
(7th Bite)
Author:
Takuma Sakai
Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka
Butareba
-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-


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This situation we're in... It's practically identical to that famous rom-com trope where a man and a woman have to hide in a broom closet! It isn't a ham sandwich at this point. It's more like a pressed sandwich...
There was no mistaking it—it was the ultimate situation known to man where beautiful maidens were pressing all kinds of things against me from the left and right.
This is the journey of two beautiful maidens and a lone pig going on the run.


Giant octopus tentacles assault two beautiful maidens!
“Jess! Ceres! Are you okay?!”





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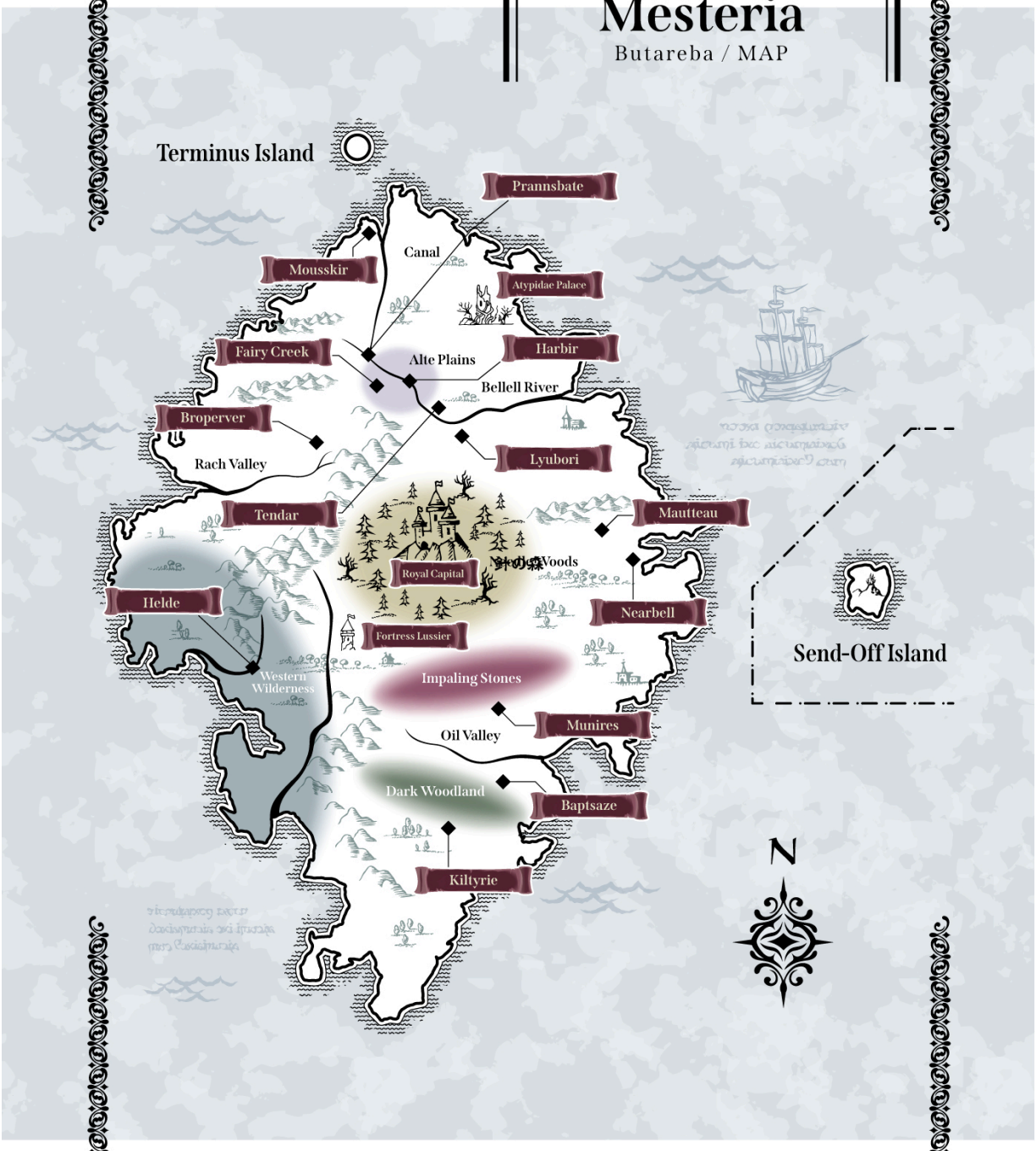
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Mesteria

Butareba / MAP



Prologue: One Person Is Enough to Make Decisions

What permeated the dim office was a distinct fragrance alongside stagnant, stifling air.

A refreshing breeze galloped across the landscape outside the windows. But, alas, these windows would never be opened to welcome it in. In fact, unlike in the past, thick curtains fastidiously smothered every single window now. Rays of light slipped in from the gaps between the fabrics, bequeathing a faint luminance to the room as it illuminated the dust in the air.

An elderly woman knelt on the deep crimson carpet. Long, silver strands freely flowed down her back. “Are you certain about this?” she asked with deference.

She was looking up at her lord across the large, antique wooden desk before her. It was a piece of furniture that had been passed down through the generations from the founding queen of the nation. During the elderly woman’s long service in the royal court, she had spoken face-to-face with kings from three generations in this exact place.

“There is no need for confirmation. I said I will do it, so I won’t turn back.”

He was the youngest king in Mesteria’s history. Ever since the second generation after the founding queen, the crown had always been succeeded by the princes when the kings became frail with age. For that reason, the previous kings had only gained their title after they were fifty at the youngest.

However, the king from two generations ago had passed away due to a curse. Then, the king from only one generation ago had been possessed before perishing with someone else’s soul in control. The crushing weight of the crown had fallen onto the shoulders of

this maturing youth all too soon.

On the other side of some stacked-up books, the woman caught a glimpse of disheveled golden hair and a pale forehead. She pressed her lips into a tight line. "But my king... The Liberators are bound to revolt against the current treatment of Yethma. In addition, if you send word of such a relentless demand and even mobilize the army against a single young girl like her—"

"I know." The king propped up his elbows on the desk and clasped his hands in front of his forehead. "I'm aware of all of that."

A ring gleamed on his right middle finger. In the elderly woman's eyes, its brilliance seemed all too sinister. The ring was a memento of his mother, infused with a magic that was more powerful than any curse in the world.

In a low voice, he continued, "The king makes decisions while the others follow. Hasn't that been the way of the royal court since the time of our founder?"

"...Your wish is my command, Your Majesty."

The elderly woman bowed deeply. It was the only thing she could do. Even if she opposed his decree, someone else would take her place; his order would be executed either way. It was preferable to take matters into her own hands if that was the alternative.

All his other close aides had shared the exact same opinion. *There's no other way—I have to do it,* they'd collectively thought.

Ever since the case of the Cross Executioner, this youthful king was no longer the person they'd grown to know. In fact, he was almost like a stranger—no, it was as if he'd relinquished his humanity and become a demon of some sort—as he'd begun making spine-chilling decisions. He didn't allow a single soul to report even slightly differing opinions to him.

He was an absolute king who had command over divine power. His words were no different from the verdict of a god—even if this god had lost his compassion and was starting to break down piece by piece.

"Continue investigating every possibility without overlooking any fine details. The royal court will, without hesitation, carry out the best possible solution available to us that your results indicate. There

is no space to fit any sort of personal feelings or guilty conscience within this endeavor, and that's final."

These were the words of her god.

"As you wish." The elderly woman bowed again before raising her face slightly to look at the king.

The youth in question had picked up a black bottle and was pouring a viscous, dark brown liquid into a glass. A pungent odor, reminiscent of the scent of mud and blood coiling with each other intimately, reached her nose. It was often described "as if someone thoroughly simmered the dirt from a morbid battlefield."

The liquid was a potent anxiolytic. The roots of Valeriana fauriei were the main ingredient, with the addition of a handful of other ingredients that were too dreadful even to put into words.

The king had filled an old, intricately decorated wine bottle to the brim with this drug. He regularly consumed this beverage during his official duties. His office was always gloomy and dismal, saturated with a dreary stench.

"I won't treat any of you poorly," the king said in a clipped voice to the elderly woman just before she took her leave. "Maintain your silence and obey my orders." After bowing deeply to him, she left him behind in the solitary office.

Moments before she shut the door, a whisper that sounded almost like an explanation to justify himself reached her ears. "...One person is enough to make decisions."

Chapter 1: Don’t Make a Written Account of a Conversation Between Otaku

The airy melody of a cowbell echoed out.

I advanced down a narrow path. This place, a coffee shop with a classical vibe, boasted a bustling atmosphere enveloped in warm lighting. Lamps decorated with colorful glass were placed throughout the establishment, and the interior was almost like a jewelry box. When I looked up, I saw that white porcelain cups had been arranged into neat rows along the wall.

The sounds of conversations and clinking tableware were cozy. However, no matter how much I strained my ears, it was all somewhat muffled. I couldn’t make out exactly what anyone was talking about. On top of that, though I could definitely sense the presence of other humans, my vision was somehow blurry, and I couldn’t properly see these people.

Something about the scenery was surreal, even if you ignored the fact that my line of sight matched the height of a pig’s face.

It was as if I were in a dream.

I kept walking and eventually found two people at the end of the path. At a bright booth surrounded by lamps of gorgeous colors, two women sat across from each other. They were an exception from everyone else: I could make out their appearances down to the fine details. One was a woman wearing a baggy gray hoodie, while the other was clad in a pastel blue gown—*is it hospital wear?*

Neither of their attires matched the shop interior, which oozed fanciness and class befitting of the aristocracy. They were modern and realistic guests.

The hoodie woman turned and addressed me. “Oh, you’re here,

Mister Lolip. Salutations, good sir."

I recognized her face. Relatively lengthy and dense bangs. Corners of lips softened with a kind, loose grin. Above anything else, I'd recognize her trademark glasses with a red frame anywhere. She was a university student and one of our teleportation project teammates, PhiloponMeth, or Philopon for short.

My mind went blank. Philopon should have remained in Japan, unlike the rest of us. So why was I facing her right now? Furthermore, I was still in the body of a pig. Just as I was about to voice my questions, the woman sitting across from her turned to flash a mellow smile at me.

Her face was that of a stranger's. She seemed a few years younger than Philopon. Her long hair flowed down the back of her hospital gown like a waterfall. Her arm that reached for a teacup was significantly thin, but as she leaned forward to pick it up, the area below her collarbones revealed very ample— *Ahem. Ignore me.*

The moment I averted my gaze from her, I realized something. The girl's free hand was stroking a black object of some sort. *No, not an object.* It was a lone black pig curled up on the couch, sound asleep.

By the time the question marks in my head multiplied to three, Philopon asked, "Mister Lolip, do you know of the movie *Inception*?"

That came out of nowhere. "You mean the one where spies infiltrate other people's dreams, right?"

She shrugged. "Huh, is that what it's about? To tell you the truth, I've never seen it."

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. "So you aren't going to use the movie's plot as a reference to explain our current situation? That isn't where this is going?"

Philopon chuckled. "Nah, that's not my thing at all. I wouldn't do something posh like that."

As we exchanged lighthearted banter, I had a flash of inspiration. "...Am I dreaming right now?"

"An astute observation." She nodded. "This is a wonderful place, isn't it? Blaise crafted it." With the same hand she used to hold up her cup, Philopon indicated the girl across from her.

That word was like a bolt from the blue. My pig trotters froze. *"Blaise"?*

The girl looked at me and spoke in the Mesterian tongue. "It has been a while, Noble Pig."

Startled, my eyes widened. I could never forget that peculiar title. Though her voice wasn't the same, this was most certainly the Blaise I knew. "Uhhh..."

Seeing my bafflement, the mysterious maiden smiled sweetly at me. However, the girl's face didn't resemble Blaise's in the least. She had black hair, and her features had all the typical traits of a Japanese woman. Upon closer inspection, her profound double eyelids were a lot like Philopon. Then, I considered her hospital gown—her delicate arms were likely a side effect of long-term hospitalization. I'd heard that Philopon had a little sister who was practically a vegetable, which could only mean one thing.

Stunned, I looked between the two girls. *Is Philopon's little sister role-playing as Blaise?*



I shot down that thought right away. *No, it can't be role-playing. You can't learn the Mesterian language overnight. Plus, how in the world are you supposed to mimic a girl who passed away in a completely foreign world?*

I wanted an explanation. "What's going on? Why is your little sister acting like this...?"

Philopon placed a hand on her chin and mulled over something briefly. "Mister Lolip, have you read the novel *Naoko* by Keigo Higashino?"

Frowning slightly, I muttered, "Yeah. The story was something along the lines of the protagonist's dead wife's consciousness waking up in his comatose daughter's body, right?"

"Huh, is that what it's about? It sounds really interesting."

I gave her an unimpressed look. "Bruh... You're supposed to explain the current situation while referencing the novel's plot after asking that question, you know?" This was why I was allergic to making written accounts of conversations between fellow otaku. "Tangents aside, are you saying Blaise's consciousness is possessing your sister's body?"

She shrugged. "Probably. Or at least, I think so. Not my problem, though."

In my opinion, it *was* indeed her problem, but that aside... Philopon somehow seemed more animated and happier than the last time we'd met. Her sister—no, Blaise let out a small chuckle as she looked at the lively Philopon.

If this girl was truly the Blaise I knew—the Blaise whose lips had forgotten the shape of a smile—this was a wonderful and heartwarming discovery.

In the back of my mind, I recalled her wish I'd heard a long time ago. *"Oh, Noble Pig, if I die, please take me to your world."*

My heart brimming with emotion, I whispered, "Looks like you were able to go to the world beyond the stars in the end, huh?"

Just like how my consciousness had possessed a pig in Mesteria, perhaps Blaise's consciousness had possessed Philopon's sister's body. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful that she hadn't ended up inside a Japanese pig.

"I'm certain that it was all thanks to you, Noble Pig," she said softly.

"I, well... I'm truly glad to hear that."

My tongue was tripping over my own words out of restlessness. Now, this most certainly, *definitely*, had nothing to do with the extremely precarious state of her gown's collar. Of course, I also wasn't getting distracted with thoughts like *Blaise has a large chest, so that's why she likely ended up in the body of someone with a large chest.*

I sighed internally. *If only I could make at least one sensible or empathetic statement.* Instead, I chose to fire a question at her. "Come to think of it, I've heard a voice calling out to me a few times in my dreams. Was that you too, Blaise?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I have tested out a few things ever since my possession, you see. At long last, I was able to meet you directly in this manner."

Now, I'm curious. What "few things," exactly, could she test to give her the ability to achieve something like this? Well, that's probably a question for another day. "I see... Sorry, I'm not sure what I should say right now..."

Searching through my mind frantically for something—anything—to say, I looked into the eyes of the maiden who seemed cheerful. "Your wish came true. I'm happy for you," I said gently.

"Yes. It's just like you described it, Noble Pig. This world is a wonderful place. Miss Philopon and everyone from the *hoshpital* are all awfully nice to me."

For a moment, my tongue was tied. In the end, I settled for, "That's great to hear, Blaise."

Beneath her slender ankles were bare feet. Perhaps she'd never left the hospital even once. I could only pray that a kind and warm world was waiting for her outside the hospital as well.

Just as I had that thought, without warning, a silly, almost airheaded voice rang out from my side. "Merlin's beard [Holy guacamole]! What a charming establishment."

I took a glance. A smug-looking boar wearing a frilly dress with coarse needlework was standing next to me.

Fighting the urge to sigh, I thought, *Oh brother, another problematic guy joins the fray.* "Don't use an idiom from the Wizarding World, thanks. The world-building's gonna fall apart."

The boar nodded to himself. "Loli FTW [Mister Lolip for the win]. What an apt retort that puts light novel protagonists to shame."

"You know, I somehow feel like you're riling me up with that sentence, so I can't say I'm too pleased to hear that."

Again, this was why I was allergic to making written accounts of conversations between fellow otaku. The sentimental mood we'd built up until moments ago was ruined beyond repair. *Well, I got a bit wistful and didn't know what to say, so maybe this is much better than awkward silence.*

It had been two long weeks since I'd last seen this boar, Kento. Not since that night—that gory, ghastly night in the underground graveyard. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that I'd next see him in a wild dream.

Philopon wasn't perturbed at all by the entrance of a talking pig and boar. She grinned. "All righty, we've got everyone here."

She proceeded to explain our current situation while referencing *Inception* and *Naoko*. *Hey! So you do know about those two works after all!*

Kento seemed to have easily grasped what was happening, but I still had one burning question. "Say, Philopon. By some chance, is that black pig..." I trailed off.

"Ah, it looks like Mister Sanon's sleep cycles have been slightly unstable," she explained. "I told him the time in advance, but he's still in the ICU, so he's in a different room, and there isn't much we can do. Well, seeing how we've got a black piggy here, I think we're on the right track, at least."

I blinked. *Sleep cycles? And...ICU? Surely she isn't talking about the International Christian University, right?*

Without delay, Kento asked, "One moment, Mister Sanon is over there [in Japan]?"

"Yep." Philopon nodded. "I think it was roughly two weeks ago when he suddenly regained consciousness. Did something happen on your side?"

Kento and I traded glances. Despite faltering, I eventually spoke up. “You haven’t...heard about it from Mister Sanon?”

“The thing is, Mister Sanon is awake and aware, but he can’t articulate properly at the moment. He also doesn’t seem to be in the mood for it, so I don’t know the details yet.”

Oh... I cast my eyes down. The second part must be the reason. I was sure he wasn’t in the mood to share his story.

My mind went to the black pig that had been blasted into smithereens in the blink of an eye. That blunder must have been quite traumatic, even for a man with a will of steel like Sanon. *That aside, he’s in the intensive care unit? Is he in such a terrible state that he can’t even speak properly?*

Philopon’s voice tore me out of my thoughts. “Okay, time for business.” She gingerly put down her cup on the saucer. “Mister Lolip, Mister Kento, please come back as soon as you can. I wanted to deliver this message at all costs.”

Once again, Kento and I went silent before trading glances.

I’d had the inkling that was the case somewhere in the back of my mind ever since I’d first heard Blaise’s voice in my dreams. I swallowed. “Are our bodies...wasting away?”

“Yes.” Philopon’s tone turned solemn. “As you’d expect, a body missing its owner isn’t a very good thing. It’s kind of like an Eva without a pilot or August without the summer holidays.”

“I’m pretty sure the second one is utterly irrelevant.”

The corners of her lips quirked up. “Well, I’ve filed an extended leave from school, so summer holidays have nothing to do with me in the first place.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize...” I paused. “Now that you mention it, it’s already August on your end, right?”

“It sure is. Over four months have passed since I sent you guys on your journey with a stun gun. I’m just about to finish writing the second volume of *Cook Your Stun Gun: The Story of My Friends Turned into Pigs*.”

I gaped at her. “What in the world is that crazy title?”

“It’s a story about securing victory through heating up and frying your enemies’ stun guns in advance, causing them to malfunction.”

"Is it really fine to spoil the tactic in the title itself?"

My brethren, you have my most sincere apologies, but conversations between a bunch of otaku sound like incoherent nonsense when you make a written account of it. I hope you'll bear with me just a little bit.

Blaise, the only person with common sense around other than myself, watched us and smiled with amusement. "All of you get along very well, I see."

I shrugged. "Well, you could say that otaku friends are kindred spirits."

Our common denominators didn't stop at the fact that we were bespectacled otaku who had experienced teleporting to Mesteria—our fundamental views on the world were also fairly similar. However, our stances had minor differences.

Blaise put down her cup and placed her hands on her knees. She leaned forward and looked down at Kento and me. I discovered that she wasn't wearing anything underneath her hospital gown—it was an excessively provocative scene.

Remaining nonchalant about the state of her clothing beneath her neck, Blaise said, "Noble pigs, at the moment, the world you are in and the world we are in are remarkably close to each other. I believe it's because some kind of abnormal event is happening on your side, but the boundary dividing the two worlds has become considerably malleable. That is likely the reason I was able to travel to this world."

I had a very good idea about the "abnormal event" part.

She cast her eyes down briefly. "I'm very sorry that I can only abstractly explain things. But that's how it feels to me when I interact with it. The fact that I am able to hold a conversation with you noble pigs right now is also because I can somehow 'see' the two of you when I search deep in my heart. Our two worlds are drawing nearer. I'm certain that in this state, I should be able to migrate you as well."

Two supple spheres swayed gently beneath Blaise's collarbones. With the slightest movements of her arms, the spheres would bump into each other and change shape. This was the exact moment she'd been talking about.

No... It's a bit different, actually. Ahem.

"Sheesh." Philopon smiled wryly at the two of us, who couldn't take our eyes off the captivating scenery. "As she has explained, now's your chance. After all, Mister Sanon was able to come back. I'm sure that as long as we seize this moment, Mister Lolip and Mister Kento, you should also be able to return safely. And I can declare this with confidence: Time is running out. If your bodies on this side perish, there's nothing to even come back to."

Philopon was right. If the bodies we'd left behind in Japan died, we'd likely be stuck in Mesteria forever. *But I...* I inhaled shakily. "Sorry, but I can't go back."

My words must have been considerably unexpected in her mind because Philopon's eyes widened comically.

Next to me, Kento voiced his agreement. "Similarly. I'm thankful for your warning, but I can't afford to return as of yet—not until I finish my last job [mission]."

Within the ensuing silence, the noisy snort of a snout echoed out. I glanced over, and the black pig was shuffling sluggishly on the couch. All our gazes convened in his direction for a while, but he didn't stir beyond that.

Philopon knitted her brows together, baffled. "Why not? What's this about a last job? Is it more important than your life?" Her bewilderment was to be expected—she practically knew nothing about the state of affairs on our side.

But it would be a long, long story. Too long for the little time we had.

Not to mention that our resolve was most certainly something only those of us in Mesteria would truly understand. I exhaled slowly. "In any case, please wait just a bit longer. There's something we have to settle once and for all."

On the other side of her lenses, Philopon's eyes wavered with worry. "I mean, I don't mind waiting at all. But the problem is that your bodies are in seriously bad shape. Like, *really* bad shape. It's already been five months, you know? If you take things too leisurely, not only will your vitals say goodbye—even worse, you'll have to say goodbye to watching the summer anime this year too."

Now that's a steep price to pay... Hmm...

Blaise spoke up. "Noble Pig, please. It is my wish as well." She bowed at us. As her silky long hair spread out like a curtain, the collar area of her gown also spread down extensively. "Please stay alive and come back. My hope is that one day, all of you valiant pigs could show me around this world."

"I... I mean, of course, I'd love to do that..." I turned away. Beside me, Kento also did his best to avert his gaze from Blaise's chest area.

Clearing his throat, Kento gave his own answer. "I will definitely return to your side of the universe [Japan]. I believe it shouldn't take too long either."

I whipped my head around. "It shouldn't take too long?" I asked reflexively. In my mind, it certainly didn't seem like the case.

Kento blinked. "Huh? You weren't the one who put the idea of Ginnokis, otherwise known as the invitational migration, in his head, Mister Lolip? I'm under the impression that there is starting to be quite a harmonious mood all around."

A Mesterian term I didn't recognize sprung into the conversation, throwing me off. "Ginnokis? What even is that?"

"The royal court is unconditionally accepting the former Yethma into the city on the royal cliffs and giving them a place to go, isn't it?"

This was news to me. "It is?"

Even though we were fellow beasts in another world, we were on entirely different wavelengths. Blaise looked at us, mystified. "Pardon, did you say 'unconditionally'? And this applies to all Yethma?"

The boar nodded firmly. "Indeed. The royal court is apparently paying compensation money to their employers as well. Naturally, the masses have begun complying with this movement. It's a wonderful omen. I was completely convinced that you and Miss Jess had managed to persuade the king [Mister Shravis]."

"No..." I shook my head. "We haven't done anything like that. In fact, we haven't even gotten a chance to talk with that guy."

Kento's jaw dropped. "Merlin's beard [Holy guacamole]..."

"Stop sabotaging the world-building," I reminded him.

"Holy guacamole [Merlin's beard]..."

"That's not how you fix it..." I sighed. "Back to business, though. This isn't good. It sounds like being in the capital actually makes me fall behind in terms of grasping the latest developments. I didn't have any clue about what was going on outside. I'm practically a pig who has my head in the sand."

Ever since that incident, I'd spent all my time in the royal capital and had been unable to see anything in the outside world—my pork cheeks in the sand idiom is so apt.

"Isn't it supposed to be an ostrich?" Philopon deadpanned.

Oh. Maybe that was the proper comparison.

The boar's tiny fangs chattered with anxiety. His round and adorable eyes stared at me. "It seems that...the amount of time we have left [the time limit] might be more demanding than I thought."

I looked back into his eyes. "But we've got to do this. Right?"

We had been the ones who'd ripped this world asunder. It was our responsibility to put it back together with our own hands—er, with our own forefeet. At the very least, we had to reconcile the shattered relationship between the royal court and the Liberators, who'd suffered a fatal falling out.

For a while, there was only silence.

Suddenly, a feeble voice rang out. "I thought I could change that world of wrongs with my own pig trotters. I...was too conceited." The black pig raised his face just a tad. Still curled up on the couch, he craned his neck by a margin and looked in our direction with black eyes moist with unshed tears.

I blinked. "Mister Sanon?"

"I have truly done something reprehensible..." he muttered. "To all of you, to him, and...to Mister Sito as well."

His voice was so shaky that I felt concern before surprise. "Are you all right, Mister Sanon? You shouldn't force yourself to speak if you can't right now."

