ended up leaving “this place” of his own volition.

<<It makes me wonder what he meant by “this place,”>> I said. <<Since he vanished from the records of the royal family after his resurrection, was he referring to the royal court?>>

“That might be the case, but I can’t say anything for sure.” Jess frowned slightly. “Both the history text and these records share a common problem where vital pieces of information or descriptions are missing, or the writing itself is crafted like riddles, making it difficult to interpret. The parts relating to Mister Ruta are written especially ambiguously on top of that.”

<<Doesn’t sound like they’re reader-friendly,>> I commented.

Behind me, Hortis let out a small chuckle. “But of course. Ruta is Vatis’s beloved husband first and a crucial historical figure second. Since these texts might be passed down for generations, there’s no way she’d go into extreme detail about her private love life. From Vatis’s perspective, she probably didn’t want other people to have a comprehensive understanding of information about Ruta.”

Hearing that, my mind casually wandered off to my own novel. *Welp, it should*

*be fine. I've made it private on the internet. I mean, I did put it in as an entry for a rookie writer literary award to commemorate it. Still, as long as it doesn't accidentally catch the editorial department's attention or anything, I'm sure it won't be passed down to future generations.*

<<Well, that makes sense. Most of the time, riddles exist so other people don't realize the writer's true purpose.>> As I made that statement, I looked at Hortis. That man had the gall to cheerfully nod as if it had nothing to do with him.

Jess seemed somewhat convinced as she gazed at the crimson book cover. "I see... She wanted to avoid writing personal details about Mister Ruta, but she wanted to draft up a record about soul magic. That's how she ended up writing such a mysterious book."

Naut cleared his throat. "Oy, I think you're getting distracted. Aren't we supposed to hurry up and look for the end of the story?"

*Ah, right.* <<Okay, it looks like our theory about this ink being used to write *Records of Soul Magic Development* is on the mark. So now, the question is, what should we do with these records to end the story?>>

I racked my brain for ideas but couldn't come up with any plausible solutions. A glance at Jess told me that she was also stumped.

This was when Hortis spoke up. "Jess, do you remember where you obtained those books?"

Jess looked up. "I found Part One in this library. Mister Shravis gave me Part Two, which he mentioned receiving from King Marquis."

"From my brother? Who doesn't read books at all?" Hortis, who'd been composed and carefree like the wind so far, expressed surprise for the first time.

"Yes." Jess nodded. "King Marquis has apparently researched the *Records of Soul Magic Development* for a long time, seeking a way to revive you, Mister Hortis. Though in the end, he abandoned that plan."

*Ahh. That's why Jess only managed to get her hands on Part One. It's because Marquis took Part Two out of the library.*

“I see...brother tried to...” Hortis muttered under his breath. I didn’t know what was going on in his mind, but for a while, he was completely silent with a noncommittal expression. But then, as if he’d gotten over it for now, he clapped his large hands together. “The point is, the *Records of Soul Magic Development* eventually became a part of this library’s collection. Knowing that, I think it’s pretty obvious where the finished books went.”

*Oh, I get it now.* <<Jess, where was the shelf that you found the book on?>>

“It’s over here.” Jess began jogging into the depths of the gloomy library, and I followed.

A while later, we arrived at a section fenced off by iron grills. A door made of the same iron grill was the only entrance into the area. When Jess placed her hand on it, the door let out a heavy groan as it swung open. She explained, “This section is off-limits to everyone but the royal family.”

At some distance from the iron grills were rows of bookshelves with robust glass doors. Though they were coated in thick dust, each bookshelf appeared to have golden ornaments.

Jess opened one of them without hesitation. “I knew it... They’re not here.” Lighting up her fingertips, she illuminated the bookshelf interior. It was packed with books from one end to another, but I spotted a gap that would snugly fit the two books we had on hand.

This sequence of events seemed too convenient—too orchestrated—but that aside, the answer was glaringly clear. Like how we’d returned Ruta’s Eye to its rightful place, we also had to return these books to this bookshelf.

<<Do you still need those books at all?>> I asked.

Jess shook her head firmly. “No. I’ve committed most of them to memory.”

*Now that’s Jess for you!* <<Well then, shall we?>>

The beautiful maiden smiled brightly at me before slotting Part One into the gap. Nothing happened.

The moment the second book fit perfectly within the remaining space—the floor beneath our feet disappeared without warning.



I literally charged like a boar across the lugubrious [dim] forest. The two of us had lagged behind the rest of the group by a margin. My boar body was advantageous for weaving between the thickets as I ran, but Nourris was the encumbered one. She wasn't quite athletically gifted—correction, calling her clumsy would be putting it mildly. As she desperately sprinted, her arm would get caught in twigs, and more and more scrapes littered her knees. I constantly moved to the position behind her and watched our rear vigilantly.

Whenever Nourris almost tripped, I felt like I would get a heart attack and quietly avert my gaze so that I didn't catch a glimpse of the item [undergarment] that peeked out from under her defenseless skirt.

<<Can you still keep running?>> I asked.

<Yes!> she chirped in a merry voice with her telepathy. <Thanks to the medicine, I can feel more and more energy surging out as if it will never dry up!> Her feet stumbled once again.

Mister Shravis had given Nourris a monster tonic—*This is the only way I can translate it, but is it just me or is the name somewhat familiar?*—a type of questionable liquid medicine. Basically, it was a medicine that could temporarily buff [enhance] the user's stamina; thanks to it, even a girl like Nourris could keep up with a long-distance sprint.

That said, it didn't improve her other physical attributes—it wouldn't, say, grant her physical abilities on par with Miss Itsune or Mister Yoshu—which meant that the distance between us and the others was only growing with time. Though we were able to communicate with everyone with Nourris's telepathy, running in this dismal forest with only each other's company made my heart leap into my throat.

I suddenly picked up what sounded like a metallic clang from behind us and pricked up my boar ears. Had it been a trick of the wind? We should have shaken our pursuers off our trail, but despite the hindrance of the forest terrain, they would be faster than us on horseback.

With my wariness at the highest level, I continued running. This time, I was positive that I heard the neighing of a horse. <<They might discover us!

Requesting reinforcements!>> I communicated to the others through Nourris.

Immediately, Mister Yoshu's voice rang out in my head. <I won't take long.>

The clapping of horse hooves closed the distance steadily. The low visibility in the forest meant that they likely couldn't see us yet, but there was a chance that they were tracking us with animals such as hounds. If so, it was only a matter of time before we were captured.

I strained my ears—it sounded like there were at least three horses. They'd gotten so close that I could distinguish the noisy clattering of different sets of armor, but I didn't have the luxury of time to turn back and confirm with my eyes. Until Mister Yoshu arrived, we had to keep running.

His voice echoed in my head. <Found you.> A shadowy silhouette passed by us. <You can keep running. It's okay, everything's under control.>

Three rhythmical twangs of a crossbow reached my ears, followed by three successive thuds of cavalry falling from horses. Mister Yoshu ran and caught up to us with a great crossbow on his shoulder.

<They're the vanguard. I've knocked all of them out. I think the main troops should take a while before they arrive.> As he gave us this report, his eyes were the color of liquid gold; his pupils, vertical slits. But soon, they returned to normal black eyes. From underneath his long bangs, he stared intently ahead of us with his sanpaku eyes. <But it's probably going to be a pretty narrow escape.>

Even after that, Mister Yoshu stayed behind to protect Nourris and me. Whenever the vanguard closed in, he'd shoot them down [knock them out] systematically in a composed manner.

Soldiers adorned in the armor of the royal court's army had a high chance of being virtuous people we'd once fought alongside, which was why Mister Yoshu deliberately avoided their vitals. What he did was render them unconscious with the enchantment on his bolts while putting them out of commission by piercing their shoulder or knee—an extraordinarily difficult feat. However, Mister Yoshu never missed this target.

I remembered that he'd once said, *"I don't have all the bolts in the world, so*

*I've got to save as many as I can.*" Still, his accuracy was off the charts—almost alarmingly so.

That said, having a hundred percent accuracy rate didn't mean he'd suddenly gain more bolts out of nowhere. Gradually, the number of soldiers that appeared increased to the extent that we had to call for further reinforcements.

The next one to come was Mister Shravis.

"Pardon my rudeness," he said before promptly carrying Nourris on his back. Then, he approached Mister Yoshu and touched the archer's bolts and quiver. There was the sound of bolts rattling against one another and tumbling into the quiver. He appeared to have replenished Mister Yoshu's ammunition with magic. The archer gave Mister Shravis a slight nod, possibly an expression of gratitude.

Thanks to Mister Shravis carrying Nourris along, our sprint became considerably faster. The prince glanced in my direction. <Their encirclement is closing in and shrinking. It should only be a matter of time before they discover our location. The capital is near—I'm considering making a counterattack while knowing it will expose our whereabouts. We'll then catch up with the other half of our group ahead of us before charging straight at the capital together. Do you agree with it?>

After disembarking at Nearbell, we'd reached the Needle Woods at top speed, only running on the bare minimum of sleep. Our initial plan was to wait out the rest of our extra time on the outskirts of the Needle Woods, but because a heckripon had revealed our presence, we were now being forced to race toward our goal [the capital] out of necessity. Since we hadn't adjusted our timing, this would mean that we were far ahead of our initial schedule.

<<Are we going to enter the capital this early?>> I asked. <<We should still have one night before the agreed time.>>

For a while, there was no response from Mister Shravis. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. He was running at the same speed as us while carrying Nourris, which must have taken a heavy toll on his stamina.

"This is a battle we can't afford to lose," the prince said out loud. "Running away isn't an option. When are we going to enter the capital if we choose to

retreat?! It's now or never!" Toward the end of his declaration, his tone grew firmer, and I inadvertently shrunk into myself at his fiery determination.

Mister Shravis seemed to snap out of it with a start. He looked at Mister Yoshu and me before speaking through his telepathy and rewording his point. <My apologies... I'm suggesting that we place our faith in Jess and the pig and take a gamble. The capital is a perilous place, but I know the finer workings of the city better than even father. There are many secret passages, so hiding wouldn't be impossible. What I want to avoid at all costs is letting our golden opportunity slip by while we run from place to place outside the capital.>

But if we disappeared in the Needle Woods, wouldn't the last boss [Clandestine Arcanist] suspect that we'd likely entered the city? That elderly man would hunt us with everything at his disposal—would we really be able to evade him for long enough?

Mister Yoshu didn't seem to share the same concern because he agreed with a "Mm-hmm" before communicating, <There's no other way, right? Then let's do it. Those two even have Naut on the other side with them, and he's never let us down. If it's only one night, we can hold out somehow.>

At that precise time, the roar of a dragon rang out from nearby. I couldn't see it due to the obstruction of the trees, but the Grim Reaper was already breathing down our necks.

I didn't have the time to hesitate. My duty was to protect Nourris to the end. <<Understood. We must hurry.>>

Mister Shravis gave me a nod before reaching out and aiming his palm behind us.

Between the trees, one patch of earth after another bulged up and began constructing countless barriers. It was a potent defense measure, but the price we paid was information. Our enemy would most certainly realize that the final royal mage [Shravis] was with us.

From somewhere far behind us, I heard the enemy soldiers making a commotion.

<I'll throw up a smoke screen,> Shravis announced. <This battle will decide

our fate.>

I watched a thick black fog spread out behind us from my peripheral vision as we charged in a straight line toward the capital.

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My pig trotters touched a hard marble surface. Hortis must have used magic because it had been a soft landing.

“Surely everyone here must recognize this place,” Hortis chirped, sounding somewhat amused as he walked toward the unoccupied throne.

We’d landed inside the Golden Cathedral. Above us was a mind-bogglingly lofty dome ceiling. Beneath us was a floor of marble tiles in a variety of colors. Along the walls were bright and vivid stained glass windows. And finally, a white sarcophagus was enshrined on the other side of the cathedral.

I could never forget this place. Too many significant events had happened here—my reluctant parting with Jess after we’d arrived in the capital due to Eavis. Eavis’s funeral. The reunion of Marquis and Hortis after five long years. The failed assassination of Marquis instigated by Naut and the others.

“I’ve always wanted to sit here at least once in my life,” Hortis commented as if he didn’t have a care in the world while he plopped down on the throne.

Judging by the absent coffins of the kings from each generation along the wall, this place must also be a part of Vatis’s Labyrina.

Hortis crossed his legs leisurely and announced in a sonorous voice, “So far, we’ve witnessed a scene of what followed the death of Vatis’s beloved Ruta and a scene after Vatis revived him with soul Magic.”

In addition, items in our possession had been closely linked to each scene: Ruta’s Eye and the *Records of Soul Magic Development*.

“It appears that the end of the story is nigh,” Hortis said matter-of-factly before stroking the armrest of the golden throne with his fingertips. “After having lost her husband and reviving him with her obsession, where and how did Vatis end her story?”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<Sounds like you aren’t going to tell us.>>

“Of course not.” He shrugged. “Isn’t there a saying that the dead wear nothing?”

*Uhhh... I think you meant “the dead know nothing.”*

“Mister Pig, let’s check on what’s there!” Jess rushed forward with quick steps, and I trailed after her. Her shoes clicked against the hard marble floor as she made her way to the altar deep in the side of the cathedral hall that faced the entrance.

Enshrined on top of the opulent altar was Vatis’s statue. It depicted a majestic queen who placed her left hand on her chest and raised her right hand high into the heavens. Right beneath the statue was a stone coffin.

<<That’s Vatis’s sarcophagus, isn’t it?>>

I could never mistake it for anything else. We’d retrieved the Destruction Spear from its lid, after all. When I inspected the lid, I immediately spotted a familiar engraving that reminded me of an arrow symbol—it indicated that the Destruction Spear was concealed there.

Jess inclined her head quizzically. “It’s supposed to be Lady Vatis’s heart, but her coffin is in here too?”

<<She likely made it before she died,>> I deduced. <<She needed to store the Destruction Spear in the lid, after all.>>

“That’s true... Hmm, is there anything inside?” As Jess spoke, she pushed the lid sideways. Though it should be made of bulky stone, it creaked as it slid smoothly with her movement—perhaps Jess had used magic.

“Off you go!” Jess adorably muttered as she finished pushing the lid out of the way. The stone slab toppled over and fell onto the marble ground. Jess apparently tended to have a lion’s heart in the Abyssus.

Such trifling thoughts were flitting across my mind when I gazed at Jess. She was frozen in place, completely speechless.

Naut walked over to us and peered into the casket. He also stiffened like an ice statue.

<<What’s wrong?>> I asked, propping up my front legs on the coffin’s edge

and hoisting myself up.

I peered inside. The face of a beautiful woman was right in front of my eyes.

Startled, I flinched backward, losing my balance and tumbling onto the ground.

“Something the matter, everyone?” Hortis walked over cheerfully. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” *Look who’s talking!* “You opened it while knowing it’s Vatis’s coffin, so you should have expected to see her, don’t you think?”

Jess responded with a perfectly sound question. “But isn’t this place supposed to be inside Lady Vatis’s heart?”

*Exactly. Finding your own corpse inside your own heart sounds like something you’d see in the horror genre.*

But that was when a certain fundamental question arose. If Vatis was dead, then how in the world were we inside her heart right now?

Something Shravis said to me a while ago flashed through my mind.

*“When I was young, I once had the opportunity to see Lady Vatis’s remains during a ritual, and...I remember it clearly. It hadn’t dried nor decayed. It retained her noble visage almost perfectly—to a terrifying degree.”*

*Don’t tell me... Is Vatis still alive?!*

Tutting lightly with his tongue, Hortis wagged his finger. “You’re asking the right questions, Mister Virgin, but you’ve come to the wrong conclusion.” He read my mind without permission and shot down my theory. “Jess, do you know the year Vatis died?”

Jess frowned with concentration. “If I remember correctly... Lady Vatis entered eternal sleep when she was forty-three. At least, that’s what was written at the end of the history text.”

Hortis quirked up an eyebrow. “And? Who wrote that history text?”

“It was Lady...Vatis...” Jess’s eyes widened, and she froze. Clearly, it didn’t add up.

“How the heck is a dead person able to record their own death?” Naut retorted.

I considered the possibilities and listed them. <<Maybe she cast an enchantment on the book so that a number would automatically be inscribed the moment she dies. Or—>>

Jess finished my sentence for me. “She...decided on the year of her own death?” The fair maiden nervously placed a hand on her chest.

Vatis was the most powerful mage in history who’d crafted the Salvation Chalice, which could save any life. But if she’d indeed chosen the time of her own death, it could only mean one thing: suicide.

Hortis paced around aimlessly as he said, “The almost impenetrable defenses of the royal capital over in the surface Mesteria were established by Vatis’s magic. But the thing with magic is that if the caster’s heart—in other words, the caster’s soul—has perished, the spell will fade into nothing in time. So then, why is the capital still under her magical protection?”

Jess gulped audibly. “Does that mean Lady Vatis’s soul is still lingering somewhere within the capital?”

“Indeed.” Hortis nodded. “Knowing that, where would be the most suitable place for a soul to reside?”

Hearing that, Jess stared into the coffin. “She preserved her own body with magic and sealed her soul within...?”

“Exactly. Vatis’s body became the vessel for her soul, which became the core of the defensive spells. For nearly a century, what was once Vatis hid within her coffin. Having abandoned all the other functions and roles of a living human, a mere shell of her former self protects the capital to this day.”

It’d sounded like an outlandish revelation, but it answered one of my questions. <<So that’s why the cliffs of the royal capital in the Abyssus were Vatis’s Econ. Vatis was determined to defend the capital even if it meant reducing herself to a living vegetable—the fortifications surrounding the capital are the best representation of her heart.>>

Naut looked like he was completely out of the loop as he gazed at Hortis. “I



dunno what you guys look so satisfied about, but are you basically saying that the old hag over there voluntarily chose to stop living? Is learning that going to help us leave this place somehow?”

Hortis gave us a hint. “Think. Vatis’s Labyrina has shown us three snippets by now. What kind of story were they telling? As long as you’re able to understand that much, I’m sure you will naturally arrive at a method that would give this story a fitting and logical end.”

I did exactly what he said and began thinking. <<First was the scene where she extracted an eye from Ruta’s remains. Second was when she put away the *Records of Soul Magic Development* in the library. Third was the scene with Vatis inside her coffin...>> I frowned. <<I think there’s some kind of significant connection between them, but with only the facts we’ve got on hand, it feels too disjointed...>>

Jess peered into the coffin. “If only Lady Vatis could tell us personally about what all this means...”

We were at a loss, and seeing that, Hortis walked up to us. “Vatis has died as a human, but her soul—her heart—remains as a mechanism for her magic, remember? And right now, the three of you are in that very mechanism. Try recalling what Vatis’s heart has done to you so far.”

That was when I suddenly recalled something that had bothered me. <<Hey, this Labyrina has confiscated Ruta’s Eye and the records as escape tools, right? I *did* have the feeling that everything seemed too convenient. I mean, how can items introduced from outside be the only keys to escape from the locked rooms?>>

“I agree, but we can’t deny that they were exactly the keys we needed to use.” Jess placed a hand on her chin. “Hmm, what kind of interpretation would convincingly explain such a phenomenon?”

There was only one theory that offered a good explanation. <<It doesn’t make sense for things we happened to have on hand to be designed as the keys this Labyrina demanded from the beginning. But what if it selected the keys from our possessions after we came in?>>

“*After* we came in...” Jess hesitated. “Are you saying that Lady Vatis’s Labyrina

redesigned its scenes after our arrival so that our specific possessions would be the right keys?”

<<Yeah. The common denominator between Ruta’s Eye and the *Records of Soul Magic Development* is that parts of Ruta’s body are used in both—his eyeball and blood. Maybe Vatis wanted to retrieve them.>>

Hortis nodded. “There’s nothing strange about Vatis’s heart desiring Ruta’s body. Even after she sealed herself away, her strong yearning for her husband remains to this day, enough for it to be an instinct in her heart.”

*So, how did things end up like this?* I voiced my thoughts as I organized the facts in my mind. <<Vatis chose to practically end her life while she was still young... And she did it while yearning for Ruta...>>

From my side, Jess interjected, “I think the clue is that one line on the last page of Part Two, which was written in a different handwriting from the rest.”

*This is farewell. I should have never come to this place from the very beginning.*

She continued, “Thanks to Lady Vatis’s tireless efforts, Mister Ruta returned alive from their journey in the Abyssus and regained his corporeal body. But he left that note and disappeared somewhere again... Is there a chance that Lady Vatis despaired and ended her life here?”

I pointed out the flaw in her narrative. <<If he only ran off somewhere though, why didn’t she try to chase after him?>>

Jess cast her gaze down onto Vatis’s terrifyingly lifelike corpse. “She would have never sealed herself away in here if he went somewhere she could follow.”

I dragged out a long exhale. <<Oh. It all makes sense now. The bedroom we entered in the beginning was where Ruta died. The library was where Ruta bid farewell to her again. And finally, the Golden Cathedral is where Vatis gave up on Ruta and ended her own life... You could say that they’re all scenes where she had to part with Ruta.>>

Arle's story floated to the surface of my mind. *Even here, dying for love is the end of the story?*

Jess nodded solemnly. "The snippets we saw each time featured different things, such as the events during the Dark Ages, soul magic, and the royal capital. But looking back now, perhaps all those moments were actually parts of the love story between Lady Vatis and Mister Ruta. Everything would make sense if that's true."

Hortis clapped enthusiastically. "Precisely. She may have divine power and be the dictator who rules over an entire nation, but at the end of the day, she is but a human with a heart like you and me." Merriment vanished from his expression—even the optimistic Hortis looked sorrowful for once. "I'm not trying to make excuses for him, but... That's the case for my brother as well." He spoke softly, as if the words had spilled out of their own accord.

It got Naut's attention. "What does that mean?"

The middle-aged man smiled with melancholy. "You might not believe me, but brother used to be a responsible and good-natured guy like Shravis. Though it's still true that he never read books."