Sanon shook his head minutely. "I'm...not in a position to critique what you should do, but Mister Lolip, Mister Kento..." Though his voice was the definition of sickly, I could sense a strong will burning

behind it. “If your minds are set, then...please see your mission through to the end without fail.”

Philopon interrupted him. “Wait a minute. Mister Sanon, they are in the same condition as you are—”

“The two of them are still...youthful and healthy. A toxic work environment hasn’t destroyed their bodies, nor were they almost killed by someone... If I managed to come back safely, the two of them...should have more leeway in terms of time. As for the summer anime this year, let’s watch them together one day on a streaming site.”

His voice was hoarse, cracking almost like the words of an elderly man on his deathbed. Sanon continued, “I beg you... My journey ended in failure, but Mister Lolip, Mister Kento...please finish what we started with your powers.”

Kento and I both looked at the black pig. The next moment, we found ourselves nodding spontaneously.

Gasping for breath, the black pig said, “There must... There must be a way... Please, please, my frien... *Zee zee zee*...”

His statement tapered off there. Sanon shut his eyes. I could hear his nasal breathing. It appeared that he was asleep.

I stared at him long and hard.

Slowly, I inhaled. “Bruh, who in the world would say ‘zzz’ out loud before falling asleep, huh?!”

Utterly exasperated, I regressed into the role of a deadpan protagonist.

When I opened my eyes, I was wrapped in a soft blanket. *That dream was almost a nightmare—actually, it* was *a bona fide nightmare.*

My pig body felt exhausted first thing in the morning, worn down by a sense of suffering as if I’d had the type of fever dream you’d have during the flu or as if I’d been forced to read an approximately fourteen-page transcription of otaku banter.

“Hameow...?” Letting out unusual noises, Jess was mindlessly moving her lips next to me. It seemed that I’d accidentally woken her up with my movement.

I peered to my side, and the light filtering through the curtains was already bright.

Yawning, Jess finally formed a coherent sentence. “It’s already morning...? Good morning, Mister Pig. Did I make any weird noi...” Her unhurried whisper paused for a moment before she finished with “...*zee zee zee*...”

If I could smack my forehead, I’d be doing that right now. *No, I’m not going to react to that, thanks.*

We’d been scouring through documents and archives in the library until late at night yesterday. Every day, Jess refused to stop reading until her eyes turned a precarious red, and I stayed with her the entire time. Lately, staying up until ungodly hours had become somewhat of a routine. Jess was practically the embodiment of disciplined conduct that brought along a pig with it everywhere, but she’d become nocturnal altogether, and mornings were now a weakness of hers.

Of course, Jess was adorable when she was half asleep as she woke up, so I wasn’t complaining. Likely, her late start today would mean that she’d feel wide awake until deep into the night, leading her to read all the way into the early morning.

It was honestly understandable. We still hadn’t found the key to rectifying the distortion in this world—the key to terminating the phenomenon known as spercritica.

“I’m not adorable.”

I cleared my throat. “That was narration.”

Engaging in an exchange that we’d already repeated thousands of times, we climbed out of bed. *By the way, I’ll say this just so there aren’t any misunderstandings, but this isn’t one of those "waking up to chirping birds after a passionate night” tropes. I’ve managed to secure my unshakable status as a pig-shaped body pillow that’s sometimes even sent flying with Jess’s kicks when the night is no longer young.*

“Wait, whaaat?” Her eyes widened. “I accidentally kicked you again? I’m so sorry...” Despite her demure looks, Jess wasn’t the type to sleep peacefully.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t hurt at all, so it’s okay. In fact, I’d

even say it's somewhat like a reward."

"You're quite the *may-so-kissed*, Mister Pig."

My brethren, you must never impart strange words to an innocent maiden. Heed that warning.

Jess pulled open the curtains, revealing a boundless, light amber sky. By now, I'd totally gotten used to the whimsical color balance adjustments. Actually, I was even improvising one-liners every day using the sky color as a theme.

"In that case, please give me a few words about the look of the sky today," Jess said. "I will reply, 'That's right, Mister Pig,' so please follow it up with the weather forecast. All right. Ready, action."

"What fine weather we have today, folks. The sky is refreshing, like a lemon."

"That's right, Mister Pig!"

"Now, we've got some rain coming up just past noon, so for those who don't like lemon on your fried karaage chicken, you better bring an umbrella with you."

Silence.

Jess didn't seem like she was very entertained. She inclined her head slightly with a skeptical expression. "Um, may I ask what *cara-agay* is?"

Oh. I gotta start from there? "Karaage's a highly popular food in the country I'm from, and well, to put it simply, it's a dish where you deep-fry seasoned meat such as chicken in a relatively light coating. Most karaage in stores comes with a lemon slice. If you squeeze the juice over the meat, it neutralizes the greasy taste and is delectable, but as you'd expect, some people don't like this addition. That's why when you share karaage between several people, it's kind of etiquette to check with everyone whether it's okay to squeeze the lemon over everything. That said, you can still often come across people who squeeze lemon over the karaage without asking, which causes the type of people who prefer no lemons to be displeased. Well, the point is, I used this cultural background as the basis for my weather forecast earlier."

Can there be a more excruciating type of torture than being forced to explain your one-liner?

Jess blinked slowly. “Um, sorry... I’m afraid I don’t quite get it.”

“I’m the one at fault here, so please don’t apologize. I’m going to feel even more miserable.”

“That’s not true. I’m so sorry. It’s all because I lack comprehension skills. I’m sure what you said was honestly very funny. It’s my bad for not being able to understand your humor.”

Guys, can I start crying already? “No, I don’t think it was that amusing. Don’t take it to heart, really.”

“...Ah, ah ha ha ha ha, I think I’m somehow starting to get your joke! It’s hilarious!”

Jess, I know you’re laughing out of consideration for my feelings, but your kindness is suffocating me instead!

Our stilted conversation, which had stemmed from my subpar one-liner, finally ended with Jess’s single angelic statement, “Let’s enjoy that *cara-agay* you mentioned together one day.”

“By the way, Jess, I’ve got an update about those dreams.”

Jess began changing clothes on the opposite side of the bed. Meanwhile, I was lying on the floor, ensuring I didn’t see anything. Upon hearing my question, the rustling of clothes ceased.

After a pause, she replied, “Do you mean those dreams where you heard Miss Blaise’s voice?”

“Yep. I’ve got good news and bad news... Which one do you want to hear first?”

Following a lengthy while of contemplation, Jess made her choice. “The good news first, then.”

“To tell you the truth, last night, the dream I had was remarkably more lucid than usual, and—”

Jess could hear my thoughts, but her abilities apparently didn’t extend to seeing my dreams. I reported back to the beautiful maiden about my conversation with my ampigos, including Sanon, about Blaise, who’d made this dream possible, and the fact that she seemed to have teleported to Japan.

If you extracted our silly otaku drivel, it was quite a straightforward series of events. Blaise had wished to go to my former world before her death, and her prayers had been answered.

Through this, she was maintaining a connection between the two worlds, which worked out in my favor.

Jess placed a hand on her chest. "That means... Miss Blaise is in your world right now."

The sounds of her getting changed hadn't resumed at all during my explanation. Though I wanted to talk face-to-face with her, I'd likely end up catching sight of...*other* areas as well, so I stayed where I was and continued. "Sounds like it, yeah. Assuming my dream was real, that is."

"That's...very delightful news! Did she seem to be in good health?"

"Yeah. She was pretty energetic." *Her chest was as large as ever too.*

"I see..." Jess's tone lowered somewhat. It must be because she was reminiscing upon Blaise's last moments. "No, I'm afraid it's because you were thinking about the size of her chest, Mister Pig."

"Sorry about that."

She hesitated. "But I must admit that, even now, I'd recall what happened back then from time to time. If it weren't for Miss Blaise, I'm certain I wouldn't have been able to leave the Needle Woods in one piece."

Blaise had sacrificed her life to protect Jess. If she hadn't perished—if the Yethma hunters hadn't mistakenly assumed that the deceased Blaise was Jess—there was a chance that they might have pursued the maiden much more tenaciously during that battle.

Gratitude filled my heart. "Even in the Abyssus, Blaise's prayers helped us. We can't thank her enough."

"Right. It's also thanks to the rumors she shared that we were able to locate the true hiding place of the First Collar."

Without that hint, perhaps the door to the Yethma's liberation would have been closed to us forever.

The time we'd spent together during our journey had been brief, and the words we'd exchanged had been just as scarce. Nevertheless, Blaise's imprint on our lives hadn't been insignificant. In fact, I could even declare that she'd left a remarkable, lasting impact. *She's almost like a large, breathtaking sunflower that's in full*

bloom under the sun.

Jess narrowed her eyes. "What are you referring to?"

"...The impact she left on us."

"I see."

Her tone was terrifying. It was unfortunate because I most definitely wasn't thinking about breasts or anything along those lines. I paused, deciding to use an evasion tactic. "Ah, right! If you've got any messages for her, I can pass them along if I have the same dream again."

The maiden's voice grew cheery. "Really?" Then, gloom abruptly took over her features. "But...what should I say to her?"

"I mean... You just say what you want to say. Anything's fine."

"Miss Blaise is someone who willingly sacrificed her life for my sake. What in the world are the right things to say to a person to whom I owe so much? I...don't know what might be appropriate."

True, choosing the ideal statement would be a challenge. When I'd come face-to-face with Blaise, I'd been tongue-tied. *It's not just because of her majestic chest, not in the least.* "Good question. It would be unthinkable to say something like 'Thanks for dying for our sake.' At the same time, telling her that we didn't want her to die for our sake isn't quite right either..."

"Agreed."

Blaise's untimely death was the last thing we'd wanted. But it was what *she'd* wanted. She'd known all the consequences and accepted them before protecting us and losing her life in the process. Meanwhile, we'd been forced to witness her death while finding all of it unacceptable the entire time. Her story had been decided for her from the very beginning—fixed to the point that nothing would change no matter how hard we struggled.

There were pathetically few words we could say to someone whose destiny had been set in stone.

I slowly exhaled. "Well, you know, you could, I mean, update her on how you're doing. For example, what life's like for you right now."

"That's true. Please tell her that the two of us are living together happily and energetically, thanks to her."

"Got it." Though it would sound like I was bragging about my

relationship in an extremely aggravating manner, it was likely much better than discussing Blaise's death. "If I end up having another dream, I'll keep you in the loop."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Even now, there was no rustling of clothes. It appeared that Jess was absorbed in the topic of my dreams.

A moment of silence. "So, what's the bad news that you mentioned?"

I opened my mouth to speak, then mulled over it for a moment. "Hang on... What was it again?"

"Hey..." She sounded miffed.

Though she should have been getting changed right now, I heard her walking toward me, so I hurriedly got back on track. "Kento mentioned a strange word in his dream. Something about Ginnokis, if I remember that right."

The sound of Jess's footsteps stilled. "Ginnokis?"

"Have you heard of it before?"

"No... I only know it literally means to invite someone to migrate elsewhere, but that's it."

Frowning slightly, I replied, "Gotcha. The thing is, the royal court is apparently calling all Yethma to return to the royal capital."

I gave her a succinct summary of what I'd heard from Kento.

I concluded, "But we didn't know what was going on at all, did we? This isn't a good omen. The world has started to shift gears—while leaving us behind. We need to procure accurate and up-to-date information."

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "It's true that ever since we no longer had the opportunity to speak with Mister Shravis, we've become utterly blind about the situation outside the capital."

"Right? That's why I figured we could do some digging into that today. How does that sound? Before anything else, I want to contact Kento through a method other than my dreams. If he also remembers the same dream, it would prove that my dream of Blaise wasn't just my imagination. If the dream is reality, I'll be able to exchange information with Kento through such dreams no matter what kind of situation we're in."

"I think so too! It sounds like a plan to me!"

When I nodded and turned around to face her, Jess was, unfortunately, still in an outrageous state of undress.

After a late breakfast—more like early lunch—we headed to the bird-breeding coop. We'd visited it a long time ago to dispatch a letter with Jess's fragrance to Naut.

Though it was called a "coop," it was more like an aviary in a zoo. A grand variety of birds were being kept in sections partitioned by wire mesh.

The area we had our eye on was the birds of prey section. The facility had been built at a relatively high altitude with good ventilation inside the royal capital, meaning that frosty winds howled as they swept across the aviary. Standing motionlessly on their perches, the birds ruffled their feathers until they were round like sweet dumplings to help brave the late winter chill.

"Would you like to use an owl this time too?" Jess asked as she walked toward the snowy owl perched like a statue on a log. Its round eyes brimmed with anticipation, and it gazed in her direction.

I shook my head fervently. "Nope, no can do. That's one cheeky owl. It's got a criminal record of nipping playfully at your ear."

"Aw, what's wrong with that? It's adorable." With her delicate index finger, Jess stroked the snowy owl's abdomen. Looking delighted, the owl clicked its beak audibly.

I narrowed my eyes. "Owls are supposed to be nocturnal, aren't they? Making them work during the day is not a good idea."

"Mister Pig..." Curious, Jess turned toward me. "Are you perhaps *jealous*?"

"Never. Who'd get all jealous because of a mere bird?"

Giggling with amusement, Jess stopped stroking the snowy owl. "By the way, this white owl is apparently an exception. It's diurnal."

"Really?"

"Yes. I read it in an illustrated encyclopedia owned by the royal court. According to the book, it comes from a place where there's no night in summer."

Ah, that explains it. Snowy owls were originally birds in the Arctic Circle, which had white nights. Their white feathers were a natural

camouflage meant for snowy fields. They'd likely adapted to seasons without nights and gradually gained the ability to be out and about during the day as well. *Of course, this reasoning would only apply to my home world.*

I was intrigued. "Would that mean this bird came from somewhere outside Mesteria?"

"Probably, yes." She nodded. "Nowadays, people who travel far into the ocean can never return for all eternity, but it's believed that until prehistoric times, we interacted with places outside our waters."

"Huuuh." That was news to me. I was dying to know what had happened in between, but it would lead us down a rather unnecessary tangent, so I decided to stop the topic here for now.

My sore loser side got the better of me, so I decided to enlist the snowy owl again. *I-It's not like I'd get jealous or anything just because it nibbled Jess's ear! Hmph!*

Or, at least, this choice was my way of proving that thought.

Jess tied the letter for Nourris, which I'd requested her to write, to the bird's leg before releasing it on a rooftop with a spectacular view. During our movement from the coop to the high ground, the pesky bird had perched on Jess's shoulder and nuzzled against her cheek with its fluffy body. *Once it comes back safely with the reply, I think we're due for a grilled poultry party.*

On our way to the library from the breeding coop, Jess asked hesitantly, "I wonder... If Mister Shravis is truly pressing forward with that Ginnokis movement, what exactly are his motivations?"

We descended a flight of stairs, which looked like they'd been carved into whitish rock. Vertical, bare stone surrounded us on both sides. The only things I could spot were little caverns here and there where barrels and wooden crates had been placed—I didn't sense a single soul nearby.

The topic of our conversation was rather sensitive. Jess must have considered that when choosing to start this discussion here.

"Could you clarify what you mean by 'his motivations'?" I asked.

"If he is purely inviting Yethma, who have been freed from their collars, into the royal capital and sheltering them unconditionally...it's quite a wonderful gesture. Within this city, the amount of danger

they will face plummets significantly. This would mean that Mister Shravis is displaying a willingness to meet the Liberators halfway."

I nodded. "It also matches the royal court's stance that leaving mages unchecked in the wild is risky."

Merely two weeks had passed since the Yethma's liberation. We hadn't left the bounds of the royal capital even once after our return, partly because we couldn't use the dragon that had been a handy method of transportation. On our way back to the capital, we'd passed a few towns but hadn't seen any apparent change. That said, it might have been because the ongoing abnormal disaster—spercritica—stood out so much that everything else paled in comparison.

According to Jess, even after all the collars were removed, gaining the ability to wield magic within the span of a week or so was highly unlikely. The change wouldn't be dramatic, but it would be something people would need to accept and adapt to slowly. We shared that kind of optimistic outlook.

That was why Jess and I poured our energy into a more fundamental issue: communicating with Shravis.

"Mister Shravis doing a good thing is something we should celebrate," Jess said. "But if that's the case..." Her steps ground to a halt. A red brick wall ahead of us blocked the rest of the path. "If that's the case...why wouldn't Mister Shravis let us see him?"

We were finding this kind of brick wall everywhere, almost as if it were encircling the royal palace. By the time we'd returned to the capital roughly a week ago, these structures had already been in place.

We could enter the section of the palace where Jess's room was located. However, the corridor that led to the area where Shravis resided was blocked off with the same kind of gapless brick wall.

The blockade left no crevices—and no openings to exploit. Even when we tried to invade from above, we'd bump into one such wall at some point no matter which route we took, a testament to Shravis's impeccable knowledge of the royal capital's layout. We'd tried using all sorts of hidden passages, but every attempt had led us to a dead end. Jess's endeavors to destroy the walls with her

magic had been equally futile. And that was because...

"*Flamma: Plodo*," Jess chanted, thrusting out her right hand. A colossal clump of liquid fuel spurted forward vigorously.

Upon impact with the brick wall, the mass of fuel splattered everywhere. It ignited instantaneously, which was followed by an extraordinary explosion down the path. Thunderous roaring and the furious blast reached us almost simultaneously, but Jess's magic defended us against all the violent winds. My eardrums tingled and went numb.

While I was cowering like a scaredy pig, Jess walked to ground zero with decisive footsteps. You could tell how used she was to this scene. Though it wasn't like we had a quota of one explosion per day, we tirelessly attempted to demolish the walls every day, just like this.

During Jess's march, the bricks in her vicinity, which had crumbled from the blast, began drifting into the air. She flicked up both hands, and all the floating debris was fired with a cannonball-like momentum, unleashing a relentless follow-up barrage on the wall. The sound of projectiles slicing through the air almost reminded me of a fighter jet.

After such an onslaught of attacks, a barrier with the durability of a normal castle wall should have been completely pulverized. Unfortunately, what I saw ahead of us was still a study brick wall. Though a large chunk of it had been gouged out, Jess hadn't been able to penetrate any part of it all the way through—not even a hole the size of the eye of a needle. Not only did it boast an unbelievable thickness, but it was also reinforced with magic. On top of that, the smashed fragments steadily returned to the hollowed out part and began self-repairs, as if someone were rewinding a video.

Jess sighed. "Looks like there's no chance of breaking through this one either. Let's try again when we have the chance."

She returned to my side. Together, we retraced our steps up the path we'd taken.

A literal bulky wall separated us and the king, Shravis.

As we searched for other paths, I gave Jess's question some thought. "This might sound silly, but there's a chance that he's

simply feeling fainthearted."

Jess blinked. "Fainthearted...?"

"Though Sanon's ultimately at fault for carrying through with his coup, it's technically Shravis's arbitrary decision that led to our current situation. Knowing him, he must be thinking that he's responsible for making his close aide and mother choose death. Maybe fainthearted isn't the right word—I wouldn't be surprised at all if he feels too guilty to see us out of self-condemnation."

His prized tactic that should have solved everything, the Cross Executioner murders, had failed because people close to him had dug out the truth, leading to the worst possible outcome. *And...we were the very people who did it.*

Jess pressed her lips into a tight line. "But considering the excruciatingly difficult position he was forced into, I'm sure that anyone in his shoes would make a wrong choice in due time, regardless of what kind of mistake it may be. He suddenly became king in a world that's been thrown into chaos. Without anyone to turn to for help, he was forced to be the rope in a tug-of-war between the royal court and the Liberators who advocated for opposing policies. No matter how I think about it, no one can say it's all Mister Shravis's fault."

She was serious about her statement. I could tell she was doing everything in her power to stand up for Shravis. I had to agree that such a little sister would be the most heartening ally in the world.

"Of course, I feel the same way. While it's true that he was too hasty, Shravis's plan was remarkably pragmatic when you looked at it from another perspective. If you were to ask someone to come up with a solution to break out of the deadlock other than his, even I would draw a blank. But that guy's sincere and responsible to a fault. He isn't capable of pushing the blame for the current situation onto someone else. He's the type who takes everything onto his own shoulders, whether it's his burden or not."

Jess was also a responsible person like him, so she could likely empathize. She placed a hand on her chest and hung her head. "I... I should have done something more to support him. It wasn't nearly enough."

"I have to agree. We should have marched up to his side and offered him a shoulder to lean on much, much earlier."

We turned at a fork in the path and entered a cramped tunnel. Petite lanterns shed light on the path ahead of us.

I cast my eyes down briefly. "But we failed. So, even if it's too late, we'll dedicate our everything to doing that for him."

Jess nodded with determination. "Yes."

If we couldn't break through the physical barrier between us, our sole choice was to take down the psychological barrier instead.

The end of the tunnel led to a plaza near the library. On the other side of unruly trees and shrubs that had been left to grow unchecked was the dignified, solemn building we were headed for.

When we weren't fumbling around for a way to see Shravis, we spent most of our time here, looking for a way to end spercritica—for a way to restore normality to this world, which was fusing with the world of desires.

The cause that had triggered spercritica was already clear: It was because all the 128 Contract Stakes within Mesteria had been consumed. *It's because...*we *used them all up.*

The Contract Stakes were crystals that bestowed magical powers upon humans. Whenever they were driven into a human's body, the magical forces that influenced this world became greater and greater. To put it another way, the Abyssus—the world of desires—and the world of reality had been gradually linked together by the stakes, almost as if someone were hammering in one nail at a time.

We'd been oblivious to this mechanism of the world. This ignorance had led us to use the last stake to vanquish the most atrocious king, a final nail in the coffin, so to speak. As a result, we'd reached the limit of the worlds' fusion, leading to spercritica—the two worlds overlapping and melting into each other.

Trying to resolve the situation was no different from blindly searching for a needle in a haystack. At some point in our research, it felt like we were completely stumped with no leads, but there were still numerous texts—ones dating back to before the Dark Ages—that featured the Contract Stakes. Right now, we were aimlessly

reading through them one by one.

As usual, the library's interior was dim and tranquil. I didn't sense anyone else's presence—or at least, that was what I thought until my pig's snout told me something wasn't quite right.

I could tell for certain that I'd smelled this scent before if my nose wasn't playing tricks on me. But never once had I encountered it in the library.

Hurriedly, I sniffed Jess's legs. I frowned. "It's a bit similar, but not identical. This isn't Jess's scent."

"Don't suddenly sniff my legs, please."

"Sorry, but it's an emergency. I'm doing this because it's necessary."

After sniffing the back of Jess's knees again, my heart calmed down thanks to her dulcet, charming aroma. *All right, let's think over this rationally.*

I picked up the smell of someone other than Jess. It felt familiar and resembled Jess somewhat, but it didn't feel as enchanting as Jess's. It's got to be a dude. Which means...

I marked my thought-speech with angle brackets. <<Shravis might be nearby.>>

Jess turned around, her eyes wide. <Really?>

<<Yeah. I can smell someone. I think it's Shravis. The smell's very fresh.>>

<If you figured that out, may I ask why you're still sniffing my legs, Mister Pig?>

<<My bad, it's a calming aroma, so I just, well...>>

Pulling away the tip of my nose from Jess's legs, I raised my face and gave her a signal. I walked in the lead and followed what should be Shravis's scent trail. Like a police dog handler, Jess walked a step behind me.

The scent made a beeline for the deepest part of the library—the area reserved for royalty, which Jess and I frequented. I didn't know whether he had business with us or the archive. In the latter's case, he might still be busy searching through the books.

If Shravis had been willing to come out from his wall, it was a heaven-sent opportunity.

Successfully activating the biometric lock, Jess opened the door of iron bars. After walking through, she closed it behind her back. The lock clicked into place.

It was a noticeably cramped section. We'd manage to corner Shravis if he was still around.

I focused on my nose. I could definitely smell him. The air here didn't change to a new batch that quickly, so he'd also left other faint traces.

However, the youth in question was no longer anywhere to be seen. I narrowed my eyes. "Seems like we were a step too late. He's already left. Do you want to try chasing him?"

"Of course."

We immediately turned on our heels and left the library. I sniffed the cobblestone paving. "His body odor hasn't dissipated yet. I think I might be able to track him down."

"Let's do it! This is our big chance!"

Commanding my trotters to sprint as fast as they could, I pursued Shravis's scent trail. I turned a corner, cut across a big street, and pressed on. *I've managed to follow him quite far. He might still be around.*

That hope, however, was snuffed out when the scent trail abruptly cut off.

I scanned my surroundings. It was a straight back alley. The path was direct, with no branching roads or entrances to buildings.

Jess looked up and sighed. The only thing we could see through the gaps between the buildings was the yellow sky. "Did he possibly fly up from here?"

"Or maybe he floated his feet above the ground so he wouldn't leave his scent."

Shravis had used that method to hide his involvement even during the Cross Executioner murders.

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "Is Mister Shravis...that determined to avoid us?"

I hesitated. "Well, it's a natural reaction for someone in his shoes."

I sniffed around the vicinity for a while but couldn't find any

leads.

Shravis wasn't an idiot. If he didn't want us to find him, I probably couldn't bet on the fact that he'd carelessly left behind clues.

We made a U-turn and returned to the library. Assuming that Shravis had indeed visited the section reserved for royalty, we might find some kind of lead there.

Not long after, we discovered a single envelope on the middle of the desk that featured tall stacks of books for investigation. The envelope was made of paper, its snow-white color akin to that of Jess's underwear—it most certainly belonged to the royal family.

Glancing at me with scrutinizing eyes, Jess crouched down while being mindful of her skirt and presented the envelope before my eyes. Nothing was written on it, but the lingering scent matched that of this section's recent visitor.

"It's a letter from Shravis," I reported.