Hortis looked down at Vatis's lifelike face and then continued his explanation. "But an overwhelming power to mold reality as he pleased, combined with his sense of princely duty, ruined him beyond recognition. Two things are vital if you wish to be the king of Mesteria: a wise governor's brilliant mind and an unquestionable ruler's absolute power. His rigorous duties meant he had less opportunity to interact with his family. He gradually became an isolated and solitary man... Though it seems that the one thing he never neglected was the necessary training for Shravis to become the next king."

Hortis shook his head, as if trying to dispel thoughts from his mind. "Sorry about that—I got off topic. Here, I'll tell you something very interesting to finish things off." He raised three fingers. "You know the legend of the three supreme treasures hidden in Mesteria, right? There's the Contract Stake that saved Ceres, the Salvation Chalice that is currently in Shravis's possession, and finally, the Destruction Spear that pierced me. Do you still remember where they were stored?"

Jess placed her hand on her chin, recalling, “The Contract Stake was at the Encounter Waterfall. The Salvation Chalice was at Terminus Island. Lastly, the Destruction Spear was in the Golden Cathedral—” She cut short and gasped, seemingly realizing something.

I made the connection at the same time. <<The Encounter Waterfall is where Vatis and Ruta met each other. The Terminus Island is the entrance to the Abyssus where Vatis went to resurrect Ruta. This coffin in front of us is where Vatis gave up on Ruta at the very end...>>

Whipping her head up, Jess looked at Hortis. “They’re all significant places to Lady Vatis—all places representing some of her most striking memories and feelings for Mister Ruta, whether they be happiness or despair.”

“Mm-hmm.” Hortis nodded with satisfaction. “On that topic, Ruta’s Eye was located at the place where Vatis and Ruta first had XXX, as a certain Mister Virgin calls it.”

*Yikes, he was listening during that conversation?* Hearing that, it appeared that Jess had finally realized what XXX represented because her face flushed bright red. *Oh well. Let bygones be bygones.*

I subtly changed the topic. <<I see. She didn’t record the most important things in her life in the texts. Instead, she indicated them through the treasures’ locations.>>

“So, the point is,” Naut chose to join the conversation at this time, “that old hag’s story can be summed up as a woman who chased after a man for her entire life. In that case, it’s fine to say that the end of her story is when she gave up on pursuing him and entered this coffin, yeah?”

The rest of us nodded.

Naut strutted over to the coffin and promptly lifted one leg, preparing to step inside. *Oh, he’s already planning on leaving?* But just as I had that thought, he suddenly stilled and looked at Hortis. “Come to think of it, are you gonna follow us?”

Hortis shook his head loosely. “Regrettably, this appears to be the end of my time on the stage. I’ve got no plans of spooking you with a feint like father did.

This is farewell.”

I didn’t know what was on Naut’s mind, but he temporarily retracted his foot. “Hey, I’ve been wondering something.”

Hortis inclined his head. “What is it?”

“You died, but you’re here in front of us. You’re basically in the same state as the swine. Say, if you came along with us... Would you be able to return to the surface Mesteria alive too?”

“Hmm, well...” After a moment of thought, Hortis was kind enough to explain. “Here’s something I have to point out first. Mister Virgin and brother’s present state is nothing like father and me—we are fundamentally different. You could say that Mister Virgin and brother are balanced on a razor’s edge between life and death. People in the world of the living have detained their spirits from leaving. But father and I are completely dead. By nature, human spirits disperse into nothing upon the moment of their death.”

Naut didn’t look convinced. “But you’re in front of us right now, aren’t you?”

Hortis nodded slightly. “That’s because, my owner, the Abyssus is a wondrous land where even spirits and the dead can materialize. It’s a place where the wishes of those burned to death can transform fire into water—where indecent wishes can influence the law of cause and effect at times. But sadly, it’s not a land of convenient miracles where you can revive the dead as you please.”

The swordsman narrowed his eyes. “If you haven’t returned from the dead, then who exactly *are* you?”

He received Hortis’s encouraging smile in reply, as if to say that he’d asked a good question. “What you see before you are the lingering traces of my wishes combined with your gazes to form a mirage, so to speak.”

Naut shrugged. “Sorry, but I’m an uneducated village boy, so you’ll lose me completely with complicated explanations.”

“Then let’s put it another way. You can say that I’m the concept of the dead itself—as long as you turn a blind eye to the fact that I don’t exist, I’m no different from the living.”

His wording was enigmatic and philosophical, as if he were providing an answer to a zen question.

Raising an eyebrow, Naut asked, “What, does that mean you’re our delusion?”

“Now, that isn’t what I said, my owner. Powerful emotions leave behind their scars on the world even after death. The Abyssus is a place where such strong emotions—wishes, prayers, obsession, yearning, regret—are all assembled in one jumbled mess and manifest physically. My wish to help all of you and your need for aid happened to align by pure chance, giving birth to me, the man you see before your eyes.”

After saying that all in one go, he expressed sorrow as he added, “In short, I can’t go back with you.”

“Huh.” Naut raised his chin by a margin. “I know this sounds harsh, but it’s not like I missed you or anything. Rossi was cute, though.”

“Now you’re making me sad.” Hortis slumped his shoulders exaggeratedly in jest.

Seeing that, Naut sported a wry smile. “Well then, see ya.”

“Oops, not so fast. One last thing.” Hortis took a single step closer to Naut. “This is where Vatis’s story ends. But it’s still far from the end of your stories, my friends. Your story involves carrying out your mission successfully and only ends after your safe homecoming.”

*He’s almost like a teacher reading out the safety tips before a school trip, I commented in my mind.*

He continued, “You must make sure to return home in one piece.”

We waited a while, but it sounded like that was all Hortis wanted to say to us before our parting.

I hated to admit it, but no matter what he was, mirage or otherwise, I felt reluctant to bid eternal farewell to him. <<We...won’t get to see each other ever again after we go our separate ways here, will we?>>

To my surprise, Hortis shook his head casually. “Come now, don’t speak

nonsense, Mister Virgin. It's not like I came to this place and waited for you to arrive or anything. I was with all of you the entire time. I have never left your side and never will for all of eternity." With a sunny smile, as if he weren't wistful at all, he waved at us merrily.

Oddly enough, my heart also grew light. I finally found it within myself to think, *Guess it's about time we go.*

Naut gave Hortis a small nod. This time, he stepped into the coffin without hesitation. Not a moment later, he vanished from our sight.

Our answer was correct. Entering this coffin was the end of Vatis's story.

Jess approached Hortis and looked up at his bearded face. "Um... Thank you for everything."

"There's nothing you have to thank me for. This is my thanks for letting me sniff a nostalgic and beloved smell." He voluntarily took a step back.

Giving him a grateful bow, Jess followed Naut's example. She also disappeared from my vision.

Last up was me. I approached the coffin and moved to the end near Vatis's feet so I wouldn't accidentally step on her.

When it was just the two of us, I heard Hortis calling out to me from behind. "Take care of my daughter, will you?"





*Now, that's the first time he's ever sounded like a proper father figure.* I turned around. <<Are you really sure about this? Entrusting her to a guy like me?>>

Hortis replied with a charming and unadulterated smile that didn't seem in character for him. "Don't put yourself down like that. You're the man my daughter chose. I've got no objections."

I nodded before peering into the coffin. Jess was waiting for me. I had to go.

For the very last time, I turned around. <<I can't thank you enough for everything you've done. Goodbye.>> I looked back at the coffin and stepped onto its base with my pig trotter. The world began spinning round and round without a sound, and I was sucked into a vortex of limbo where I didn't feel or sense anything.

As if chasing after me, Hortis's final words caught up to my ears. "If you don't make Jess happy, you better be prepared. Because for the rest of your life, you'll have to fend off the haunting terror of a nude middle-aged man barging in and intruding on your most important moments."

## Chapter 4: A Lonely Flower Shatters in the Darkness

The evening sky was a bright pea green, almost like someone had messed up the hue adjustment filter in a photo editing program. Judging by this sight, we'd safely escaped from the Labyrina.

The three of us found ourselves standing in a familiar area. The flower plaza, which faced west, was located halfway up the capital. Everlasting flowers of marble decorated the entire area—or at least, that was what I remembered about the place. However, in the Abyssus, genuine red flowers bloomed profusely, carpeting the ground like a sea of flowers with no end in sight.

I recalled my previous visit to this place with Jess. The appetizing smell of roasting meat and the clinking of tableware had been cozy and pleasant. But now, the overpowering aroma of flowers dominated the place, as if someone had carelessly scattered perfume everywhere. The only sound I could hear was the wind galloping through the capital. Just like before, I didn't sense any other humans around. It was an uncanny world indeed.

Naut marched to the plaza's edge and looked down at West Mesteria, which stretched to the horizon. "This place's got a great view. The people in the capital have looked down on us all their lives like this, huh?"

<<It sounds like you don't like this place,>> I commented.

He curled his lips into an artificial smile. "Don't be silly. I was just being jealous." Turning away from the railing, he began walking over to the center of the plaza. "Back to business. We're supposed to find that Econ thing of that old goat. Surely you've at least got a few ideas about where it is?"

"Of course!" Jess chirped before putting her full faith in me. "You're all prepared, right, Mister Pig?"

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<I wouldn't be so sure about that. There aren't any clear clues pointing us in the correct direction.>>

Her eyes widened with shock. "Whaaat?"

We'd arrived at our destination, the capital. That was good. We didn't know where the most important thing was: the entrance. That was bad. The situation felt somewhat nostalgic.

It was currently the evening of the third. After one night, it would be the time of our mission—the morning of the fourth. Shravis and the rest of the gang should be making their way to the capital with that time frame in mind. We had to help Marquis break out before morning arrived by any means necessary.

<<Well, I haven't got any conclusive evidence, but I can use my imagination to make an educated guess.>> I reassured her. <<The Clandestine Arcanist possessed Marquis's body and has taken over the government, which means that his heart should be located within the area of activity you'd expect from a king. Specifically, the king's bedroom, office, or places where he holds audiences.>>

Jess placed a finger on her chin. "A place where the king holds audiences... Should we check out the Golden Cathedral we just came out of?"

The Golden Cathedral was a place that paid tribute to the departed souls of royalty. At the same time, it also demonstrated the royal family's authority and prestige. That said, only a very few had the privilege of laying their eyes upon the king's noble visage—the capital's citizens and a small handful of exceptions like Naut.

Naut crossed his arms. "That old goat's goal is to take revenge on the royal family. It'd be pretty straightforward for him to be obsessed with something representing the king. You know, like that giant, gaudy golden throne in the Golden Cathedral."

*He has a point there. I don't think the Clandestine Arcanist would have any attachment to the office or the bedroom.* Nodding, I said, <<There's no easy way around it—we've got to confirm it for ourselves. Let's try heading over to the Golden Cathedral first.>>

The royal capital was a fortress lifted into the air thanks to its surrounding perpendicular cliffs. The city had been carved into the precipitous slopes of an independent mountain—which was shaped like a pointed bamboo shoot—and

accordingly, the buildings were arranged in tiers of different elevations like a terrace. A cobblestone path weaved between the buildings horizontally, parallel to the horizon. Most vertical movement in the city involved utilizing narrow and steep stairs. Realistic statues had been dotted all over the city in places like plazas or junctions, but they weren't statues in the Abyssus.

Here, they'd gone past realistic—they were the real thing. In appearance, at the very least.

The first one we came across was the life-sized statue of a half naked woman, which Hortis had used in his riddle once upon a time. She possessed a voluptuous figure and only had a loincloth wrapped around her hips. She'd been made of marble the last time I'd seen her, but in the Abyssus, a real woman stood on top of the square pedestal. There wasn't anything artificial about her looks at all. Her hair and the loincloth gently fluttered in the evening breeze.

Jess was dumbfounded. "Why is she...?" She slowly approached the woman.

The woman remained completely still. After we got closer, there wasn't even so much as a twitch in her eyelids. With a faint blush on his cheeks, Naut looked away. *Oh? Heh, are you a virgin or something?*

I was poking fun at him in my mind when suddenly, Jess withdrew her arm with a startled "Eep!"

Judging by her posture, Jess must have touched the woman's leg without any apprehension while I'd been distracted. It appeared that Jess had the qualities of a mad scientist, for whenever she came across something that caught her eye, her first instinct was to get some hands-on experience.

<<What happened? Are you all okay?>> I asked worriedly.

"Yes. I was just a little startled because she felt awfully cold..." With curiosity burning in her eyes, Jess lightly patted the woman's calf that was at her eye level. Possibly because she didn't have to worry about other people's judgmental gazes in the Abyssus, Jess's inquisitive spirit overwhelmed her self-discipline.

I frowned. <<I don't think touching her so much is a good idea. She's kind of

creepy.>>

“No, it’s all right. It’s very cold, but it feels like normal skin.” Jess’s hand carefully rubbed against the woman’s bare lower leg. “Do you want to try touching it too, Mister Pig?”

<<Uh, I’m fine, thanks. I don’t really have any interest in touching any legs other than yours...>>

Jess gave me a scrutinizing look, but she didn’t say anything.

*Ahem, apologies for my late introduction. I’m a pig who has a sense of self-restraint.* <<Looks like it’s following the theme of the roses in the Flower Plaza—things in the Abyssus are the real deal.>>

I walked toward the sculpture on the opposite side of the path. This one was a stark naked man. Jess stared long and hard around the lower half of the man’s body before nodding. “In the case of the roses in the Flower Plaza, Lady Vatis likely petrified real roses to make them. It’s a much easier spell than manifesting elaborate sculptures out of thin air.”

That was when she suddenly stopped talking. She looked down at her palm, which had touched the woman’s leg. Likely, both of us had the same thought.

I recalled Hortis’s words earlier.

*“I’d say it’s more distrust in other people than petty vengeance. After Ruta’s murder, Vatis could no longer believe in anyone else. She should have executed every single suspect, along with their entire families and supporters. Nothing was left in written records, but traces definitely remain even today. When you have time, you could look for them. The remains of seemingly executed mages are still pilloried as public warning trophies in the capital.”*

“Public warning trophies” had been the exact way he’d described the fate of Ruta’s murderers, suspects, and their families. The royal capital wasn’t a museum but a bustling city filled with residents. It would be ridiculous of her to dangle carcasses from posts in the middle of the streets. In that case, what *had* she done? As it turned out, there was a method that seemed sanitary at a

glance, and by using it, even corpses could blend in harmoniously with the cityscape.

If the rose sculptures were made by petrifying real ones...how could you rule out the possibility that the same was true for the human sculptures?

The realistic, life-sized sculptures scattered all over the city were likely—

Naut's nonchalant comment interrupted my thoughts. "Why are you guys staring at the statues? Stop wasting time. We gotta go." I couldn't thank him enough for snapping me out of my spiral of horror.

The sun sank below the horizon very soon, and by the time we arrived at the Golden Cathedral, the sky was already inky black. That said, though it was a shade of black, it wasn't dark. Just like before, a ridiculous number of stars and an excessive supply of shooting stars crammed the sky to the brim. It almost looked as if someone were playing a malicious prank on our eyes.

Almost all the buildings in the capital were made of white stone, but the Golden Cathedral had been built using obsidian black stone. Embellished with delicate golden ornaments that weren't too flashy, it had a majestic atmosphere that told everyone who laid eyes upon it that it was special.

The front of the building faced west, and you could see stained glass windows and towering bronze doors. The wall, which Marquis had once blasted away in the blink of an eye during his rage, was now standing with dignity without so much as a scratch.

Naut pushed open the doors without hesitation. Pale starlight poured in from the windows, revealing the spacious, dim hall. Possibly because of the protection of Vatis's heart, there hadn't been that many alterations to the capital itself. Even the interior of the Golden Cathedral was exactly as I remembered it. Unlike the Labyrina version we'd seen earlier, the coffins of the previous kings were arranged along the wall.

Though the previous sovereigns likely had life partners they'd loved, they all rested here alone, following Vatis's example. Perhaps one day, Marquis and Shravis would join their ranks. *I know I'm being irrational here, yet I can't help but be worried that it's going to be lonely for them.*

We walked across the marble floor with a geometric pattern and approached the golden throne. In this world, there was no such concept of a hierarchy between royalty and commoners—the only class system was the Yethma. Naut went up the steps to the throne with his muddy boots without even a hint of guilt.

“Come on already,” he called out. Jess and I quickly caught up to him.

I looked over the vacant golden throne. At the very center of the backrest was a single human eyeball. Spider veins drew patterns across the sclera, framing a golden iris that was dazzlingly bright.

Naut scowled. “This gives me the creeps. Feels like it’s staring at me. And yeah, there’s no mistake. This is the old goat’s eye.”

I nodded. <<Looks like we’ve come to the right place. The throne is the Clandestine Arcanist’s Econ.>>

Jess swallowed audibly. “Do we go in?”

I took a moment to reconsider our situation. It was only a little past sunset. Marquis’s jailbreak operation was scheduled for tomorrow morning. Going now seemed slightly early. <<We’ll be walking into a world of unknowns—we don’t know what it’s like, and we also have no way of gauging the strength of the obstacles it will throw in our way. Based on what we know of that mage’s character, it would be prudent to brace ourselves for the worst-case scenario. The longer we stay inside, the longer we’ll be exposed to danger.>>

“Danger was a part of our mission to begin with,” Naut argued. “Nothing can be worse than showing up late. Wouldn’t our best bet be jumping in right now, finding wherever the heck Shravis’s savage old man is, then waiting for the best opportunity to strike while hiding?”

Naut made a good point. It all boiled down to one question: Do we bet on us weathering out the wait in a dangerous environment or on Shravis and the others possibly weathering out their wait in a dangerous environment?

Compared to the surface Mesteria where the most atrocious king was their opponent, I felt we had more power over our situation in the Abyssus.

Mind made up, I declared, <<All right, let’s go with your plan, Naut.>>

Jess nodded. “Agreed. After our preparations are finished, we should head in at once.”

Naut inclined his head quizzically. “We’ve come all the way here and know what we’re supposed to do. What else is there to prepare?”

*Uh... Bracing our minds and hearts for what’s about to come, I guess?*

Both Jess and I were the cautious type. Bluntly, unlike Naut, we didn’t have the kind of foolhardy courage to march forward without ever looking back. Our nature dictated that we had an unavoidable aversion to breaking into the Labyrina of the most atrocious king.

But after I gave it a second thought, I realized that we could barely do anything by waiting around here. After all, we didn’t even know what kind of world we were about to take on.

Exhaling slowly to find my resolve, I looked at the beautiful maiden by my side. <<Do you think you can do this, Jess?>>

Enchanting eyes, glowing as they reflected starlight, turned to me. They blinked slowly. “Yes. If you’re with me, Mister Pig, I can do anything.”

Naut didn’t choose to pour cold water on the mood by saying something like, “Hey, what about me?”

Instead, he nodded briskly before saying, “Huddle over. We don’t want to get separated in there.” He clutched Jess’s wrist while Jess placed her hand on my back.

Within the dark cathedral hall, we faced the monocular throne under the watchful eyes of the previous kings’ coffins.

“Let’s go,” the huntsman announced before reaching out to touch the backrest without a shred of hesitation.

The next moment, we were sucked into the last Labyrina we would brave.

Scorching winds and ominous roaring engulfed us.

Jess reacted instantly—she summoned a veil of water around us, and I narrowly managed to avoid becoming roast pork by a hair’s breadth. Voracious



flames sputtering out black smoke were on the other side of the transparent rippling water. Everywhere I looked, there was fire—it had us completely surrounded.

When I focused on my vision, I could make out stone blocks between the gaps of the blinding flames. They seemed to form the wall of a house or a building. Underneath my trotters was cobblestone paving. I concluded that we were in some kind of human settlement.

Covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve, Naut cursed. “Darn it, we have to look for a way out.”

Without a word, Jess pointed in one direction. The sky smothered with black smoke was scarlet like the flames they reflected, but the smoke appeared somewhat sparser in the direction she indicated. I could catch glimpses of the starry sky.

Jess used magic to pump in fresh air from higher altitudes while we broke into a run, searching for a place that wasn’t on fire. There might be some kind of fuel around because the inferno tenaciously coiled around the stone houses, refusing to die down even under the fanning of powerful gusts.

We wandered into a circular plaza and stopped. Here, we were able to put some distance between us and the blazing fire shrouding the houses. Furthermore, fresh air from outside the town flowed in through the wide main street. I spotted broken fragments of burning stone littered across the level cobblestone paving—they must’ve been sent flying from somewhere. In the middle of the plaza was a large fountain with a sculpture. Or at least, it had been a fountain, because flickering embers were still scorching its heavily damaged wreck.

“The entire town is on fire,” Jess observed. She was looking far down the main street where the ruin of what used to be a towering church was blazing with a column of fire that reached for the skies.

Right before my eyes, Naut’s boot trod on a small burning pebble. He ground it against the cobblestone with his foot, but there were no signs of the petite fire dying down. “It’s not burning oil. These are magical flames, just like the ones that burned down the convent in Baptsaze. They’ll eat through a human

right down to the bones and reduce them to ashes.”

Jess glanced at Naut’s boot worriedly.

Naut shook his head. “There’s nothing to be worried about. My boots are fire-resistant. But we’ve gotta be careful so we don’t get roasted to a crisp.”

With the fire obscuring our vision, we didn’t even know where to go. We decided to follow the main street and run all the way outside the town for now. Then, we climbed up a low hill and looked out over the entire place.

It was a very big town—no, a city. A spectacular, concentric city spread out in front of our eyes, centered around a giant rock with a strange shape that could rival a knoll in size. However, every single part of it was engulfed in roaring flames. Dark smoke and soot rose from the streets, attempting to paint over the brilliant starry sky with an inky black. The city’s structure was well organized, and it was evident that it had been a breathtaking scene before the fire had destroyed it. What a saddening sight.