Jess pressed on it. "There seems to be some kind of metallic object inside!"

"Let's open it right away."

The maiden manifested a piece of metal in the shape of a paper knife out of thin air, almost like she was performing a magic trick. She carefully unsealed the envelope. What slid out were a single piece of white paper and a slender, silver chain that formed a bracelet. On the paper was elegant script written in black ink, which depicted the following succinct message:

I found the method to dispel spercritica.

The cause is the Contract Stake that is pinning the two worlds together. Therefore, we only need the person who houses the stake within her body to disappear.

I have already sent a notice to the Liberators to offer Ceres up to the royal court immediately.

In the event you discover her location, contact me with this bracelet.

It took a long while before my brain could comprehend the letter's content.

Shravis had written, “The person who houses the stake within her body.” During our expedition to the Send-Off Island, we’d stabbed Ceres with a Contract Stake to lift the fatal curse she’d shouldered in Naut’s stead. My mind went to the other people who’d been pierced with the stakes.

Hortis, who’d been struck by the Destruction Spear with a Contract Stake at its core, had passed away long ago. The Arcanist, whose immortality had been dispelled by the Contract Stake hidden within the Salvation Chalice, had died at Shravis’s hands.

Except for these three stakes, all the remaining ones had been used up before and during the era of Vatis, the royal court’s founder. Based on what we knew, all survivors from that era should have already died out.

In a hushed voice, Jess muttered, “If you look at it that way, Mister Shravis might be right. It could be said that Miss Ceres is the last person who houses a Contract Stake within her body.”

I was equally as lost about what to say as I whispered, “But if what Shravis wrote here is true, then that means...”

I didn’t finish my sentence. However, even if neither of us spelled it out, Jess and I silently shared a bleak hypothesis. Assuming that the requirement to terminate spercritica was the disappearance of everyone who housed a stake within them...

To return this world to its original state, Ceres had to be erased from it.

Shravis had likely requested that the Liberators offer her up for this very purpose. *And he left this letter for us because...*

I lowered my eyes. “Shravis probably deemed that there’s a high chance we might be able to get in touch with Ceres. That’s why he left the letter despite refusing to meet us in person. He wants to capture Ceres, and Ceres alone, by any means necessary.”

“How did it come to this...?” Jess whispered hoarsely.

I’d never felt more anxious that we couldn’t see Shravis face-to-face. *What in the world is he trying to do? What plans does he have for Ceres after capturing her? Don’t tell me... I don’t even want to consider this possibility, but could he be...?*

I didn’t dare finish that thought.

Chewing on her bottom lip, Jess picked up the bracelet. "Let's try contacting him." A coin-shaped silver plate was attached to the chainlike bracelet, almost like the dial of a wristwatch. A tiny green jewel was embedded into the plate's center.

She inspected it. "This...is a common magical gadget that's crafted in the royal capital. Inserting a green rista can deliver your voice to another bracelet paired with it." As Jess spoke, she put the bracelet around her left wrist. The metal clasp wasn't too complicated, but possibly because she was flustered, it took her a few tries to secure it.

When she finally linked the chain, it fit her like a glove—no, that wording would be slightly misleading. By "fit her like a glove," I'd meant it in the literal sense. It coiled tightly against her skin and was barely large enough not to constrict her circulation.

Jess pressed the rista down with her finger, and the bracelet glowed a faint green. She called out to him immediately. "Mister Shravis! Can you hear me, Mister Shravis?!"

We waited for a while, but there was no reply. Jess released her finger, and the bracelet's shine died out instantly.

After that, we attempted to get a response from him in all sorts of ways, but none of them had borne fruit. We'd even tried lying to him that we'd found Ceres, but we'd already tried to call him countless times just to get his attention before then, so it'd likely been way too obvious.

We decided to take a break before trying again, but ultimately, we had to give up. Jess chose to remove the rista but kept the bracelet on her wrist. She folded up the letter and tucked it into her skirt.

Just once is enough, I thought despondently. *If he'd let us talk to him, even once, then...*

Such thoughts swirled gloomily within my heart, haunting me like a nightmare.

My nonsensical weather report ended up being accurate, for it began raining just past noon. Tuning into the rhythmical humming of raindrops, we continued our investigation in the library. However, partly because of the news about Ceres, our hearts were in our

throats the entire time. Our progress, which had been undesirable from the beginning, was practically a big, fat zero today.

Shravis seems to be trying to capture Ceres. According to him, he's already sent a notice to the Liberators about it. If that's true...people like Naut must be flying into a rage right now.

Regrettably, there was too little we could do. Because of that, our only option was to at least keep searching for a way Ceres didn't have to disappear—even if we didn't know whether such a method existed.

During this quest, the higher librarian elder, Vivis, appeared before us. She was an elderly woman with long, straight silver hair. On her right middle finger gleamed the golden ring that was solely bequeathed to the king's closest aides. Usually, she'd be wearing a faint, meaningful smile, but today, she looked somewhat lost in thought.

As she approached us, she asked, "You have received the letter, yes?"

Jess and I didn't know how to respond. We'd lifted our gaze from the book when she'd emerged and were now awkwardly frozen in that position.

Vivis closed her eyes briefly. "It must have been about the girl called Ceres, yes?"

"May I ask how you learned of the letter's content?" Jess asked cautiously.

Vivis had the special right to enter this area. She might have overheard our voices or thoughts—Jess was probably considering such a scenario.

The older woman smiled wistfully. "I was the one who did the research for His Majesty, after all."

"Huh...?" For a moment, Jess was speechless. In the next, she leaned forward vigorously and asked, "Madame Vivis, are you saying that you have been seeing Mister Shravis in person?"

"But of course. I'm one of his closest aides, which only consists of three people now." She pulled over a chair and quietly sat down. It appeared that she wished to talk to us about something.

"Um, excuse me!" Jess exclaimed frantically. "If it's not too much

to ask, could you please help persuade Mister Shravis to see us?”

Looking somewhat apologetic, Vivis shook her head in response to Jess’s desperate plea. “My deepest apologies, but I can’t do that. Even if it would be for the good of His Majesty, I cannot go against his will.” Her bony finger reached out to caress her golden ring, looking as if it were an absent-minded gesture. “I shudder to think about what happened to those close to Sito after that day...”

I was too terrified to ask her for the details of their fate.

Sito was the former commanding officer elder who’d attempted to assassinate Shravis under Sanon’s instigation. Originally, he’d been one of the new king’s closest aides like Vivis, but he’d almost been killed after his betrayal and had lost his left leg. He was a fugitive even now. If the royal court ever discovered the man, only one fate awaited him: execution.

When Queen Vatis’s husband had been assassinated long ago, the culprit and all the suspects had been sentenced to death without exception, alongside their entire families and followers. Their bodies had been petrified into stone and were scattered all around the capital as decorations, even today. This was the hefty price one would pay for turning their hostility on the royal family.

Vivis continued, “Today, I’m here because I have an important message for the two of you.” Her gaze flitted toward the shining bracelet around Jess’s wrist for a split second.

The beautiful maiden gulped audibly before nodding solemnly. “What might it be?”

Letting out a deep sigh, Vivis slowly spoke up. “It seems that the theory about the Contract Stake is accurate. To end the ongoing spercritica, we must obliterate the stake left behind in the body of that girl, Ceres, from this world entirely. And at the moment, there is merely a single method to achieve that.”

She didn’t explain further, but I wanted confirmation, so I asked her, “What might it be?”

“Young Ceres’s death.”

Glancing to my side, I saw Jess’s shoulders tremble. I couldn’t afford to cry—not yet. “Is there no other way?”

She inclined her head. “I hear that she’s a close friend of you

two. I'm sorry to say this, but we haven't discovered any other methods so far."

I narrowed my eyes. "But you mentioned 'so far,' ma'am. That means there is a chance we might find one in the future, yes?"

"I...can't fully deny that, theoretically, there could be such a possibility out there, of course."

Though she didn't refute my statement, her answer was as close to a no as humanly possible.

Sniffling, Jess spoke up. "Sorry, but... How can you be so certain that Miss Ceres's death is necessary in the first place? I have searched through countless reference books, and none of them mentioned anything along the lines of the death of someone housing a stake..."

Vivis nodded. "That is only natural. How could anyone in this world know a reliable method to end a phenomenon that's happening for the very first time in our history? The answer we seek could never be hidden within the writing of the people in *our* world."

I struggled to process her words. "Then, are you possibly implying that the answer was within a book written by someone who wasn't from this world?"

Sanon, Kento, and I were people from another world. Was she saying that there were other teleporters like us?

She hesitated. "You must know of the man called Ruta as well. He was Lady Vatis's husband—a man who possessed an otherworldly power to perceive the location of Contract Stakes with his eyes. Despite being resurrected from the dead like you were, he disappeared into the western wilderness, leaving his wife and son behind. He is a figure shrouded in enigma."

Jess and I nodded. Of course we'd know that name—in fact, we'd even gone on a treasure hunt while carrying that man's eyeball around with us.

For that very reason, Vivis's next words stunned me speechless. "Ruta, you see, actually hailed from a foreign world."

My eyes widened. For a good while, I wasn't able to react, and the same could be said for Jess. Our brains needed time to come to terms with that statement.

When my thoughts finally stopped stuttering, I muttered in a daze, “Are you saying that...he came from the world I’m from?”

The librarian shook her head. “I believe he wasn’t from your world. After all, based on the records, he was able to use magic even before coming to Mesteria.”

In other words, Ruta wasn’t from this world or the world I was born in—he had come from a completely different universe.

Vivis continued, “Just like how your world ended up gaining a connection with Mesteria, our world has been linked to a separate one since prehistoric times. Lady Vatis wrote in her records that Ruta came from such a place. The blood of someone from a foreign world is mixed within the royal family’s blood.”

Jess’s eyes grew wide. Then, like she was trying to gloss over something briefly, she asked, “Um... Were there Contract Stakes in Mister Ruta’s birth world as well?”

“Indeed. On top of that, the exact phenomenon Mesteria is going through right now had already happened in his birth world. According to him, it was apparently said to be an event from roughly a millennium ago. In other words, Ruta’s world has already experienced spercritica—and resolved it as well.”

“So, Mister Ruta knew of the solution...” Jess muttered.

“That appears to be the case, yes. After hearing about spercritica from Ruta, Lady Vatis penned it down in her collection of personal notes. That book is only passed down to the king of each generation, so until I humbly borrowed it from His Majesty, I wasn’t even aware of its existence.”

Vivis sorrowfully shook her head and continued, “So far, the only reliable means we have is the one written in her notes. The one single method we can depend on is to sacrifice that girl. Of course, I’m still searching for other measures, but there is no doubt that before I can make any progress, that young Ceres”—she dragged out a long, long sigh—“will meet an unfortunate end at the hands of our king.”

After dinner, Jess and I walked across the gardens of the royal palace. It was an area with a somewhat oppressive atmosphere where plants, trimmed evenly to the point of perfection with magic,

were arranged in an orderly fashion. The sky had gone dark, but the heavy clouds had remained. Even now, cold rain sprinkled down on us. Within the darkness, Jess's floating magical lights whimsically illuminated our surroundings.

As for why we were here, birds delivering letters addressed to the royal palace were trained to return to the coop located in this garden. We wanted to check for a reply.

"If we consult Mister Ruta, we might find a better resolution that doesn't involve Miss Ceres's death," Jess said.

"I mean, he's the only person who might know, but..." I trailed off. "He's a person who perished a long time ago. How are we even supposed to talk to him?"

Jess knitted her brows together. "Mister Pig... Are you saying that we should give up on Miss Ceres?" I could hear the bewilderment in her voice.

I shook my head. "No way, never. If there's a possibility we can avoid her death, no matter how slim it might be, I'll gamble on it for sure. But the problem is, even if I want to gamble on that one-in-a-million chance, we need time before all else."

"Time..."

"Shravis's rushing things. He wants to restore normality in this world as soon as possible. That's why he sent us a letter even though he's refusing to see us. Knowing the Liberators, if Shravis suddenly demands they hand over Ceres after everything that's happened, they're going to revolt for sure. The situation is balanced on a blade's edge, and if we leave it to develop on its own, it will go from bad to worse."

"You're right..." Jess placed a hand on her chest. "Where should we even start? What do we do?"

"Stop Shravis," I said bluntly. "If we can't do that, then we'll prioritize guaranteeing Ceres's safety."

"And we'll search for a way to save her on top of that, yes?"

I shrugged. "It's the only choice we've got."

Arriving at the dark bird coop, Jess turned on the lights. The shape of a snowy owl was lit up in the dim illumination. Its round eyes were fixed in our direction. I looked down—a letter had been

tied to its leg.

"Mister Pig!" Jess exclaimed.

"Looks like we've got a reply."

We got our hopes up slightly. In our letter, we'd written about the dream and requested that they tell us about their recent affairs. Assuming that the reply from Kento—who was with the Liberators—contained information about their circumstances, perhaps we might find a clue that would help us break out of the tense dilemma.

However, all that was written in the letter was a single line that consisted of an outlandish series of characters strung together.

Merlin's beard.

Jess blinked. "Um... This says... *Marin's* beard? What in the world...? I can't make any sense of it."

"That's because it's part of the world-building of a different universe. There's no wizard called Merlin in Mesteria."

"Huh...?" Unable to make heads or tails of my statement, Jess furrowed her brows and gave me a confused look.

I should take this conversation seriously. Ahem.

"This series of characters is good news. The dream I had was genuine. Kento also shared the same dream. And likely, Blaise has truly gone to our world," I explained.

"Um... Oh..." It seemed like Jess still had doubts, but after some contemplation, she nodded. "If that's what you say, Mister Pig, then it must be true."

"Yep. The problem is that this piece of news is the only thing I can glean from this letter. Why didn't Kento write a more detailed message instead of only sending such a code to us?"

Though Jess couldn't make sense of the text, she inspected the letter and thought over her observations. "Considering Mister Kento's appearance, he wouldn't be able to write any text. Someone from the Liberators must have written it on his behalf. Perhaps the writer didn't grant him permission to write more."

That's true. From the Liberators' perspective, it's a letter addressed to an enemy's close affiliates. They must want to avoid handing over any more than the bare minimum of information. "I see... Hey, could you let me smell it for a bit?"

Jess immediately held out the letter in front of my snout.

I leaned my nose closer to it. "I can smell Nourris's scent... Itsune's too. But the strongest smell of them all is, hmm... It's got to be a dude. It's familiar to me, but I can't pinpoint who exactly it is... It slightly reminds me of something citrusy."

"Oh. You can distinguish the scents of women right away, huh?" There was something frosty about her tone.

"I mean, y'know... I barely ever sniff guys, after all."

"So, you're a pig who constantly sniffs women."

"Never. Sniffing any woman other than you, Jess? Ridiculous. I can even swear by Vatis."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's what you claim, but just a while ago—"

"Ah! I remember now! It's Yoshu! That's right, this scent has got to be him!" Changing the subject, I analyzed the letter. "The strong smell that's lingering near the center of the paper belongs to Yoshu. He was probably the one who wrote the message. We know what Itsune's like—though she checked the letter just in case, she must have dumped the annoying work on her brother."

I frowned. "Still... That's weird. We addressed our letter to Nourris, so why wasn't she the one who wrote the reply?"

After a moment's hesitation, Jess spoke up. "Perhaps...Miss Nourris isn't very skilled at writing."

At her faltering tone, I abruptly recalled the circumstances surrounding Yethma. It had completely slipped my mind because Jess was a studious girl, but Yethma were treated as servants—if I were to be blunt, they were no different from slaves, just seemingly packaged in a nicer manner. Though Mesteria was a nation with a relatively high literacy rate for some reason, in a medieval-esque setting like this, I highly doubted all the Yethma could read and write.

In Jess's case, she was literate and possessed a good foundation of knowledge—like what she knew about history, for example—because she'd served the local governor.

On a whim, I continued sniffing the letter, and I noticed something. "That aside, there's a faint smell of something burnt."

"You mean...on the letter?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It smells like there's soot—or more like it's been exposed to smoke over an extended period."

"How curious..." Tilting her head, Jess commanded one of the magical lights to approach the snowy owl.

This was when a very belated realization dawned on us—soot was clinging to its feathers, which used to be a pristine white. The bird had turned into the color of ash so thoroughly that it was almost inconceivable that it used to be white.

Jess's eyes widened. "What?! Are you all right, little owl?" When she reached out to touch its feathers, the snowy owl clicked its beak, and its eyes still looked round and innocent. It seemed relaxed—it wasn't injured.

That said, why is it completely covered with soot? True, I was thinking about holding a grilled poultry party, but that doesn't mean it had to fly into the fire to get barbecued—it's not like a pig to a flame, after all.

A gentle breeze whimsically brushed against my cheek, and I realized something else. "Hey, Jess..." I muttered nervously.

"What's the matter?"

"Is it just me, or is there also a burning smell around here?"

She blinked. "Um... Is there?"

After returning the snowy owl to its home, we headed outside the coop. Though it was already March, the wind had yet to lose its frosty bite. Within it was the unmistakable smell of something on fire—no, trees on fire. It was a crisp odor, and after it became more potent, I realized that it reminded me of burning needle leaves.

Coniferous trees—likely an alarming number of them—were being engulfed by fire somewhere.

Jess gasped. "Mister Pig, look at the sky!"

I craned my neck to witness Jess's thi—to witness faint, scarlet light reflecting off the dark clouds. It was as if I were gazing at the clouds above the capital at night, illuminated by the light of civilization, from somewhere deep in the mountains.

I frowned. "We've seen the sky dress up in all kinds of weird colors, but the clouds have never lit up like that before, right?"

"It's a patch of sky in the east! Let's head over to see what's going on!"

Immediately, we sprinted out of the garden. We rushed down cobblestone paths, raced down the mazelike stairs, and ran past the cityscape underneath the gloomy night sky. Our destination was the slope on the eastern side of the capital—a plaza there offered a sweeping view of eastern Mesteria.

By the time we arrived, the capital citizens had already flooded the plaza. They were gazing outside the capital while making a great fuss. We weaved our way through the crowd and ran all the way to the edge of the slope.

Jess leaned over the marble railing while I poked my head through the gaps between the same railing. Both of us froze.

Someone tell me I'm dreaming...

We were both stunned speechless by the view beneath our eyes —the Needle Woods was on *fire*.

Underneath the overcast sky, the fire stretched out like a belt surrounding the royal capital. The wind that swept in from the east slowly but steadily nudged this belt toward the city. Black and white smoke, painted over with a splash of crimson from the luminous fire, swirled into each other as they climbed the night sky.

"What a disaster..." Jess's eyes were wide with shock. "How did this even...?"

I recalled how Naut had triumphantly bragged that he'd burn the Needle Woods to the ground one day. If this was a manufactured disaster, there was only one likely culprit: the Liberators. *As for their motive... Considering their timing, it's got to be about Ceres.*

Exhaling slowly, I said, "It looks like the situation's going from bad to worse, and fast."

There was no reaction at all from Jess, however, as if she'd been deaf to my words. Perhaps that was just how shocking the scenery was. I gazed up at her.

Jess turned to face me, her mouth still parted with astonishment and her face white as a sheet. "Mister Pig!" Without warning, she abruptly broke into a run.

I followed her without hesitation. "What is it?"

"I heard... I heard a voice! There's a voice calling me over and over."

As we navigated the gaps between the capital citizens who were unanimously making a racket, Jess relayed the voice to me as well. It was a telepathic voice that only Jess could hear, just like the time we'd found the imprisoned Blaise.

My breathing hitched. "Wait! Is that Ceres's voice?!"

"Yes, it has to be. She's very close to us—just outside the capital."

But why? I thought, incredulous. *Coming to the capital at a time like this—and in this situation, no less—is practically no different from suicide. We just discovered that the world would return to normal if she dies!*

Frantically rushing down the underground passages that were convoluted like an ant nest, Jess and I aimed for the outside world. The scenery was a monotony of cramped tunnels at first. Just as I thought it'd stay that way, we came across vast caverns where blood was splattered everywhere and what seemed to be natural caves that had been left mostly untouched.

But I didn't pay much attention to it. Rushing forward as quickly as possible, Jess and I left the bounds of the capital. We barely had anything with us but what we were carrying.

A shadowy forest welcomed us as we stepped outside the cliffs. Though the fire hadn't reached here yet, I spotted crimson flames blazing fiercely somewhere deep inside the forest—and it wasn't too far away.

I narrowed my eyes. "Where's Ceres? You can determine the direction of her voice, right?"

"Yes. This way." Gasping to steady her erratic breathing, Jess pointed forward. There was only darkness.

But time was something we couldn't afford to waste right now. If Ceres was somehow unlucky enough for the royal court's army to find her... I didn't dare to even *think* of the consequences.

"We're almost there!" Jess exclaimed. "Follow me, Mister Pig!"

"Right away!"

We kept sprinting and sprinting.

After what felt like an eternity, we discovered the person we'd

been looking for. A girl was sitting limply near the roots of a tree. She looked exhausted. Possibly because she was in a disguise, her rustic attire, which was different from usual, was tattered all over. Her hair was disheveled, and her face was smeared with mud and soot.

When she spotted us, she climbed onto her feet. Her arms and legs were all trembling helplessly.

What alarmed me more than anything else, however, was the fact that she was all alone. *Did she come all the way here by herself? She managed to brave the Needle Woods and make it out alive?*



Ceres must have suffered a lot on her journey. Jess threw her arms around the younger girl, and tears began spilling out of Ceres's eyes uncontrollably. Her feeble voice called out to us. "Please, Miss Jess... Mister Super-Virgin..."

"What happened?" Jess asked in a gentle, placating voice. "Why are you alone in a place like this?"

Ceres didn't move her head from Jess's shoulder. She stifled her own sobbing and shook her head again and again.

It was my first time seeing her like this. The maiden who used to remind me of a delicate fawn now had a powerful determination burning within her, spurring her to come this far.

Squeezing her hoarse voice past her throat, Ceres pleaded to us, "Please... I'm begging you, please..."

Her petite hands, which were gripping Jess's back, tightened.

She forced down her sobbing and begged in a trembling voice, "Please...kill me."

The Person I Admired, the Person I Wasn't Worthy Of

Even after all these years, I could remember the first time I saw those eyes as if it were yesterday. They were the bluest eyes I'd ever seen—though they reminded me of crystal clear water, they also had a depth to them that almost threatened to trap my heart forever.

"You're Ceres, aren't you?" the man had asked.

It was spring when I met him. Back then, I'd only just come to Baptsaze at the young age of eight. The man's curt voice was scary, so I remained crouched on the lawn, my eyes fixed on the ground. I wanted to run away the moment I found a chance, but my body had tensed up on its own, and my legs refused to move.

"I'm Naut. I'm a huntsman who's active around this area."

His name rang a bell. He was the person Madame Martha had mentioned. She'd called him a brilliant huntsman and the village's hero. Recalling that she'd said, "He's seriously a good boy to the bone," I raised my face out of curiosity.

Mister Naut's eyes pulled my wavering gaze over to them like a spell. He was a person with a most mysterious aura. Now that I had a good look at him, he was much younger than the man I'd imagined from Madame Martha's stories. But something about his expression was mature, dry, and cold. Only his eyes were misty with tenderness, and for some reason, it looked as if he was about to cry any moment now.

I was silent for a while, and Mister Naut asked me, "I heard you arrived here recently. How's things? Anything troubling you?"

I shook my head right away. I didn't want to say anything to anyone. Not anymore.

I was so miserable because I was doing something wrong. It was

my fault. That was why I didn't want anyone to do anything for me.

Mister Naut's gaze shifted to my surroundings. Then, it moved onto my arms, littered with wounds all over, which hugged my knees. Hearing his thoughts, I learned that he'd realized what had happened.

"Someone threw twigs at you, didn't they? Why did they do that?"

I didn't want to tell him. Since I couldn't run away, I turned away from him as much as possible.

Mister Naut's voice had sounded disinterested from the very beginning. If I ignored him, he would surely go elsewhere. That was what I had thought.

But instead, Mister Naut walked up to me and squatted down. "Tell me. I'll give you a hand if you do."

Those blue eyes captured me again. Those eyes that were misty like a fountain in contrast to his dry expression.

I'd never seen such eyes before.

I squeezed my voice past my trembling throat. "It's because...I'm a twig."

"'Scuse me? What're you even saying?" he replied instantly in a fierce tone.

My shoulders shrank reflexively. I couldn't suppress my instinctive fear at the voice of a man who'd reached the age where his voice broke and sounded somewhat gruff.

There was a pause. Mister Naut was kind enough to rephrase his words gently. "You mean that there are people around who call you a twig?"

His guess was on the mark. The children in the village called me "Twig."

Even though I was a Yethma, I couldn't do my work properly. I'd only been in this village for a short time, but I'd already caused trouble for all kinds of people. I didn't like eating, was scrawny, and had no strength. I couldn't carry heavy things. I'd drop and shatter plates of food. I'd trip over thin air.

I really disliked looking into a mirror. My thin limbs looked as if they were only skin and bones. Even my neck was thin—it looked

like it might snap at a moment's notice if someone grabbed my heavy Yethma collar. My legs often got injured, so I wasn't very good at standing up straight either. When I took off my clothes, I could see protruding bones pushing up my skin all over my body. Sometimes, people called me "Skeleton," and I had to agree. I was a twig and a skeleton.

I nodded honestly in response to Mister Naut's question. He looked somewhat appalled. I could hear his thoughts: *If they wanna toss twigs at something that won't fight back, why don't they throw stuff at trees instead?*

But he had it all wrong. After all, trees didn't have to work. Trees didn't cause other people trouble.

I shook my head. "It's all right. I'm the one to blame. It's because I'm clumsy and look like a twig and bones..."

"Oh, shuddap. That's what you say, but have you ever actually experienced becoming bones, huh?"

His tone was much firmer than earlier. Startled, I became even more scared of him. However, looking back now, comparing myself to bones was the one thing I shouldn't have said to Mister Naut.

There was a pause, and his voice became gentle again. "Don't ever put yourself down like that, all right?"

I could tell he was trying to show as much kindness as possible to someone hopeless like me and felt even more miserable. I made people around me angry all the time. I was the problem. It was only natural that they got mad at me. Making a kind person strain himself was more unpleasant than being yelled at.

It was then that I found my resolve. I decided I should actually run away from him this time.

But suddenly, he grabbed my chin, and my body froze.

Mister Naut guided my face until I was looking at him. "Your eyes remind me a lot of the eyes of the person I liked. They're clear, pure eyes without a hint of filth. Don't dirty them with tears. No matter what anyone says to you, don't mind their nonsense."

It was unbelievable. I'd never thought anyone would say such a thing to me.

I also hated my own eyes, on top of everything else. They were

unnecessarily large and would become watery with just a tiny breeze. They were eyes that made a coward like me look even more cowardly. I'd never imagined that one day, someone would praise them.

Silence. All words left my mind.

Mister Naut shrugged. "But, well, it's better for you to eat a little more. You're too thin." Grabbing my arm, he guided me to rise onto my feet. "If you keep that up, even your boobs won't get bigger, you know."

Though I was taken aback at his unusual statement that came out of nowhere, I followed him obediently as he pulled me along.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Mister Naut pointed at a cabin on the rear side of the inn. It was a rustic building assembled with logs. Though it had seemed like a storage room, it was equipped with a chimney, but I'd never seen smoke rising out of it before. Since I'd come to Baptsaze, I'd been wondering what precisely this cabin was used for.

"I just so happen to have some rabbit meat on hand," he explained. "I'll give you a treat. Follow me."

Though the cabin was cramped, it was cozy. Lots of well-maintained tools for hunting were hung on the wall. Beast pelts dangled down from a beam. But it had good ventilation and no feral, beastly odor. Instead, the refreshing scent of fir filled the room.

Lighting up a fire in the hearth, Mister Naut began grilling some rabbit meat, which he said was in season. "There's still snow in the forest around this time of year, so rabbits are easy to find 'cause they leave behind footprints."

He brought up a casual topic, and I was stumped. I was utterly convinced that the meat was just an excuse and that he would take me to the people who'd tossed twigs at me instead. I hadn't wanted that to happen, so I'd kept quiet initially.

But it seemed that Mister Naut had honestly just wanted to feed me some rabbit meat. He didn't mention the twigs again after the end of the earlier exchange.

Possibly because the firewood had been damp, it took a while for the meat to cook through. Within the cabin where the still-chilly

drafts of early spring snuck into, the two of us stared steadily at the fire.

As if the idea came to his mind on a whim, Mister Naut kindly said, "I've got plans of continuing my hunting with this general area as my base. When you're in trouble, feel free to call me whenever. I'll give you a hand."

Someone who had earned the name of hero in this village at a young age went out of his way to say this for me.

After hesitating for a little while, I replied, "Thank you." The offer to call him whenever was daunting, and that was the only response I could find in my mind.

"I'll brush up on my skills and become strong enough to even hunt down bigger game one day, just you watch. When that day comes around, I'll give you a treat again, so look forward to it."

I knew for sure that he didn't think anything of someone like me. However, my heart still grew all warm at his kindness to a point that even I found unbelievable.

He said he'll give me a treat again, I thought, stunned. *But I'm not worthy enough for him to go out of his way like that.*

Fat sizzled and popped noisily. Slowly, the heavenly smell of cooking meat started filling the cabin.

Mister Naut cut the meat into smaller pieces with a petite sword, getting grease all over his hands. He offered it to me. There were no plates, so it looked like we had to eat with our hands.

"Eat up," he said. "Careful, don't burn yourself."

"U-Um..." I stammered. "Thank you."

The freshly grilled meat was very hot, and I admired Mister Naut for not showing it in his attitude at all. When I'd accepted the meat, I'd touched his hand slightly, and I remembered that his fingers were very tough.

I had my hands full just eating the meat I received as tidily as possible in front of him. It was awfully hot, but I did my best and ate it all. To be honest, I didn't really remember what it tasted like. Perhaps it was too scalding. Or maybe I was simply so overjoyed that I didn't have the extra attention to come up with an opinion of the taste.

“It’s good.” I wanted to say something more, something better, but these words were the only ones I could find.

Mister Naut chewed on his own portion of meat, only taking sidelong glances at me once in a while. “I see.”

After that day, Mister Naut truly kept his word. Quails, boars, deer, bears... I had the honor of sharing most of the prey he hunted, except the heckripons. Still, the game he caught the most were rabbits. I didn’t exactly hear this directly from him, but it must be his favorite meat.

Once the villagers began seeing the two of us spending time together, they stopped picking on me. In fact, more and more of them started to watch over me warmly.

Mister Naut was a hero who had earned everyone’s respect despite his young age. The bullying had stopped all because of him. Just this fact alone was enough to be a favor I had to repay someday.

Even after the bullying stopped, Mister Naut gave me meat whenever he managed to catch suitable prey. He said he disliked too much noise, which was why we always ate all by ourselves in that cabin. The time of the day didn’t matter to him—he always gave me meat until my stomach was completely full. Even if I protested that it was already enough, he’d give me another helping, saying that my boobs wouldn’t get bigger otherwise.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of my chest growing larger at all over the years.

One time, I tried asking him about it. “Mister Naut, do you like people with large boobs?”

He was shaken—a first for him—and accidentally dropped his meat. Since then, he’d never made any comments about chests again.

Whenever I was injured, Mister Naut would tend to my wounds. Though I was clumsy and bumbling, I did the same for him. There were even times I’d ask Madame Martha for permission to use a black rista when he sustained major injuries.

Every day, every night, I’d check whether he’d returned to the village. Whenever he headed out to distant places, I practiced

medical care and cooking.

On his birthday, I decided to take the leap and made a pie with rabbit meat for him. Mister Naut was extremely delighted. Even now, I remember him opening his eyes wide with surprise, muttering, “I never knew pie could be this good.”

To me, Mister Naut was the person I admired. No matter how hard I racked my brain, I couldn’t figure out why he was willing to be so kind to me. But I was truly happy, and nothing could change that.

To me, time spent in Mister Naut’s company was what I lived for. However, I was a child, and I was of lowly birth. I knew that I had no right to fall in love with him.

Mister Naut must like mature women with large chests. I knew very well that the feelings he had for me weren’t anything along the lines of romantic love. Even then, thanks to him, my everyday life was filled with happiness.

Such days went on and on...until a pretty woman visited the village together with a single little pig.

Chapter 2: A Little Sister's Little Sister Is a Little Sister

It was almost inconceivable that this young girl had overcome the Needle Woods and journeyed to a place like this all by herself. She was hurt, shaken, and disoriented. She must be exhausted on top of that because her feet were unsteady, and her articulation was just as clumsy. One look told me that she wasn't her usual self.

Above all else, asking someone to kill you wasn't something you could say casually, as if talking about the weather.

For now, we focused on pacifying Ceres, telling her she should calm down first. I noticed that a large, dense bush in a shape akin to a pony had fallen over nearby. It was battered all over, and the parts that should be its legs were particularly barren, having lost all their leaves.

Only a mage could bring forth such a creation. *Did Ceres control this pony with magic and ride it all the way here?* I wondered. *But before anything else, why is she all alone in a place like this? Why did she ask us to kill her?*

I wanted to settle down and have a thorough conversation with her right away, but unfortunately, the circumstances didn't allow us such a luxury. The distant neighing of horses reached my ears. It was followed by a wind that carried over the clopping of hooves, then armor clattering.

The sound didn't belong to one person—it was likely a large army. I instinctively knew that danger was looming over us.

I narrowed my eyes. "That's not good. The sound's coming from inside the belt of fire—from the same side as we are."

Jess touched her chest and gazed into the dark forest with apprehension. "Yes, it sounds like it."

No matter who the arsonists were, whether they be the

Liberators or otherwise, it made no sense for them to be on the inner side of the belt of fire. After all, what was the point of igniting a flame behind your own backs? Therefore, I could deduce that the sound of the horses belonged to the royal court's army—or to more unscrupulous fellows who lurked inside this deadly forest.

The most alarming thing was that these noises were approaching our direction.

"Ceres," I hurriedly addressed her. "Hopefully, you didn't come across any heckripons on your way here, right?"

"Heckri— Oh!" She covered her mouth, as if she had recalled something. "I'm so sorry. I was disguised the entire time and kept my guard up, but... For just a single time earlier, I think one of them might have... It was very dark because it was night, but a heckripon might have seen me moving with the help of magic in the Needle Woods."

Judging by her reply, she'd more than likely been spotted by one of those creatures. Heckripons were beasts that the royal court used as lookouts. It would be prudent to assume that Shravis had already learned of Ceres's presence in this forest. There was a chance that the royal court had already launched an investigation for her in the forest right at this moment.

I slowly exhaled. "In any case, our priority is to run and hide. The royal capital is full of threats. We'll have to head into the forest. You guys okay with that?"

"Let's do that!" Jess exclaimed before turning to face Ceres, who was barely maintaining her balance as she stood. "Miss Ceres, are you capable of running right now?"

"Oh, um, I'm so sorry..." Ceres stammered. Her legs were trembling uncontrollably, like a newborn fawn. "It's been a long journey, and I..."

She didn't look like she was in any shape to run. However, horses were closing in on us. We couldn't exactly escape by walking away leisurely. "What about your magic?" I asked. "How about using the method that helped you reach here?"

"I'm so sorry," Ceres apologized in a tiny voice that almost melted into the air. "I can't...concentrate anymore after focusing for so long.

I'm very sorry for being completely hopeless and useless."

Jess shook her head gently. "Please don't say that. You're already admirable for managing to come this far by yourself." After a moment of hesitation, Jess glanced at me. "We're out of time. Miss Ceres, please climb onto Mister Pig."

"Huh?" Startled, Ceres's large eyes widened.

I was just as surprised. "Is that *really* okay?" It was several different questions bundled into one.

Jess nodded firmly. "It's an emergency. There's no other way."

"Okay, got it." I nodded. "We can't exactly pick and choose during an emergency." As I spoke, I approached Ceres in high spirits before my trotters abruptly ground to a halt. I realized something peculiar.

What in the world is this? I think I've come across it somewhere before... I frowned.

"Mister Pig." Jess's unimpressed voice rang out from behind me. "Why are you sniffing Miss Ceres's bottom at a time like this?"

"Uh, well... I picked up a pleasant smell, so I got curious..." I fessed up.

The miffed maiden's cheeks began puffing out. Her eyes, which glared at me intently, looked as if she were staring at a pervert.

Oops, that was a misleading statement. I cleared my throat. "I wasn't exactly talking about Ceres's smell. It's just that, well, there's an herby scent on her skirt."

I'd thought I'd recognized it from somewhere, and now, it hit me. It was something similar to thyme, which was often used in meat dishes. I recalled how Ceres had chopped up herbs when she'd been baking a meat pie a long time ago.

The localized thyme scent from her butt implied that her bottom had somehow come into contact with thyme. Upon closer inspection, the pony was made from fine clusters of shrubs. Slender branches decorated with petite leaves twirled together intricately to create the shape of a quadruped animal. She'd likely transformed thyme plants into her vehicle.

Twisting her waist to put some distance between me and her butt, Ceres explained, "I'm not that skilled at magic, but when it comes to herbs used for cooking, I can control them a tiny bit, just

like this."

She can only manipulate herbs that are used in food? Sounds like an awfully particular ability. I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *Oh well. Right now, I should focus on getting away from here, not the smell of Ceres's bottom. I can sniff her butt as much as I like afterward.*

"You can't," Jess flatly said.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am."

Ceres usually wore a tiny, troubled smile by Jess's side when we engaged in such banter. But this time, she didn't seem to be in such a mood. Just keeping her legs upright already appeared to be taking everything out of her.

Under Jess's pointed glare, I sat down obediently like a pet and waited for Ceres to straddle my back. I'd assumed she might be uncomfortable about it, but the young girl dutifully followed our directions.

I knew enough about Ceres to determine that her request to kill her wasn't what she truly wanted. In my eyes, she hadn't marched here with an unshakable resolve—it was more that she didn't know what to do and had fled all the way to this place at a loss.

Ceres was much lighter than I'd ever imagined. She was featherlight, unstable, and trembling.

I traded glances with Jess before we simultaneously began our escape. Selecting paths with a lot of shelter where we could instantly hide, we pressed on while trying to get as far away as possible from the sound of the horses.

Then, my ominous premonition—the one thing I'd feared—came true.

"Mn...!"

I heard Ceres making a noise on my back. For some reason, it was a little higher pitched than her usual tone.



A moment of silence.

"Wh-What's wrong, Ceres?" I carefully asked while fixing my gaze on the back of Jess's head. She was running in the lead. "Are you okay?"

"I'm very sorry... Um, I'm probably...all right."

Though her voice was feeble, I was reassured by her reply. It sounded like there were no problems.

That was what I thought until Ceres continued, "It just...feels a little strange..."

Uh-oh. There is a problem. A big fat problem.

Jess briefly turned over her shoulder to glance at me. Her expression had gone past the realm of miffed to the point of apathy.

I did nothing wrong. I made sure to check with her beforehand. "Ceres, try sitting a little farther back and sandwich me tightly with your legs. It's okay to put your weight on your hands." For various reasons, I was quite knowledgeable about safe ways to ride a pig.

Having avoided the crisis of becoming gamja-tang stew, I sprinted through the gloomy forest with Jess. I hadn't been on the run in the Needle Woods since Jess's initial journey to the capital. Back then, we'd been desperate to get inside, but this time, it was the one place we couldn't go.

The influence of the Abyssus had grown potent due to spercritica, and all kinds of bizarre noises and eerie groaning echoed out from the darkness. We prayed in our hearts as we pressed forward. *Please don't let us bump into the things making that noise. Above that, please don't let any heckripons discover us.*

A breeze galloped through the leaves, and the thunderous roaring of blazing fire resounded from our surroundings. The forest fire was gaining more momentum. Even now, the clopping of hooves sounded hot on our heels. It felt like we were running blind, which wasn't a good idea.

"Let's decide on our route," I gingerly proposed. "A strategic escape is our safest option."

Jess must've thought that this wasn't the time to be angry at me because she nodded gravely. *Thank goodness. Looks like she's accepted that there are extenuating circumstances to do with my*

back incident and is letting me off the hook.

"We'll have a proper and thorough conversation about that later," Jess assured me before weighing our options. "Where should we go? If we aren't going to return to the capital, shall we leave the forest?"

"Escape's probably our only option. But we'll have to take the fire into our calculations."

"Are there any safe places where the fire can't spread to?"

I mulled over it. We'd only seen the eastern side from the capital, but everything within our field of vision had been burning in a belt-shaped region of fire. The wind was strong tonight, and the fire had appeared to only rise in vigor over time. Our hopes of escaping safely in that direction were close to none.

Frowning, I replied, "That's a tough question. If the entire Needle Woods is on fire, we'll have to cross over the inferno at some point."

"That's..." Jess trailed off.

That's likely a tall order. I sighed. I almost wanted to go back to the capital to look over the entire forest and check for patches that weren't burning. That, however, wasn't exactly possible. Our only choice was to search for the ideal escape route from within the forest with a highly obstructed vision.

Let's see. Assuming there is indeed somewhere that the fire hasn't spread to, then it would be... "Hey, the wind has been blowing east since earlier, right?"

Still sprinting, Jess checked the direction of the wind and nodded. "Yes. We are currently on the eastern side of the capital, which means the fire is closing in on us."

"The city's considerably large. There's a chance that maybe—"

I didn't know how she interpreted my statement, but Jess asked me in a startled tone, "Are we suggesting that we head back to the capital?"

Shaking my head, I replied, "Not quite. The capital is somewhat like a large mountain. It also blocks off the wind. Therefore, the western side of the capital might have weak winds, which means the fire is spreading slower. We might be able to avoid contact with it."

"I see!" she exclaimed. "Then let's go to the west! Many regions on that side were devastated during the Dark Ages, so it should be

easy to avoid attention. Our escape, even after we break out of the forest, should also be simpler."

"All righty, that works out for us."

"But that means we'll have to make a detour by circling the capital. Is that all right?"

"It's not like we've got any other choice. Let's head west."

Coming to a decision rapidly, we selected the west as our escape route. During this discussion, Ceres was quiet the entire time. Because she was riding on my back, I couldn't see her face or get a read on her thoughts.

It made me anxious. What, exactly, had happened to her? What was going on with the Liberators? With only questions churning in my mind, we raced across the dark forest.

We didn't even know whether there was truly a way out, but we could only believe that there was as we pressed on.

I wasn't sure which had done the trick—was it my tactical proposal for Ceres to use me as a vehicle or our choice to head west? Either way, the clopping of hooves gradually faded, and eventually, the sound disappeared altogether. The blaze grew distant as well. Slowing down somewhat, we continued our journey toward the western edge of the Needle Woods while walking.

As our situation calmed down, Jess gently addressed Ceres. "Miss Ceres, if you don't mind, could you tell us your story?"

The younger girl, however, only shrank into herself, trembling. I could sense her movement on my back. Twisting my neck, I looked up at Ceres. She awkwardly turned away from my gaze.

I rephrased Jess's question slightly. "Anything is fine. Truthfully, we don't really know what's going on either... It would help us out too, so could you share what happened?"

This time, Ceres was willing to open up. "I'm...not worth it, not at all..."

Nothing could sum up her nature better than her first statement. She then explained how she'd gotten here in disjointed bits and pieces while mixing in self-deprecating statements.

In summary, the sequence of events went something like this.

It had all started at midday the day before yesterday. Ceres had accidentally overheard Naut's thoughts and learned that the royal court had sent a single demand to the Liberators: Hand Ceres over.

The correspondence had apparently come with the explanation that Ceres's existence had caused the world's abnormal state. But naturally, the executive officers had no intention of obeying that order whatsoever. Therefore, they'd burned down the letter without even sending a reply.

According to Ceres, Naut had been livid and declared to Itsune and Yoshu, *"No matter what, I won't give Ceres to them. I'm going to resist to the very end. If push comes to shove, I'll even take up arms."*

"I was scared... I was so, *so* scared," Ceres whispered, her tears splashing on the nape of my neck. "What if I became the spark of havoc that leads to a fight between the royal court and the Liberators...? I could never bear it. What if Mister Naut and the others got hurt because of me? What if someone died because of me? Just thinking about it was unbearable."

Ceres, however, didn't have the nerve to erase herself from the world. That was why she'd run away. She'd fled in the middle of the night. Secretly. Solitarily. Then, over the course of an entire two days, she'd made her way to this place. She'd come here to find someone who would snuff out the spark of strife—to snuff out her very existence.

"That's out of the question!" Jess firmly raised her voice. "The world will return to normal if you disappear? Miss Ceres, that is definitely unacceptable!"

"...I think it's okay," Ceres quietly said. "If I can avoid causing trouble to everyone, that's for the best."

Jess's eyes went wide. She was stunned speechless.

I had the feeling that this would spiral into a clash of what was wrong and right with no clear conclusion, so I tried putting a different perspective forward. "Hey, let's say that we handed you over to the royal court, and they end up doing something to you."

Hearing the possibility I proposed, Ceres's hand tightly gripped my grilled pork shoulder. "Yes..."

"Do you think Naut and the others would go, 'Welp, that's just life,' and take it lying down? Not in a million years. Knowing them, they'd wage war against the royal court."

"Then... Mister Super-Virgin, please kill me personally."

If I did something like that, I'd be braised and sliced into chashu pork... "Clam done. I mean, calm down. Listen up. Neither Jess nor I would do something like that. No matter what happens, we will protect you, Ceres."

The girl swayed unsteadily on my back. For a while, she didn't utter a single word.

Now that we'd escaped the fire, the forest was pitch-black. It was only broken up by faintly glowing white mushrooms that dotted the scenery.

Looking jittery, Jess clung to my side—or more like Ceres's side—as she walked. In essence, we were a ham sandwich. If we were in a different situation, I'd be duty bound to rejoice at the fact that I was surrounded by beautiful maidens.

"Mister Pig?" Jess's voice was steady.

I won't celebrate, of course. Never.

"But..." Ceres spoke up at last in a nasally voice. "If I die, the world will go back to normal."

I shook my head. "Don't jump to conclusions so quickly. True, the world *might* go back to normal if you pass away, but no one ever said that you absolutely have to die for the world to regain normality. There's a difference between a sufficient condition and a necessary condition."

A noise that I'd never heard from Ceres before leaped out from her mouth. "Hweh...?" It was unexpectedly adorable.

"Mister Pig." Jess's voice was unfaltering.

Jess is much more adorable, of course. Always. "My point is, there might just be a path out there that doesn't demand your death, Ceres. No, there *must* be. And we're not going to give up until we find it."

Jess nodded. "Right. We just happened to be searching for that

path when you arrived."

"Re...ally?" Ceres whimpered.

"Really," I replied with determination.

For a short while, Ceres searched for the proper reply. She then slowly spoke up. "Thank...you."

Possibly because her nervousness had melted away with relief, Ceres finally began raising her voice and crying out loud. Eventually, her sobbing was replaced by steady breathing—exhausted from her weeping, she had fallen asleep.

She must have covered this great distance without catching a wink of sleep. Just like I'd thought, Ceres must want to live deep down. She'd gone through the effort of disguising herself with modest clothing because she didn't want the royal court's army to discover her.

Despite what it had seemed like, Ceres hadn't come to the capital to offer up her life for the greater good. The choice of death had suddenly been thrust onto her lap, and she'd been at a loss about what she should do. She'd come here hoping that the two of us could help her.

Now that Ceres had fallen asleep, Jess and I finally locked gazes.

Though we'd made a dramatic and brazen declaration, at the moment, we knew nothing about a solution that could avoid Ceres's disappearance. We'd only heard that a person who had passed away a long time ago, Ruta, might have been able to provide some clues, but we had absolutely no useful information other than this tidbit.

I said, "Come rain or shine, let's protect Ceres together."

"Yes." Jess was so solemn that there were even light creases on her fair forehead as she nodded.

Both of us felt guilty about how we'd torn apart Ceres and Naut during our first journey. If we hadn't asked Naut to come along as our companion, perhaps there was a world where he'd be busying himself with hunting in Baptsaze by Ceres's side even now. Furthermore, the battle in the Needle Woods at the end of our journey had been the catalyst that led to the rise of the Nothen Faction, which had brought pandemonium to Mesteria. The Liberators had banded together to oppose the faction, eventually

leading to our current situation.

If someone were to trace Mesteria's disorder back to its roots, the responsibility would fall on our shoulders. And if Ceres couldn't stay by Naut's side—it was also our fault.

"I will work hard." Possibly because she'd read the narration, Jess looked at me with steely resolve in her eyes. "Miss Ceres has helped us in so many ways, and we've caused her so much trouble. Now is the time to return the favor. I will do everything within my power to help her."

"Way to go. That's the spirit."

We were no longer a powerless maiden and pig. Jess had enough magic to be on equal footing with Shravis, the current strongest mage in Mesteria, and I was more than well-informed on the situation in this world. There was a limit to what I could do in my pig body, but I could lend her my wits. Combined with Jess's knowledge and magic, the world was our oyster.

Considering that, it should be possible to defend a single girl from the pursuit of the royal court's army. I was sure of it.

"Jess, I have one piece of valuable advice for you."

"And what might that be?"

Seeing her solemn expression, I replied equally solemnly, "You should become a big sister."

"...Pardon?"

"Like I said, you should become a big sister," I repeated. "Ceres's big sister."

"Um... Why?"

"You said that you want to do everything within your power to help her, didn't you? In that case, you need to change your way of thinking before anything else. You can't stay the same old Jess as before if you want to achieve that goal."

"Is that how it works...?"

"It is," I declared.

Jess didn't look very convinced by my argument of brute force. I added, "Here's an example. Master-pupil relationships exist, don't they? What do you think is the significance of such titles?"

"Well, I've never given it much thought before, but..." She mulled

it over. “I think it’s meaningful in the sense that it distinguishes the positions of someone doing the teaching and someone being taught.”

“But think about it. If you only want to teach or learn something, specific titles aren’t exactly necessary, are they? Even if you don’t clearly define your mutual statuses, can’t you simply be an individual human who teaches and an individual human who takes lessons?”

Jess blinked. “You’re...right?”

“So, we’re back to the question of master-pupil relationships and their significance. Here’s the answer: These positions justify you to take action.” The maiden stared directly at me as I debated with my barbecued pork tongue. “You teach because you’re a master. You learn because you’re a student. By establishing this relationship first, you can develop such a sturdy bond between you over time. As you take on these roles, the two people involved will change their awareness of each other, leading to a higher standard of understanding and communication between you.”

“That’s... It does make sense, yes.”

Looks like she gets me now. “That’s why it’s crucial that you become Ceres’s big sister, Jess.”

“Ye...s.” Her reply was awfully stilted.

Hmm, her level of acceptance plummeted all of a sudden. Can I really trust her reply? The problem is, I need her to become a big sister, or else I’d be in a bind.

As a matter of fact, there was one more glaring merit I couldn’t disregard about Jess’s change of status. Jess was my little sister. Accordingly, if Jess became Ceres’s older sister...