Naut furrowed his brows. “I don’t remember there ever being such a big city around.”

Jess inclined her head. “A city of this scale...might be something from the Dark Ages.”

I pulled up the memory of Jess explaining the history text to me. When the royal court had been established, Mesteria had a population of several hundred thousand. But before the Final War during the Dark Ages, there had apparently been over ten million citizens. Most of them had perished as collateral damage of the battle between mages. *Could this burning city possibly be...?*

I decided to voice my suspicions. <<This has to be a distant memory of the Clandestine Arcanist. If this was a striking memory to him, the burning city we see now just might be—>>

Jess finished my sentence for me. “His...homeland?” She gingerly placed a hand on her chest.

If magic had set such a big city on fire, I couldn’t even imagine how many people had been burned to death.

In contrast to us, impatience seeped into Naut's tone as he ushered us along. "Well then, where do we go from here?"

I mulled over it. <<The imprisoned spirit is supposed to be sleeping in the innermost recesses—the place with the most robust defenses. If it was a city during the Dark Ages, it might have had something like a castle—well, a building that served as the heart of the government, at the very least.>>

The three of us surveyed the landscape but couldn't spot any buildings that fit the bill. Was it possibly underground? That theory wouldn't be far-fetched if it were a castle built by a mage.

Jess frowned. "In terms of position, the best place to build a castle would probably be on the summit of that rock in the middle of the city."

She pointed at the colossal, solid rock structure at the center of the blazing city. It was several times bigger than the towering church-like building we'd come across a while ago. Considering how it was in such a central position, it should be symbolic in some way.

Naut sized it up. "I gotta say, that rock is weirdly shaped."

The solid rock structure was separated into two parts: one on top and the other on the bottom. It felt precariously balanced, as if a child had stacked two wooden building blocks. Furthermore, it wasn't like any buildings were on the summit of the top part either. *Why in the world is something like that taking up so much space at the heart of the city?*

When I strained my eyes, I realized that the top and bottom halves had different colors. The top was darker, more blackish, but the bottom was a bright gray. It was as if an enormous chunk of rock had fallen from the sky and landed on the knoll. *Hang on a minute...*

<<Hey, can you see anything around that big rock? Say, the debris of a destroyed building?>>

Hearing that, Jess narrowed her eyes in concentration. "Hmm... Yes, I can see a handful of runes that remind me of collapsed towers."

"But that's weird." Naut sounded surprised. "I don't see any buildings in the area that looked like they'd be designed with towers."

I nodded. <<But what if there was such a building on the summit of that giant rock in the beginning?>>

“On the summit?” He quirked an eyebrow. “But there’s nothing there.”

<<There *is* something—we just can’t see it anymore because the large rock on top smashed it.>>

Naut’s tongue darted across his dry lips. “Are you saying that someone made a rock big enough to smash a castle fall from the sky?”

Jess anxiously placed her hand on her chest and slowly nodded. “Legends say that Lady Vatis was powerful enough even to submerge islands... It wouldn’t be impossible for her.”

“Interesting. It’s simple, then—we’ve only got to reach the other side of the main street and that big rock.”

Racing down the hill, we threw ourselves back into the fiery city and made a beeline for the unusual rock formation.

We soon discovered that we should be on the right track. The evidence backing up that theory was simple: we ran into a monster protecting the rock formation.

When we closed in on the unusual rock structure, a creature had dashed out from the burning city and pounced on us, taking us by surprise. Naut called out in alarm, and I dodged on the spur of the moment thanks to his warning. Not too far away, I saw a gigantic skeleton hand balled into a fist large enough to crush me within its grasp. A direct hit would turn me into a sausage patty in an instant.

The fiend was a ghastly sight—a titanic skeleton clad in raging fire. Just looking at it made me feel as if I’d lose control over my bladder. A rough estimate told me that it was at least ten meters tall. Its bones, thick like pillars, were each twisted individually like timeworn trees. When I got a better look at it, I realized that each bone was an assembly of numerous human bones that had been melted down before being fused together. Countless corpses melted into one another within the searing heat, and the inferno with hints of white

and red burned on brightly without rest.

“Mister Pig, are you injured anywhere?!” Jess rushed over and fussed about me.

<<I managed to dodge in time. Don’t worry,>> I reassured her.

The monster of bones and flames looked toward us with its hollow eye sockets. It climbed to its feet with an agility that didn’t belong on such a giant, clumsy-looking body.

“Get back,” Naut barked, pulling out his twin shortswords and sending arcs of flames in the creature’s direction.

To no one’s surprise, it was almost completely ineffective. Naut swung down his unsheathed sword and used the recoil to propel himself in the monster’s path. His projectile motion drew a high parabola across the sky, and he was expected to land on the abomination’s skull.

There was a grotesque crunch. The skull was so large that you would have to use both your arms to lift it, and now, there was a hole—the tip of Naut’s sword had chiseled out one small part. An enormous arm swung up swiftly, as if to swat a pesky fly, but Naut narrowly dodged it before moving behind the monster.

The towering skeleton turned around to face Naut, its body roaring and hissing like a gas burner. It lifted its leg, revealing red-hot cobblestones beneath its feet. The cobblestone tiles were such a vivid red that I thought it was lava for a moment.

<<Jess, let’s do what we can to support him from the rear.>>

“Okay. I’ll borrow the house over there.”

I blinked, bewildered.

Jess thrust her palms at a burning house with a triangular roof nearby. After successive snapping and cracking, the entire building drifted off the ground. *Oh. So that’s what she meant by “borrow.”*

Making a small noise of effort, Jess swung her arms toward the creature. The house—or rather, a cannonball in the shape of a house—slammed into the back

of the fiend's large cranium at awe-inspiring speed. The guardian stumbled, landing on its knees and one hand, but it didn't seem to suffer any lasting damage.

Almost immediately, it whipped around its head to face us. One pair of hollow, pitch-black eye sockets stared intently in our direction. Without warning, it raised its hands at a much more ferocious speed than I'd expected before bringing them down at us—as we were temporarily paralyzed from fear—like whips.

*That's not good!* I manifested as much water as I could with my anklets and pinned Jess down so that I covered her like a meat shield. Instantly, a blinding fire burned my vision, followed by an abominable pain that pierced my entire body. It was as if someone had peeled off my raw pork rind, and the excruciating agony even started eating into my bones.

I could only roll back and forth on the ground, writhing as the hellish pain assaulted me. It must have burned my eyeballs and eyelids because I couldn't see anything. As if every nook and cranny of my pig body had been roasted whole, the pig was reduced to a simple mechanism that only knew how to send pain signals to me, the consciousness controlling it. There was a shrill ringing in my ears that blocked out all sound. *What do I do? Jess. Is Jess all right?*

Gradually, I felt my vision return to me in hazy bits and pieces. The ringing stopped. A shadowy silhouette, which reminded me of Jess, sat up beside me. The silhouette's hand touched my head, and I felt my pain quickly ebb away, starting from our point of contact.

Soon, I regained my normal vision, and I looked at Jess. Her face was sooty, the ends of her wet hair were singed, and heart-wrenching burns stained her hands. However, possibly due to the protection of Eavis's robe, most of her body was unharmed.

Preoccupied with Naut, the enemy had its back turned to us.

<<You okay?>> I croaked.

“Yes. Thanks to you, Mister Pig, I avoided becoming a whole roasted human.”

I twisted my neck to look at my own body. My hideously scorched pig hide,

which was in such a gory mess that I instinctively wanted to avert my gaze, steadily restored itself as if someone had rewound time. <<That's amazing. Are you healing me, Jess?>>

The beautiful maiden only smiled as if she hadn't done anything special. I vigilantly watched over the monster in my peripheral vision while expressing my gratitude. <<I thought I was dead for sure. Thanks.>>

"Did you really think I'm going to allow you to die so easily?" Framed by her sooty face, Jess's honey-brown eyes stared straight at me. They were moist with unshed tears.

<<You know, you sounded like a villain just now...>>

As we exchanged silly banter, I spotted Naut's twin shortswords flashing across the air. He somersaulted skillfully like an acrobat and landed nearby. "You're alive, huh?" Even while he spoke, the brute fixed its hollow gaze on us. "We ain't got time. Let's go with our usual strat."

One part of his blond hair was frizzled—it had been singed. There were also scorched holes here and there on his white shirt. Against the vermilion backdrop of the burning city, he looked like a hero who'd walked out of a painting.

I blinked. <<Our usual strat?>>

Naut wasn't given the time to answer. We scattered to evade the monster's strike. After the monumental fist struck the ground, white-hot flames flared up and spread around it. This must be the flame that had roasted me earlier. It was an area-of-effect attack that would count as borderline broken if we were in a game.

Jess's voice echoed in my mind. <Mister Naut, what do you mean by "our usual strat"?>

Though she was immediately next to me, Naut had given himself a boost with his swords to go around the fiend until he was on the opposite side. Sandwiched by our pincer movement, the titan faltered about whom it should target, creating a small opening during its moment of indecision.

<Go on without me.>

That was all Naut said before I saw him strike the monster's right leg. He attacked at the exact moment when the giant leg lifted to take a step forward. The seemingly puny interference of shortswords boosted by flames successfully offset the abomination's balance. The creature landed in an unfortunate direction. The impact of the crash barely harmed the brute. Clearly, Naut's attack was a distraction that created an opening for our escape.

*"Go on without me." "Go ahead of me."* Naut had made such statements when we'd been attacked by the white dragon in Arle's Labyrina and far back when the giant and his minions had caught us by surprise on our journey to the capital. Both times, he'd taken all the perils upon his own shoulders, carving out a path for us by wagering his own safety. Thanks to him, we'd safely reached the capital and managed to talk to Ferrin.

If he declared that he would devote himself to that role, then we had to gamble our lives on our duty as well.

I only had two words for Jess. <<Let's go.>>

She nodded, and the two of us broke into a sprint. With Jess as my medium, I communicated to our hero, <Don't you dare die on us here.>

Naut's characteristic brusque voice echoed in my mind. <That's my line.>

The clamor of his shortswords cutting through flames was already distant and faint.

The bottom part of the rock formation was as tall as a high-rise building, and it came with a spiral path that led up from the bottom. There appeared to be a handful of robust gates, but they were all utterly wrecked—I even marveled at how thorough the destruction was. We'd braced ourselves for numerous hurdles that would obstruct our way, but it appeared that we only had to run up the steep incline.

And that was what we did, but Jess's run gradually slowed, her steps becoming heavy and sluggish.

<<What's wrong?>> I looked at her worriedly. <<You need to take a break?>>

She shook her head and only looked forward. "It's all right. I can still keep



going.” She furrowed her eyebrows with effort and single-mindedly commanded her feet to move.

Alarm bells ran in the back of my head. Something about this wasn’t right. Though Jess appeared to be a dainty, delicate maiden on the surface, her legs were surprisingly strong, and she also had the stamina necessary for long-distance travel on foot. I didn’t see any hints of fatigue on her features either.

What wasn’t right was the way she was walking. Though her feet were a normal distance from each other, she kept her knees somewhat apart as she walked. Even though she was climbing an incline, her knees weren’t bending and stretching as far as they should.

I jogged ahead and stood in her way, forcing her to stop with my body. <<Wait. Halt right there.>>

That was when Jess finally stopped walking. But she stumbled forward and landed on her knees on the cobblestone paving.

My eyes widened with alarm. <<Wha... You’re not all right at all! Are you injured somewhere?>>

She pressed her lips into a thin line, shuffled her knees until they were next to each other, and covered her legs with the hem of her robe. “Just a little... But I’m fine, really.”

We stared into each other’s eyes. I didn’t have telepathy like Jess—I couldn’t hear her thoughts. I didn’t know whether I could trust her when she said she was fine. At the very least, my intuition insisted otherwise. <<Show me the wound. I’ll be the one to decide whether we can keep walking like this,>> I stated firmly.

Jess nodded. She sat down and shifted until her legs were facing me. After brushing away Eavis’s robe, her knees parted slowly.

They opened to reveal ghastly burns. The stretches of her skin from the other side of her knee all the way to her thighs were burned a raw, painful crimson. Her overknee socks, slick with blood, had stuck to her wounds, and a vivid red was seeping into the white fabric.

I was speechless. She’d likely sustained these burns during the incident when

I'd almost become a whole roast pig. Fire had invaded from the front part of her robe that hadn't been fully closed and had burned her legs. *She...walked all the way here, pretending she's okay, while putting up with such awful injuries? Her mental fortitude is otherworldly,* I thought numbly in the back of my mind.

<<You're the furthest thing from all right! You should see to your wounds right away.>>

The pain must have gotten to her because, at long last, her eyes grew moist—the normal reaction of a teenager at her age. “The problem is...I can heal you, Mister Pig, but I can't heal myself.” There was resignation in her voice.

Realization hit me like a slap in the face. *That's true. Healing magic is supposed to be a highly sophisticated skill due to how magic works in this world. Even if she's a mage, it's difficult for her to perform this magic unless she strongly wishes to heal her target.*

<<Then...>> I swallowed. <<What do we do?>>

As I spoke, I forced my almost panicking mind to think. *Though it'd only serve as first aid, maybe I should get Jess to manifest bandages for herself. But judging by the severity of her wounds, the bandage might stick to her skin and only do more harm instead. Okay, in this situation, we're supposed to wash her wounds with running water, then smear salve onto the injury—but what are the ingredients in a salve to begin with?*

*Is there any method we can use right now to stop her wounds from bleeding and festering? Is there any way I can save Jess? Think, pig, think already!*

“Mister Pig...” Jess's voice, broken up with pained pants, snapped me out of it. I lifted my face. “Um... I know I don't have any right to ask you this, but...” She spread her legs even more while facing me. “Could you please...touch me?”

For a moment, I thought my ears had failed me. I froze. <<Huh...?>>

There was a dust of pink on Jess's cheeks as she cleared her throat softly. “No, um, that's not what I mean... I was asking you to touch my wounds.”

Of course I didn't have *that* kind of misunderstanding, but at this point, I finally realized Jess's intentions. We were in the Abyssus—a wonderland where desires took shape.

I walked forward and between her parted legs. Lifting my front leg, I tenderly touched her knee.

I was stunned by the events that followed. Starting from the place I touched, her burns vanished without a trace, as if they'd never been there at all. The effects spread like a ripple, and supple, fair skin began covering the wound again.

When I touched her other leg, the burn also recovered in the blink of an eye. *So this is the power of wishes...* <<It's almost like magic,>> I muttered in a daze.



Jess gently placed a hand on my head. “It *is* magic. It proves I’m very precious to you, Mister Pig.” Her gorgeous honey-brown eyes stared into mine. She said her next words slowly, as if savoring each syllable. “Thank you.” A smile bloomed on her face like a flower before she threw herself on top of me and held me in a tight embrace.

Hugged by all four limbs of a beautiful maiden, I stammered, <<Y-Yeah, well, I mean, it’s obvious that I care a lot about you. You should already know because you can hear my thoughts, right?>>

I could feel from the movement of her torso that she was shaking her head. “Even if I can hear your thoughts...I don’t have any way of telling whether you truly believe in them.”

Jess had pointed out that I had a somewhat troublesome personality last night, but at this moment, I felt that it had been the pot calling the kettle black.

The maiden released me and stood up. “Okay, I think it’s about time we go.” Blood was still staining her socks, but her wounds had already made a complete recovery, and she’d regained full mobility in her legs. We shared a look once again before we turned to face the steep uphill path.

<<Yeah, let’s go. We’ve got to find Marquis, and fast.>>

We advanced as far as the path would allow us, and we soon reached a plaza paved with tiny square cobblestone tiles. A colossal clump of rock, which was as large as a mountain, stood imposingly atop the plaza. Other than this structure, only tiny fragments of smashed stone were scattered haphazardly.

Jess nodded. “It’s just as we suspected. There was some kind of building here.”

*Was* because it had been flattened by the gigantic rock in front of us. <<They were destroyed, but the defense measures we encountered along the path seemed tough. The building here was likely some sort of castle.>>

She hummed in thought. “Do you think structures are still left behind, such as some kind of underground prison?”

<<That’s very possible, yeah.>>

The question was, even if there were truly such underground facilities, where would we get in from, and how?

The two of us explored the vicinity of the boulder that was as grand as a castle. Jess suggested we could detonate the ground spectacularly to make an opening for ourselves. However, we were technically inside someone else's heart, so I suggested that we refrain from doing things that would draw too much attention.

After walking around the plaza for a while, we came across one part of the ground that had collapsed, leaving a gaping hole in the middle.

I narrowed my eyes. <<Now that's suspicious... We're at the summit of a rocky mountain. If the foundation was stone as you'd expect, it shouldn't cave in like this.>>

"That means someone might have dug underground and built an artificial structure, yes? Let's take a look."

Jess summoned an orb of light and directed it to fly into the inky black pit, shedding light on its contents. There appeared to be a structure akin to a narrow passage.

"Let's go in and see what's there!" Jess exclaimed.

I blinked. <<But how?>>

"Please leave it to me. Even at my skill, slowing our descent isn't anything difficult." The maiden crouched down and spread her arms, inviting me to walk over.

*Ahhh... I feel just like an infant drawn to his mother's encompassing bosom.* It was almost as if an invisible force was pushing me closer to Jess.

The moment her arms wrapped around me, magic shoved us from behind, and we fell into the pit. As if there was a counterforce resulting in negative acceleration, we gradually slowed down. Eventually, we landed softly on the ground. In fact, I'd had enough time to thoroughly enjoy the soft chest that had pressed against my cheeks.

"So you took your time enjoying yourself while I was focusing so hard on

casting that magic, I see..." When she summoned an orb of light, the white illumination traced the contours of her slightly sullen face in the darkness.

<<It was amazing, just so you know.>> Though she'd read the narration, instead of becoming flustered, my rebellious spirit decided to strike back.

Jess averted her gaze bashfully and whispered, "Well... Thank you."

Somehow, that had earned her forgiveness, and I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Since the ceiling had collapsed, blocking off one side, we could progress in only one direction. We moved away from the cave-in site and advanced down the cramped underground passage—it was more of a basic tunnel that had been dug through the rock. The only sources of light we could rely on were the handful of glowing orbs Jess was floating around us.

The underground was damp and utterly silent. As we continued on the straight path that led downward, it abruptly opened into a spacious corridor. Though I described it as spacious, that was only in contrast to the narrow passage—the ceiling was so low that if Jess reached up, she could touch it. In width, it could roughly fit three people walking shoulder to shoulder. Small rooms lined both sides of the corridor with robust, gilded bars blocking off their entrances.

One thing was more prominent than anything else within this space: a pungent, rotting odor filled the corridor's every nook and cranny—the stench of death.

Covering her mouth and nose with her sleeve, Jess held her breath and asked, "Would this be the underground prison?"

I approached the nearest cell and peered in. Something looked back at me. As if I'd been slapped, I backed away instinctively.

It was a corpse. The corpse curled up on the ground of the cramped rock cave had shriveled up like a mummy, and parts of its skeleton protruded out from decomposing flesh. Its hands and feet were still fettered with gilded shackles, though the gold plating had begun to chip off.

I frowned. <<Looks like it.>>

I couldn't see the end of this wider corridor. Jess increased the luminosity of her light orbs as we slowly headed deeper inside. Contained within all the solitary cells, which were unthinkably small for someone to live in, were corpses that had perished in all kinds of varying postures. As the orbs of light moved forward with our strides, the countless prison bars glinted gold as they reflected the light.

Despite being surrounded by dead bodies everywhere, Jess analyzed the situation calmly. "Gold tempered with a special kind of magic has a certain amount of magic resistance. This might be a prison dedicated to mage prisoners." She had truly become a much stronger girl than when I'd initially met her.

We still couldn't glean what awaited us in the corridor, but I could feel the tension rising. The two of us looked at each other and exchanged nods. We were slowly but steadily approaching something important, even if we didn't know what it was yet.

The underground prison was filled with a foul odor that attacked our noses and the haunting silence of the dead. It was even engulfed in pitch-black darkness that threatened to swallow up all light, but we pressed on with fiery determination.

After passing by dozens upon dozens of cells, we finally saw gilded bars ahead of us—we must have reached the end of the corridor. The bars in front of this specific cell were exceptionally robust compared to the others. There were even sharp spines protruding inward. The blood clinging to the bars gleamed dark crimson as Jess's light struck them.

Something had to be inside. Jess's intuition must have told her the same thing because both of us quickened our gait spontaneously.

We stopped before the cell and peered in nervously.

This special dungeon didn't confine a mummy. A tall man, whose skin still held the warm hues of the living, lay collapsed on the ground feebly. He wore a dignified violet attire, but his golden hair was disheveled and covering his face. His wrists, which peered out from his sleeves, were worryingly thin.

"Excuse me..." Jess called out in a small, cautious voice.



The man's shoulders jolted. Ever so slowly, he sat up and looked at us with sunken eyes. Ashen orbs glinted with a hostile, aggressive light.

He was so haggard and worn out that he almost looked like a stranger. However, there was no mistaking it.

This man was Marquis, the former most destructive king of Mesteria.

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Only the royal family could access a secret entrance along the precipitous cliffs. Together with Cece and the others, I managed to shake off the pursuit of the royal court's troops and invade the royal capital without incident. Though we'd entered the capital much sooner than planned, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The underground area of the capital twisted and turned like a labyrinth. In a line, we navigated the narrow paths that were practically no different from rustic mining shafts. I didn't know what Cece was worried about, but she firmly pressed down the back of her skirt with one hand, leaving no openings. I gazed at her calves as I walked behind her.

Nonnie and Kentie walked in front of Cece, then Batbat, then Tsunnie. The prince was leading the procession. Behind me, Yoyo walked vigilantly at the rear, holding his crossbow at the ready. The cramped pathway restricted the effectiveness of a greataxe, so if we excluded the prince, Yoyo was our strongest warrior at the moment, which was the reason for his position.

Soon, we learned that assigning Yoyo to the rear had been a wise decision.

More quickly than everyone else, Yoyo's ears picked up the footsteps of several people on our trail. He reported, "Sounds like the citizens of the capital are here. Ceres, is there any way you can make them retreat a little?"

Hearing that, I swiftly proposed, <<Our pursuers can use magic as well. I suggest we put their eyes and legs out of commission simultaneously to stir up some panic and confusion.>>

Cece nodded solemnly before immediately pressing her palms against the ground. Colorless water surged out from beneath her tiny hands. The water was producing white smoke, as if someone had submerged dry ice in it. The flowing

water smoothly rippled out and carpeted the surface of the stairs, and at the same time, a dense white fog filled the passage. Cece tightly squeezed her eyes shut with effort, and the next moment, the water on the ground began freezing over like a chain reaction.

Our tactic was to distract them with the fog and make them more negligent about where they stepped.

One set of footsteps, which had begun to run and approach us, slipped in the distance. We heard successive thuds of something tumbling follow.

It was a narrow passage—judging by the echoing sounds, the first person who'd slipped had crashed into the others. Like a row of dominos, they all tumbled down together.

In the past, Cece had been Nattie's personal healer, but after her collar had been removed, she'd also gained the ability to support us in simple ways. Though her body looked frail and delicate, she possessed strength comparable to two trained soldiers.

Yoyo nodded. He guided us to climb a little more on the stairway before he coolly fired a single bolt toward our rear. The prince had enchanted this bolt with a potent explosion spell. The moment the bolt pierced the rocky ceiling, there was a blinding flash as it violently detonated. That part of the ceiling collapsed, and rocks completely blocked off the cramped tunnel.

I could hear Tsunnie, who was ahead of us, grumbling to Yoyo. "Hey! There's only one path! What are we gonna do if you block off our only path of retreat?!"

Yoyo sighed. "Don't pick apart everything I do, sis. The people who came after us are the capital citizens. They've done nothing wrong, and I don't want to fight them."

Tsunnie argued, "But you could've just knocked them out like you usually do."

Yoyo shook his head. "We might be up against mages. If we end up confronting them, we'll have to kill them."

The older sister was a battle maniac, but the younger brother had a level head. Both of them felt a burning resentment against the royal court, but Yoyo

always avoided killing innocents. Perhaps his combat style had influenced him since it involved accurately shooting down his targets optimally.

However, it wasn't something I could commend him for without reservation. Now that our lives were in danger, we didn't have the luxury of choosing how we dealt with our enemy. The correct choice should have been killing all our pursuers and securing a path of retreat for ourselves.

I grew even more certain of this because soon, we came across armed citizens lying in wait in the underground cavern at the end of this path. The prince had come to a stop in the passage and given us a soundless signal. He'd bent light with his magic so that he could see the path ahead, which was why we'd managed to halt before the citizens noticed us.

<What should we do?> the prince at the vanguard asked, turning around and staring at me with his green eyes. Overwhelming unease and anxiety seeped into his orbs. Despite being our commander, who was the most familiar with the terrain here, he asked me for advice—our situation must be dire. Just like Yoyo, he was the type who preferred to avoid battle and brutality to the best of his ability.

I inclined my head. <<We can either go back the way we came, digging out the rocks as we go, or break through that cavern. Those are likely our only options. Either way, we can't avoid confrontation.>>

<I see.> The prince had been assuming a self-possessed demeanor, but the moment he heard that, his eyes began wavering. Yoyo and the others stared steadily at him. But the prince struggled to make a final call.

I frowned. I couldn't let this go on. <<They aren't overwhelming opponents—we have a moderate chance of winning a fight. Breaking through should be our best option. This place is dark. After distracting our enemies with magic, Mister Shravis and Yoyo will head out first. Please neutralize as many of our opponents as possible with long-range attacks.>>

The prince nodded nervously. Behind me, Yoyo made an okay sign with his hand. It seemed my thoughts were being broadcast to everyone present, so I quickly explained the next part of the strategy. <<When the battle starts moving to close-quarters combat, Tsunnie will join you in the cavern. Mister Shravis,

please continue fighting while backing her up. Cece and I will hide in this path while providing aid in any way we can. If anyone is injured at any point, please come back here. Nonnie will heal you.>>

<Understood.> That was what the prince communicated, but he still didn't make any moves. Yoyo and Tsunnie soundlessly approached him.

We were stuck underground in a passage with a single exit available. This was hostile territory as well; at this point, we couldn't back out anymore. Possibly due to that, the prince looked rather shaken.

There wasn't much I could do. I walked up to Shravis and gave him my encouragement. <<This is a battle we can win. Let's secure victory together.>>

Again, the prince nodded but still looked at me with imploring eyes, as if searching for something to cling to. <If I lose... Am I going to die all alone here?>

*My goodness...* My eyes widened by a fraction. The person in front of me wasn't a mage with the most powerful blood in his veins but a vulnerable boy who was terrified of his fate.

<<Now, don't be silly,>> I chided. <<If you lose, we'll go down with you. Get a grip and chin up.>>

He inhaled shakily. <Right...>

One of the footsteps in the cavern began advancing in our direction. Time had run out.

Yoyo fired one of his explosive bolts at the towering wall on the other side of the cavern, signaling the beginning of the battle. Our enemies immediately located us, so we moved on to the second phase.

There were more enemy troops than I'd expected. One soldier after another appeared, as if there was no end to them. Our three foremost warriors met them head-on, taking down our opposition.

Roars of rage. Blinding flashes. Thunderous explosions. In the blink of an eye, the hollowed-out rock of the underground cavern transformed into a bloody, gruesome battlefield.

The rest of us took cover inside the cramped tunnel—the only thing we could

do was watch the battle unfold.

Under the pressure of his enemies, Yoyo was forced all the way back to the entrance of the tunnel we were in.

He furrowed his eyebrows. "This doesn't look good. There's too many of them." He gazed into the cloud of dust with his golden, serpentine eyes as he notched a bolt.

Suddenly, within the sounds of the chaotic battle, there was a heavy metallic clang.

A hysterical noise ripped out of Yoyo's throat. That metallic sound had come from Tsunnie's greataxe, which had clattered onto the hard stone ground. The cloud of dust died down to reveal the prince supporting her prone, unconscious form.

"You knaves!" The prince's roar resounded within the cavern.

For a single moment, utter silence fell over the entire battleground.

I could see a growing blood patch on Tsunnie's chest, almost like a grand crimson flower coming into full bloom. The prince held her up with one arm as his eyes shined with blazing fury. He hollered, "Such impudence! You dare rise against a royal with divine blood?!"

If I had blinked, I would have missed what happened next. The heads of our armed enemies exploded violently all at once. Though the cavern was dark, I could still see a copious amount of fresh blood splatter onto the white rock. Perhaps he'd projected powerful microwaves or something of the sort in their direction. All the soldiers I could see had lost their heads. Blood gushed up and out of their necks like water fountains as they collapsed one after another.

The prince had lost himself to madness and wrath. In fact, he was so livid that I feared he might even decapitate us.

This demonstration reminded me of how fearsome the race of mages was. At the same time, I saw the makings of a merciless king hidden deep inside this boy as well.

The battle ended just as abruptly as it had begun. I felt that our priority was to

confirm that this area was safe, but Nonnie hurriedly rushed out from the passage and ran over to Tsunnie.

Though I agreed that healing her was our top priority with the amount of blood Tsunnie had lost, something smelled fishy about how the endless supply of soldiers had abruptly ceased. <<We haven't gotten to safety yet,>> I warned Yoyo. <<Let's keep our guards up as we scout out the situation together.>> The two of us walked out of the passage.

Now that I was outside, I better understood the cavern's size. Large enough to rival a small gymnasium, this cavern had transformed into a gruesome massacre site. For the time being, the enemy troops fallen on the ground were evidently dead. None of them retained their original form—they'd either lost their heads or had their torsos split cleanly in two.

As for the wall on the other side of the cavern, there were entrances to several wider passages—I suspected that our enemies had flooded in from these. *It's not like we've blocked them, so why aren't there any new troops?* I wondered.

There was a saying that it was always better to be safe than sorry. I soon learned that I should have listened to my gut instinct.

The moment I looked up, I saw a single survivor descending on us—no, they were aiming directly for the prince. They were fast—too fast. They weren't falling with gravity but sweeping down with clear intent. But by the time realization sank in, it was already too late.

The assassin dealt a powerful blow to the prince's head. Landing on the ground, the assassin—who appeared to be a male soldier—lifted the prince's tumbling body in a choke hold. Startled, Nonnie tripped and fell over.

I looked over at the man. He wore a camouflage cloak that allowed him to blend into the white rock, so he must have been clinging to the ceiling the entire time. Despite jumping down from such a height, he could land firmly on his two feet and stood steadily. It was almost surreal—a normal human could never achieve that. Shortly trimmed black hair framed the rugged face of a middle-aged man. He seemed to have the air of a responsible and upstanding person. His arms were covered with black scales.

Next to me, Yoyo sucked in a sharp breath.

This man was a Lacerte—a dragonkin. Lacerte were an exceedingly rare lineage bestowed with the gift to manifest physical abilities comparable to dragons momentarily. Though they weren't as few as the mage race—which technically only consisted of those who could use their magic freely—I'd heard that barely any Lacerte were left in Mesteria. It was my first time seeing one other than Yoyo and Tsunnie.

"Dad...?" Yoyo whispered weakly, as if someone had sucked out his soul from his body.

*This man...is these siblings' father?* My eyes widened. I'd heard that Yoyo's father had been a part of the royal court's army, but I'd never expected to encounter him here, of all places.

Now that he'd captured both Tsunnie and the prince, we were completely at his mercy.

As soldiers flooded in from the passages on the other side, the Lacerte man cuffed the prince's hands and feet with golden shackles before effortlessly lifting the young mage onto his shoulders. He didn't even spare a glance at Tsunnie, who lay collapsed on the ground nearby. *Is he really her father? Did I hear Yoyo wrong?*

In a bass voice, the man gave directions to the surrounding soldiers in a clipped voice. "Withdraw now. Pay no mind to the small fry. The prince is our only target."

When he left, the man seemed to drop something from his hips as he disappeared into a passage.

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The voice that rasped out was so hoarse that I almost suspected he hadn't drunk water for months. "Why are you two here?"

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *Thank you for your warm welcome.* <<Please allow me to ask a question first. The Clandestine Arcanist can't see this place, right?>>

For a good while, Marquis stared at me incredulously. Then, he sluggishly adjusted his sitting posture, forcing his emaciated body to look as big and pompous as possible while he leaned against the wall. He was once like an accomplished stockbroker on Wall Street, but now, his aura of a successful elite had been tucked away. Only his arrogance and intimidating presence were left behind in his impoverished body.

“Are you saying that you came here without even knowing such an elementary thing?” he asked with disbelief.

*To be fair, we did try to check that back in Fairy Creek.* Though his uncooperative attitude got on my nerves, I maintained my composure and said, <<I’m only asking to be on the safe side, so please don’t be difficult and tell me the answer. Is there any possibility that the Clandestine Arcanist could realize we’re here? Because if there is, it might put Shravis, who is on the surface Mesteria, in grave danger as well.>>

Marquis scoffed derisively. “That senile old fool won’t take any notice of you two. This place is his heart. Are you able to see the inner workings of your own heart?”

Ferrin had already told us that. The heart’s owner in the surface Mesteria couldn’t peer into this place, which Eavis called a Labyrina. However, there was a question I hadn’t managed to ask back then. <<Yes, I know that. But even if the Clandestine Arcanist isn’t able to see this place directly, he should be able to interact with you somehow, right?>>

Though Marquis looked annoyed, he dipped his jaw slightly in a nod. “He can, but it’s only possible when he summons me to the other side. Summoning a spirit to the real world is no easy task—you need a strong desire to achieve it. Generally, that old fool is content enough with my political authority and magic. Rarely does he ever wish to communicate with me.”

I recalled Ferrin’s words. *“Whenever my husband bakes pie, he summons me over, even though I can’t eat...”*

Back then, her wording of “summon” hadn’t quite clicked with me. After all, I hadn’t sensed anything like that when I’d been in the surface Mesteria.

But now, Marquis’s statements had clarified a few things. Normally, spirits



could only appear in the surface Mesteria when summoned there from the heart that was imprisoning them. Only then could they interact and communicate with the owner of the heart. To achieve this summoning, the heart's owner had to wish strongly for it.

<<In other words, you stay in this prison most of the time. The Clandestine Arcanist can't see or hear anything that's going on around you. Do I have that right?>>

He inclined his head. "Indeed. Unless that old fool wishes for my presence and calls me to the other side."

*Aha.* A missing piece of the puzzle clicked into place. Though I'd become a spirit, I'd stayed in Mesteria by Jess's side the entire time after she'd successfully performed soul magic. That was why I'd also assumed it was the norm for other spirits.

As it turned out, it wasn't. And now, I finally had the answer to the question that had popped up in my mind when I'd talked to Ferrin.

Just like Ferrin's situation, I was a spirit possessing Jess's heart. In that case, why hadn't I ever seen the Abyssus—the scenery within Jess's Labyrina?

The answer was straightforward.

It was because *Jess* had chosen to have me by her side every waking moment, refusing to let me go even for a brief second. She had wished for me to be with her forever and ever.

The beautiful maiden must have read the narration since she mumbled, "No, I...I was, um..." She cleared her throat and changed the topic. "Your Majesty, together with Mister Shravis, we have devised this plan to come all the way to the Abyssus to rescue you. While we are here, Mister Shravis is heading toward the royal capital in the surface Mesteria. He's scheduled to arrive there tomorrow morning."

Even after we told him about our rescue operation, Marquis barely acknowledged us as we explained our rescue operation.

Jess continued, "After we help you break free from this Labyrina, the Clandestine Arcanist's magic should weaken. Mister Shravis will use that

opening to deliver the finishing blow.”

After observing us with an apathetic face for some time, Marquis’s dry and chapped lips moved. “Rescued by a little girl and a pig? I can’t call myself a king after that.”

His statement was so inappropriate that it got on my nerves. <<What in the world are you saying? If you don’t escape from here, Shravis won’t have a chance to succeed, and Mesteria will be done for. Please cast away unnecessary pride to one side and cooperate with us here.>>

There was a pause. Possibly because he’d been abandoned in this prison for a long time, Marquis’s reply was slow, almost as if he were an elderly man. “I see. In my current state, there’s no longer anything I can do alone. If you say that it’s necessary to reclaim the royal court, I shall go along with your plan.” But then, he sneered with self-deprecation. “Provided there *is* a way to leave this prison, that is.”

Hearing that, Jess looked at me. “These metal bars are protected with gold... Do you think I can possibly destroy them?” She sounded uncertain.

<<You’ll never know until you try.>> I gave her an encouraging nod.

Jess thrust out her palms and aimed at one point on the gilded bars. She made a grunt of effort, and her body tensed.

Nothing happened.

Marquis closed his eyes briefly. “That’s futile. You are in the Clandestine Arcanist’s heart. As long as the prison serves the purpose of a prison, it’s likely impossible to break into this cell with brute force.”

“Oh...” Flustered and at a loss, Jess looked at me again. “What do we do?”

I narrowed my eyes. <<Let’s give it a think. We should have enough time to test out a few different methods.>>

That said, even if I wanted to consider the problem carefully, the heavy, murky darkness that stretched out behind me and the stench of decaying corpses wafting over from every direction kept interrupting my thought process. I couldn’t focus.

We tested every method that came to mind—slamming a big chunk of metal into the bars, cooling them, heating them, and so on. But nothing worked.

Perhaps she'd exerted herself and used too much magic—beads of sweat rolled down Jess's cheeks.

"There's one method." Marquis, who retained his position on the floor, turned and tilted his body sluggishly in our direction. Suddenly, he vigorously swung up his arm and pushed it forward—right into the sharp spines protruding inward from the lattice.

I heard Jess gasp next to me. Reflexively, I squeezed my eyes shut.

"You fool." Marquis scoffed with impatience. "Look."

I followed his directions and looked at his hand. The spines should have pierced his hand, but it remained unscathed. Instead, it had somehow teleported beside the spines.

My eyes widened. <<Those spines didn't pierce you?>>

"Not only has he sealed my magic, but I also can't even harm myself. But that rule doesn't apply to the two of you here with me. I'm certain that you will be able to wound me." From inside the cell, Marquis reached out and offered one hand. He'd lost an unhealthy amount of weight—his hand was bony, and his porcelain white skin was dry and cracked.

Marquis gave Jess a signal with his eyes. Hesitantly, Jess cautiously reached out from between the gaps of the lattice and touched the king's offered hand.

After confirming that they could touch each other, Marquis withdrew his arm with an air of indifference. "It's simple. Kill me here. If I die, the Clandestine Arcanist will lose my magic. With his meager mana pool, he can't even pose a threat to Shravis."

*True, that would achieve the same effect.* Jess shook her head fervently next to me just as I thought that. "We can't do that! We came here to save you, Your Majesty!"

"Then save me." His ashen eyes glinted sadistically. "If you can, that is."

*Sheesh, why do you keep talking with that condescending attitude?! <<How*

about this? We can attempt to dismantle your body and take it out piece by piece from the gaps between the bars. We can use magic to reassemble you over on this side.>>

Hearing my proposal, Marquis curled his lips into a frosty smile. “Now that’s an intriguing idea. Go on. I’d like to see how far you can get.”

I glanced over at Jess, but she grimaced and shook her head. She probably couldn’t cut into the king’s body with her magic—not because she didn’t have the ability, but because of her strong aversion to such a notion.

*Then...what do we do? Do a pig’s jaws have enough strength to dissect Marquis’s body? Or should we call Naut over and get him to cut the guy up?*

*I frowned as I stumbled upon another problem. There’s also one more question: Will Jess even be able to reassemble this man? Connecting a human’s severed parts should count as a type of healing. But healing is a sophisticated branch of magic that requires the caster’s keen wish. If things don’t go as planned, we might end up accidentally killing Marquis through this method.*

The man scoffed. “Don’t make proposals you can’t use. Be obedient like you should and obey my command.” Despite being locked up in a cell, his pompous attitude hadn’t changed one bit.

<<Please shut up for a bit, Your Majesty,>> I snapped. <<I’ll put a little more thought into this.>>

Out of my ire, I’d ended up saying something rude to the king, but all he did was wear an unflinching smile. “I have more than plenty of time. I suppose I could be benevolent and wait for you.” The gaunt king leaned backward and rested against the wall.

Jess chewed on her lip. “Mister Pig, we may have time, but Mister Naut is fighting and Mister Shravis should be waiting for us in a perilous place. We need to hurry.”

<<You’re right.>> I nodded. <<Their lives are on the line—we can’t gamble with them.>>

Marquis raised one eyebrow. “Oh? So that foolish swordsman has come to this side as well?”

*I mean, true, Naut isn't the brightest light bulb, but when this guy calls someone foolish, it really gets on my nerves. <<Pardon me, but he isn't foolish. And yes, he is here.>>*

"Well then, call him over."

I'd had a vague feeling that it was the case, but it appeared that Marquis didn't have the ability to read minds right now. Otherwise, he should have been able to recognize Naut's presence the moment I'd thought about him earlier.

*You're a big stupid poo-poo head! You can't do anything here, so what are you acting so snobbish about, huh?! Just you wait. Once I get back to Mesteria, I swear I'll ogle your wife's Les Panties!*

Marquis didn't seem to notice the narration at all. Unfortunately, Jess was right next to me. My last sentence apparently wasn't very appropriate because she stared down at me with unimpressed eyes.

<<We've probably got more options if we get Naut to come over, but he's keeping that monster distracted,>> I said, trying to change the topic. <<The fiend might end up tagging along with him and attack us, grilling me thoroughly enough even to cook my liver.>>

Jess nodded. "Right. Its firepower is too intense for your punishment."

*Oh. She was planning on punishing me...*

Silly things aside, we were stuck in a conundrum. Time trickled by meaninglessly. Our goal was to take action tomorrow morning. If possible, I wanted to establish an escape method before dawn. Naut's stamina wouldn't last forever, and Shravis was also waiting for us. *Think, pig. What should we do?*

I was wringing my brain for every drop of wisdom it had when it happened.

An intense light abruptly flowed into my pupils and struck my retina. Reflexively, I shut my eyes and pressed myself as flat to the ground as possible. Judging by the rustling of clothes, I could tell Jess had crouched beside me.

*What happened?* I thought, alarmed. Trying to get a read on the situation, I cracked open my eyes. I immediately realized we'd moved to a familiar place out of the blue: the Golden Cathedral.

The environment had felt dazzling, but the only light sources were the multiple chandeliers hanging from the lofty ceiling. It appeared to be night outside the stained glass windows. The underground prison had been extremely dark, so the contrast must have blinded me.

I was lying low on the marble floor with geometric patterns. My pig's wide field of vision captured Jess, who stepped backward. I hurriedly retreated with her and took cover behind one of the stone coffins, which just so happened to be Eavis's coffin.

I poked my head out from my hiding spot and peered at the golden throne. On it sat "Marquis" with a healthy complexion. Meanwhile, the wasted Marquis was lying on the ground next to the healthy one's feet.

As a test, I rubbed my hooves against the thin layer of dust that had accumulated on the ground. However, I didn't leave any marks. Jess touched the floor with her fingers, but she received similar results. We weren't able to interfere with or affect this world.

With that, I'd grasped the situation. This wasn't the Clandestine Arcanist's Labyrina. It seemed that Marquis had dragged us into his summoning, and we'd appeared as spirits in the surface Mesteria alongside him.

The Clandestine Arcanist couldn't perceive the situation within his Labyrina. Our appearance here must be unintentional. Fortunately, the mage didn't seem like he'd detected us. That made sense—after all, how could he have ever predicted that someone had infiltrated his heart from the outside world?