I reared my head triumphantly. *It means that Ceres will unmistakably become my little sister as well!*

Jess’s cool retort snapped me back to reality. “I’m afraid she won’t.” After a pause, she muttered, “But I’m starting to grasp what you mean.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m sure that just like you, Mister Pig, Miss Ceres is reluctant about one-sidedly receiving favors from other people.” The maiden’s tender eyes shifted onto the younger girl, who was sound asleep on

my back. “If both sides have a justification to act, it’s easier for us to return all the kindness she has given us. You’re right about that.”

“Right?” I nodded with satisfaction. “Good to hear that you get me.”

Curling her lips into a sweet smile, Jess declared, “I do. I will become Miss Ceres’s big sister, Mister Pig.”

Paying utmost attention to avoid discovery from the heckripon network, we pressed on in the forest. We had circled the southern side of the capital and were currently on the western side. We planned to continue marching west and away from the city.

Jess asked, “Before anything else, we need to focus on outrunning our pursuers by any means necessary, yes? Would escorting Miss Ceres to the rest of the Liberators be our safest option?”

I considered her proposal for a moment. “About that...”

“Is something bothering you?”

“I want to properly analyze our situation first.”

She tilted her head quizzically. “Our situation?”

“Yeah. Take a moment and think back to Shravis’s letter today.”

Jess nodded. “I’m remembering it now.” Knowing her, she must be picturing the contents of the letter, word for word, in her mind. “Actually, I have it here.”

She proceeded to fish out a piece of paper she’d tucked into her skirt. It was the letter Shravis had left behind, though it was folded up neatly now. She held it up with the hand still adorned with the transmission bracelet that had also been left in the envelope.

“Thanks, it’s convenient to have it on hand.” I nodded. “So here’s the problem. You see the last two lines of that letter?”

“‘I have already sent a notice to the Liberators to offer Ceres up to the royal court immediately. In the event you discover her location, contact me with this bracelet.’ Those two, right?” Jess recited without even unfolding the letter she held.

Whoa, she really has *memorized every single word on it.*

“Something about his phrasing bothers me. I’m just guessing, but maybe when he wrote this letter, Shravis already knew that Ceres

wasn't with the Liberators."

Jess hummed thoughtfully. "That makes sense. He wrote 'discover her location,' so it would be a natural conclusion."

Ceres was always by Naut's side. Shravis was also well aware of that fact, so he wouldn't write such a phrase under normal circumstances. Therefore, he must have known that Ceres had gone missing.

I frowned. "But something doesn't add up. How did Shravis learn of this fact? Ceres said that the Liberators burned the letter without sending a reply, right? Without any response, Shravis should have, by all rights, assumed that the Liberators were sheltering her."

"Your logic is sound." Jess furrowed her brows. "That said, Miss Ceres departed in the dead of night two days ago. There *is* a chance that the Liberators sent some kind of response to Mister Shravis yesterday or today."

"The thing is, that also sounds improbable to me."

Jess blinked. "It does?"

"Remember the letter we received from Kento? Let's think about why he only included code words in it. Who wrote it on Kento's behalf?"

"Mister Yoshu."

"Well then, why didn't Yoshu give us more details about other things?"

Jess hesitated. "Maybe...he was short on time."

"It would be ideal if that was the reason, yeah. But if you add my dream to the equation, something just seems off."

Her eyes widened. "That reminds me... Mister Kento didn't mention Miss Ceres to you at all, did he?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And that's despite the fact that he brought up other topics like the Ginnokis. I had the dream last night. Meanwhile, Ceres went missing two nights ago—but Kento didn't tell me about her, even though it's a matter of great importance. Would he really neglect to mention it?"

"If he knew, he would have certainly passed on the information. Which means..." Realization dawned on her, and she looked at me with wide eyes. "They didn't inform Mister Kento about Miss Ceres's

situation from the start?"

"That's my theory too. The Liberators didn't even tell one of their insiders, Kento, about Ceres. They covered up everything about her. Assuming that's the case, the reason Yoshu merely wrote the bare minimum in the letter is also starting to surface."

Placing a hand on her chest, Jess whispered, "It's because they don't want us to know Miss Ceres disappeared..."

Though this conclusion hurt like a punch to the gut, it was likely closest to the truth. The Liberators had treated Ceres's vanishing act as top secret. If the royal court got wind of the fact that she was out there somewhere, defenseless, she'd be in grave danger. It was a sensible decision.

Exhaling slowly, I said, "This is where the mystery comes in. Why did Shravis already know such a top secret before noon today? Ceres was disguised while on the move, so I doubt that the heckripons discovered her identity. They only witnessed her using magic tonight—and that's *after* Shravis wrote the letter. Until then, the royal court shouldn't have had any methods to learn of her disappearance. It doesn't add up."

Jess went silent, as if fumbling for the right words.

I stated the conclusion for her. "We can't exclude the possibility that someone noticed her somewhere. But the royal court should have never anticipated that she was roaming outside to begin with because, logically, the Liberators should be hiding her in a safe place. She isn't a household name either—is it truly plausible for someone to discover her by pure chance while she's fleeing in disguise?"

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "If I were the one who witnessed her... Assuming there was still room for other possibilities, I'd consider those first."

I nodded. "I can think of two likely scenarios. An informant among the Liberators, or Shravis spying on their conversations with magic or some other means. Military reconnaissance against an enemy group is, well, kind of standard practice."

"Mister Shravis arranged that? That's heartbreaking..."

"If I were to be optimistic, Shravis avoiding contact with us might

be a part of that. We are intimate with the Liberators, and exchanging information with us, given the current situation, is hazardous from the standpoint of preserving secrecy. In Ceres's case, he probably thought that there were more advantages in giving us information than withholding it. That's why he contacted us through a letter, a medium unlikely to give us more intel than necessary."

In a face-to-face meeting, he could passively reveal information through his looks, facial expressions, and mannerisms. There was also the risk that he might accidentally let his tongue slip. Meanwhile, a letter didn't have the same issues. *That said, we're currently reading between the lines of his letter and trying to gain more information than what he deemed necessary, ironically.*

This was information warfare. Maneuvers concerning Ceres—no, a silent war revolving around Ceres—had already been set in motion.

I continued, "Getting back on track, assuming that there's a chance Shravis can get his hands on the classified information of the Liberators... Let's say that we head straight for the Liberators and deliver Ceres to them. I'm sure you can tell what's problematic about it now."

"Yes. Mister Shravis would learn of Miss Ceres's return. And if he does..."

It would trigger a true war with Ceres as the trophy—the exact thing that the young girl had feared.

"There's a very real possibility that the royal court's army might attack Naut and the others. It might spiral into an all-out war between the two factions."

Jess shook her head minutely. We had to avoid that brutal future at all costs. "Then... What should we do?" she asked nervously.

"Ceres's disappearing act is a silver lining. At the moment, the royal court doesn't have any grounds to attack the Liberators. For Ceres's safety, we can't afford to return to the royal capital, and to avoid total war, we can't depend on the Liberators either. Our only choice is to keep running. We'll run and run, buy time, and search for a way to save her."

Sucking in a sharp breath, Jess solemnly replied, "I understand.

Let's do that."

Like a cruel joke of fate, it was only moments after this discussion that we ran into a royal court soldier who'd been hiding as if lying in wait for us. A small mercy was the crimson armor he equipped—possibly a military regulation—that didn't blend into the dark night. It bought crucial time for us to respond.

When the soldier reacted as if he'd noticed us, Jess managed to move first by a fraction of a second, thrusting her hands forward. A long stretch of cloth rushed out like a lasso. It coiled around the soldier like bandages in the blink of an eye.

Just as he opened his mouth to shout, the tip of the cloth—which had been rolled into a ball—shoved into that opening like a fist. It served as a merciless gag that didn't seem like what you'd expect from Jess. Wrapped in cloth all over like a mummy, the man flopped onto the ground.

Not a moment later, a gunshot resounded.

Based on the sound, I could tell that the bullet had flown in a wayward direction. The soldier, unable to move in his binds and even gagged, had fired his gun as a last, desperate resort to notify his surroundings about the emergency.

<<That's not good...>> I marked my words as thought-speech as my vigilance soared.

We'd only bumped into one person, but assuming that only one soldier had been preparing to ambush us was nothing short of wishful thinking. Just like a certain glossy black household pest you might find in your kitchen, if you see one ambushing soldier, you should assume there were at least a hundred more.

Coming to a stop, I focused on my ears. Jess moved her hand slowly, and air flowed quietly within the forest. *Wind Tidinge*—it was an advanced technique that involved manipulating air currents with magic, allowing the user to one-sidedly eavesdrop on their target. A gentle breeze blew straight at us from the front, carrying over the crisp whispers ahead.

"What was that? Who pulled the trigger? Wasn't our instruction to

capture our target without using weapons?"

"It was likely an accident. The bullet flew upward."

"Are you sure? We received a notice that our target is heading in this direction. How can you be so certain it was a mistake?"

"True... There is a chance it might be some kind of signal."

"...Should we take action?"

"No, heading into the open is unwise. If we're being paranoid, then they'll discover our presence here. We wouldn't be able to ambush them."

"Got it. Let's deploy dogs in that case."

"...Excellent idea."

Jess looked at me, panic clear on her face. At that precise moment, my nose picked up a bestial odor on the wind. The soldiers planned on dispatching dogs to search for us. Like how I could pick up their scent, dogs had sharp noses as well.

I wasn't even given time to think over our options. I heard the sound of several dogs running in our direction.

<<They'll find us at this rate,>> I anxiously reported. <<Let's silently run away.>>

Turning on our heels, we quietly moved through the pitch-black forest as if to retrace our path. However, it sounded like the dogs were approaching us faster than we could escape. The huffing of animals steadily became more vivid.

Jess asked, <What do we do? Should I take the leap and turn this entire region into a blazing inferno?>

Her idea was a little too audacious. <<We don't want humans to notice us. As long as we're able to shake off the dogs somehow, it's possible for us to break out of our plight.>>

<But...how?>

Yikes, I thought. The sound of animals breathing didn't grow distant, no matter how far we ran. The dogs were stubbornly chasing us. If they managed to track down our scent trail on the ground, we wouldn't have any means of getting away.

Abruptly, the footsteps of the dogs scattered into our surroundings.

<<They have us surrounded!>> I reported, alarmed. The dogs were more well trained than I'd expected. Their collaborative behavior also seemed polished.

"Flamma—"

The moment Jess whispered that incantation, I felt Ceres sitting up on my back.

A sharp gale swept across our vicinity. I didn't know how it was happening, but the wind was blowing in opposite directions on my left and right. Without warning, Ceres's cold and soft hands blocked my ears.

The wind intensified. Not a second later, the high-pitched roar of an explosion resounded, threatening to split my cranium. It was a violent sound that barbarically painted over all the other noises present, as if a maelstrom of air was tearing through the night.

As my brain jolted painfully with the thunderous commotion, a voice reverberated in my mind. <Please leave the dogs to me.> It was Ceres.

When I scanned our surroundings, I noticed that the dogs, which should have been working in tandem, had begun rioting while neglecting us altogether. Jess found a path of retreat during this opening and broke into a run. I chased after her.

For a while, I sprinted through the gloomy forest while fixing my eyes on Jess's bottom alone. Eventually, she came to a stop, so I stopped with her and tried to steady my breathing. The roaring had already faded away.

I glanced up. Jess seemed to be directing a statement at me, but I couldn't hear her. When I tilted my head quizzically, I sensed that something was out of place with my ears. It was a sense of oppressiveness—or rather, the sensation of someone holding them down.

Alongside the cold air, an apology entered my ears. "I'm so sorry..." It appeared that Ceres had blocked my sliced and pickled mimiga ears.

"Don't sweat it. Your palms were cool and pleasant."

Ceres hesitated. "Really...?"

"Yeah. It's nothing to apologize for. In fact, I almost want to pay

you for the experience."

"Huh? Pay me?" I could hear the confusion in her voice.

I wonder what the appropriate price is for a wonderful service where a girl blocks your ears firmly with her supple hands, I thought absentmindedly.

Pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes, Jess turned to me. "I don't think it's very appropriate to think of Miss Ceres in that way."

Hearing that, Ceres inclined her head adorably. "'In that way'? In what way, may I ask?"

Jess opened her mouth to answer, then closed it, as if she wasn't sure what to say.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow and launched a follow-up attack. "In what way, hmm?"

"I-I wouldn't know!" The beautiful maiden huffed and turned away sullenly.

Ceres muttered in a small voice, "Huh? Um... Have I said something bad?"

"No, not at all." I shook my head. "Don't worry about it."

Jess walked briskly, and I trotted after her with Ceres on my back.

The forest at night was pitch-black. Just like before, Jess was vigilantly observing our surroundings with the aid of her *Wind Tidinge* spell. We'd already gained quite a lot of distance from the ambush—it appeared that there was no longer anyone after us.

This was when I voiced the question on my mind. "Ceres, what did you do to the dogs earlier?"

I felt Ceres shuffle her butt a little on my back. With a hint of joy in her voice, she replied, "Thanks to your help, I was able to get some rest and regain a bit of energy. As for the dogs, I used the spell *Wolf Call*."

I hesitated. "What does that do again?"

"Um... It's a spell that calls for wolves."

Oh, Ceres, you're not an explainer, are you?

That said, as we talked, I managed to dig up an old memory. On my initial journey with Jess to the capital, Jess had received a certain lifesaving gadget from Naut—a wolf call. In an odd twist of

fate, we'd used that item in the Needle Woods as well.

Wolf calls were enchanted gadgets that produced deafening ultrahigh frequency sounds—outside of a human's hearing range—to provoke wolves. Not only could wolves hear sounds of this frequency, but so could pigs. Naturally, that applied to dogs as well. It was the ideal spell for confusing dogs without tipping off humans.

I nodded to myself. "That reminds me, we've used it before too. Though it wasn't in the form of a spell but a roundish gadget."

"That sounds right. Normally, you would use this spell by inserting a small green rista into an enchanted gadget crafted in the capital. Mister Sanon analyzed and broke down its structure... He taught me how it worked while I practiced imitating it with my own magic."

Jess whipped her head around fervently. She reached out both hands and clasped Ceres's hand within. "So that's how you learned it! A spell that can produce an inaudible sound... Unbelievable. Miss Ceres, you're amazing!"

"O-Oh," Ceres stammered. "I'm not worthy of such praise..."

"Could you tell me the details, please? How in the world did you manage it?"

Jess leaned forward so eagerly that my vision was completely buried under the part of her skirt that covered her thigh. *I can't see a thing right now.*

"Well..." Ceres hesitated. "Um, you make the wind go round and round, then do your best and go, 'Hiyaah!' with it... That way, the air starts wailing bit by bit."

I repeat: Oh, Ceres, you're not an explainer, are you?

Jess's eyes lit up. "I see, so you make wind, which is going in opposite directions, brush past each other, causing the air to vibrate minutely. To do that, you line up two swirls of air that rotate in the same direction next to each other, and..."

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *Wow. I'm impressed she managed to decipher an explanation like that.* Poking my face out of Jess's skirt, I asked, "But Ceres, why did you practice such a spell?"

The young girl smiled shyly and sweetly, looking somewhat delighted. "It's so that I can be Mister Rossi's standin."

I stared blankly at her. *Does she mean that Rossi used to activate the wolf calls in the past?* Seeing her merrily proclaim herself as the standin for a dog was just a tad mind-boggling.

We commanded our feet to move forward until we eventually reached a small river.

"What do we do?" Jess asked. "Should we cross it?"

I scrutinized the body of water. It was more of a shallow stream that we could walk across. Snowmelt must be mixed within—it would be cold if we entered it. *That said...* "The royal court's army has dogs with them. So long as we walk on land, we'll leave a scent trail for them to follow. How about we walk in the river for a while?"

"Right, we wouldn't leave behind any smell or footprints in the water!" Jess beamed. "I know I can always count on you, Mister Pig!"

She openly showered me with her usual praise, and I felt somewhat guilty. I wasn't exactly the one who'd invented the idea of walking in the river to shake off pursuers. In fact, it was the oldest trick in the book within the crime-suspense genre. *Oh well, I suppose this is part of the appeal of isekai teleportation stories.*

I raised my head proudly. "Impressive, right?! I'm quite the genius, if I say so myself. You may send even more praise in my direction."

"Um..." Jess gave me a skeptical look.

Oops. I forgot how she can read my mind like a book.

We trekked into the river, splashing water vigorously about—was what you'd expect, but we had a handy mage in our party. Jess froze the river surface into ice with a walkable texture, and we followed that path. Whenever we were finished with one patch of ice, it would melt immediately. She was the true genius here.

After following the river for a while, we managed to leave the bounds of the Needle Woods. I thought back on our current journey—we'd roughly walked twenty kilometers since we'd met up with Ceres. Even a fit person like Jess was beginning to show signs of fatigue.

The small river eventually converged with a grand river that

flowed southwest. We appropriated a petite boat, which had been on the verge of total decay after being moored and abandoned, and went downstream.

Thus began our voyage in the darkness of night while this nation's army was hot on our heels.

I scanned our surroundings. The peaceful river we were advancing down was surrounded by mountains covered all over with lush, shadowy trees. Tiny towns were dotted along the shores. All of the houses had a unified design, with walls painted white and roofs in dark colors.

As Jess admired the townscapes, she commented, "We've never come to this area before, now that I think about it. It's very quiet around here, possibly because there are only a few residents."

I looked up at her curiously. "What part of Mesteria are we in?"

"We're in the southwestern part, so I believe this is the Mayr River. There is a mountain range to the west of Kiltyrie, and this river flows into the ocean that is farther west from that."

"You mean that we can sail all the way to the western ocean if we keep going?"

"Yes, I think so." This was when she furrowed her eyebrows. "However, many say that the light of civilization in the southwestern region was snuffed out during the Dark Ages. Many of the human settlements were utterly destroyed in the aftermath of battles between mages. Information about this place is scarce... I also can't guarantee whether the old maps accurately reflect the flow of the river."

"Still, it sounds somewhat like a thrilling place. I think it's worth a visit."

Jess turned around, surprised. "You do?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "We've got two things we need to do from here on out. One is going on the run with cutie-pie Ceres. And the second is...?"

"To search for a solution that doesn't involve cutie—Miss Ceres's death!"

Ceres had been leaning against the boat's edge and dozing off, but she abruptly raised her face, possibly at the mention of her

name. We both gave her warm smiles, and she lifted the corners of her lips while looking awkward. Then, she started nodding off again.

I resumed our discussion. "The problem is, no matter how much we searched through the royal court's body of knowledge, we couldn't find hide nor hair of such a method. That's why we're grasping at pigs and resorting to tracking down something, anything, that belongs to Ruta, a man who apparently came from a foreign world a century ago."

"Shouldn't that be grasping at straws?"

Smoothly, I continued, "And, according to Vivis back in the library, Ruta disappeared into what she called the *western* wilderness, right?"

The maiden's eyes widened. "Right... Yes, she *did* say that. I believe the western wilderness should be referring to the region where the light of civilization has vanished."

"Now isn't that convenient? Escaping to the west will lead us to the region that's been untouched since the Dark Ages—a region that hasn't been contaminated by the royal court's body of knowledge because it's never been under royal rule. On top of that, Ruta, who seems to be our best lead, was also said to have vanished in the same direction. The chances are exceedingly slim, but if we're going to look somewhere for hints, the wisest plan is to start from the west."

"I agree. Well then, let's keep our eyes peeled for even the smallest of details on our way, Mister Pig."

Only a few minutes after this statement, Jess also began drowsily nodding off. She repeated the cycle of drooping her eyelids before waking up with a start.

We'd covered the boat's surface, which was on the verge of falling apart, with a cloth that Jess had soaked in oil. Thanks to it, the boat managed to keep floating, even with passengers like us. However, it didn't even have a rudder, much less an enchanted engine. If we didn't row the oars, it would only drift forward unhurriedly with the river currents.

I sank into my thoughts. *What's the right thing to do from here on out?*

If we followed the river, we would flow southwest away from the capital. The question was how far we should go. There should still be pursuers on our trail. We had to anticipate them somehow and escape to safety.

Assuming that the soldiers used dogs to track us down, the royal court's army should eventually notice that our scent trail cut off abruptly at the river shore. It was simple to deduce that we'd started moving along the river from there. In that case, those people would certainly investigate everywhere along the river. Therefore, if we promptly reached shore and chose to travel by land, there was the undeniable chance that they might locate us through our scent trail again.

Meanwhile, going along the river would buy us a substantial amount of time. However, it was still perilous because we would remain on a predictable route that would come under scrutiny.

Furthermore, since it was a journey on the run, selecting the right route was important, but so was being aware of our own stamina and health. It would all be moot if we exhausted our energy and our pursuers caught up to us. Jess and Ceres, who were resting as they leaned against the boat's edge, already looked quite fatigued. Ceres appeared to be asleep.

By the way, I'm full of energy due to the fact that I'm going on a journey sandwiched by two beautiful maidens.

"You are?" Jess flatly asked.

"Well, of course." I shrugged. "Anyone would be happier with more cute girls around. It's an absolute truth of all worlds."

She pouted with displeasure. "...Please don't keep calling another woman cute or adorable too much, thank you," she protested in a tiny whisper.

On reflex, my heart seized up. "Sorry, my bad. You're the cutest in the entire world, Jess."

"No... I'm not cute or anything..."

Uh... So what am I supposed to say, then?

The atmosphere grew awkward, so I changed the topic. "Come to think of it, there was one thing I was wondering about. How in the world did the royal court's army locate us? One of them mentioned

receiving a notice that the target was heading in that direction, right? How would they know? Did a heckripon spot us somewhere while we were on the move?”

Jess placed a hand on her chin and considered the question. “Hmm... Heckripons have a unique mana signature. I was quite careful inside the forest, so I should have noticed if one of them came within distance to notice us.”

“In that case, what other possibilities could there be?”

“The fire was spreading from the east side of the Needle Woods. If someone wanted to escape, like you analyzed, the best option is to head west, where you can distance yourself from the fire as much as possible. Perhaps our pursuers came to the same conclusion.”

I sighed. “I see. You have a point there. Maybe I should have put more thought into it.”

In the scenario that Shravis was taking command, I wouldn’t be surprised. *That guy messes up once in a while, but he’s quite the quick-witted person. Just look back at the Cross Executioner murders. He’s inherited his mother’s brilliant mind and is superior to us in at least a few aspects.*

Our pursuers had a fairly sizable army and a network of heckripons scattered across the country. Naturally, the Liberators were likely murdering every heckripon they came across, so the number of those creatures should have depleted. Nevertheless, keeping up our life on the run sounded like a harsh, uphill battle.

A voice rang out. “I’m so sorry. It’s all because of someone like me that you’re in such a terrible situation...” It appeared that Ceres had woken up at some point.

Jess shook her head and stroked Ceres’s hair. “Please don’t put yourself down like that. There’s nothing to apologize for. We only did what anyone would have done in our shoes.” She paused. “After all, you are my precious little sister, Miss Ceres.”

“Little...sister?” Ceres blinked in confusion.

“Yes.” Tightening her hands into fists, Jess smiled warmly at the younger girl. “Consider me your big sister and rely on me a lot, all right?”

“Is that really okay...?”

Jess puffed out her chest reassuringly. "Of course!"

I wedged into their exchange. "Feel free to call Jess 'big sister.'"

The pair looked down at me, bewildered.

Then, the older maiden asked, "Why are *you* giving permission for that, Mister Pig?"

I cleared my throat. "Weeell, I mean, I just thought that it'd be difficult for you to bring up." *I'm not hoping that she'd start calling me "big brother" while she's at it, not at all. Not in a million years!*

Jess looked exasperated. "So you were hoping that she would call you 'big brother' too."

Hearing our banter, Ceres meekly spoke up. "But I still feel so guilty about all the trouble I caused... You are always doing something for me, while I can never give anything back."

"Not true," I declared without hesitation. "Ceres, you are our savior. Without you, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Sa...vior?" Ceres whispered in a daze, as if no one had ever said that to her before.

I explained, "When I returned to Mesteria, I could only reunite with Jess because you strived to find the Liberators, Ceres. More than anything, you saved Naut's life on the Send-Off Island. In a world where he didn't make it, we wouldn't be here right now. The stake ended up inside your body because of that incident, didn't it? It's only natural that we bear the responsibility with you."

Jess nodded fervently. "Exactly! Mister Naut has saved us more times than I can count."

Wiping at her eyes with her sleeve, Ceres sniffled. "Miss Jess, Mister Super-Virgin... Thank you so much."

Though it was meant to be a moving scene, it was utterly ruined because of my nickname.

Curious, Ceres glanced at me. "Um, now that you mention it... What does 'super-virgin' mean?"

Hrm.

I wasn't too bright on the laws of this nation, but a nineteen-year-old man telling a thirteen-year-old girl about the meaning of "super-virgin" probably counted as a crime. Before anything else, if I wanted to explain the word "virgin" to Ceres, I first needed to give

her a lecture about all sorts of background information. It was definitely better to nip that idea in the bud.

I cleared my throat. "You need to understand a few things first. Okay, so you know how flowers have stamen and pistils, right?"

Jess slowly called out, "Mister Pig?"

Now, why are you smiling so widely like that? "Then, there are petals and calyces. These four flower parts—otherwise known as verticils—are constructed with three types of transcription factors that are expressed at different places at the base of the flower. So, for example, if the transcription factors responsible for expressing stamens and pistils aren't working properly, you'll end up with flowers that only have calyces and petals—otherwise known as double blooms. I think this topic might still be a little difficult for you, Ceres."

Tilting her head quizzically, Jess asked, "What are you talking about?"