"Raise your face, youngster," the Marquis on the throne drawled. "I'll show you an entertaining spectacle."

*No, he isn't Marquis.* I shook my head. It was the Clandestine Arcanist who'd snatched Marquis's body—he was the most atrocious king who we had to bring down.

The Marquis on the ground lifted his head. Concurrently, we witnessed the "spectacle" that the Clandestine Arcanist had prepared for Marquis. My eyes widened. *It can't be!*

"Shravis!" Marquis called out. It was the first time I'd ever heard horror in his

voice.

On the ground, a few steps below the throne, Shravis was lying with golden shackles around his hands and feet. He hadn't sustained any grave wounds, but small cuts and scrapes littered his face and limbs. There was a hint of resignation in his eyes.

*Why is he here? How can he be here? Does this mean he didn't wait for our scheduled time? Or...were we too late?*

"What a tragedy," the most atrocious king mused. "Shout and yell as much as you like, but it will never reach this brat. Though I can deliver his screams to you." He thrust his right hand forward, and the prince's body began convulsing violently. The prince was likely undergoing excruciating agony because muffled groans slipped out from his throat.

"Please, no!" A woman's voice echoed down from the ceiling. "I'm begging you! Not Shravis! Please, please have mercy!"

Marquis looked up. Simultaneously, Jess and I did the same thing.

The owner of the voice was Wyss. Her hands and feet were restrained, and she was hanging from the lofty ceiling on a single cord like a piñata. Nothing was preventing her horizontal rotation, so she was continuously and slowly turning, almost like an ornament inside a display case.

The arcanist's mouth cracked open in a wide, satisfied smile. You could practically hear the murky, sludge-like malice stirring within. The king was next to his feet, the queen was above his head, and the prince was right in front of him. It was almost as if he was declaring, "Vengeance is mine."

"All of the surviving royal family members should be present," he announced. "This is your last family reunion. Enjoy it while it lasts."

The Clandestine Arcanist stood from the throne and gradually closed in on Shravis. After turning around and glancing up at Wyss, who let out a grief-stricken scream, he kicked her son in the stomach as hard as he could, sending the prince flying.

The prince tumbled across the ground without uttering a single sound. In his spirit state, Marquis was powerless—he could only kneel with his hands on the

ground and pant heavily. Just like how I hadn't been able to touch Jess, he wasn't able to physically interact with the Clandestine Arcanist either.

Wyss hoarsely pleaded and begged without rest.

Jess placed a hand on my back. It was trembling. All color had drained from her cute face, and it looked as if terror and despair had seized her soul.

<It's all right,> I whispered to her in my mind. <It'll work out somehow. I'll *make* it work out somehow.> Since I could speak out loud now, I marked these thoughts with single angle brackets to catch Jess's attention.

I said that, but my mind refused to work, as if it had frozen over. *If Shravis has been captured, where is everyone else? Not even Marquis can do anything about the situation... What in the world can we even achieve?*

The Clandestine Arcanist kicked Shravis's stomach with the foot of the prince's father until the youth began coughing up blood. For the finishing touch, he spat on him. But the prince didn't seem to resist—he was completely limp and listless. The only thing he did was tremble and convulse every so often.

"Seeing despair on the faces of royalty is the height of entertainment," the Clandestine Arcanist declared. "That said, at the same time, another part of me wishes to fulfill my dearest wish of revenge as soon as possible. Though I have made attempts on this youngster's life, it's not like I have any direct resentment toward him."

The most atrocious king trod on Shravis's head, forcing it to turn so the prince's face looked up. The man continued, "I suppose I shall conclude things with a story from the distant past. Back when I was still a youngster, just like him."

There was a moment of silence. Only two sounds echoed within the quiet hall: Shravis's ominous, strangled breathing and the heartbreaking voice that spilled out from Wyss's mouth. Unable to do anything, Marquis could only glare from the floor at the mage who snatched his body and appearance.

"My hometown was a beautiful city called Pospoum," the Clandestine Arcanist began. "Stone houses lined up to form impeccable circles that surrounded a sacred rocky mountain, which served as the heart of our city. On



its summit was once a splendid castle that stood tall and proud, which was lauded as a remarkable structure like no other in North Mesteria.”

I recalled the city we’d just traveled across. The streets had been burned down by enchanted flames that would never die. The castle had been wrecked beyond recognition by a colossal rock that had crashed from above.

“Though it existed during the Dark Ages, Pospoum was governed by a benevolent and outstanding king. Under his reign, it was the picture of peace itself. Indeed—though the king of each generation possessed powerful magic, they shunned war, instead showering their compassion upon their people. This, I can guarantee. I served directly under one such king.”

The most atrocious king directed his words at the prince’s face, which he was stepping on. He spoke in an unhurried and mild tone, as if reading a fairy tale aloud to a child. “A king who cherishes peace but possesses mighty magic—no one within the nation even attempted to attack Pospoum, the city under his noble protection... But that all changed on the day when a young woman called Vatis appeared.”

Then, with the eyes of Vatis’s descendant, the Clandestine Arcanist turned around to look at one of the altars. It was the altar dedicated to Vatis. “That woman appeared out of nowhere. Once a nobody mage, she somehow amassed power and rose to prominence. Possessed by the accursed ideology that war and strife will never end as long as mages exist, she murdered all the mages who refused to take her side one by one, almost as if crushing ticks that she found on her clothes.”

Letting out a slow exhale, the Clandestine Arcanist returned his gaze to Shravis. “My lord didn’t agree with Vatis’s beliefs but didn’t actively oppose her movement either, attempting to maintain neutrality. However, one night, a towering mass of rock comparable to a mountain crashed down from the heavens and broke through the defensive magic on Pospoum’s castle. It was devastated instantly.”

His tone gradually grew fiercer and more emotional. “Undying flames engulfed our city, and almost all our people were burned alive. On that day, my friend happened to invite me over to his house. I protected his family with what

little magic I could wield, and together, we barely escaped alive from Pospoum. I was easy pickings as a mage, but when it came to spells to evade detection, I was talented to the point that I even surpassed my lord in this single field. Because of that, we managed to escape from Vatis's web of annihilation at the time."

My body was trembling with shock as I listened to the Clandestine Arcanist speak. No matter how you thought about it, this man and his lord hadn't been at any fault. *They only tried to stay neutral and live peacefully! Why did Vatis have to wipe out Pospoum?!* I couldn't come up with even one reason to justify her actions.

The man continued his story. "Vatis followed the traces of my magic and pursued us tenaciously. She was likely spurred on by her duty to eliminate every last mage in the world other than herself. But in my case, I succeeded at convincing her that I was dead because my friend was willing to sacrifice himself in my stead. My talent in stealth magic also assisted me—from the shadows, I watched over Vatis as she slaughtered all the other mages and gradually constructed the royal court. I became the only mage that managed to elude that woman's pursuit. I continued to secretly accumulate power and seek out immortality, waiting for the fitting day to tear the royal court asunder."

He paused for a while, as if reminiscing upon those times. "I must say it's quite a tragedy. You pitiful souls only ended up in such misery due to sheer misfortune. There was a single remaining descendant of my friend who died nobly in my stead—a man whom I have looked after and raised more compassionately than anyone in the world. But that man's life ended all too soon when that youngster called Naut cut him down with blazing swords. That was what started it all and incited me into action."

I reflected upon the time when Jess, Naut, and I had sprinted frantically across the Needle Woods for dear life. Naut had fought against that Yethma hunter with a large build to buy time for our escape. Ultimately, Naut had come out as the victor.

According to Ceres, that giant—Enn the Mutilator, who'd brutally murdered Eise and become the target of Naut's vengeance—was one of the underworld's big shots. And now, there was a new revelation—that man had also been the

Clandestine Arcanist's cherished disciple.

The homecoming of the secret princess had cast the die—it had triggered the royal court's collapse.

"I'm sure that I don't have to spell out the extent of my hatred," the most atrocious king said. "The same emotion united his followers and subordinates, igniting a fire within them that only grew. How could I let such a golden opportunity slip away? Therefore, I set up a pitiful jewel merchant and craftsman, Arrogan, as a leading figure who went on to found the Nothen Faction. I decided to begin a head-on confrontation with the royal court. The situation before your eyes is a result of that."

The trampled prince. The king lying powerlessly on the ground as a spirit. The queen hanging from the ceiling like an ornament.

"It was a long, long war, but it all ends today," he announced. "If I kill the prince here and wipe my current body from existence, the abominable bloodline of Vatis will be no more, and the royal court will be gone along with it. The fabrication of peace built upon the burning of my homeland, as well as the murder of my kind lord and childhood friend, will crumple into nothing at this very place."

Smiling with Marquis's lips, the Clandestine Arcanist moved his foot off Shravis's face. "At the end of the day, the only target of my hatred and vengeance is Vatis. Kicking a whelp that's only her descendant doesn't offer my heart any gratification."

After a dreadfully lengthy silence, the most atrocious king added frostily, "Think of this as a small gesture of mercy from me. I will cease tormenting you and put you out of your misery now."

A distressed, hysterical scream of raw emotion resounded from the ceiling. Wyss sobbed and howled without care about appearances as the death of her beloved son closed in.

Meanwhile, Marquis got on all fours on the floor and crawled over to the arcanist in an unseemly manner. The other Marquis stared down at the pitiful father with unfeeling eyes, as if gazing at a cockroach. The most atrocious king asked, "Oh? Do you wish to watch over your own son's death nearby with your

own eyes?”

Under the belittling gaze of his own body, the spirit of the former most destructive king raised his head. A feeble voice I’d never heard from him before shook Marquis’s vocal cords. “I...I understand what you have come for. No matter...no matter what you demand, I swear I will...I will atone for the wrongs done to you. If you bear no resentment toward us, then at the very least...at the very least, I beg you, please spare my wife and son—”

The arcanist in Marquis’s skin cut the former king short. “Hear this, prince. I believe your mother might be interested in this news as well. Unfortunately, I can’t deliver his voice directly to you, but your father is sneering and telling me to do as I wish.” Possibly in a reenactment of Marquis’s supposed response, the most atrocious king leaned back pompously with the man’s body and roared with haughty laughter. The Clandestine Arcanist’s actions looked so fitting for my impression of the former king—so much like my assumption of the real Marquis—that it was heart-wrenchingly tragic.

I didn’t have any way of showing Shravis or Wyss the actions of the prince’s real father.

The Clandestine Arcanist jerked his body forward again before distancing himself from the prince. “I shall give you a swift and painless end, at least.” Wyss’s horrified shriek rang out. The mage raised his right hand toward the immobile target, as if taking aim.

I gritted my teeth. *It’s now or never. I have to do something.* <<Stop! If you kill him now, you’ll regret it!>> I ran out from behind Eavis’s coffin and dashed straight at Shravis.

“You’re...that pig?” The terrifying eyes of the most atrocious king turned to face me.

*Thank goodness. He can see me. He can hear me!*

In the blink of an eye, fire blazed around me and swallowed me whole. The marble beneath my feet popped out and exploded from the thermal shock, and a painful, scorching heat transmitted to me from the air. But I was—no, the body of the pig remained unscathed.

The fire died down. Eyes filled with disbelief fixed on me. “The fire didn’t burn you...?” the man muttered in shock. “How?”

It appeared that the Clandestine Arcanist couldn’t read my thoughts. *Looks like I can throw him off for a good while.*

Not a second later, a sinister chill ran down my spine. My vision dimmed. When I looked up, I realized that a towering metal boulder was levitating right above my head. It was huge, like a shipping container, and the metallic bulk that was likely at least several hundred tons smashed down on me with no chance of escape.

I should have been completely flattened into a messy pork pancake. However, the moment the metal boulder sank into the ground with a low, deafening rumble, I was spat out from that area without interacting with the floor or the metallic structure.

Though I staggered somewhat, I immediately regained my balance. <<I’m invincible for a good while. Could I use you as my entertainment for a bit?>>

*Time to charge like a wounded boar!!!* I hollered in my mind as I rushed straight at the most atrocious king. There was a blinding flash that threatened to burn my retinas, and an unbelievably loud explosion boomed, sending rubble and dust flying in a frenzy around me. The attack directed at me struck the cathedral wall. But not even a speck of dust entered my eyes.

<<You need better aim!>> I yelled as I closed in on the man’s feet. I turned on my heel, pointed my butt at him, and wagged my curly tail.

Jess’s voice echoed from behind me inside the dust cloud. “Mister Pig, get down!”

She must have read my intentions because Jess sent innumerable spheres of light in the Clandestine Arcanist’s direction. The dazzling orbs detonated one after another. Visibility was already low with the dust in the air, and these lights undoubtedly robbed our enemy of his vision.

We were only projections within the Clandestine Arcanist’s heart. Interacting physically with the mage was impossible, but he could see us. Using that to our advantage, we created the maximum disturbance possible.

“I see...” The mage muttered. “It seems that small fries wormed into this place unnoticed at some point.”

The place where Jess had been hiding exploded, almost like he’d sent a missile in her direction. A frosty chill ran down my spine for a moment, but since I’d been unharmed, Jess should be all right too.

<Mister Pig, over here!> A white light swayed within the dust, almost like a waving hand. I sprinted over and made out the contours of Jess’s silhouette.

<Let’s head out,> I communicated through my thoughts. <The chances of finding a way to turn the tables at such an overwhelming disadvantage within the Golden Cathedral are too low to gamble on.>

Worriedly, I wondered in the back of my mind, *How long will it take before that mage realizes why we’re invincible at the moment?*

We climbed over the collapsed wall and entered the cemetery with gravestones arranged in orderly rows. Cold moonlight cast dark shadows behind the gravestones. Side by side, we rushed further inside.

When I turned over my shoulder, I saw a grand, gaping hole in the magnificent wall of the cathedral, which had been built by stacking up slabs of black stone. Though the hole was large, it wasn’t enough to cause the total destruction of the structure itself. Light from the cathedral interior scattered in the dust clouds. From within, the shadowy silhouette of a tall man walked toward us—it was the most atrocious king.

Though I knew we didn’t have to be afraid of him right now due to our status, I still felt as if my pork heart was being skewered and crushed.

“How does it feel to have the most powerful magic in the world chasing after you?” A low voice threatened us. “Tell me—what is it like having the ground part beneath your feet and seeing the brink of death stare back up at you?”

I thought about our next step. <<Are you speaking from experience?>> With my pig mouth, I responded with the best taunt I could come up with.

The most atrocious king stepped out from the dust like a looming shadow. “That is correct.” Simultaneously, something murky and black writhed beneath our feet.

While leaping away, I glanced at the unknown object. Countless black hands were stretching out from the lawn and had attempted to seize my pork hocks and Jess's beautiful legs. However, all of them had passed through our bodies.

"Why isn't my magic working on you?" The mage sounded baffled. "Are you two—"

*Yikes, he's going to figure it out!*

The moment I thought that, a low whistling sound reached my ears, and the Clandestine Arcanist abruptly halted his steps. Beneath the moonlight, a single bolt glowed bluish-white before the king's eyes. Its tip was aiming directly at his right eyeball, but it froze in place a few centimeters short of its target.

Swiftly and accurately, the bolt reversed its trajectory. The metal shaft glowed an ominous crimson. Before I could even blink, the bolt sliced through the air and retraced its path. The ceiling of a building—which seemed to be where the bolt had been fired—erupted and was utterly destroyed effortlessly.

A spark of hope kindled in my heart. At the very least, Yoshu was still alive. An exceptional archer like him should have anticipated a counterattack and moved elsewhere the moment he'd shot his crossbow.

There was the displeased click of a tongue. The Clandestine Arcanist was losing his patience. *Okay, we'll keep fighting with Yoshu as our ally and—*

Without warning, complete darkness enveloped the cemetery. An acute, rotten odor attacked my snout. Unable to process what had happened, I stood at the ready within the world I couldn't see. Next to me, Jess summoned a light orb, revealing golden bars in front of my eyes.

Realization dawned on me. *Ah, got it, the Clandestine Arcanist returned us to the underground prison.* Marquis was lying in his cell.

"Huh?" Jess sounded baffled. "Wha... Why are we...?"

I shook my head. <<It was only a matter of time before this happened. The arcanist probably figured out that we're the same type of existence as Marquis. We were nuisances in his battle against Yoshu and the others, so he likely sent us back here.>>

“...me.” A small, raspy voice echoed out from inside the cell. “Kill...me. Hurry. Kill *me*.”

Ominous rumbling in the ground resounded from afar. The bars rattled unpleasantly.

“Kill me,” Marquis repeated. “If that mage’s mana pool reverts to his original capacity, Shravis and the others can put up a fight against him.”

Jess gasped. “No, we can’t do that! There must be another way!”

“You saw what happened with your own eyes. Wasting your time with indecision about killing me will only put Shravis, Wyss, and your friends in grave danger.”

I frowned. <<But Your Majesty...>>

I couldn’t find the right words to say. I didn’t know what was the right thing to do.

From the elevation of the ground, ashen eyes, which I remembered as cold and aloof, looked up at me. “The king must be wiser, stronger, and more absolute than anyone else.”

My eyes widened. <<What are you—>>

Still lying prone on the ground, the former king turned only his face to us and spoke rapidly. “I failed to be an absolute ruler. Therefore, I am not worthy of the title. If I’m not the king of Mesteria, then I might as well be no one—a worthless man. Kill me.”

“But Your Majesty, you won’t have to die if you can break out of here,” Jess protested. “You can come with us to the Abyssus and return to the surface Mesteria—”

Marquis’s matter-of-fact voice cut her off. “I can’t. I can’t return to Mesteria.”

A silence as still as dread fell over the gloomy underground prison.

<<You can’t go back...?>> I echoed, bewildered.

Marquis had a chagrined expression as he crawled over and reached out to us from between the bars. When his hand went past the boundary of the cell,



however...for some reason, it became completely invisible. It was as if his arm had disappeared the moment it had reached outside.

“Since you have come so far, you must have read *Records of Soul Magic Development*. The Abyssus is a world created by sincere wishes—weaved together by people hoping ‘if only.’ Someone who no one desires isn’t capable of existing within this world from the very beginning.”

My mind went completely blank. *Huh? What does that mean? Is he saying that it’s impossible to save him?*

A self-deprecating smile curled Marquis’s lips. “My spirit is only being kept alive by that old fool’s desire to appropriate the most powerful magic within Mesteria for himself. Even Shravis and Wyss don’t wish for my existence. Accordingly, the moment I leave the cell, I will disintegrate on the spot. There is no way to circumvent this. Don’t make me repeat myself again. Kill me.”

*Someone who no one desires can’t exist here... How can this be happening...?* I could feel my heart break a little.

The Abyssus wasn’t a world where wishes came true but a world constructed by wishes themselves. Being able to exist in this world meant someone wished for your existence. However, if you weren’t a part of anyone’s wishes and desires, you couldn’t be a part of this world.

Could there be anything crueler than being forced to face the fact that no one wanted you—that even your wife and child didn’t want you—in such a manner?

Marquis opened his reddened eyes wide and shoved his face between the bars. “Kill me! What are you waiting for?! Are you going to get cold feet and turn a battle you can win into a battle of certain defeat?!” The tall tip of his nose was shaved off by brutal reality, leaving behind a gaping hole like in a skull. A single tear streamed down his dry cheek. It was something more dreadful than a command—it was a desperate plea.

Jess shook her head fervently. “Your Majesty, we need your power. Mister Shravis said the same thing. We won’t be able to remove the Yethma collars without you either!”

With tears trickling down his face, the unwanted man moved his quivering

lips. “But you don’t need *me*. You need my *power*. I knew that a long time ago. That’s the way of life I chose as a king. Hortis died because of me. Now, there isn’t even a single person left willing to love me.”

Faced with his wretched cry, there was nothing we could do.

He continued, “There are other methods to remove Yethma collars. Kill me right here, right now. *Now!*”

The sinister rumbling in the ground approached until it was immediately nearby. Following it was the sound of someone sprinting over.

Flames in the shapes of blades illuminated the underground prison. It was Naut. His clothes were singed all over and burns littered his entire body, but thankfully, he appeared to be alive and kicking without any lost limbs.

The moment he found us, Naut ran over at top speed. “My bad. The monster suddenly changed the focus of its attack. It won’t take long before it reaches here. We gotta run.”

Having noticed intruders like us, the Clandestine Arcanist must be trying to purge us from his heart. The same phenomenon had happened in Arle’s Labyrina.

That abomination was closing in on us. Shravis and the others were short on time, and we were too. We had to make a decision right away.

I hesitated. <<Naut, the thing is...>>

Naut noticed the cell we were facing and shed light on the ground with his blazing shortwords. “You found him.” Though out of breath, Naut retained his composure.

Marquis’s eyes fiercely glowed as they reflected the flames. He rasped, “What a twist of fate. When we first met, you were the one groveling in a cage.”

I blinked. *What in the world is he talking about at a time like this?*

Naut marched up to the bars and looked down at the king, who was lying at his feet. “Looks like our roles have been reversed. Well then, do you want to drink water from my legs or something?”

“Such pity is unnecessary. I won’t ever beg for help from a Yethma protector.”

“What did you just say?” Naut growled and gritted his teeth. The flames possessing his shortswords flared up fiercely.



Marquis scoffed. “You are nothing but a weakling who can’t even slaughter the man you loathe. If you are only going to stand around and do nothing, you might as well tuck your tail between your legs and go home—or should I say, return to where your beloved Eise is, hmm?”

Unable to get a read on Marquis’s intentions, I stood there, bewildered. Why was he wasting his time on frivolous talk during an emergency like this?

However, when I saw the creases of hatred carved between Naut’s brows, it hit me. This wasn’t frivolous talk. The king was trying to taunt Naut into killing him.

I hurriedly said, <<Naut, don’t get hasty—>>

“I know,” Naut muttered. “This guy doesn’t mean what he says.”

The rumbling pressed even closer. Now that I could hear it more clearly, it sounded like a gigantic creature punching through this rocky mountain. We’d run out of time.

With disdain from the bottom of his heart, the swordsman of flames looked down upon Marquis. “What do you want? Get to the point already.”

The king’s lips curled into a hopeless smile. “Then I shall. Right now, your comrades are being attacked by the Clandestine Arcanist in the surface Mesteria. If you wait, their death is inevitable. There is only one way to snatch my magical abilities from that elderly mage—and it is for you to kill me right here, right now.”

“I see. So it’s really fine for me to kill you, huh?” Naut asked as he knelt and approached Marquis’s face.

“Stop wasting time and cut me down,” Marquis hissed. “Your swords are blazing with flames to kill me, are they not? They are ablaze with vengeance to kill the man who burned down Baptsaze’s convent—me, the man who snatched away your beloved from your life.”

Hearing that reply, Jess placed a hand on Naut’s shoulder. “Mister Naut, please wait!”

However, it didn’t seem to reach Naut’s ears because the swordsman barked,

“Leave behind your last words before you go.”

I widened my eyes. <<Naut, no!>>

But my words also fell on deaf ears.

A smile lifted the corners of Marquis’s lips. “I shall take you up on your offer, then. Don’t disclose the manner in which I died to anyone—remember that. The official story is that I disappeared with dignity alongside the collapse of this Labyrina.”

“Is that it?” Naut asked.

Marquis’s mouth moved to form more words, almost as if lingering regrets and reluctance spurred him on. “I—no. The most destructive king won’t perish for the sake of you people, his wife, or his son. He died for his own sake as an absolute king. Like how no one loves me unconditionally in the world, there must be no one who takes pity on me either.”

Contrary to the smile on his lips, Marquis’s voice was keen and pleading, almost like a heartfelt prayer. He continued, “If you have accepted those terms, then do what you ought to do.”

Naut nodded slightly and dispassionately held his sword aloft.

Words were rushing out of my mouth before I could think. <<No, you can’t do this!>>

Naut was oblivious. He hadn’t heard the screams of a father who truly loved his son. He hadn’t seen the tears of a man who wished to die the solitary death of a shallow, evil villain.

Under the fiery crimson flames, Marquis’s eyes glinted brightly.

<<Stop it!>> I screamed hysterically. <<Naut! Don’t do this!!!>>

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Today, I learned a life lesson: no matter what kind of dire circumstances you are in, you must never abandon the last thing remaining in Pandora’s box [hope].

Taking advantage of the mayhem, I brought Nourris into the cathedral. The

first thing I heard was Mister Shravis's pained groaning. He was still alive. The key that his captor had "accidentally" dropped was a perfect fit for the keyholes in his golden fetters.

After freeing the prince, Nourris clasped a black rista and prayed with all her heart. Though the prince didn't completely recover, I could tell that the injuries littering his fair skin were gradually fading.

Once he regained awareness, Mister Shravis practically jumped to his feet. When he saw me, he frantically asked, "Where is that mage?" There must have been blood left in his mouth because a scarlet strand of drool dripped down from one corner of his lips.

<<That villain is responding to our attack outside,>> I reported. <<He suddenly started destroying the cathedral—>>

I was interrupted by a female voice from above. "Shravis!" It was Mister Shravis's mother.

When Mister Shravis reached out his hand, the rope that had been tying Queen Wyss up and dangling her from the ceiling came untied with a rustle. His mother softly landed on the cracked ground and walked over to us. She touched her son's hand, and the rest of his wounds vanished instantaneously.

She looked over all of us. "That man said something about a pig. Do you have some kind of tactic?"

I considered those words. Since she'd been a captive inside the cathedral, the most atrocious king must have been referring to a pig that had been present within the building. However, Mister Sanon and I had been standing by outside the building. *Therefore...*

Nodding, I explained, <<Mister Lolip and the others must have succeeded at coming into contact with this world from the Abyssus. I'm certain that they stirred up confusion on the battlefield on the spur of the moment to help us find an opening in this crisis.>>

Mister Shravis narrowed his eyes. "If that's the case, this should be our opportunity to strike."

<<Since they know about the situation on our side, I'm sure they will attempt

to neutralize that villain as quickly as possible.>>

“Right.” The prince hurriedly walked out of the cathedral hall from the large hole in the wall. A dark, gloomy night awaited him outside.

Batt rushed up to him and handed over a small package, just as we’d planned. The boy reported, “That mage’s in the plaza below. He’s been acting all weird since moments ago.”

Mister Shravis and I traded glances.

“All right.” The prince nodded to himself and opened the small package. Within it was a goblet decorated with precious stones—the Salvation Chalice.

The cathedral was on the brink of collapse, but the environment outside was even more of a disastrous spectacle. I almost wanted to avert my eyes. Devastation could be seen everywhere in the vertical city, and rocks were scattered all over the place, almost like the site of a landslide.

Together with Batt, we led Mister Shravis to the plaza below.

At the heart of the plaza, the most atrocious king was pressing down on his chest. Indeed, something didn’t seem right about him. He was heaving heavily, standing still as if rooted to the spot. Our party in the Abyssus must have accomplished its mission.

Mister Shravis spread his hands, and a circle of vermillion flames flared up vigorously, walling in the plaza. The red glow illuminated the king’s face, which had gained wrinkles all over.

“What happened to your vigor until moments ago, father?” Maintaining a fixed distance from the other mage, Mister Shravis icily barked those words. He thrust out his right hand at the king and folded his fingers in a strangling motion before slowly raising his hand. In reaction, the king’s weakened body floated into the air. His limbs dangled down limply.

There was no response.

Mister Shravis’s eyes shone violently under the flickering flames. “Did you really think you could oppose divine power with your insolent little tricks, old mage?”



When the king attempted to thrust his right hand at the prince, that hand bent and twisted unnaturally. As if someone had chopped his bones into pieces, the king's arm rolled up into a small ball, completely disregarding where its joints should be.

The prince narrowed his eyes. "Though it seems you don't have this divine power anymore, knave."

The raspy voice of the strangled elderly mage reached my ears. "What have you done?"

"I believe I don't owe you any explanations," Mister Shravis replied in a low growl.

Hearing that, the king looked at the boy with an undaunted smile. "I am immortal. No matter what you people may try, I will simply pick myself back up and return to kill you again."

The prince shook his head. "You're too conceited." With his left hand, he held the chalice up high. "Did you really think I came here without a countermeasure?"

Without hesitation, Mister Shravis threw the chalice vigorously onto the cobblestone paving. A transparent crystal shaped like a triangular pyramid emerged from the center of the scattering jewels. This was a Contract Stake—an artifact that could dispel any and all spells, even fatal curses and immortality.

The king's reddened eyes bulged out with shock. "A stake... There were still more remaining in this world?!"

The prince didn't even respond to the king's words as he swiftly swung down his hand. The Contract Stake cut through the air in a straight line and sharply pierced the king's chest.

There was a blinding white flash. For a single moment, I wasn't able to see anything.

I opened my eyes. The king lay with his arms and legs outstretched on the cobblestone paving illuminated by the flames. Almost as if someone was fast-forwarding time, his body shriveled up like a mummy at a rate the eye could see.

“It’s over.” Mister Shravis slowly raised both hands. Without delay, white-hot flames burst up and consumed the most atrocious king’s body.

When the fire died, not even a single speck of ash remained.

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As if someone had scheduled it for fun, two things happened at precisely the same time: the cave-in of the prison’s ceiling and the collapse of the Labyrina we were in. I’d shut my eyes, bracing myself to be crushed under the rubble, but the next moment, I detected a floral aroma and cracked open my eyes warily. Within my vision, the battered Jess and even more battered Naut stood inside a cathedral.

It was none other than the Golden Cathedral in the Abyssus. There wasn’t even a scratch in the dim cathedral hall—it preserved its unperturbed tranquility and the dignity of the kings from previous generations. No longer was there a golden eyeball embedded within the solitary golden throne.

“Looks like they did it,” Naut said, sounding utterly exhausted as he sat heavily on the throne. “Our operation was a success.”

Jess and I looked at each other without a word. Since the throne was no longer an Econ, the Clandestine Arcanist must be dead for good. Our grand pincer attack that spanned across two worlds had ended in victory.

But I couldn’t celebrate with unadulterated joy, as if there was something stuck in my throat. Doubt still swirled in my mind: Had we really made the right choice? Was there truly no other way? Had there been a chance that we could have rescued Marquis as well?

A small smile softened Jess’s face. “We’ve come this far and accomplished such a difficult mission without losing any of us along the way. Though there were countless perils on our journey, thanks to you and Mister Naut, we somehow overcame all of them.”

<<Right. I’m so happy that everyone made it out safely.>>

“Now, don’t mind me...” Jess muttered as she sat on the floor. I walked up right next to her and sat dutifully like a pet.

A beautiful maiden's hand gently stroked my head. *Good, belly good*, I preened.

The next thing I knew, Naut was looking in my direction. Our eyes met, but he averted his gaze on the spur of the moment and breathed out a big sigh.

"We've got no reason to rush anymore," he said. "All that's left to do is to go to Send-Off Island, yeah? Lemme take it easy here for a bit."

I nodded. I shared the same opinion. Since things had calmed down, it would be nice to bathe with Jess and relax.

Jess sighed as she continued stroking my head. "Let's leave the bathing for after we return, okay?" Naut looked away from her somewhat exaggeratedly.

Since the cathedral hall was so dim, it was likely still dark outside. I peered out a high window. The dense stars, which looked back at me, poured cold light into the vast hall. The stained glass facing west blended into the darkness as if it had never existed to begin with.

I couldn't stop my mind from going to Marquis. I used to think of him as a quick-tempered, megalomaniac man beyond salvation who was even willing to strangle his own son. *Scratch that; he's still a man beyond salvation, for sure.*

That said, it didn't invalidate his frantic begging for the mage to spare Shravis's life. It had been Marquis's final display of conscience—the indisputable love tucked within the unloved king.

Jess cast down her eyes. "Do you think it's all right to tell Mister Shravis?"

I inclined my head. <<About what?>>

"About King Marquis's last moments. He offered up his life as a sacrifice because he wanted to save Mister Shravis and Madame Wyss. But with his dying breath, he told us never to disclose the details of his death to anyone else—to go along with the story that he went down with dignity alongside the Labyrina."

<<If that's his wish, then I don't think we should tell Shravis.>>

She chewed on her lip. "But..." Her eyes were moist with unshed tears. "At this rate, Mister Shravis will never learn of his father's love for him. He will

almost certainly scorn King Marquis for the rest of his life. That would be a tragedy!”

<<I get you. I can see why you’d think we should tell him the truth.>>

There was only one truth, and it couldn’t be tarnished by anything else. However, when it came to how you should handle that truth, things were a lot more complicated. After all, the unadulterated truth didn’t always bring about salvation.

Naut uncrossed his legs and leaned toward us. “That guy, Marquis, is no longer anywhere in this world. Why should we think about what would or wouldn’t be tragic to him? Wouldn’t honoring his last wish be the best way to pay our respects to him?”

Marquis’s declaration echoed in my mind.

*“I— No. The most destructive king won’t perish for the sake of you people, his wife, or his son. He died for his own sake as an absolute king. Like how no one loves me unconditionally in the world, there must be no one who takes pity on me either.”*

Why had he said something like that? My best guess was that Marquis had adamantly refused to recognize that he’d sacrificed his life for us—for his wife and son. He was going to die anyway, so he hadn’t wanted to display half-baked affection and for his wife and son to learn of it. Perhaps that was the only way of love Marquis had known.

With a sigh, I said, <<Naut makes a good point. If there ever is a day when we think Shravis ought to know the truth, we can just tell him then. For now, let’s honor Marquis’s wish.>>

After a moment of indecision, Jess nodded. “You’re right.”

Silence returned to the cathedral. Jess’s hand continuously stroked my back. Naut propped up his elbow on the throne armrest and was nodding off. *It would be so nice to take a nap right next to Jess here—*

A low creak cut my thoughts short.

Startled, the three of us literally jumped at once. Naut swiftly unsheathed one of his shortswords. Jess and I also turned to the source of the sound.

The large doors at the cathedral's entrance were only a little ajar, revealing the silhouette of a single girl against the blinding display of stars that crowded the inky western sky. Unable to adapt to the sudden contrast, I had trouble recognizing exactly who she was.

Long hair. A bountiful chest. She looked like the person who'd guided us in the foggy cemetery yesterday.

The girl's shadowy silhouette turned on her heels swiftly and disappeared behind the door.

"Hey! Wait up!" Naut yelled fiercely. He chased after the girl without a moment's delay. We hurriedly followed suit.

The moment we got outside, I realized something wasn't right with the landscape.

The sky had *split apart*.

Just like before, the stars were hugging one another tightly, but crevices were separating them now, as if the starry sky had turned into drift ice floating on an ocean. Between the crevices were glimpses of a pitch-black sky—the typical starry sky we were used to.

Naut didn't even turn around to look at us as he single-mindedly chased after the girl. So that we wouldn't lose sight of him, we were hot on his heels.

As we traveled the streets, I noted that although the capital's statues still looked like living humans, bits and pieces of them were gradually returning to white marble. It almost looked as if the Abyssus and reality were melting into each other.

Pursuing Naut, who fixed his eyes forward on the girl, we climbed up an incline and entered the east side of the capital. I looked at the eastern sky and noted that the horizon was shining pastel blue. Though the color wasn't right, that was undoubtedly the light of dawn. Judging by the current brightness, the sun would rise in less than an hour.

As she ran, Jess craned her neck and looked up. She gasped. “Mister Pig, look at the sky!”

I blinked. <<What happened?>> I asked as I looked up as well. My eyes widened.

The upper air in the east was still the distinct, overpopulated starry sky of the Abyssus. However, starting from the point above my head, the dense starry stretch was slowly cracking and dividing into polygons before scattering into nothing, almost like drift ice separating and melting. This change only grew more prominent toward the west, and the westernmost end had already fully transformed into an ordinary night sky.

“The starry sky...is dissolving,” Jess whispered with disbelief.

In the patch of the sky right above our skulls, the starry sky was splitting up before our eyes and melting into the standard night sky. There wasn’t the harsh sound of something cracking or smashing, but fissures formed in the eastern sky that we were headed toward as well.

<<What the heck is going on?>> I asked incredulously.

“I have no idea either... Oh!” Jess raised her hand and pointed at the eastern sky. Along the horizon that had begun lighting up with a pastel blue glow, vivid red light filtered out from the cracks in the sky’s canvas. This was the natural color of the morning glow.

The world constructed purely from wishes was rapidly losing its equilibrium. It was almost as if someone had destroyed a planetarium, causing the bright blue sky outside to leak in.

I frowned. <<What’s happening to the Abyssus? This can’t be normal.>>

At the plaza facing east, Naut was swishing his head repeatedly while jogging aimlessly from one place to another.

“Mister Naut! Did something happen?!” Jess yelled.

At long last, Naut’s feet ground to a halt. “I lost sight of her.” Sweat formed a sheen on his forehead. His cheeks were flushed. He looked desperate and extremely invested.

I glanced at him, concerned. *Why is he so obsessed with that girl? We don't even know who she is.*

“Oh!” Jess gasped. “Look! The doors over there aren’t closed!”

Hearing that, Naut and I turned to look at the stone warehouse in one corner of the plaza. Robust metal doors had been left wide open, almost as if it was telling us, *“Over here!”*

Naut broke into a run without another word and peered inside. “Hey!” he shouted.

There seemed to be no response.

Following his example, Jess and I also peered inside the warehouse. Jess widened her eyes. “That’s rather peculiar... What is that?”

There was a curious object within the warehouse. At first glance, it resembled a dragon. On its back were a pair of bat-like black wings stretching out, each roughly ten meters long, around the height of a standard utility pole. Their bases at the center—where the torso of a dragon would normally be—were attached to something that looked like a dugout canoe in a streamlined shape.

I inclined my head. <<Is it just me, or did that girl guide us all the way here? The same thing happened in the cemetery of opium poppies, after all.>>

Naut looked like he had his head in the clouds. Now, he was stealing glances outside the doors.

Placing a hand on her chin, Jess began her deduction. “Hmm, doesn’t this vessel appear to be designed for flight? At the very least, if I can use my magic properly, it should be able to glide across the air from our height. This might be the perfect means of transport to Send-Off Island in the eastern sea.”

*That’s brilliant.* <<I’d like to avoid a second round in the Needle Woods. Travel by air is ideal.>> I looked over at Naut. <<What do you think? If you’ve got no objections, how about we try using this?>>

After a pause, Naut turned around to face me. “Ignore me, you guys go ahead. I’ll stay behind for a little longer.”

It was a response I’d never expected, and I forgot how to breathe

momentarily. Jess also gaped at him.

<<Wherefore art thou doing this?!>> I asked incredulously.

Naut didn't give me an answer.

*Is it her impressive chest that he's after? Does he want to chase after those gigantic breasts or something?*

Jess approached him and started gently talking to the swordsman. "Mister Naut, please look at the sky." She then went outside and pointed up at the eastern sky.

Against the canvas of a stunning pastel blue glow were large fissures where the crimson color of dawn leaked through like speckles, and the red was so vivid that it almost felt baleful. I had never witnessed a scene more suitable for the description of "apocalypse."

The maiden then marched up to Naut. "Clearly, something is amiss about the Abyssus right now. Even after we left the Golden Cathedral, this change is only progressing rapidly. It's dangerous to stay behind."

Jess placed her hands on his shoulders. At long last, Naut looked her in the eye, but he didn't utter a single word.

<<Our story only ends after our safe homecoming,>> I reminded him.  
<<That's what Hortis said too. Don't let your guard down.>>

After fighting with his indecision for a while, Naut finally nodded.

The boat languidly flapped its dragon wings as if it were actually alive while it glided across the sky at a pleasant speed. Below it, the sinister, inky black Needle Woods and the vast, leisurely hilly area flowed past us in a blur. The dragon boat eventually soared past the upper air of Nearbell—which had been reinforced as a stronghold—and carried us to the eastern sea of Mesteria.

We gradually descended as we glided, then ascended back up to the same altitude with the whimsical flap of the boat's wings whenever it remembered to move. Our journey was so comfortable that it was difficult to imagine how much hardship we'd suffered at the beginning of our adventure in the Abyssus.



*That said, I thought, if it weren't for our hardships, we probably wouldn't have gotten to see Eavis and Hortis. We would have likely never gotten to know Vatis's story.*

*And if we hadn't learned about the royal family's situation through them...maybe I wouldn't feel so much heartache about Marquis's lonely end.*

The sun climbed up from the horizon, and the sky grew brighter. Horizontal and vertical scarlet cracks ran through the baby blue sky, casting an enchanting striped pattern that rippled delicately on the navy blue sea.

Before long, a single volcanic island poked up its head from above the horizon. I recognized its silhouette.

"Mister Pig, we're almost there!" Jess announced cheerfully.

I nodded. <<Yeah. Soon, we'll be home, sweet home.>>

Though I was the one who'd said it, calling Mesteria "home" was admittedly rather strange. That country wasn't my homeland, nor was I a resident there. At the same time, calling it "home" felt oddly fitting. *Is it because I missed the other side after coming to a completely different world?*

But more than anything, the fact that I was heading there together with Jess gave me an inexplicable rush of joy.

Meanwhile, Naut stared absentmindedly at the approaching island while maintaining his silence and appearing apathetic. I didn't know what was on his mind. *Maybe his thoughts are preoccupied with big boobs.*

The boat lowered its flapping frequency and unhurriedly descended toward Send-Off Island. This was where we'd attempted to take down the Clandestine Arcanist once and for all—and failed. It was also where Naut had collapsed from his curse, and Ceres had shouldered it in his stead with a kiss.

The tumultuous story that had started from that debacle had reached its finale at long last with the sacrifice of two siblings: Hortis and Marquis.

Our story was heading toward its end. All that was left to do was to go home.

## Chapter 5: Your Story Doesn't End Until Your Safe Homecoming

The Send-Off Island in the Abyssus was barren. It didn't even have a single tuft of grass to boast about, much less trees. Jet-black volcanic rock and reddish-brown pumice stone carpeted everything as far as the eye could see. It was a lifeless island.

It was only after we approached the upper air of the island on our dragon-wing boat that we realized we still had one big question left: how in the world were we going to get back?

The island wasn't that large. If we walked for a day, we could probably do one lap around the entire place. But if we were going to search every nook and cranny, it might take decades. It wasn't like any map or notice boards were available to direct us to the exit.

Before we knew it, clouds had gathered overhead, smothering the peculiar, speckled sky. Dark gray clouds, which looked ominous enough to start pouring rain down on us at any time, drifted at low altitudes.

On the boat, we went around the island aimlessly. After a few rounds, we decided to get down onto the wasteland after all and investigate the ground first.

<<Vatis only wrote that the Send-Off Island is the exit in the book, right? Nothing else?>> I asked for confirmation.

Jess nodded and looked conflicted. "Yes... I was completely under the impression that we'd naturally figure out how to leave the moment we arrived here."

<<Well, we're lucky that there're only rocks everywhere. We should be able to find anything that doesn't fit immediately.>>

"Right. Let's do our best!" Jess balled her hands into fists in front of her chest and pumped them to motivate herself.

In contrast to her vigor, Naut seemed distracted. He was heedlessly kicking away pumice pebbles as he trailed behind us. Considering how he'd taken the initiative to lead the charge and put his life at risk for us countless times so far, I didn't have it in me to bark at him, "Hey, don't slack off, you lazy bum! Can't you see that we're busy here?!"

I still called out to Naut, though I didn't intend it to be any form of ushering. <<Are you all right?>>

He turned to me. "Where did that come from?"

<<Well, you just look somewhat under the weather...>> I hesitated. <<Is what happened with Marquis bothering you?>>

All because we'd lacked the necessary resolve, we'd half forced Naut into the unpleasant role of decapitating the king. I was guilty and remorseful.