I mean... I only explained the ABC model of flower development, that's all. I raised an imaginary eyebrow. "Sheesh. What in the world did you imagine when I said stamen and pistil, Jess?"

Her cheeks flushed a bright red, and she ended up yelling reflexively. "I-I didn't imagine anything!"



Now that I think about it, saying something like that to a sixteen-year-old girl as a nineteen-year-old man should also count as a crime for sure. I'm only let off the hook because I'm taking on the form of a cute pig.

Jess narrowed her eyes. "No one is letting you off the hook at all..."

Oops. Seems like that wasn't the case.

For a while, Ceres nervously stared between the two of us. Eventually, she opened her mouth slightly before closing it again. I could tell she wanted to say something.

"What's on your mind?" I asked under Jess's glower. "Are you wondering about what the term means after all?"

A little intimidated, Ceres shook her head profusely. She must have sensed that it was a taboo topic based on Jess's behavior. "No... To tell you the truth, um... It's really not a big deal at all, but... It's not something worth your time one bit, but, well..."

"That's not true," Jess patiently said. "Please feel free to say anything to us."

Under her prompting, Ceres finally spoke up. "I... The thing is, I'm not thirteen. I'm already fourteen."

"Oh, I didn't know that!" Jess clapped her hands together gently in celebration.

It turned out that Ceres had been bothered by the fact that I'd thought of her as a thirteen-year-old. *When you get to my age, you might even forget how old you are occasionally, but for a youthful girl around Ceres's age, even a difference of one year must be pivotal.*

"I see. Sorry about that," I apologized. "When was your birthday?"

"Um... It was the fourteenth day of this month."

So, it's the fourteenth day of the second month, gotcha. Wait, that's Valentine's Day back in my world!

Shravis's birthday was on the eighth day of the second month, so Ceres's birthday had been right after the Cross Executioner murders that had begun the day after that. She'd ended up separated from the Liberators, which meant that celebrating it had likely been the

last thing on her itinerary. How depressing.

"That's practically just the other day!" Jess beamed at the girl. "Congratulations!"

"Th-Thank you..." Ceres whispered shyly.

"Now that's wonderful news," I said cheerily. "Happy birthday."

The young maiden began fidgeting with her fingers. "Oh, not at all... It's nothing wonderful..." Her low self-esteem hadn't changed even after she'd grown older.

"Have you already celebrated?" I asked.

Possibly remembering something, Ceres's face softened with a hint of joy. "Yes. Everything had been quite hectic because it was just after that terrible incident, but...everyone was kind enough to congratulate Mister Naut and me on the day itself. Though the celebrations were mainly for Mister Naut. I was only an afterthought..."

Somewhat mystified, Jess muttered, "Huh? Does that mean you share the same birthday with Mister Naut?"

Scratching the back of her head with evident bashfulness and happiness, Ceres nodded with a smile.

Oh my. Such an intriguing design by fate. She was born on Valentine's Day, and they even share the same birthday. It almost sounds too good to be true. They were practically destined for each other. As someone who shipped the Naut/Ceres pairing, I found this to be a most thrilling discovery.

"No, um..." Ceres stammered. "It's not destiny or anything like that."

That was narration, though. "Then what is it? How can it be anything other than destiny for you to share the same birthday?"

Though hesitant, she replied, "Well... It can."

Jess and I both cocked our heads quizzically. How could there be any kind of actual justification for two people to share the same birthday?

"Miss Ceres, are you and Mister Naut actually twins?" Jess asked.

I scrutinized the young girl. "They'd be twins with a pretty big age gap."

The beautiful maiden argued, "There's a chance that Mister Naut

might really be fourteen."

"He'd be a pretty impressive, handsome hunk for a fourteen-year-old..." *He'd be a junior high student in that scenario. What is he going to do with those looks at his age?*

As we pushed forward with our speculations as we pleased, Ceres interjected remorsefully. "Um, Mister Naut doesn't know his parents, so no one knows his real birthday. Until I asked him, it seemed like he'd never even thought about it."

Ahh, so that's how it is. I nodded.

She continued, "I don't know anything about my parents either, but I do know my birthday because I'm a Yethma... I told him I felt guilty about being the only one receiving happy birthdays. And then, he said, 'Then I'll just make my birthday the same day as yours. It's hard to forget it that way, so it works.'"

"Huuuh?!" Jess's eyes lit up as she clasped her hands together. "So that's what happened!"

"Yes... Every year since then, it's become a custom that whenever Mister Naut wishes me a happy birthday, I wish him a happy birthday too." She paused. "He doesn't seem like someone too interested in receiving birthday wishes, though."

The sudden supply of cute Naut/Ceres stories was like a bolt from the blue, and my brain couldn't keep up. *I mean... If someone is willing to do that for you, it's only natural that you'd fall head over heels for them. No wonder.*

Ceres blushed. "I wouldn't say I've fallen head over heels or anything..."

Ahem. Narration.

"You have the wrong idea." She continued to protest. "Mister Naut is, well... He's like a big brother figure to me."

Oh? Interesting. Could I replay that part for a bit?

"He's like a big brother figure to me."

***

"Big brother."

"Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother—"

"Mister Pig." Miffed, Jess began sulking and puffing out her cheeks with displeasure. "Why are you cutting out a part of Miss Ceres's statement and repeating it inside your mind?"

"It's not a big deal." I shook my head. "I'm only editing my memory until it's a short clip and saving it in my little sister folder."

Jess didn't quite seem to understand what a "folder" was, but she seemed to have grasped the general gist because she began looking at me frostily. "You are a big brother with no self-restraint, I see."

***

"Big brother."

"Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother. Big brother—"

Without a semblance of restraint, I began livening up my little sister folder with new content, and both maidens looked down at me as if I were a lowly pig.

Just as planned. I smirked in the back of my mind. As a matter of fact, even such gazes were rewards for me.

It was late at night—roughly the time when the next day came around—when Ceres sat up as if she'd noticed something. A little ahead of us, the river we were going down was about to stream into a lake.

The starry sky of an unthinkable density peered through the cracks between the clouds, casting beams of pale light on the water's surface. It was a vast lake. The gentle slope of a mountain surrounded the perimeter, and a small, solitary island was at the water's center. An old fortress stood all alone on the piece of isolated land. Faint light shone through the building's small windows.

I glanced back at Ceres. Even though she'd been quiet and still until now, she'd abruptly sat up and had started staring restlessly at

the old fortress.

"Miss Ceres, is something bothering you?" Jess asked, concerned.

The combination of the young maiden's long lashes, large eyes, and natural aura gave the impression of a deer that had been startled by a carnivorous predator. Possibly because of discomfort, Ceres patted the center of her modest chest as she explained, "I recognize that building from somewhere."

My interest was piqued. "Have you gone there before?"

"No... I believe I've never been to this area, but I..." Her hand, which had been placed near her heart, tightened and gripped the fabric of her clothes. She groaned.

Hurriedly, Jess leaned over and propped her up. "What's wrong? Are you all right?" The small boat rocked precariously.

The younger maiden collapsed, practically falling onto Jess. "My chest...aches."

"Please excuse me for a moment." Jess hastily unbuttoned Ceres's clothes. I caught a glimpse of bony skin.

"Uhh... Is it okay for me to watch this or nah?"

"It's not," she declared firmly.

Yeah, I figured. Drooping my ears despondently, I turned my back on the two girls.

Almost immediately, I heard Jess's sharp gasp. "This is...! Miss Ceres, why in the world is...?"

It was a rather vague statement. I frowned. "What exactly is 'this'?"

"Um..." Ceres spoke up feebly. "It got worse around the time you two returned from the Abyssus... It's been like this ever since."

"What exactly is 'like this'?" I asked again.

"This can't be normal," Jess said gravely. "Have you consulted anyone else about this problem?"

There was a pause. "No... You are the first person I've shown."

"Miss Ceres, why have you kept it a secret until it's gotten to this point...?"

There were only question marks in my head. "What exactly has gotten to what point?!" Unable to bear it anymore, I turned around. With a rustle, a black cloth covered my vision. Jess had blindfolded

me with magic. “Hey, that’s mean. I’m only worried about Ceres’s chest...”

No response. In exchange, there was a moment of silence—long enough for the two girls to communicate through telepathy.

Finally, Jess said, “I understand. Okay, Mister Pig, you can look now.”

The black cloth cleared away, and the first thing I saw was Jess holding Ceres up in her arms. The blouse buttons around the younger girl’s collar had been refastened. Only the buttons around the central area of her chest were left open, revealing her bare skin—her bare skin that was emitting a faint white glow. A pattern, which reminded me of cracks, had spread with her sternum as the epicenter. It was painful to look at, and on top of that, these lines were responsible for the white light. Though I described it as faint, it was prominent enough to illuminate the inside of her clothes.

“Wait...” Realization dawned on me. “That’s where she was stabbed by the Contract Stake, isn’t it?” I trotted forward, trying to get a better look, but Jess casually obstructed me with her body. Not willing to back down, I pushed her back.

Within the silent battle that unfolded, Jess softly asked, “Miss Ceres, has it been hurting this entire time?”

“Not all the time, no. It’s just that once in a while, I’d have this peculiar feeling that I think something is familiar even though I should’ve never seen it before, like what I felt earlier. But it’s never been *this* painful until now...”

While we jostled around, Jess and I looked at each other solemnly. I began thinking over what I’d learned. *The place where the Contract Stake pierced aches from time to time. The condition leading up to this phenomenon is a peculiar sense of déjà vu.*

I needed more data. “Ceres, could you give me an example of what else you felt was oddly familiar?”

“I think it’s when I see buildings that have been around for a long time... Old fortresses like this one or grand churches.”

Which meant that, perhaps, she’d been influenced by the memories of someone from a long time ago. *But how did something like that end up in Ceres’s mind? That aside...* “Jess, this might be a

valuable lead on the Contract Stake. I think there's merit in investigating it in detail."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you implying that you're going to investigate Miss Ceres's body in detail?"

Hey, she makes it sound like I'm eager to examine Ceres's chest. But I'm not a pervert. There's no way I'd ever think that way! Never! "No. I'm talking about the places that bring about this sense of familiarity. Ceres mentioned that the old fortress on that island seemed familiar, didn't she? At the same time, the place where the stake stabbed her began throbbing. Maybe that fortress holds clues about the Contract Stakes. We don't have any other leads to follow or people we can turn to. Going past that place without investigating it is unthinkable."

"You're right..." Jess warily gazed at the fortress.

I could understand her anxiety. The fortress was on a solitary island in the middle of a lake. The royal court's army was after us—if they discovered us in that fortress by some chance, we would have nowhere to run.

"It's all right," I reassured her. "We've been extremely careful about avoiding heckripons, haven't we? The army hasn't found us yet either. At the moment, no one knows our location. Even if our pursuers search through this river system from one corner to the other, it should take a lot of time, giving us enough leeway to make a small detour."

Taking in a deep breath, Jess said, "Got it. Let's go."

After properly fixing Ceres's state of dress, Jess began rowing the small boat with oars. Though her arms were delicate, the boat advanced into the lake vigorously.

The lake's surface rippled peacefully with the breeze. I couldn't get an accurate gauge because it was dark, but it appeared to be quite deep. We headed straight toward the miniature island.

With a soft bump, the boat arrived at the pier. There was only a single other vessel moored here—a small boat that had been painted in an impeccable white. It was probably the usual means of transportation for the fortress's owner. A maintained hill road stretched up from the pier and drew a gentle curve all the way to

the high ground where the old fortress stood.

Alighting from our boat, we made our way toward the fortress. A grand diversity of garden trees were arranged around the path, and you could tell that they were well taken care of. The chilly wind of winter wafted over the graceful fragrance of white flowers.

"There's a chance that the resident is someone rolling in money," I commented.

"Yes, it certainly looks like it." Jess raised her face and observed the entirety of the old fortress. Though it seemed like an antique structure made of stone, there weren't any defects or damages. Even flowers decorated the windows. You could tell that it had been cherished and carefully protected over the years.

Next to the majestic entrance doors stood the following wooden sign:

Fortress Lussier—The Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures
Please feel free to come knocking at our doors at any time

I was pretty sure that "at any time" didn't include the middle of the night. However, warm light was spilling out from the windows. Maybe someone was still awake.

As national fugitives, we didn't have time to waste. Jess lifted a knocker and resolutely struck the door.

Immediately, a younger voice than I'd expected replied to us. "Yes, coming right now!" The hefty doors heavily creaked as they opened.

The person who greeted us was a girl who looked even younger than Ceres. Her straight blonde hair was trimmed neatly like a doll's, and a hairband with a deep crimson ribbon decorated her golden strands. Her frame was wrapped in a pretty maid uniform with a black-and-white theme, and you couldn't even spot a single crease in the fabric.

"Good evening!" She exclaimed cheerily. Her polite tone gave me the impression of a clever girl. "Welcome to Fortress Lussier, the Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures! I spotted your arrival from the windows, esteemed guests." Animatedly, she pointed up at the windows in question.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *Her greeting sounds just like a*

staff member at a theme park.

"I'm really sorry for coming here in the middle of the night," Jess said. "If possible, I have a request I'd like your help with."

The eyes of the maid girl shifted onto Ceres, who was battered all over, then to me for a split second. She placed an index finger on her chin and went silent, as if considering something.

Then, leaning slightly in our direction, she whispered, "The two of you have escaped here from pursuers, I see."

She'd deduced our situation accurately, and tension rose in my body. *To be fair, considering Ceres's getup and the ungodly hour we're visiting, it's probably clear that we aren't normal guests.*

Possibly because she'd sensed Jess's and Ceres's anxiety, the girl pulled the corners of her lips into a bright, innocent smile. "It's okay, I'm also a Yethma. Please come in. I shall take you to see the senior."

Though I couldn't grasp what was happening, I sensed nothing malicious from the girl. She welcomed us in and guided us to the living room. A vintage carpet covered the ground, and high-class furnishings, which were both old-fashioned and sophisticated, were arranged on top of it.

At the fireplace along the wall, lively tongues of flames licked what little firewood was left. In front of this fire was an elderly man with gray hair who lounged on a somewhat unusual chair.

It was an armchair padded with crimson cushions. Large wooden wheels were attached to both sides—it was almost like a wheelchair. Yellow ristae were inserted into the armrests, and when the man brushed those parts with his fingers, the wheels moved on their own, turning the chair to face us.

Deep creases were etched into the senior's skin. He looked notably seasoned with age. His well-combed gray hair flowed gently down his neck—starkly contrasting with his raven-colored nightgown. A deep scarlet lap blanket was spread out over his knees. Judging by his features and serene aura, he seemed to be an affable person.

"Greetings, young ladies." The man's voice was deep and unhurried; a note of elegance was even woven within. My impression of him perfectly fit my image of a wealthy elderly man.

"Welcome to Fortress Lussier, the Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures." The welcome catchphrase that reminded me of staff at a theme park appeared to be a standard phrase shared between them.

He continued, "Now, please take a seat over there. We shall prepare some warm tea right away. Ezalith!"

The girl from earlier had begun moving even before he gave his instructions and was in the middle of arranging a tea set with stylish patterns on a tray. She proceeded to carry it over. There was a merry spring in her step, and the cups rattled on top of the saucers with her movement.

Jess and Ceres sat down on the sofa as prompted. I curled up next to Jess's feet.

The elderly man cordially inclined his head. "Sorry for the late introduction. My name is Gran. I am the lord of Fortress Lussier, the Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures."

Huh. By any chance, is "the Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures" part of the fortress's official name?

He then indicated Ezalith with his hand. "And this is Ezalith. She takes care of me. May I ask for your names, young ladies?"

The pair proceeded to introduce themselves in succession.

"I'm Jess."

"I'm Ceres."

I'm a pig.

Gran smiled warmly. "I see, I see. You have lovely names."

Even though we'd come knocking at his door in the middle of the night uninvited, the senior received us so readily that it was mind-boggling. Possibly because he saw Jess's unease, Gran's shoulders shook from his laughter. "Don't worry so much. Sightseers are always welcome at this place. When you get to my age, you naturally sleep a lot less than when you are younger. But in Ezalith's case, I think she'd better get to bed soon."

As she placed the tray on the table, Ezalith shook her head fervently. "No, they are our first guests in a long time! I also had a nap today, so I will stay up for just a little longer."

Gran nodded. "I see, I see."

I still didn't really understand what was going on as the pair

pushed things forward. *Does this old man think we came to this place as tourists in the dead of night? While looking bruised and battered all over?*

Or...does he know that we fled here and is choosing not to touch on that subject?

We didn't exactly ask him for it, but while Ezalith made tea, the friendly-seeming Gran began giving us a lecture on the old fortress with a hint of pride. He began, "It's a slight shame. This place is more beautiful during the day, and—"

It ended up being quite a lengthy description, so here's a summary.

According to him, since ancient times, Gran's household had guarded and maintained Fortress Lussier, the Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures. It was blessed with a unique and stunning scenery, both in the past and the present—before the world had been thrown off-kilter with bizarre phenomena, countless travelers would visit to behold the views. Many of them would also rent rooms.

This was the background that led to the excessively welcoming mood, the outlandish nickname given to the castle, and their practiced reception of guests. Having learned the reason, we breathed a sigh of relief.

"We haven't been blessed with guests for quite a while," he said. "No matter what reason has brought you here, I'm over the moon that you have come. Since you're here, please take your time and enjoy yourselves. I know everything there is to know about this fortress. If you're curious about anything, feel free to ask me at any time."

That works out for us. We wanted information about this fortress, even if just a little, to investigate Ceres's sense of familiarity with it.

Jess accepted a cup of tea with a pleasant aroma and took a breather. I secretly communicated to her through my mind. <<It sounds like this grandpa holds extraordinary pride in this fortress. I think if you actively demonstrate an interest in this place, he might take the initiative to tell us all about it.>>

<You're right. That's an excellent idea,> she replied.

After looking around the living room for a while, Jess turned to face Gran. “Excuse me, but is this fortress perhaps a building from the especially early days of the Gothel style? The choice of colors for the stone materials seems fairly characteristic of it.”

Gran widened his wrinkly eyes and stared intently at Jess. They remained wide as they lit up with delight. “My word...! Miss, I can tell that you are quite knowledgeable about architecture. Did you possibly serve under a reputable family in that field? Indeed, you are correct. Fortress Lussier, the Fort of History, Adventure, and Treasures, is categorized under the earliest period of the Gothel style. In fact, strictly speaking, it is a structure built before the concept of the Gothel style came about. You could say it’s a monumental building that can be considered the originator of the style itself.”

I’d instructed her to proactively show interest, but I hadn’t expected Jess to be this skillful at it. *And actually, what in the world even is the Gothel style?*

“Oh, I didn’t know that!” Jess beamed. “That would mean it’s a structure built a long time before the start of the Royal Years. I’m very curious about the history here. It’s already late at night, but if it’s not too much to ask, could you please give me some more details?”

Just like Jess said, it was a presumptuous request to make at the witching hour. However, Gran’s long, white brows sprang up with joy. “Yes, yes, of course! You could even say that telling this fortress’s tale is what I live for.” With a stroke of his armrest ristae, the chair twirled around with its passenger and faced the corridor. “I have good company today—I shall show you the treasures of this village that I have gathered over countless years.”

By now, it was clear that Gran’s armchair was a wheelchair powered by magic. He could move it at will by touching the attached ristae. While Ezalith ran out to fetch the keys, Gran brought us deeper into the fortress.

<<Way to go, Jess!>> I whispered internally.

<Thank you very much.>

The fortress’s interior design spoke of ancient times but was in

good order. I could never get tired of admiring the mazelike corridors. Though it was late at night, enchanted lanterns fitted with ristae painted every part of the building in warm light.

As a tourist, it was a thrilling experience. Sadly, we had no time to treat our current predicament leisurely. In fact, by all rights, we ought to distance ourselves from the capital as quickly as possible.

However, Ceres's sense of déjà vu and the pain in her chest were causes of intrigue that would be too wasteful to ignore. *What we want right now is even the slightest bit of information on the Contract Stakes and Ruta. Anything will do.*

And to get our hands on it, we needed to draw out as many stories as possible from this jovial grandpa.

Soon, we reached our destination under Gran's lead—the treasure chamber. We waited a while in front of the sturdy doors, and not long after, Ezalith came running with the keys in hand.

When the doors opened, Jess let out a cheer of excitement. They revealed a magnificent room with a lofty ceiling and a diverse selection of articles that practically crammed the area. Though the collection was referred to as "treasures," most of the objects weren't valuables like gold, silver, or precious stones. Instead, they were more along the lines of art and handicrafts, such as paintings, sculptures, furniture, and carpets.

The grand exhibit decorating the wall facing the entrance was an exquisite oil painting depicting a certain town with a precipitous rocky mountain at its heart. Mountains completely surrounded the place too, and one eye-catching monument was a castle on top of the central rocky highland. I didn't recognize the town, but there must be something special about it since it was in the most conspicuous place in the gallery.

That aside, I have to say this is an unbelievably large collection, I commented in my mind. The numerous exhibits were likely rather ancient—there was even a marble sculpture that had completely discolored into a shade of light brown.

Gran merrily gave us commentary on his treasures. "This sculpture depicts a goddess. It was displayed on the altar in the village's church for a long, long time," he explained. "Before the Dark

Ages, there used to be slightly differing religions in each respective town and city. It was believed that this goddess would bring about an abundant harvest, and as you can see, she has extremely abundant breasts—"

His explanation flowed fluently, likely a skill he polished after giving countless tours to guests. One after another, he introduced the exhibits, each of which had a lengthy and intriguing history. Possibly because he was ecstatic at having his first guests in a long time, he was in extremely high spirits. As he talked, he would lovingly caress the articles in his collection with his wrinkly hands, including the extremely abundant breasts he mentioned.

Behind him, Jess and Ceres furtively whispered to each other.

"Miss Ceres, take a good look around. If anything catches your attention in some way, please tell me."

Ceres nodded. "Okay... I'll try."

I pretended to be a simple pig to the best of my ability so I wouldn't garner any problematic attention. Luckily, Ezalith didn't appear to show any particular interest in me. By the looks of it, Yethma couldn't read my narration unless they focused on me and deliberately tried to glean what I was thinking.

When the young girl innocently had squatted down before my eyes and stroked my head, my blood had almost run cold, but I'd managed to worm out of my plight by stuffing my thoughts with oinking, just like a pig would do. I hadn't averted my gaze from the area between her bent legs because I'd prioritized acting like a pig over a gentleman. *I had no devious intentions at all, I swear.*

Gran continued taking on the role of a guide without showing any exhaustion. "The white porcelain pig we have here was placed in the village's public bathhouse. Can you see the deposits of the hot spring that are clinging to it? Its testicles were sculpted to be extraordinarily large, for they are symbolic. The pig represents the devious intentions of humans, and in a sense, it served as a warning to the villagers—"

Uh... Why is Jess looking at me after hearing that?

After we made some progress in the gallery, Jess casually cut into the elderly man's smooth exposition. "Pardon me, Mister Gran."

Gran's hands, which had been fondly stroking a gilded toilet seat with an ancient and honorable origin, stilled. He turned around to face the beautiful maiden. "Yes, may I help you?"

"Um, I just got a little curious... You have been talking about a village for a while, but where exactly are you referring to?"

Oh, now that she mentions it... Her words were a wake-up call. We were on an island floating in the middle of a lake. We hadn't spotted anything remotely similar to a village in the vicinity. I'd accepted his explanations as they were without questioning anything, but Jess raised a good question. What exactly was this "village"?

Looking happier than he'd been all night, Gran cut his explanation about the toilet seat short. "Yes! That is the exact question I have been waiting for! I knew that a girl like you would ask me about it."

He then nimbly weaved through the gaps between the rows of sculptures with his wheelchair and led us to the wall on the farthest side of the room. Indeed, it was the one that exhibited the spectacular oil painting that stood out the most—the one that depicted the town surrounding a rocky mountain.

The elderly man gestured at it. "This is Lussier—the village that is my ancestral home."

Ceres stared at him with her mouth wide open. Jess, however, sucked in a sharp breath. Realization finally dawned on me as well.

The castle on the summit of the central rocky mountain was Fortress Lussier, the very place we were in. *Which means that the surrounding village...*

Stunned, Jess asked, "Are you possibly implying that the rest of the village sank?"

"Very much so." Gran nodded. "Once upon a time, Lussier was such a beautiful village that it even earned the nickname of Little Pospoum. But during the Dark Ages, the mountains were torn down, and the Mayr River was dammed up. Everything other than this fortress ended up at the bottom of the lake."

We'd only just come down that very Mayr River. The lake we'd cut across was where the village used to exist. A valley downstream must have been blocked off somehow, causing the river to flood and

engulf the entire town.

Jess asked for confirmation, "Pospoum was a fortified city in the north, is that right?"

"Indeed. You might be young, but you are certainly a knowledgeable one!"

"I happened to have seen it once! The cityscape was gorgeous."

Just as I was wondering what she was referring to, it hit me. *Right, when we were in the Abyssus, I think we caught a glimpse of the Clandestine Arcanist's hometown. Its name should have been Pospoum. Like Lussier, it also featured a grand rocky mountain at the center and a city built to surround it.* If someone were to ask me to describe the town in this painting, calling it Little Pospoum *did* seem fitting.

That said...the Pospoum we saw back then wasn't in the best shape. A massive chunk of rock had crushed the castle on the mountain summit, and the entire city was practically burning to the ground.

Gran tilted his head quizzically and quietly said, "How strange... Miss, from what I know, Pospoum should have been destroyed over 130 years ago."

Hearing his whisper, Jess was clearly shaken. She must have realized that her tongue had slipped. After all, unless there were extraordinary circumstances, there was no way a sixteen-year-old maiden would have ever seen a city destroyed over a century ago.

"Oh, um, I saw it in a painting!" she hurriedly exclaimed. "Sorry for wording it as if I'd seen it in person."

"I see, I see. No, that's quite all right," Gran gently replied. "That aside, I'm surprised to hear that such a painting has survived. Records of the period before the Dark Ages should have been placed under the strict regulation of the royal court, after all... That's especially true for Pospoum."

That caught Jess's attention. "Is Pospoum special in some way?"

Gran lowered his voice a little. "Pospoum's king was renowned as a kind and compassionate sage who disliked war. Despite that, Vatis one-sidedly devastated everything in the city he ruled... There could never be a more unfavorable reality for the royal court, don't you

agree?”

Jess stammered, “O-Oh... I didn’t know that happened...”

“All right!” Almost like a child, Gran gave her a toothy grin. “I can tell you are a studious young girl with a burning interest in the distant past. I shall make an exception for you and show you my secret, prized gallery. It would be rather inconvenient if someone from the royal court learned of it, so don’t breathe a word of it, no matter what happens, all right?”

Slightly taken aback, Jess said, “Ah... Thank you very much.”

It seemed like Gran was going to tour us around an even deeper section of the chamber.

In one corner of the treasure chamber was a large, hanging tapestry. On it, a girl with golden hair sat on the rim of a bathtub while only a white cloth covered her private parts. With a cue from Gran, Ezalith flipped up the fabric.

As it turned out, the image was hiding a black metal door. Ezalith took out a key and unlocked it. “Please come on in!” she exclaimed.

Within it was a long, windowless corridor. The lanterns lined up neatly along the walls lit up in succession.

Gran led the charge into the hidden passage in his wheelchair. At the very rear, Ezalith locked the door.

As he advanced down the path, Gran explained, “This passage leads underground. Long ago, you could head out from an exit halfway down the mountain. But as you know, it’s currently very much underwater. My legs are also debilitated now, so I’m using it as a secret gallery. What you see here are precious treasures that my household has protected from the censorship of the royal court for generations.”

Along the wall were paintings depicting all kinds of towns and cities. As Jess admired them, she let out a spontaneous sigh of awe. “Goodness... There are so many paintings of towns I’ve never seen before... Are they possibly settlements in the southwestern area of Mesteria?”

“Correct. They were all settlements situated in the area that is now referred to as the western wilderness. All of them were devastated by the aftermath of fruitless conflicts up until and during

the Dark Ages. Did you know that during Mesteria's golden age, we used to have approximately ten times as many people residing in our nation compared to now? Not only were people and settlements lost, but we were also deprived of many precious heritages of our civilization alongside them."

"I never knew..." Jess's voice was small and apologetic.

The elderly man gently shook his head. "It's only natural that you aren't aware. These are all truths that the royal court has buried into the darkness with brute force." His tone grew firmer. "But even a powerful entity like the royal court cannot erase all the evidence left behind by history. Not only do the traces of the past remain here, but you can also find them scattered all over the country."

Abruptly, the man turned around to face Ceres. The young girl was pressing down on her chest with both hands and staring unblinkingly at one oil painting.

He said, "The town you are looking at is a striking example, miss. Beautiful, isn't it? It's Helde, the Town of Death."

The townscape was painted onto the canvas in a detailed style with sensitive strokes. Two gigantic towers—one white, one black—lined up next to each other as if to pierce the heavens. On the mountainside of the town's outskirts sat a castle of bricks.

Gingerly, Jess asked, "Miss Ceres, are you curious about this place?"

Still pressing down on her chest, Ceres nodded. Jess gently reached out one arm and hugged Ceres's shoulder to reassure her. The older maiden then asked, "Mister Gran, may I ask what kind of town Helde is?"

"More like was, for it's now a forsaken place." He paused. "Helde has been referred to as a domain shrouded in secrets and mystery since the faraway past. It isn't in the most accessible location, you see. I have gone there once myself, but it is a land with a somewhat otherworldly atmosphere. There, you can find the mysterious tomb of a man with strange powers who is said to have perished during prehistoric times."

Jess and Ceres traded glances. If Ceres's enigmatic sense of familiarity applied to this town as well, then there was most certainly

merit in visiting it.

Approaching the painting, Jess proceeded to observe it carefully. Her honey-brown eyes moved over the canvas as if to scan every last detail before they stopped at one place. “Ah, this is...” She pointed at the castle.

I couldn’t see it very well from a pig’s point of view, but there seemed to be some kind of tiny detail there.

“Well now, you have good eyes, miss.” Gran sounded impressed. “Someone has engraved a triangular symbol with some kind of hard object, though I’m afraid I can’t make any sense of it. It must be some sort of graffiti added later on.”

With her fingers on both hands, Jess formed an isosceles triangle that was tall and narrow before showing the shape to me. *Don’t tell me...* My eyes widened. Assuming this wasn’t a simple coincidence, then it must be the symbol representing the Contract Stakes. The exact same symbol had been carved into the wall when we’d found one of these artifacts at the Encounter Waterfall.

“Pardon me!” Jess raised her voice and eagerly leaned forward. “May I ask how you can reach this town?”

Gran looked mystified at her attitude. “I know this is a wild thought, but you aren’t heading there to seek death, are you?”

“Well... Um, no, that’s a misunderstanding...” Jess shook her head. “I’m only asking out of pure curiosity.”

“I see, I see. Unadulterated curiosity is a precious thing. Look over there—that’s a map. No matter where you start, the path to the town is considerably complex. But I’ll let you in on a little secret. There actually happens to be a slight shortcut if you leave from here __”

A sudden voice cut his words short.

Gran closed his mouth. The smile on his face vanished without a trace.

Abruptly, there was utter silence in the passage. I could pick up an irregular series of sounds when I focused on my sliced and pickled mimiga ears. It echoed from far away and reminded me of someone banging on a door. The manner in which they did it sounded a little rowdy.

"Oh my, do we have more guests?" Ezalith hurriedly turned to go back the way we'd come.

Gran swiftly reached out his wrinkly hands from his wheelchair and detained her. Then, he quietly shook his head. "You mustn't go." His voice was composed, but I picked up a hint of tension. "I shall greet them. You should wait here."

Ezalith looked at his wheelchair with indecision. "But senior..."

"We don't even know who's here, so I could never let you head out alone. Ezalith, hide here with the young ladies. I'm certain you know what to do if the unexpected happens."

Operating his wheelchair, Gran retraced our path. Ezalith sprinted past the man and opened the door for him. After the wheelchair left the passage, the girl firmly shut the door.

Jess's face was pale as a sheet. I shared the exact same sentiment.

Who in the world would visit this fortress at such an ungodly hour? My mind was racing. *We're apparently the first guests they've had in a long time. Is it really possible for other visitors to come at the same time by pure chance?* The odds of that were low.

Meekly, Ezalith asked, "Um... May I ask where the two of you and Mister Pig escaped from?"

Jess's eyes shifted slightly to the side. "W-We came from Kiltyrie's direction. Do you know of it? It's in the south."

"Yes, of course. It's immediately south of Baptsaze, where the famous convent was, after all... Hmm, but I haven't heard anything about the invitations being so severe over there yet."

Her wording of invitations being "severe" caught my attention. *What is she talking about?*

With a slightly resigned smile, Ezalith looked up at Jess. "Lately, I've been having trouble understanding what exactly the king is trying to do. Even though the world has become so strange, he hasn't explained anything to us... He suddenly released us from our collars one day, then invited us to the royal capital on the next. When he takes such actions without explaining his reasoning, I'm afraid I only feel more and more suspicious."

Ezalith gently touched her slender neck. I was certain that until

two weeks ago, a hefty silver collar had been wound around it. There was a faint bruise above her delicate collarbones that the device had likely left behind.

After hearing the girl's point, Jess's expression fell despondently. "That's very understandable..."

"Huh?" The girl blinked. "Why do you look so apologetic, Miss Jess?"

"Ah, no, um... It's not that I'm apologetic. I just feel the same way." Jess smiled with chagrin.

"Right?" Ezalith nodded. "You might already be aware, but the capital seems to have even stopped supplying ristae. That's really troubling because plenty of people will be inconvenienced without them, like the senior."

Jess hesitated. "Mister Gran...has trouble moving around by himself, is that right?"

"Yep. He's already quite high up in age. That's why I don't want to go to the capital. Without me, the senior can't even survive."

Despite her youth, this girl appeared to have her own opinions already. Her statements were also logically consistent, and I could infer that she'd had a proper education.

She added, "Not to mention that the senior is remarkably kind to me. Never once have I even thought that I dislike being a servant here." Then, as if she had to get this off her chest, she continued, "The senior has taught me, a Yethma, all kinds of things so that I wouldn't be impolite to our guests, or so he said. He told me about the fortress, the village, the history, and the countless bad things the royal court has done. I know the truth. The part about being impolite to guests is nothing but an excuse. The senior has raised me caringly, almost like I'm his granddaughter. I never want to live apart from him."

Partway into her speech, tears began shimmering in Ezalith's eyes, possibly because she'd gotten worked up.

Startled, Jess waved her hand around in a fluster. "You *can* stay with him. I'm sure of it!"

"Do you think so?" Ezalith looked in the direction of the shut door. Gran, who'd gone to check on things, still hadn't returned. "I keep

thinking that the king's methods are wrong. If only Mister Naut and the Liberators would take down the royal court."

At the sudden mention of Naut's name, Ceres's shoulders jumped. Jess feigned composure, but asking the same of Ceres was probably unreasonable.

Possibly because she'd heard Ceres's thoughts, Ezalith stared fixedly at the young maiden. "Miss Ceres... Have you met Mister Naut before?"

Ceres stammered, "Ah, um, I only happened to have seen him briefly..."

"Really?! Aw, I'm jealous. Hey, what did he look like? I've heard stories that he's a handsome young man with an extremely striking face."



Ezalith seemed to have a rather notable interest in Naut. At the same time, it also looked like she was trying to chat about everything she could think of to distract herself from the fact that she couldn't move from here or do anything.

At that question, Ceres's cheeks gained a rosy tint. "He's...a very dignified and charming person."

"I knew it!" Ezalith clapped her hands together. "That must be so nice. I'd love to see him for myself someday, even if it's just once. Naut, the hero of liberation... He's the man all Yethma across Mesteria adore, after all."

As a pig, I could only watch over as the conversation unfolded. It seemed that Jess also struggled to find something to say.

Ezalith added, "Oh, have you heard this, Miss Ceres? Mister Naut apparently went down the path of liberating Yethma because the woman he loved, who was a Yethma, was killed. Even now, I hear he's charging into battle with only that person in his heart. He's exactly what you'd picture when you think of a hero born from tragedy... Don't you think he's simply dashing?"

I noted her wording of "only."

Ceres hung her head and nodded. "You're right. He is very...dashing, yes."

An awfully awkward atmosphere hung in the air. Even Ezalith, who'd been moving her mouth restlessly, must've picked up a little of it because she glanced at the door and sighed. "I'll head out and check on the senior. Everyone, please don't move from here, no matter what happens."

Jess worriedly looked at Ezalith. "But Mister Gran just said—"

The maid shook her head. "I'm worried about him. In any case, I'm heading out. I'll be right back."

Leaving us with those words, Ezalith hurriedly opened the hidden door and entered the treasure chamber. Jess, Ceres, and I were left behind in the gloomy passage.

I glanced to my side. Ceres was facing the wall. I could hear stifled sniffling.

Jess and I traded glances. I struggled to find the right words to calm the young girl. Meanwhile, Jess quietly walked to Ceres's side

and hugged her shoulder. “Miss Ceres, let’s settle the problem with the stake for certain, then return to Mister Naut, all right?”

There was a pause. “Yes...”

I skirted around the pair and looked at a certain oil painting from next to Ceres’s bottom. “Helde, the Town of Death... Do you guys want to try heading here next?”

On Ceres’s other side, Jess nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Miss Ceres, you felt this place was familiar, just like your initial reaction to the castle, right?”

“I did... I somehow have this mysterious feeling that I really want to go there.” Her small hands pressed down firmly just above her heart.

I nodded. “That’s all the more reason we should go. The panging in your chest might be some sort of message. That grandpa said there’s a shortcut from here, right? Works out for us.”

Jess agreed, “It’s settled then. Let’s do that.”

There *was* one problem, though—the unknown entities who had visited this fortress in the middle of the night. Gran, who’d gone to welcome them, was taking an alarming amount of time to come back. My intuition told me that something undesirable was happening.

I narrowed my eyes. “Before anything else, we should focus on getting out of here safely. If the royal court’s army has located us here by some chance—it won’t be easy. In the worst-case scenario, we might even have to fight our way out.”

Placing a hand on her chest, Jess hesitantly asked, “But what if even Mister Shravis is here?”

“If that happens...” I paused. “We’ll think about it if that happens.”

Fleeing without confrontation was ideal. However, if there were any powerful mages among our pursuers’ ranks... We’d likely have to resort to relatively drastic measures as well. I pictured Jess and Shravis fighting each other, and a chill ran down my spine.

In a frail voice, Ceres spoke up while looking at the older maiden. “Miss Jess, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for putting you through something so awful for a person like me...” Her large eyes were red

and puffy.

Smiling warmly at the girl, Jess gently placed her hands on Ceres's shoulders. "Everything's all right. We will protect you, Miss Ceres, and that's a promise."

"Thank you..." Ceres placed her tiny hands on top of Jess's.

We waited for Gran and Ezalith in the dark passage for a while. However, there were no signs at all of their return. We couldn't hear any sound or voices even when we pressed our ears against the door connected to the treasure chamber. We didn't have a clue about what was going on.

The wait had stretched on for too long. Within the cramped secret passage, we started getting apprehensive.

"This passage is connected to a place halfway down the mountainside, right?" I recalled. "But that exit's currently submerged underwater. In other words, we're stuck in a dead end. If someone enters the treasure chamber right now, we'd be no different from sitting pigs."

Jess inclined her head. "Sitting pigs?"

Maybe the proper term was ducks. "How about we try heading outside for now? Our current location is a good hiding spot, but it's unfortunate in the sense that we can't glean anything about our situation. If there are truly pursuers on our trail, then we must devise an escape route. I suggest we move to a place with a good view of our surroundings."

"Agreed." Jess took a step forward. "Let's go." Opening the door just a crack, she peered into the room. "There doesn't seem to be anyone here. Now's our chance."

With Jess in the lead, we filed into the treasure chamber.

I mulled over our situation. "This fortress has a tall tower, doesn't it? I think we can scout out our surroundings from there."

Jess nodded without hesitation.

We headed out into the corridor and approached the tower with utmost caution. Of course, we didn't know the route there. We could only rely on our memories of the fortress from the outside and our general sense of direction.

"Over there!" Jess exclaimed and pointed.

I followed her line of sight to see the entrance to a set of spiral stairs. Judging by the narrow structure, they must be climbing up a tower. A fleeting thought occurred to me, and I let Ceres go ahead so that I could watch our rear.

We raced up the narrow, steep stone steps in the order of Jess, Ceres, and me. The three of us single-mindedly went in circles and circles up the cylindrical tower with no windows.

I'd undertaken the role of the rear guard purely, genuinely, out of one hundred percent devotion and self-sacrifice—*I swear, I have no other motives whatsoever*—but from a pig's point of view, I could see up to quite a precarious part of Ceres's legs. That said, I only had trouble making things out because of the darkness, but actually, from this angle, I could see her *Les*—

A frosty voice cut into my thoughts. "Mister Pig."

I lowered my gaze. *True, the rear lookout shouldn't focus on the front but the back.* I made full use of my wide pig's vision and surveyed our surroundings vigilantly.

We finally came across a small window when we reached the room at the top of the tower. I climbed onto a wooden box that had been left nearby and peered outside with Jess and Ceres.

I was struck speechless.

Boats that numbered easily in the twenties—*Did they come from the river?*—were floating around the fortress's solitary island as if encircling it. I caught a glimpse of red armor—the royal court's army. Underneath the cloudy sky was a grand, shadowy figure that came in and out of vision as it flapped its wings—the royal court's dragon.

Enough military forces to capture an entire village had Fort Lussier surrounded.

"No way... It's really them?" I muttered in shock.

Without a moment's delay, Jess muttered, "How in the world did they find this place so quickly?"

It was a good question. Even if our discovery was inevitable, this was fast—too fast. *Too* precise. I narrowed my eyes. "It's as if the royal court has a grasp on our exact position."

"Right..."

Yeah... It's as if Shravis has planted some kind of article enchanted with the Trac *spell on us—*

"Oh..." Jess said in a small, sorrowful voice. "The bracelet."

She was referring to the silver bracelet Shravis had entrusted us with—the communication device he'd left us alongside the letter so we could call him over when we found Ceres. At the moment, it was the only item connecting him and us.

I whipped my head around to face Jess. "Where is it? We've got to get rid of it."

"It's...still around my wrist." With a pale face, Jess lifted her left wrist to show me. "I've taken out the rista, so it shouldn't be possible for him to eavesdrop on us, but there *is* the chance that..."

"He might have laced it with a *Trac* spell. I see," I finished for her.

Jess nodded, her face contorting with grief.

I can't believe it. This is no different from going on the run with a GPS tracker on our bodies. "Let's take it off. We need to throw it somewhere before we run."

"Agreed." Her fingers reached for the clasp. They were shaking and slid along its surface several times.

"Clam done," I reassured her with a not-so-reassuring message. "He already knows where we are anyway. There's no rush."

"That's not it..." She chewed on her bottom lip. "It isn't that I'm flustered."

"What's wrong?"

"This thing...won't open. The metal fittings won't budge at all."

A bloodcurdling dread and a sense of revulsion toward facing potential betrayal knocked all words out of me for a moment. "Don't tell me... Shravis made it that way with magic?"

"He might have." She gave up on trying to take it off with her fingers. Pulling away her fingertips, she then pointed them at the bracelet from a slight distance. "I'll also try removing it with magic."

With an adorable grunt of effort, Jess's body tensed up, and the silver bracelet abruptly let out a metallic sound akin to a shrill shriek.

Sweat slicked her forehead.

She mustered up even more strength, and the shriek grew one level louder.

Shravis's enchantment was potent—the metal fittings showed no signs of bending, much less popping open. This pretty much confirmed that he'd enchanted this bracelet with a *Trac* spell. That guy hadn't given us that bracelet to communicate with us. Instead, he'd wanted to grasp Jess's location, likely because he anticipated that we'd give Ceres a hand with her escape.

Jess stole glances outside the window and began losing her composure. "Wh-What do I do? At this rate...I won't be able to escape with Miss Ceres."

If we ran away with Ceres, it would be no different than broadcasting her location to Shravis. But if we separated from her, we wouldn't be able to help her in any way.

This was when Ceres spoke up. "Miss Jess... You've already done enough." Her voice was hoarse, as if she'd squeezed it past her throat. "I was really happy that you were willing to help me...that you were willing to become my big sister. But you don't have to mind me anymore. I'll figure it out somehow by myself, just like I planned at first."

Jess shook her head fervently. "No. That's not acceptable. Never." She looked down at her left hand and the bracelet that wouldn't come off. Then, her eyes widened, as if she had a stroke of inspiration.

My intuition kicked in on the spur of the moment. "Wait, Jess. Don't do it." I tried to stop her.

But my pig trotters never reached the fearless maiden.

Jess's right hand firmly gripped her left one and the bracelet itself. Gritting her teeth, she squeezed hard. There was a nauseating snap, then her right hand moved just a little. Her left hand's white, silky skin peeled off in one large sheet. Viscous blood began dripping down her arm.

Overcome with horror, I shut my eyes. I heard the cold, metallic clang of the bracelet hitting the ground.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that the bracelet, slick with fresh blood, had fallen before me.

If she couldn't break the bracelet, she could simply break her left hand—that was Jess's conclusion.

Manifesting a white cloth and wrapping it around her left hand like a bandage, Jess smiled at Ceres and me. “It’s okay, it wasn’t my dominant hand.”

I stared at her incredulously. “Hey. That isn’t the problem here.”

While Ceres and I were reeling in shock, Jess picked up the bracelet with her right hand before wrapping it in the letter Shravis had left behind. Blood gradually seeped into the white paper.

“What do we do with this?” she asked. “Should we leave it behind?”

I paused to give it a think. “If we want to throw off our pursuers, hiding it in a place no one can find it might be our best bet.”

Jess looked outside the windows. The tower was facing the lake, and right beneath the glass panes was water. I nodded.

After gazing at it with slight wistfulness, Jess sucked in a deep breath before tossing the bracelet, still bundled with the letter, outside. The trinket—Shravis’s present that we’d placed so much faith in, as well as our only method of communication with him—disappeared into the depths of the dark lake.

“Miss Jess, um...” Ceres said, stepping forward and taking the older maiden’s left hand—blood had already begun speedily seeping into the cloth. “Thank you...for doing all this for someone like me.” She tightened her grip and clasped Jess’s left hand.

Startled, Jess looked at Ceres before unraveling the cloth bandage. Her left hand was like new. Ceres had healed her with magic.

“Does it hurt anywhere...?” Ceres nervously asked.

The older maiden shook her head. “No... Miss Ceres, thank you very much. I’m all better, thanks to you.”

Up until now, Ceres’s face had been dark with misery. But at long last, she smiled with a tinge of joy. “Hee hee.”

After checking on the situation outside the windows, I addressed the pair. “Now then, let’s think about a way to escape. This tower’s a dead end. We’ve got to go back down and find a path out.”

Jess nodded. “Right.”

We briskly ran down the stairs we’d just climbed. Since we didn’t have to watch our rear, we went in the order of me, Jess, then

Ceres. As I trotted at the forefront, I asked, "Hey, Jess. You know how you took off your bracelet just now? Surely, you must have done it knowing that Ceres would heal you?"

"Huh? ...Oh, yes, o-of course!"

The way she stuttered that seriously isn't giving me any confidence here... "It worked out this time because your wounds healed without a problem in the end. But keep your self-sacrificing tendencies in check, all right?"

There was a pause before Jess defiantly retorted, "You're the last person I want to hear that from, Mister Pig."

Oh. She makes a very good point there.

We returned to the ground floor. Unfortunately, I couldn't come up with any good plans. I'd never expected to be surrounded by such a considerable number of soldiers. We were only a harmless trio of two girls and one pig—did they really have to go *this* far?

A moment later, I shook my head. *No. Knowing Shravis, I should have expected nothing else. That guy knows the extent of Jess's magical abilities. He'd never underestimate us and would most certainly attempt to crush us promptly with all his might.*

That was exactly what he was doing right now. Ships were surrounding the water's surface. The dragon was patrolling the sky. We had nowhere to run. It was pretty much checkmate.

Unfortunately, because we'd rushed out in a hurry, Jess wasn't wearing Eavis's invincible cloak. Naturally, we didn't have any magical gadgets on hand either. I, for one, was utterly defenseless. Ceres was exhausted and worn out. Even if we tried to break through the encirclement by fighting, our chances were incredibly slim in our state.

That said, luckily, the fortress interior still seemed mostly quiet. Our pursuers must be acting with caution as well. After all, we were on an island floating in isolation on a lake—they must think that there was no risk of us escaping as long as they had us surrounded.

We decided to sneakily move around the castle and probe into our pursuers' situation. Honestly, I wasn't even confident about finding my way back to the treasure chamber. However, Jess had more or less memorized the countless artworks and antiques lined

up along the corridors, and she selected our route while relying on these memories.

Abruptly, Gran's protest reached my ears. "Wait, surely you can't make such an unreasonable demand!"

Frantically, my trotters ground to a halt. It appeared that we'd returned to the area around the fortress entrance during our wandering. The footsteps of multiple people resounded from the other end of the corridor—just around the corner. I noted that it was a corridor with an unobstructed view.

"That's not good. We've got to hide," I hissed.

Flustered, Jess whipped her head back and forth. "But *where*?"

It was a straight corridor with no doors. The only place we could hide would be...

"Get under this study desk!" I whispered.

One of the antiques lined up along the corridor was a vintage, elegant wooden desk. Between its legs, which were fitted with drawers, was just enough space for two humans to squeeze into. Without any other choice, the three of us hurriedly slipped into the crevice. Using magic, Jess created a stylish piece of cloth with a fitting design before draping it down the front of the desk. Like a curtain, it shrouded us from view.

The underside of the desk, when viewed from below, revealed unpolished timber. This specific part was dirty, as if it had been submerged in muddy water. I wouldn't say it was the most comfortable place in the world, but it wasn't like we could go anywhere else.

That was when something clicked in my mind. *Hold on...*

I realized something groundbreaking that I could have never predicted, not even in my wildest dreams. *This situation we're in... It's practically identical to that famous rom-com trope where a man and a woman have to hide in a broom closet!* On top of that, I was currently in a ham sandwich with Ceres to my right and Jess to my left. The space underneath the desk was much more cramped than I'd estimated, and we were packed tightly like sardines.

Actually, it isn't a ham sandwich at this point. It's more like a pressed sandwich... There was no mistaking it—it was the ultimate

situation known to man where beautiful maidens were pressing all kinds of things against me from the left and right. *Well now, it smells sooo nice!*

Silence.

Sensing a wordless pressure from my left, I temporarily paused my thoughts.

I solemnly focused on my ears; I could pick up the sound of Gran's wheelchair moving across the tiles, as well as the footsteps of several armed humans quickly approaching our direction.

A man's curt voice rang out with an underlying threat. "I know that you are sheltering fugitives. We are ordering you to tell us their location."

"Sheltering fugitives?" Gran's voice objected. "What evidence do you have?"