He scowled. "Don't speak nonsense. Do you even know how many heads have rolled at my hands so far? Cutting that man down isn't nearly enough to perturb me in any way, shape, or form."

<<Then what's—>>

Before I could finish my sentence, Jess turned to face me. "Mister Pig." Under her beckoning, I returned to her side. As we continued walking, Jess smiled softly. "Mister Naut must be exhausted. Let's look for the exit just by ourselves for a while."

Seeing her expression, I put two and two together. Mages could read minds. Jess likely knew what was plaguing Naut's heart. With that knowledge, she was advising me to give him some space about it.

*Okay, I should go with what she thinks is best. I'll leave him be for now.*

Jess must've read the narration because she nodded slightly and winked at me. <I'll tell you everything later, I promise.>

I answered with a nod of my own.

We'd left the dragon-wing boat behind somewhere as we explored. Without any leads, we roamed aimlessly around the black wilderness. It was an uncanny island—if possible, I wanted to find the exit before it became dark.

As if on a whim, Jess asked, “Um... What would you like to do after you get back to Mesteria, Mister Pig?”

<<Take a bath.>> My mouth was moving before I could think.

Hearing that, Jess smiled mischievously at me. “Does that mean you want to see me undressed?”

*I do!* <<Nah, I just thought that if I can finally have a corporeal body, I’d like you to brush me.>>

“I can hear your thoughts loud and clear though.” Reading the narration without permission, Jess giggled. “Sure, I don’t mind. Let’s bathe together. I’ll brush you then.”

<<That’d be great.>>

“But I have to say that’s a little unfair. Since we will be able to touch each other, please help me get clean as well, Mister Pig.”

*What can I even hope to do with my pig limbs, though?* was a question I never asked in the end.

Before the words could make it out of my mouth, there was an abrupt rumble in the ground beneath our feet—no, it was significant enough to classify as an earthquake. We had nothing to hold on to nearby, so we crouched down and leaned against each other.

Low, ominous rumbling echoed from somewhere deep below. There was only one scenario you would immediately think of when a volcanic island experienced an earthquake. Jess’s gaze shifted to the volcano on the island’s north side.

I also looked over, and my worst fears were confirmed—it was an eruption. The black volcano, shaped like a mini Mount Fuji, was erupting near the summit and spitting out a mind-bogglingly large cloud of smoke. I almost wondered where in Mesteria it had stored such an incredible volume of fumes. The dense, colossal ashen cloud rose rapidly, almost like a fist punching the sky.

<<Run!>> I screamed. <<We’ve got to escape to the coast!>>

The three of us ran as fast as our legs could carry us. Accompanying the

eruption, a pyroclastic flow made of volcanic gas and solid matter scorched everything within their vicinity at astounding temperatures of hundreds of degrees—many times that of a deep-frying oil. It rushed down the slope at equally alarming speeds, sometimes even exceeding a hundred kilometers per hour. In some countries, it'd be breaking the standard highway speed limit.

There was a foreboding roar behind me, and I turned over my shoulder. Just like I'd feared, the pyroclastic flow was sliding down the mountain in our general direction. Fortunately, it should barely miss us, judging by its current course. But the next moment, my relief instantly vanished. *Hold on...*

Panting heavily, Jess let out a startled "Oh no..."

Unfortunately, the dragon-wing boat we'd used as our ride was left precisely in the pyroclastic flow's direction of travel. I prayed that the tides would turn, but it fell on deaf ears. The gray torrent swallowed up the entire area in question.

My liver went cold with despair. We'd lost our means of transportation. How in the world would we get away from this isolated island that didn't even have a single tree?

Survival, however, was our highest priority. For now, we decided to focus on distancing ourselves as much as possible from the volcano by going to the coast. Whenever I turned over my shoulder and stole glances behind me, I saw glowing red lava overflowing from the caldera that slowly covered the mountainside like sticky goo. The amount of lava flow was shocking. At this rate, it would likely blanket the whole area we were currently in without mercy.

Before I'd realized it, the environment had grown dark, almost as if it were night. The volcanic smoke was expanding and concealing the entire patch of sky above us. Ash sprinkled down on us like confetti.

<Mister Pig, use this!> Jess manifested a piece of cloth with her magic and used it to cover my nose like a mask. She and Naut were protecting their noses with their sleeves.

The winter chill had vanished without a trace, making way for hot, suffocating air. With the caldera as its starting point, the lava was leisurely but steadily eating away at the island.

*Darn it, I was too careless, I cursed. I let my guard down because I thought looking for the entrance was the only thing left to do.*

The world was already dark, but to make things worse, volcanic ash rained down incessantly, and I couldn't see anything around me. The ash would fly into my eyes as I ran, so the best I could do was to crack them open a tiny sliver. Hot wind blew over from the lava, and I felt as if my ham was being grilled. We'd clearly failed to get away in time.

Occasionally, a cool, refreshing breeze would blow around us, likely thanks to Jess creating air with her magic. If it weren't for her valiant efforts, the hot air might have burned through our lungs long ago and suffocated us to death.

We couldn't afford to die in a place like this. Stumbling over the small pumice stones, we single-mindedly ran toward where the coast was supposed to be. The visibility only deteriorated with time, and it got to the point where I could only recognize Jess and Naut as faint shadows at best. So that I wouldn't lose sight of them, I stubbornly clung to Jess's side as I ran. Naut was sprinting slightly ahead of us.

"That's the wrong direction," Jess called out to Naut in a steady voice, pulling his hand and correcting his course so that he turned left by a margin. *Wait.*

Just as I had that thought, I noticed something wasn't right. Jess was right next to me. In that case, who on Mesteria was guiding Naut by his hand as he ran in the front?

Naut said something. "...se. Why—" But his words were drowned out by the thundering eruption of the volcano behind us.

So that we wouldn't lag behind, Jess and I focused solely on running and chased Naut as he followed the hand's lead. We appeared to be heading upwind. The headwind pushed back against me, snatching away my stamina, but I could tell that my vision was gradually clearing up.

After we continued dashing for a while, cold, fresh air blew in from ahead of us. The sky was still dark, but the raining ash faded away, and I could properly open my eyes. What entered my eyes was a dark sky-like night and scarlet lava that radiated extreme heat. This entire stretch of the island was like hell itself.

The first thing I did was turn to Jess. She was sooty all over but appeared to be in good health. Jess was also looking at me and breathing a sigh of relief. I was probably covered all over with ash too.

Meanwhile, a mysterious girl was holding Naut's hand and guiding him up an incline. The incline was part of a great boulder that protruded up one level above everything else in its environment. Jess and I followed them and scaled to the top of the boulder. The other side of it cut off sharply like a cliff, and beyond the cliff was the ocean with fierce waves rolling about. Right before the cliff, the sooty Naut stopped and was face-to-face with a lone girl.

Oddly enough, there weren't any signs of ash on the girl. She was wearing a full-length white dress and staring steadily at Naut. Since her height was roughly the same as Jess, as she looked at Naut from point-blank range, she had to crane her neck slightly to gaze up at him. Her profile was so similar to Jess's that I might mistake the two girls for each other if I weren't focusing. The evident differences were the mysterious girl's hair, which had been let down to flow freely, and above everything else, her bountiful chest that you could recognize even with the covering of her clothes.

My intuition immediately told me who she was. And now, I knew what Naut had chased after devotedly this entire time in the Abyssus. She was why Naut, someone who'd always done what he wanted in his life, had chosen to help us. *She* was why Naut had risked his safety to join us on our journey in this dangerous world.

Once, the swordsman had asked this: *"His Royal Highness mentioned that the dead can appear as ghosts in the Abyssus, right? Do you think that's actually possible?"*

All this time, Naut had tirelessly sought out a single girl without even pausing to look at anyone else—Eise, his beloved whom he'd lost five years ago, who was also Jess's older sister.

Eise was the first to break the silence. "Goodness, you've grown so much. Back in the past, I was the one who looked down at you, but it's the other way around now."

Naut's only response was the silent tears sliding down his cheeks.

The top of the boulder wasn't that spacious, but we had no other shelter available because the lava was approaching quickly. Jess and I could only watch over the pair at a slight distance as they gazed into each other's eyes.

"Eise..." Naut finally whispered shakily. A fair hand, without even a hint of ash sullying it, reached out to cup his cheek. Looking startled, Naut overlapped it with his own palm.

It was as if time itself had slowed down. The rumbling earthquakes, which had resounded incessantly, suddenly seemed distant and faint. On this one corner of the volcanic island with no way out, it was like someone had sectioned out this area of the boulder protruding out into the sea and crafted a whole other world.

"Finally..." Naut croaked, his throat raw with emotion. "I've finally..."

He threw his arms around Eise in a tight—no, in an almost rough hug. His dignified shoulders trembled, and I heard intense sobbing that I'd never, *ever* heard from him before. At this point, he'd probably completely forgotten about the two onlookers present.

Eise also wound her arms around Naut's back, and her chest softly molded around his form as they pressed against Naut's abdomen. I cast my eyes down and thought, *Oh...* My mind went to a conversation I once had with Ceres.

*"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."*

*"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?"*

I'd made the wrong assumption. Five years ago, when Naut had been



thirteen, there was a woman who'd decisively and irreversibly warped his fetishes for good.

I was reminded of another scene back when we'd first arrived in the Abyssus. If someone hadn't wished strongly for it, Jess's chest would have never grown bigger like it had.

Naut had defended himself by saying, *"You've got the wrong idea. It's not that I'm interested in Jess or big boobs."*

He'd been telling the truth. Naut hadn't wished for Jess to grow huge breasts. He'd yearned so desperately for a reunion with Eise that his crush's appearance had been projected onto Jess.

This was when I caught myself. *Oops, I went on too long about chest sizes.* Nervously, I peered at Jess, but she maintained her gaze on Naut, and tears were gathering in her eyes. She balled her right hand into a tight fist and placed it against her modest chest.

Jess had the ability to read minds. Naturally, this lovely maiden had been well aware of the anguish and hopeful desperation churning within Naut's heart as he'd accompanied us on our journey.

Eise's hand gently stroked Naut's head. "I've known that you've held me in a special place in your heart all your life."

Naut's choked sobbing refused to die down. He leaned on Eise's delicate shoulder and wept. In my mind, Naut was a strong man who could brave any hardship that came his way with a defiant glare—I'd never imagined that one day, I'd see him look so vulnerable.

The girl softly said, "I'm glad I got to see you again, but..." Still smiling, Eise pushed Naut's shoulder back and distanced herself slightly. "The three of you shouldn't stay forever in a place like this. You have much better things to do."

After making that statement, Eise turned to Jess and me. The environmental lighting was a mess—a grayish light leaked out from the sky while the lava radiated a vermilion glow—but despite that, her honey-brown eyes glowed just as brightly as Jess's. Her appearance, which had been frozen in time for five years, made her look as if she were her younger sister's twin.

“Jess, Mister Pig,” she addressed us. “I’m leaving Mister Naut in your dependable hands.”

The mood was so heavy that neither Jess nor I could respond.

As if the two of us didn’t even exist in his world, Naut firmly grabbed Eise’s shoulders. “Don’t be silly. I won’t go back. Let’s be together forever.”

Turning back to the swordsman, Eise slowly shook her head. “I came here to bid you a very belated farewell that I never had the chance to say. I would be very troubled if you didn’t go home.”

Naut gaped at her, speechless.

Tenderly, Eise continued, “Mister Naut, your place isn’t by my side.” Though her tone was kind, it was also firm. “I’m dead. The Eise that lives on within your heart is my everything.”

“Wha... What are you even talking about?” Naut stammered. “I can’t figure out what you mean at all.”

There was a pause, long enough for Eise to think things over. She then reworded her point. “Choosing to stay on this side means you will have to die, Mister Naut.”

Naut refused to let go of her shoulders. “There’s nothing wrong with that. If it’s for you, even death is worth it.”

“You mustn’t.” In contrast to her gentle and determined speech, I saw a single tear stream down Eise’s cheek.

“But why, Eise...?”

“Because it’s not your time yet.”



In the distance, glowing scarlet lava spewed out, and a rumble in the ground made our bodies jolt with it. Before I knew it, the lava had crept up all the way near the boulder we were standing on.

Naut looked like he couldn't understand any of her words, and seeing that, Eise explained in a slightly hurried tone. "This world—the Abyssus is a place where countless wishes vie and jostle against one another as they take shape. Normally, even if you dove in here from the Terminus Island, you wouldn't even be able to exist because all sorts of different desires would swallow you up and erase you at once. The only thing that can oppose a wish is someone else's wish. The fact that you are standing before me is proof that even now, someone out there earnestly wishes for you to exist in their life."

As if quietly telling him he mustn't go any further down this path, Eise placed a hand on Naut's chest. She whispered, "It's proof that someone out there loves you so much that they can't live on without you."

The person she was talking about was obvious. She didn't even have to spell it out for us.

Eise smiled. "Please cherish that person, okay?"

Naut didn't agree or object. He was only staring at Eise's face in a daze.

Suddenly, I was reminded of Marquis—the lonely king who hadn't even been able to come out of his prison simply because no one had loved him.

I looked at Jess, who was standing next to me. She was also looking at me. We likely weren't exceptions to the rule Marquis and Eise had mentioned. *And since we're existing right here, right now...I'm sure you know what that means, my brethren.*

We had to go back by any means necessary. And we had to take Naut with us.

Sensing heat against my skin, I turned over my shoulder. Comparatively less viscous lava was glowing red-hot as it ran in our direction and began encircling the boulder we were standing on.

No matter what choice we were going to make, time was running out. Though I knew I was being an incredibly rude third wheel, I looked at Eise and voiced

the question that had been stuck in my mind for the longest time. <<Excuse me, but...someone guided us through the Lyubori cemetery and to the capital. Were you possibly the one who did that?>>

Eise looked in my direction and smiled impishly. It only lasted for an instant, but my heart skipped a beat, and I was almost dazzled by it. *I think I understand now why Naut cried on Jess's shoulder back then...*

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't me."

*I knew it.* To an extent, it was exactly the answer I expected.

Hortis had said, *"My wish to help all of you and your need for aid happened to align by pure chance, giving birth to me, the man you see before your eyes."*

If his words were accurate, there should be one more person we ought to have met in this world.

"It seems that people have been praying earnestly for the three of you to finish your journey safe and sound," Eise said.

Hearing that, next to me, Jess's breathing hitched.

We would never forget about the girl who'd traveled with the three of us, even if it had been tragically brief.

Our own wishes hadn't been the only things that helped us cling to life in this world. There were people out there who cared about us—people who had wished for our happy future during their last moments. And right now, we were alive in the Abyssus that was also crafted by such wishes.

Eise's honey-brown eyes gazed at me, Jess, then returned to Naut. "To live is a very painful thing. But it's much, much more painful to wish for life after you die." A tear slipped down from Eise's eye. "You must choose to live on. That will be the end of your adventure—the end of your story."

At this point, Naut looked like he didn't even have enough strength left to make any rebuttals. "But I... Eise, for all my life, I've..."

With a kind smile, Eise interrupted Naut, though it sounded like he would have never finished his sentence in the first place. "I really liked you, Mister Naut."

The two of them stared at each other in silence for a while. *No, there's a chance that they're having a private conversation through telepathy.*

"Mister Pig." Jess crouched down and gazed at me. "Let's turn around for a bit, okay?" She softly placed her hand behind my ear, and abiding by her motion, I turned my back to the pair. A copious amount of lava spurted out from the volcano, and a scorching light swallowed up the entire island.

Next to me, Jess reached out her hands and covered my eyes, almost as if playing a game of "Guess Who?" The maiden's slender fingers blocked out my pig's wide field of vision, and the world went completely dark.

On top of the heavy bass rumbling in the ground were the growling and crackling of the bursting lava higher in pitch. Unease crept up on me in the darkness until I became aware of a faint sound—the pulse in Jess's hand. Its pace seemed somewhat quickened, and listening to it gave me an odd sense of security.

Abruptly, her hands moved away, and the hellish landscape of red and black was projected onto my retinas. When I turned around, Naut looked like he'd managed to come to terms with something and move on. His hand was linked with Eise's as he gazed toward the other side—toward the ocean.

Within the world of waltzing ash, the sea remained calm and composed, its waves rolling over steadily.

"I'll go back," Naut muttered so quietly that he sounded as if talking to himself. "This place is beautiful. It's beautiful, but it's a bloody rotten world."

I wondered what had changed Naut's state of mind. When I walked over, his face, covered with ash all over, turned to me. His eyes' bright whites and sapphire irises remained pristine and untainted. Perhaps he'd wiped his mouth because only the filth around his lips was less noticeable than everywhere else.

After looking at Jess and me, Naut shifted his gaze to the ocean. The side of the boulder was a cliff that dropped sharply like a wall. All the other directions were surrounded by lava, and the single path left for us was jumping into the ocean from here.

<<This is the exit, isn't it?>>

Eise was the one who indirectly answered my question. “No matter what kind of crisis you might come across in your life, you must choose to live on—live on the side where your precious people need you and are waiting for you.”

Our struggles and desperate efforts might only end in despair. Even so, we were still going to bet on the slimmest of hope and cling to life.

We would choose to jump off a cliff—not to our deaths, but gambling that it would lead to life. This was the most obvious and fitting answer possible for the end of our story, or so I thought.

I nodded. <<Let’s go. An accursed, rotten, but beautiful world awaits us.>>

We opened our eyes along the water’s edge in the early evening. A salty taste filled my mouth. I was drenched from head to toe, and my pork trembled as the breeze rushing over from the ocean brushed against me. I climbed onto my pig trotters.

Waves calmly pushed onto the fine black sand beach before shying away with a whisper. The sky was a natural gradient that smoothly transformed from a vivid orange to a soothing navy blue. It was a beautiful sky—a *normal* sky.

*Have we returned to Mesteria?* I wondered.

Next to me, Jess was rubbing her eyes. Her wet clothes were clinging to her skin.

“Yoink!” When I tried to talk to her, the unpalatable noise of an overzealous otaku slipped out of my mouth. “Grunt noink snort...”

I wasn’t able to speak coherently with a pig’s mouth. But that was only natural—the structure of a pig’s mouth was fundamentally different from that of a human. Unless I was in the Abyssus, that is.

Jess’s hands, which had been wringing her hair, stilled. “Mister...Pig...” She gingerly reached out toward me. Her fingertips softly touched my pork cheek and were met with juicy, supple skin. Immediately, her expression lit up like the sun. “Thank goodness!”

With a vigor so great that I almost thought she was about to assault me, Jess

jumped at me and threw her arms around my body. She gave me a firm, happy squeeze. Her modest chest pressed against my neck without any semblance of restraint.

Since we'd made our daring escape from the Abyssus, the indecent fan service law of cause and effect where my desires had been dutifully realized should have vanished long ago.

Hesitantly, I muttered in my mind, <<Hey, maybe you should be more mindful of where you put your chest.>>

"They're exactly where I want them to be," Jess declared in a nasally voice.

My eyes widened. *Whoa. A real girl is saying this line to me? This trope isn't only limited to fiction?* I was oddly moved by this event.

She continued, "I'm so glad... Oh, Mister Pig, I've never been more relieved in my life..."

*Technically, it's still too early to establish that we've truly returned from the Abyssus.* But I could never say such cold words in the face of Jess's warm elation. <<Thanks, Jess.>>

This determined maiden had dived into a forbidden field like soul magic and endured a journey in the perilous Abyssus to fully resurrect me, a pig who should have been dead as a doornail. It was likely a feat—a *miracle*—that no one had achieved after Vatis, but the girl pressing her chest against my body had tenaciously followed it through to the very end.

While she rubbed her cheek against me, I took a sidelong glance at Naut. The swordsman was sitting down in solitude, not paying any mind to the dripping seawater from his hair. He was gazing at the ocean vacantly as he touched his own lips. His free arm hugged two swords on his lap—the twin shortswords with Eise's bones in the hilts. Reflecting the evening sun that steadily sank beneath the ocean, their blades glowed a brilliant scarlet.

Eise was nowhere to be found. Only the three of us had washed up on this unknown beach.

I inclined my head quizzically. <<Where exactly are we?>>



At long last, Jess released me and began surveying her surroundings curiously. A sandy black beach stretched as far as the eye could see along the shoreline facing east. On the inland side of the coast was a dense row of tall pine trees, which didn't allow me to see what was beyond. Only the horizon was on the opposite side, drawing a completely straight line, not providing any clues either.

I didn't know where we were right now. But the fact that I couldn't spot even a single anomaly in the scenery sent me over the moon.

Jess turned to me. "I don't mind. As long as you're with me, Mister Pig, I can be anywhere in the world or beyond." That was all she said before she smiled.

I knew that she was speaking from the bottom of her heart. <<Good point. Where we are doesn't matter at all.>> I was also voicing my genuine feelings.

Through our adventure in the Abyssus constructed by desires, I'd learned one thing: Jess truly didn't wish for anything more than what we already had, even in her subconscious. All she ever wanted was for me to be by her side—nothing else.

I hadn't ever caught any glimpses of Jess's Labyrina because she'd wished for my company forever and ever. It wasn't because she'd tried to hide her desires from me or anything of the sort.

Of course, if I had the body of a human, it would make some things more convenient. Perhaps I'd gained the ability to speak the human language with my mouth partly due to a sliver of that thought. But this wasn't even close to the true nature of her wish.

I'd remained a pig in the Abyssus because the only thing Jess ever wanted was my company. No matter how our story may end, as long as we were together, that was enough. We both felt this way. Truly.

There was the shrill trill of a bird. I looked up. A large bird of prey was circling in the upper air above us. After doing a few laps, the bird of prey screeched briefly again before flying back toward the sea—toward the western sky.

"That was a pretty bird," Jess commented.

<<Hmm, was it a goshawk?>> I guessed.

During our exchange, Naut stood up with a grunt of effort. He pointed directly toward the setting sun, where the bird of prey had soared toward. “Our ride’s here.”

Narrowing my eyes against the blinding light, I looked over. Against the backdrop of the sun sinking below the horizon was a lone black shadow on top of the ocean—a ship was coming toward us.

The ship anchored offshore and dispatched a small boat that hurried toward us. Naut lit up his swords with flames and swung them. In response, a magical white light shot up into the sky and scattered like a firework. Jess performed the same spell in reply.

The moment Shravis alighted the small boat along the water’s edge, the prince sprinted over, splashing water noisily with every step. “Jess!” He spread his arms, as if he wanted to hug her without regard for the audience around him, but he stopped short. His hands, which had lost their destination, moved onto Jess’s shoulders instead.

After smiling slightly and catching his breath, Shravis finally looked at Naut and me, seeming like he’d only just noticed us. “Naut...and you too, pig. I’m so glad that you came back in one piece.” He crouched in front of me and stroked my head with his rugged hands.

*It’s a relief to see that he’s doing well too.* <<You sure you don’t have to give Jess a head pat?>> I asked with a hint of sarcasm thrown in.

Shravis schooled his expression into a solemn one. “I would never give a head pat to my equal, though.”

I scowled. *Hey! Hmph, you think I’m just a cute little piggy, don’t you?!*

He shook his head and continued, “I’m joking.”

<<Don’t joke with a deadpan face!>>

Shravis’s lips curled into a content smile before he turned to Naut and began walking—but he only went as far as one step before he stopped. After all, the prince had spotted a small, shadowy silhouette who’d fallen behind and was now charging right at Naut.

Crashing into the swordsman, Ceres hugged Naut tightly. She rubbed her head against Naut's chest and began bawling uncontrollably. At this heartwarming sight, I could feel the corners of my eyes softening reflexively. Jess and Shravis were also smiling warmly at the pair.

One after another, our friends who had headed for the Terminus Island with us alighted from the small boat. A black pig, Sanon, walked over with a leisurely gait. Itsune was practice-swinging her greataxe as she approached. An exhausted-looking Yoshu was carrying his crossbow on his shoulder. Batt was waving at us. Nourris walked across the beach with precarious steps. A boar, Kento, marched forward while pridefully arching his back.

Under everyone's watchful eye, Naut caught Ceres's shoulders and nudged her backward until they were face-to-face. "I know. It was my bad, so don't cry, okay?"

That was when I noticed something. Naut's body had been littered with wounds all over after his adventure in the Abyssus, but now, they'd all healed without leaving even a mark.

Naut leaned down in one fluid motion and kissed Ceres on the cheek. I didn't know whether it was because he was clumsy or he'd aimed for that precise place, but the spot his kiss had landed seemed like it was almost on the corner of Ceres's lips. Ceres's crying stopped abruptly.

Snorting out loud, the black pig approached me. <Goodness me, I think actions like those ought to be punishable by the law.> It appeared that Jess was acting as our medium.

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Bruh, you think you're one to talk?* But I held back my retort and turned to face him. <<Mister Sanon. I'm delighted that we got to see each other again in good health.>>

<Indeed. It is all thanks to your efforts that the operation on our side succeeded. By now, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say this country is ours.>

There was the faintest hint of something unsettling within his tone, but after the black pig rubbed his cheek against mine, it vanished. When I recalled Sanon's bearded face from when he'd been a human, pig bumps rose all over

my skin. *Cease your actions at once, good sir.*

Looking as if he'd suddenly remembered something, Shravis turned his head and scanned the vicinity. "Come to think of it, where is father?" His emerald eyes turned to Jess, as if to ask whether Marquis had left without us.

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "Um, well..."

Seeing her plight, I grunted out loud to catch Shravis's attention. <<I can't apologize enough. We tried everything we could, but we couldn't bring him back home with us.>>

For a fraction of a second, the prince's eyes widened. "Do you possibly mean...he passed away?"

Ever so slowly, I nodded.

To my surprise, resignation took over his expression right away. I'd expected more surprise and grief, but Shravis only smiled at us instead. He said, "That's regrettable, but the fact that the three of you managed to come home alive is already more than enough. Don't take it to heart."

A part of me thought, *Is that all you want to say on this topic? Shouldn't there be, like, you know, a bit more?* But I didn't have it in me to make any statements.

Jess looked restless. She must have the urge to say something, *anything*, because she blurted out, "But Mister Shravis, King Marquis..." Her words went astray in the middle of her sentence, and she trailed off. Both of us were at a loss for words.

Shravis gave us a reassuring smile. "I already braced myself for this possibility the moment the Clandestine Arcanist possessed his body. Though our loss is great, I'm sure we can start anew together and rebuild this nation even without father's powers. I have faith in all of us."

*Oh...* My heart sank as I noticed Shravis's phrasing. The statement I'd heard back then hadn't been mistaken at all. Even Marquis's own son hadn't wanted Marquis himself, just his powers.

Seeing our reaction, Shravis looked at the two of us quizzically. I averted my

gaze from him and stared at the evening beach. Nourris must have fallen over at some point because the right half of her body was drenched with water. She walked over with Kento by her side.

The boar looked between Jess and me. <Considering that the king isn't present, may I assume you have brought back a separate method to remove Yethma collars?>

*Oh, right.* Kento's number one goal had always been to liberate Nourris from her collar. The girl with braids looked at us with innocent eyes. Even now, a bulky silver collar gleamed dully around her neck under the twilight illumination.

Feeling awkward and guilty, I bowed remorsefully at Kento, <<I'm so sorry. We just didn't have the time to work out the details. Marquis mentioned there are other methods to remove the Yethma collars. I'm sure that if we invest our efforts into searching for it, we'll...>> I broke off there. I didn't know how I should end that sentence.

Next to me, Jess apologized profusely. "I'm so, so sorry!"

The boar's stiff hair bristled. I braced myself for anger, but to my surprise, Kento's response was reasonable and mild. <If there is another approach we can utilize, we merely have to seek it out until the day we narrow it down. Kindly give me a hand, will you?>

Hearing Kento's words, Shravis nodded. "Remember, the objective of our operation this time was overthrowing the most atrocious king of Mesteria. Since we have accomplished it, for now, let's celebrate what we've achieved. Father might have disappeared, but it doesn't mean the *Cæg* spell to remove the collars is lost forever. Magic is a system, not a single person. It might be an uphill battle, but I'm certain we'll find a way to unravel the spell one day."

Saying that, his angular hand gently gave Jess's slumping shoulders—she was still remorseful—an encouraging tap. He continued, "The war is over. There's no need to be hasty. We only have to tackle one problem at a time. Together with all of you, I'm sure we can achieve anything."

Our voyage from the Send-Off Island to mainland Mesteria was peaceful,

uneventful, and pleasant. Though I was tired, sleep wouldn't come to me, so I ended up going out onto the deck with Jess. Stars decorated the entire sky above us enchantingly, and I felt as if it was even going to suck my soul away with its beauty. I concluded that, indeed, having just the right number of stars—not too many, not too few—was the most breathtaking. It was the same as my opinion on chest sizes.

““Magic is a system, not a single person. It might be an uphill battle, but I'm certain we'll find a way to unravel the spell one day,”” Jess whispered Shravis's statement earlier in the day. “Considering all the obstacles we have overcome on our journey this time, I'm starting to feel that the difference in appearances and even the differences in the worlds we came from are more like barriers to overcome rather than insurmountable rifts.”

<<Right.>> I nodded. We still had many things on our to-do list. But my heart was also telling me that if Jess was by my side and all our friends were on the job, we would figure it out one way or another, just like Jess had said. <<Let's overcome them together.>>

“Yes. We're together forever.”

Clouds might obstruct them, and the bright blue sky might drown them out, but the stars were perpetually shining far, far away. *It would be wonderful if we could stay this way forever, just like those stars,* I quietly thought.

“Wow, Mister Pig, look!” Jess pointed up at one patch of the night sky. A bright vein ran through the dark canvas of night, almost as if someone had scratched it with a crayon.

I leaned forward. <<What's that? Is it a comet?>>

“I'm not quite sure... But it's pretty, don't you think?”

As we watched it, the streak rapidly grew longer and longer. By the time I realized it wasn't a comet, the single line had started branching out. Here and there in the sky, white glowing lines manifested, stretched, then branched. They only continued multiplying.

It was almost as if the night sky was gradually cracking like glass.

Simply elongating and branching wasn't enough for them anymore, it

appeared, because the veins of light also grew thicker. Soon, I could make out the identity of the white glow: fragments of a highly dense sky crammed to the fullest with stars.

The gorgeous night sky of Mesteria had broken into pieces, and a starry sky of madness peered out at us from between those crevices.

Jess's eyes widened. "Wait, is that...?"

<<That doesn't look good.>> I frowned. <<We've got to wake Shravis and the others.>>

We rushed back to the ship's cabins.

Jess and I recognized this phenomenon—we'd seen something similar in the Abyssus. Back on the other side, we'd caught glimpses of the surface Mesteria's night sky from the cracks. Now, the same thing was happening in the surface Mesteria.

It was as if these two sides of the world were preparing to merge.

<<That can't be...>>

I only made the belated realization that I'd spoken my last sentence out loud with my mouth after a few seconds.

As I sprinted alongside Jess, an ominous thought crept into my mind. I swallowed nervously. *I think we've messed up big time somehow. And...I don't know whether we're ready to face the consequences.*

# In a Bright Room One Certain Night

Glass spheres enclosing colorful liquid were suspended within a transparent cylinder of oil. Six spheres floated on the top part while four spheres had sunk to the bottom.

The factor that dictated their differing fates was the density of the oil inside the cylinder. The large spheres, which were denser than the oil, sank. The small spheres, less dense than the oil, floated near the lubricant's surface with their buoyancy.

When the room temperature rose, the oil expanded, causing its density to decrease. Therefore, more spheres would sink to the bottom of the cylinder. Putting this principle into practice, academics and technicians had invented the Galileo thermometer before me.

Right now, a label that read "22°C" was dangling down from the lowest floating sphere. In other words, the room temperature should be roughly twenty-two degrees. However, considering the display of "20.6°C" on the digital clock right next to it, I could deduce that this stylish thermometer likely wasn't used for reading temperatures but as a mere decorative ornament at best.

Everywhere in the minimalistic hospital director's office were furnishings so pitiful that they'd lost their purpose. A small vase for one or two flowers crafted with the Edo Kiriko technique, which, from what I could remember, had never been adorned with flowers. An ebony coat hanger that no one had ever hung up coats on. Finally, a family photo on the office desk that wasn't facing the office chair but instead the sofa for receiving guests.

The family featured in the photo was mine. Surrounding my mother on the hospital bed was my father, me, then my younger sister. My compassionate and kind mother had passed away two months after this photograph had been taken. Now, even my sister was confined to bed with the same illness. She was also quickly running out of time. Her illness had progressed to the stage that she'd even stopped replying to my words altogether.



The only ones left were a workaholic father and a mentally unhinged firstborn daughter. In the present, the two of us were sitting across from each other on the sofas. As I faced my father, who wore a fatigued face, my mind replayed a nightmare that haunted me like a curse.

It had all started on the day I'd overdosed on sleeping pills.

The next thing I knew, I'd ended up on an unfamiliar farm on the outskirts of a town I didn't recognize. When I looked into my reflection in a pond and saw a pig's face looking back up at me, for a moment, I sincerely suspected that I'd received divine punishment for proclaiming to be a vulgar pig from time to time—that karma had reincarnated me as a sow. To me, being a pig was unbearable.

I'd heard that drowning was a lot of suffering, so I thought the swiftest methods of death available to me were either eating poisonous plants or jumping down from a high place. Being in a pig's body meant that I had limited options. Unfortunately, I didn't have knowledge about poisonous plants, so I could only go around looking for a suitable high ground.

For some reason unknown to me, I could understand the language of that foreign country. It was a linguistic system that I'd never seen nor even heard of during my entire twenty years of life, but somehow, I was able to read the script and understand the speech flowing into my ears.

And that was what had led to the fatal discovery of a name I could never forget: Blaise. Yes, that was the girl's name. When I found her, rough and uncouth men were violating her in the forest at night. They called her a slutty pig and punched her repeatedly.

Blaise was around the same age as my sister. Someone had put a silver collar with no seam onto her neck, and it was connected to a metal chain.

I was completely powerless. I could only watch on numbly like a spectator from the thicket.

Eventually, the men took a moment to rest while smoking something that looked like cigars. But Blaise didn't even attempt to escape. She knelt on both knees, clasped her hands tightly in front of her chest, and single-mindedly prayed to the starry sky.

<I beg you. Please save Blaise. *Please*.>

She didn't open her mouth, but I had the feeling that her voice still reached me.

Back then, I'd thought it was a trick of the wind, but now, I knew better. She'd been asking for *my* help. The powers of her prayers had quietly guided me to her side, and she had been using her telepathy to communicate with me.

But I didn't do a single thing. In the end, Blaise was dragged away by the men, and she disappeared into the darkness.

I'd run away.

What awaited me down the path I'd chosen was a reality that didn't improve one bit and a direct message from a man who called himself "Sanon." I clicked on the link he'd sent me, read an online novel with a bizarre title, and felt goose bumps rising on my skin.

Because in that novel was the ending of the girl I'd forsaken. I'd compared it with my dream journal that I'd written before I'd read the story, and the facts had checked out. Therefore, it confirmed that I hadn't been delusional and created false memories. That dream hadn't been a mere dream.

I had to atone for her death.

And so, I'd supported the ridiculously reckless project those three bespectacled otaku had concocted and helped them in ways I could.

In the present, those three were sleeping in one corner of this hospital even now. There was nothing abnormal about their bodies, but they still didn't wake up after three entire months. If you diagnosed them according to a certain standard, they were fully-fledged vegetables.

My father had mentioned that their vital signs were starting to become unstable recently. "If you know something, anything, please tell me," he'd said earlier. After all this time, his commanding tone had already transformed into pleading, but just like every other time, I'd persisted with the cover story that "I don't know anything. I can't figure out anything either."

The air of the hospital director's office, which had effective air-conditioning, was so chilly that it was hard to believe it was a summer night after the star festival—a hot and humid period in Japan.

I'd written my wish, "I hope at least one thing goes well. Even one thing's enough," on a colored paper strip and hung it up. So far, however, it didn't seem even close to being answered at all. *I mean, Mister Lolip's novel in question has apparently passed the first selection of the rookie writer award he applied for, so that's good, I guess.* That said, it would be meaningless if the author didn't wake up.

A loud, shrill, and insistent electronic ringing tore apart the icy mood crafted by our silence. My father stood up at once and picked up the receiver with practiced ease. "Yes, this is the director's office."

In contrast to his steady voice with no inflection, the voice on the other end of the receiver was so worked up and confused that even I could mostly decipher her statement. *"Director, your daughter! ...snuck out and gone to the rooftop... I can't even make heads or tails of what's happening..."*

I frowned. Was the staff member talking about my sister's ward? *Who snuck out? And what's this about the rooftop?*

As I eavesdropped on the shaken nurse's statement, I soon realized that the person who'd woken up and snuck out was apparently my *sister*. It was my sister, who I'd thought would never open her eyes ever again.

I immediately rushed out of the director's office and sprinted to the rooftop. The wish I'd written flashed through my mind: *"Even one thing's enough."* Had my prayers been answered?

The rooftop was a spacious place fenced off by tall railings. Though we were in the heart of the city, it had a spectacular view of the starry sky.

Clad in a hospital gown, my sister was kneeling on both knees on the flat ground. A female nurse, who looked bewildered, noticed my arrival and turned over her shoulder.

When I got a good look at my sister, I reflexively sucked in a sharp breath.

She clasped her hands tightly in front of her chest as she looked up at the

starry sky. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, but there was the faintest of smiles on her lips.



## Afterword (Fifth Bite)

Hello, it's been a while. I'm Takuma Sakai. Ever since the second volume, I've had the honor of having four entire pages allocated to the afterword for every volume, and believe it or not, I ended up writing four pages yet again this time. My readers, I hope you're not getting too fed up with this...

Every time, I worry in the back of my mind that the section is probably too long as I write, but sadly, I happen to be a rather greedy little piggy who can't control his urges to fill every single page he gets... I'm relieved from the bottom of my heart that I became an author, not a school principal.

Well then, is it all right if I start on a long ramble again? (No. Stop.)

I know this might sound abrupt, but I like shrines and temples. If they were within my neighborhood, I'd visit most of them at least once, and whenever I spot one during a trip, I would find my feet carrying me over before I could think. I would bask in the beautiful landscape with a torii gate and the serene silence on the path leading up to the shrine as I make my way over to the offertory box. There, I toss in some one-hundred yen coins, pay my respects, and pray. Then, I'd wander aimlessly around the premises again. This is basically my routine.

Now, as for what charms me so much about shrines and temples... I think it has to be the mood and atmosphere there. Even if it's located within a city, it will become a tiny patch of forest within the concrete jungle. The paths are wide, and the grand buildings are arranged in an orderly manner, but just when you think you've got their patterns figured out, you'll find slightly curious stone objects in one small corner. Not to mention the wonderful aroma of antique timber permeating the grounds. Sometimes, you'll even come across a towering tree being protected with great care and love.

There is a special aura to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples—it feels as if time grinds to a halt or you're stepping into a whole other dimension.

When I came to this conclusion, I began thinking about the reason behind this unique charm. The answer that appeared in my mind was “prayers.”

This is a very crude, sweeping statement, but in essence, shrines and temples are places of prayer. There are likely very few people who’d leave without praying after they go all the way there. (We don’t talk about tests of courage at night; that’s an exception.) The people who visit these places of prayer have some kind of wish hidden within their hearts, whether it be grand or minor, and they pray to the deities.

It’s because these places are created for praying people—are created for prayers and hopes—that they’re isolated from the rapid changes in our society and end up with a slightly distinct atmosphere from the world we usually live in. This is my theory, at least.

Thanks to their innate peace, whenever I visit them, I have the opportunity to take my time to look at my own wishes and reflect on what I truly want.

Slightly over a decade has passed since I first learned the joy of writing a story. This entire time, I wished to become an author one day, and that’s exactly what I prayed for whenever I went around visiting shrines and temples. Eventually, that led to the person I am today.

Mister Pig mentioned something similar once upon a time, but perhaps, in the end, you’re the only one with the power to realize your own wishes. That said, properly putting your wishes into words and dedicating the occasional prayer are meaningful acts, in my opinion. Through these deeds, you’ll get a clearer picture of your wish, making it even more robust and resistant to the test of reality and time.

As I weaved this volume together, I decided to focus on such wishes and prayers.

I’m certain that all prayers will be answered. Even if your wishes aren’t realized flawlessly, the hopes and desires you hold close to your heart for a long time will take some kind of shape one day. That’s what I believe.

For those who can’t feel the same faith within themselves, I would highly recommend looking at the back cover of this book after reading this section.

That aside, thanks to all my wonderful readers, the *Butareba* series is still going strong. I think those who have read to the end will have already guessed, but this story will continue. *Butareba* is a series that changes its contents and focus drastically in every volume, and I'd like to keep tackling that goal in the sixth volume. My goal is to subvert everyone's expectations except one: weaving together a fun story. I wouldn't want to betray that!

To tell you the truth, no one knows how far this series will go. But no matter what, I plan on dutifully depicting everything that leads up to where Mister Pig and cutie-pie Jess's relationship leads them to at the very end. I'd be delighted if you continued accompanying them on their journey.

Lastly, I would like to close out with wonderful news! Volume 2 of the *Butareba* manga adaptation by Minami-sensei is on sale now (or at least by the time you pick up this book)!!!

Volume 2 starts with Jess and Mister Pig leaving their first town, Kiltyrie, and arriving at a village in the mountains, Baptsaze. Ceres, Naut, and a certain pupper will make their first appearance.

At this point in the story, when I look back on the events, it stirs all kinds of emotions in my heart. Since you were willing to read all the way to volume 5, my dear reader, I'm sure you understand what I'm going on about. Though I'm the novel author, I'm immersed in a cocktail of sentiments and emotions whenever I look over Minami-sensei's manuscript.

As ever, the manga is sublime. I was muttering, "Cutie-pie Ceres~!" as I read through the chapters. I felt a sharp gaze digging into me from Jess's tapestry hanging on the wall, but I was probably imagining things.

I highly recommend giving the manga a try!

(On the topic of tapestries, that reminds me of another piece of delightful news! *Butareba* merch featuring Asagi Tohsaka-sensei's art was released a while ago! You can browse all sorts of things, such as tapestries, desk mats, pillowcases, clocks, and so on. If you're interested, please check it out!)



That ended up being a rather long ramble. Still, it wouldn't be possible for me to enjoy my time writing this afterword if it weren't for everyone involved in the book's publication, as well as all of you, my readers, who are willing to accompany me this far. I can't thank all of you enough. To finish, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude. Thank you so, so much.

Well then, I hope you'll continue taking care of me and *Butareba*!

Takuma Sakai—September 2021



5<sup>th</sup> Bite



Author:  
Takuma Sakai

Illustrator:  
Asagi Tohsaka



# Butareba

-The Story of a  
Man Turned into a Pig-





Author: Takuma Sakai

Illustrator: Asagi Tohsaka

(5<sup>th</sup> Bite)



# Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-





[NAME]

Yoshu

profile

A Liberator. A level-headed youth who wields a crossbow that can be equipped with ristae. Itsune's younger brother.

[NAME]

Itsune

profile

A Liberator. A hearty woman who wields a greataxe that can be equipped with ristae. Yoshu's older sister.







Butareba

<<Jess, it  
can't be. Your  
boobs got...  
bigger?>>

*Tell me I'm dreaming.*  
*This cannot be happening.*  
*This isn't right.*  
*I liked her size just as it was!*



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Butareba -The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-Fifth Bite by Takuma Sakai

Translated by Zihan Gao Edited by Nicole D'Andria

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