"There was a small boat along the pier. It was of a crude make—I highly doubt it's your possession."

"Well, I have no idea. They probably came to this island as they pleased. My apologies, but I have no part in this."

"You certainly don't know when you should relent and listen. We are saying that if you confess their location without a struggle, we will give that Yethma back to you."

Right next to my ear, I heard Jess gasp.

Gran's infuriated voice echoed out. "That's what you claim, but knowing you lot, you don't plan on returning her to me in the least, do you? I have heard all about it—you people are practically dragging girls away with you all over Mesteria, aren't you? Do you really think I would readily believe the words of men who forcefully took away a girl who was screaming so desperately that she didn't want to go with you?!"

There was no response.

A chill ran down my back fat. *Ezalith...was dragged away by the royal court's army? Not Ceres, who should be their target, but a girl who has nothing to do with any of this?*

Another man's voice said, "Enough. Questioning this senile old man is getting us nowhere. We should begin our search at once."

The first man asked, "What should we do with this senior?"

"He's noisy, so we can just leave him here. It's not like he could sneak around and make any maneuvers with those legs."

"...Very well. I shall call for reinforcements immediately."

The soldiers ended the discussion there. Footsteps heading left and right followed. Gran's wheelchair remained motionless in front of the desk we were hiding under.

There was a moment of stillness before I heard Gran's voice. "Now then... How do I help you girls escape?"

He knew we were here. Though it was a vast fortress, as its owner adored history and treasures to a remarkable extent, he must have known that there shouldn't be any cloth on top of this study desk.

Only a single possible escape route emerged in my mind. After I communicated it in my thoughts, Jess nodded, looking convinced. Without a moment's delay, she whispered to Gran, "Mister Gran, shall we return to that secret passage first?"

We hurriedly moved to the treasure chamber before the soldiers had a chance to come back. Through the door behind the tapestry, we entered the hidden passage. We could probably escape discovery for a while if we stayed here.

Jess was the first to speak. "May I ask where Miss Ezalith is?"

Gran grimly shook his head. "They have taken her away at last... I *did* know that this was going to happen one day."

Worriedly, Jess asked, "Taken her away?"

As if to urge Jess to hurry, Gran said, "She's already on those people's ship. There's nothing you young ladies can do now. You have a plan, don't you? Focus on getting yourself to safety first."

Jess glanced at me, then Ceres. She nodded.

Ceres's life would be at risk if she were captured. The one thing we couldn't gamble on was her safety at the moment.

"Mister Gran, this passage leads into the water, yes?" Jess asked.

The elderly man grimaced, possibly because he couldn't make sense of Jess's statement.

The maiden continued, "Could you please tell us the way? We will escape from underwater."

That's right. The water's surface and the sky have been sealed off from us, which means there's only one way out—under the water itself.

Gran had said that he'd collected the treasures of his village, but the town itself had been submerged underneath the lake ever since the Dark Ages. How had he even gathered them, then? There could only be one answer: diving into the water. As evidence, the underside of that study desk had been stained, as if it had been submerged for a while. It must have been hauled out of the water after the sinking of the village.

I recalled what Gran had said a while ago. "*This passage leads underground. Long ago, you could head out from an exit halfway down the mountain. But as you know, it's currently very much underwater. My legs are also debilitated now, so I'm using it as a secret gallery.*"

The other end of this hidden passage led into the lake. The fact that Gran was using it as a secret gallery now, *after* his legs were debilitated, meant that he had used it for a different purpose in the past.

It all pointed to one conclusion: When Gran's legs had been fit and healthy, he'd left from the submerged exit to dive underwater and collect these treasures. In other words, though the other end was submerged, it was possible to escape into the lake from this passage.

It appeared that the meaning of Jess's words finally sank in because Gran nodded. "I have grasped your plan. But I only have one diving suit, I'm afraid. The rista fitted in it is also old—I can't guarantee whether it will produce air successfully."

"That's quite all right. Please lead us there," Jess declared without leaving room for objection.

A moment of silence.

Gran fixed his stare on Jess. "I see... Your confidence must mean you can already use magic."

Jess was taken aback. She fumbled for an answer.

The senior gently shook his head. "Now, you don't have to hide it. I'm not a fool who would persecute a young girl merely because of

something like that.” He moved slightly down the passage, took out what seemed like a timeworn piece of paper from a small shelf, then handed it to Jess. “You mentioned you wanted to go to the Town of Death, correct? This is the map. Though you must traverse mountain trails, you should be able to use the route without any issues during this time of year. There aren’t any people around, unfortunately, but it’s likely the ideal place to seek refuge. Even if Ezalith has been captured, I pray that at least you young girls can escape to safety.”

Operating his wheelchair, Gran rapidly went down the passage. We ran after him.

Halfway through, the path turned into a flight of stairs. Gran stopped right before it and lightly tapped his wheelchair. “I’m afraid I can’t go any farther. But it’s a direct path to the exit. Getting lost isn’t a possibility. You should be able to reach the exit as long as you can spot the flip-up door. I wish you the best of luck.” After saying all of that in one breath, he looked at Jess with concern. “Magic, at times, behaves wildly despite the wielder’s will. Make sure to take utmost care when using it.”

“Yes, I will.” After saying that, Jess hesitated before staring back into Gran’s eyes. “Um, about Miss Ezalith... We, um...”

“Don’t take it to heart. Ultimately, those men are soldiers serving the government. They act on orders, not self-interest. They likely won’t indiscriminately take her life now that she’s a captive. Come now. You must go.”

With that, Gran ushered Jess forward by practically pushing her insistently. Ceres and I followed after her.

As Jess raced down the stairs, she yelled, “Mister Gran, thank you for everything!” There was no reply.

We went down the passage filled with twists and turns. Eventually, we arrived at a small room at the very end. A leather diving suit resembling a spacesuit was collecting dust in one corner. In addition to the suit, there were pieces of cloth sewn together in the shape of bags. Several such bags were folded up and tucked away nearby. They reminded me of deflated balloons.

Did he dive underwater in this diving suit, tie these balloons to the treasures he found, then inflate them with ristae or some other

method and float the treasures to the surface of the lake? If he had indeed accumulated his impressive collection using such a method, he must've needed to invest an incredible amount of effort. His obsession was almost terrifying.

I scanned the room before nodding. "There it is." Like Gran had said, there was a flip-up door on the ground in the middle of the room.

We went further inside the door, and it revealed a rustic passage that had been made purely by digging a tunnel through the rock. There weren't even lights, so Jess used magical ones to illuminate our surroundings.

As we walked, I wondered out loud. "Now then, how do we travel underwater?"

"To stabilize our bodies while we are moving, we need a place to stand on before anything else," Jess promptly said. "That's why I will craft a board of ice that we can climb on. Then, I will make a layer of air that will wrap around us. While I use magic to cancel out the air's buoyancy, I will move the ice board while taking care not to break the layer of air. It will carry us through the water."

Judging by her quick and effective response, she must've been pondering a method for a while.

When we went farther down the passage, the path abruptly widened. Crystal clear water was pooling in the slightly more spacious area like a pond. Without a lick of hesitation, Jess took a step forward into the water. The surface beneath her foot froze, and the ice spread outward like a ripple. A perfectly circular board manifested with Jess at its center.

"Please climb on!" Jess called out to us.

Ceres was the first to step onto the platform. I quickly followed. Possibly because she was steadying it with magic, it didn't sway too much as long as we paid attention to our balance.

Nonchalantly, Jess took Ceres's hand as she said, "We shall head underwater now."

Defying Archimedes's principle, the ice board sank into the pond. Water should have rushed onto my trotters, but it went against fluid dynamics and enveloped us like a wall instead.

We glided through the water on top of the sturdy ice board while a layer of air protected us—if I had to describe it, it was just like a submersible made of glass on all sides. After moving through the darkness that seemed like an underwater cavern for a while, we spotted light ahead of us. As we approached it, our vision instantly turned bright.

This brightness was, of course, only relative, but after our long journey through the underground passage, the light almost felt like dawn. Cold white beams of light—*Were they moonlight or starlight?*—filtered down from the faraway water's surface.

The lake's water was clear and pristine. The bottom sides of the royal court army's ships looked like the shadowy silhouettes of distant fishes far above our heads.

Next, I cast my gaze downward—and was met with an unbelievable spectacle. There were lights dotted here and there within the submerged village. The streetscape that I'd seen in the painting was right beneath my very eyes. Was it possibly the influence of spercritica?

The houses had discolored altogether into shades of brown from the mud. Parts of them had also crumbled. Even then, possibly because they'd been protected by their isolation underwater for many years, it was such stunning scenery that if someone told me this was the city of underwater folk, I just might believe them.

"Amazing..." Jess whispered in awe.

The scenery of such a well-preserved settlement underwater was a considerably rare sight. Ceres appeared to be captivated by the village at the bottom of the lake the entire time as well.

I glanced up. Luckily, the royal court's army on the water's surface didn't seem to have noticed us.

After we gained plenty of distance between us and the soldiers, we floated to the water's surface and climbed onto shore under the cover of night. Then, walking along a small stream so that they wouldn't track us down by scent, we left the lake behind us.

The journey to Helde, the Town of Death, was a lonely one.

The population of Mesteria had been culled to a mere hundredth

of its golden age due to the violence of war during the Dark Ages, and even now, that pitiful number had only recovered to a tenth of its prime. It must mean that there was plenty of land that had been left abandoned in the aftermath.

The southwestern part of Mesteria, also known as the western wilderness, fits that description impeccably.

We navigated rivers that had likely been used as canals, walked through valleys that had likely been used as paths, and cut across plains that had likely been used as towns as we headed for our destination, as indicated on the map. We even traveled throughout the entire night, with me giving Ceres a ride on my back from time to time.

Anyone would be exhausted in our shoes, and all of us spared only a few words during our journey. But considering our pursuers, we couldn't exactly sit down and have a picnic.

If the royal court's army discovered us, Ceres would be in mortal danger. The farther we got from Fortress Lussier, the lower the risk of that happening.

We pressed on single-mindedly as if the Grim Reaper was hot on our heels.

Morning came around.

A little past noon, we discovered a small abandoned carriage. Possibly because its owner had been dealing in some questionable business, the horses and passengers were missing, but numerous alcohol bottles remained. Although it was neglected, it appeared to have been exposed to the elements for a mere few years at most. One part of it had rotted, but some repairs made it roadworthy again.

The grass was growing rampantly along the large road paved with cobblestone, but it wasn't impossible to travel by carriage, provided we evaded some of the trees. Jess moved the vehicle with her magic, making our journey much more pleasant. As the carriage rocked and swayed, both Ceres and I grew drowsy and shut our eyes. Once in a while, I'd come to and look around to see that the scenery had transformed dramatically.

Among the three of us, only Jess grew fatigued by the hour as

she had to concentrate and maintain her enchantment. Whenever I called out to her in concern and suggested, “Jess, I think it should be fine for you to rest a while by now, don’t you think?” she would clench her petite fist in front of her chest with vigor and reply, “I can still keep going for ages! I’m a big sister, after all!”

Her big sister role that I’d proposed seemed to have worked more like a curse than a charm. I knew that she was pushing herself to the extreme out of a sense of duty. That said, it was also evident that Jess would never voluntarily ask for a break in this situation. No matter what kind of excuse I used, Jess would still push the carriage forward without a wink of sleep, for Ceres’s sake.

She was willing to stop the vehicle only a single time—and it was when Ceres restlessly shuffled her legs and said, “Um, I would like to answer the call of nature.”

The call of nature wasn’t something you could answer in a carriage. I jokingly said, “I’ll accompany her as a bodyguard.”

Seemingly half asleep, Jess began by saying, “That would be great.” But she immediately came to her senses and amended, “That’s simply out of the question!”

In the end, it was Ceres and Jess who went into the forest together. After they came back, I suggested, “Hey, since we’re here and all, how about we get some rest?”

Jess, however, only shook her head. “I’m all right. Miss Ceres, Mister Pig, the two of you can sleep while we’re on the move.”

I frowned. “That’s not what I mean... The thing is, I want to enjoy a nice and long nap with your lap as my pillow, Jess.”

“No can do. You’re a big brother, so please bear with it.”

“Then I guess I’ll get cutie-pie Ceres to lend me her lap as my pillow.” I shrugged.

“Huh?” Ceres, who’d been listening beside us, was downright appalled at me. “No, I wouldn’t do that...” Her reaction extremely rattled me.

At the end of the day, the only thing I achieved was worsening their impression of me. The carriage set off almost immediately.

Once upon a time, Jess had been willing to ride on my back when I’d said, *“It’s been a dream of mine since I was a child. I’ve always*

wanted a cute girl to straddle me like a horse with her bare legs pressing against me." She'd changed considerably within a little over half a year. It likely wasn't just because she'd been freed from her collar. We'd gone on all kinds of journeys, faced all sorts of mysteries, and had to confront many, many deaths.

I didn't know whether I'd changed, but Jess clearly had. She'd grown into a strong woman. Now, she wasn't a princess who had to be protected but a princess knight who devoutly defended Ceres.

The carriage continued moving all the way into the night. The wide path, which seemed to be a former highway, gradually narrowed. By the time the moon was out, our mode of transportation was no longer able to fit on it.

Temporarily pulling our chariot to a stop, we discussed our plans. As we talked, Jess abruptly fell asleep as if she'd run out of battery.

We decided to sleep in the carriage.

In the middle of the night, the slight shaking of the carriage's frame roused me, and I opened my eyes. Jess was doing something near Ceres. Her hand held a soft-looking cloth that was giving off faint steam. It appeared that she was wiping down the filth on Ceres's body while the younger girl was fast asleep.

She seemed to be focused on her task because she hadn't noticed that I'd woken up. Because if she had—she wouldn't open up Ceres's clothes to such a revealing extent. Within the darkness, a scar that reminded me of a crack steadily emitted a white glow on Ceres's chest.

While Jess was wiping down her body, Ceres looked cozy as she was fast asleep. Once the older maiden finished cleansing the dirt with a warm, steamed towel, she proceeded to wipe away the moisture with a dry cloth.

At this time of year, the nights were still chilly. It must be a considerate gesture to prevent the water from evaporating and taking away too much of Ceres's body heat.

Jess was willing to go this far for Ceres, but it looked like she didn't mind leaving the filth on her own skin as it was. There was mud from when we'd raced through the forest. Oil from when she'd

reinforced the small boat. Wood shavings from when she'd mended the carriage. All this debris collectively dotted Jess's clothes and limbs like speckles.

I spoke up. "Does this mean I've got to wipe down your body, Jess?"

With a start, Jess whipped her head around. "Mister Pig. You were awake?"

"Pretty much."

There was a pause. "You saw, didn't you?" Jess checked over Ceres's frame. She'd already finished the cleansing session, and Ceres was properly clothed again.

"No, I haven't seen you wiping Ceres's dignified chest."

"How do you know that I was wiping her dignified chest?"

A moment of silence. "If you leave your own body dirty like that, Ceres's gonna start blaming herself again, you know."

I blatantly changed the topic, and after giving me a long, hard stare, Jess nodded. "You have a point there, Mister Pig. I'm going to wipe my own body, so please keep your eyes closed."

"Now that's a difficult request."

"Says the one who would look away if I actually undressed..." Grumbling, Jess began unbuttoning her clothes.

I shut my eyes on the spur of the moment—and that was as far as I could remember. It seemed that I was also quite exhausted. I'd fallen asleep during the very brief moment that I'd closed my eyes.

I only realized the next morning that Jess had even wiped my body clean.

The morning sun dragged me out of sleep. Once we were all ready, we continued our journey on foot because we couldn't use the carriage from here on out. Though it was daytime, the vivid colors of the sky reminded me of the evening glow.

We cut across the wilderness in a straight line and bumped into a river. According to the map, this river led all the way to our destination, Helde.

After we chopped down the large trees along the bank, Jess used her magic to craft a simple dugout canoe, which carried us down the

river. By the time we arrived near Helde, my entire body already felt heavy like lead from fatigue. We didn't even have anything to eat. Nor did we have the energy to head out and procure edible ingredients in the wild. Unfortunately, this applied to all three of us.

For that very reason, our response was notably delayed when giant tentacles began attacking us just as Helde reached our sight.

When I spotted a tentacle with a thickness that rivaled a pillar, along with the countless suckers attached to it, my first thought was *Hey, it's a giant octopus. Eating this might fill up our stomachs.*

Eight tentacles thrust out from the water of the clear lake and crushed our dugout canoe in an instant. Water splashed everywhere, shrouding my vision. The only thing I could do was to cling to a wood splinter and keep myself afloat. As I was bathed in cold water from head to toe, my sense of danger finally kicked in.

"Jess! Ceres! Are you okay?!" I yelled.

There was no response. Instead, something wound around my stomach and clung firmly to me—it was Ceres. It appeared that the expression "grasping at pigs" applied to reality after all.

"What about Jess?" I nervously asked. "Don't tell me—"

The enormous octopus tentacles that had withdrawn into the water surfaced once more. *You've got to be kidding me. Surely such a big octopus can't exist in real life.* Not to mention that we were on fresh water.

Due to spercritica, anomalous monsters like this one had begun emerging all over Mesteria. We should have proceeded with the necessary caution.

As the currents carried me away, a scene of dread and despair entered my vision. Jess was entangled in one of the octopus's arms. She was twisted into an outrageous pose, almost as if someone had taken a manga panel from a naughty work featuring tentacles.

I was screaming before I knew it. "Jess!"

There was no reply. Possibly because she'd hit a concerning place on her head, Jess was slumping listlessly within the tentacle's hold.

Desperate, I asked. "Ceres, is there anything you can do about that thing?"

I heard Ceres's voice right near my ear. "Wh-What should I—"

Without warning, her voice abruptly grew distant.

I turned around to realize that Ceres had also been ensnared in one of the gigantic tentacles. If it weren't such a hopeless emergency, I might have thoroughly enjoyed this view.

It was then that I spotted Ceres firmly clasping her hands. Not a second later, the direction of the wind shifted, followed by a loud and shrill sound as if someone had sliced through the air.

Is she calling for help? But who in the world would be in the middle of nowhere like—

The next moment, it felt as if someone had literally turned my world upside-down. Something slimy coated my entire body. The water surface looked like it was far, far away beneath me. Unfortunately, one of the tentacles with suckers had coiled around me as well.

I had my back against the wall. My mind entertained useless trains of thought, such as, *An octopus and a pig? That doesn't sound like a tasty combination. In fact, I think I've only eaten them in tandem while I'm having okonomiyaki.*

Crises always struck unannounced—and at times when we were the least prepared to deal with them to boot.

When the mud salamander monster had attacked us, Naut had come to our rescue at the very last second like a shooting star. But this time, we were attacked outside the sphere of civilization. He had no way of even knowing our location.

And so, our savior was someone completely unexpected.

"As swift as the wind."

A deep voice rang out. Before I could even blink, something tore apart the monster and the surrounding water like a sharp gale.

The shadowy figure that flew across the air had black scales covering their skin—and was distinctly lacking a left leg.

Despite Everything, I Still Wanted to Stay by Your Side

Resdan, a strategic location of northeastern Mesteria, was a rare fortified city with star-shaped defensive walls that still survived to the present day. Fortified cities were a relic of the Dark Ages, and most of them had been destroyed by Lady Vatis. But unlike the others, Resdan had been spared from ruin due to particular circumstances.

A nonmagical human—or more specifically, a Lacerte man—had risen up in revolt, killed the mage that had been the fortress's ruler, and handed over the city to Lady Vatis.

Lady Vatis's aim hadn't been the annihilation of the people but purely the mages. It was an unfortunate fact that mages had, naturally, ruled at the summit of almost all the factions at the time, meaning that most cities had been utterly devastated. However, the assassination of their own faction's mage had helped the citizens of Resdan evade the tragic fate of a bloody massacre.

Possibly because of such a background and culture, the governor didn't place even a sliver of faith in me. But no one could blame him. After all, I was the descendant of a Lacerte—the race that had murdered the ancient fortress's ruler.

The Lacerte race has been feared for our powers, but such fear never came with respect. We were often prized for our superhuman fighting abilities in the military, but for instance, if there was a murder with an unknown culprit, we were the first suspects. It appeared that in the eyes of others, even the most illogical deductions would make sense if they used our inhuman physical capabilities as an argument. The fact that Yethma couldn't read our minds was probably one contributing factor as well.

Since a long time ago, Lacerte had been considered a race born

to kill mages. A race of slaughter. A race of violence. Such cursed blood ran in my veins.

Ever since my early childhood, I would be put under suspicion if there were any thefts, investigated if there were any acts of violence, and arrested if there were any murders. Many a time had I been subject to unjust brutality, but I'd known that even the smallest attempt to strike back would justify them to further their cruelty, so I'd held my tongue and endured. There had been pain, yes, but the sturdy bones of Lacerte meant that most wounds would heal on their own, provided I was given enough time.

The noble governor of Resdan had seen promise in me since I was a child. That said, it was out of self-interest to the bitter end. Not even trusting me in the slightest, he'd given me a purpose as his minion—as a soldier.

The governor was an exceedingly calculating and rational person. As long as I served him dutifully, I was able to secure appropriate working conditions and compensation, even if I couldn't win the proper amount of trust. When I was fourteen, I was granted a house that was within the immediate vicinity of the governor's residence. It was a petite house that the adults had ridiculed as a kennel, but I had never held any negative sentiments toward working as the governor's dog.

Maryess had also served under the same governor.

I knew that it was peculiar to use this phrase to describe a Yethma, but she was a woman who gave off the impression of a dignified treasure we could only behold from afar. In age, she should have been approximately one year above me, but she held herself with such maturity that I thought she was already several years my senior. She was quiet, aloof, and beautiful.

Perhaps there were even ranks within the Yethma, and maybe the royal court was selecting the highest rank Yethma to serve families of exceptionally high standings, such as the governor's household. Or at least, she had made such an impression I'd even thought that when I first met her.

Maryess was different from other Yethma. She was also different from other women.

Once, I made an appalling blunder. It happened immediately after I moved into the "kennel." I should have made sure to dispose of certain documents during a murder. However, I'd accidentally left them behind at the scene, causing an emergency where suspicion fell upon the governor. It was a complete and utter oversight on my part.

Though the governor managed to deal with the documents, I received an exceedingly harsh scolding from him. He hadn't stopped at just kicking and punching me—he'd even hit me with a metal rod countless times as I cowered and shrank into myself on the ground. As he reprimanded me with his face contorting with fury, the only thing I could do was apologize over and over again. It would have been effortless to strike back, but if I dared to do such a thing, I would be executed on the spot. The governor was tormenting me because he knew our power dynamic like the back of his hand.

I could only prostrate myself before him on the red carpet, clench my teeth, and hold back my tears.

Eventually, my awareness faded away.

I came to my senses when a dignified voice rang out.

"He uses you as a convenient tool on a day-to-day basis"—it was Maryess; I'd been left lying on the floor, and she was addressing me —"but treats you in such a manner the moment you make a mistake. Goodness, it is quite an outrageous story."

Without even the hint of a smile, Maryess helped me onto my feet and performed basic first aid on my wounds to stop the bleeding. I was invited to her room, which was in the immediate vicinity, and there, she performed medical care on my more minor injuries.

After she was done, Maryess proceeded to mix an original blend of tea leaves and brewed some tea for me. Even now, I could never forget that taste or the gentle aroma of spearmint that had seemed to soften my pain and thaw my frigid heart.

Thinking back, it must have been the first time in my life that anyone had ever shown such kindness to me.

We hadn't exchanged any words in particular. All she'd done was

attend to my wounds and give me tea, but I couldn't fight the tears that spilled out on their own. Maryess steadily gazed at me in silence.

It was fortunate that she couldn't read my mind. Because during that moment, I had fallen hopelessly and irresistibly in love with Maryess.

It was a love that would never come to anything.

I continued working under the governor regardless of any kind of dreadful treatment I suffered. Part of it was because I had no other choice, but above all else, I was able to stay by Maryess's side if I worked under him. Ever since that incident, I hadn't had the chance to converse with her, much less enjoy her tea, but I was still drawn to the dignified treasure I could only behold from afar.

My eyes were much sharper than any normal human's. So sharp that even if she were a treasure enshrined on the tallest of cliffs, I could yet find solace in her beauty.

On one certain day, I witnessed the governor punching Maryess. Judging from his angry bellowing, the reason behind his violence was all too trifling—it was apparently simply because Maryess had forgotten to feed the young mistress's little pet bird.

But Maryess wasn't a Yethma who'd make such a blunder on a normal day. She was a flawless servant who'd immaculately perform every single task given to her. It appeared that the governor had punched her because he had found one flaw in that canvas of perfection.

It was the same as when he'd punched me. My lord was someone who couldn't tolerate anything but perfection.

Even after the governor had left the scene, Maryess remained sitting motionlessly on the carpet for a while, as if her spirit were elsewhere. My feet moved on their own and carried me toward her.

"Goodness, it is quite an outrageous story," I said. "He uses you as a convenient tool on a day-to-day basis, but treats you in such an appalling manner the moment you make a mistake."

The moment she noticed me, Maryess tried to stand up

immediately. But the punch to her face must have caused some blunt trauma to her head because she staggered and almost fell over. With the excellent reflexes that I was born with, I supported her. Maryess's cheek had been struck by a fist, causing dark patches of internal bleeding that were painful to look at.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

Maryess twisted her body, distancing herself from me and standing on her own feet. After a pause, she said, "You are worried about a Yethma? I must say, you are a strange one."

"Didn't you display concern for me too?"

There was no response.

I gazed at her and asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

She quietly shook her head. "Just the thought is enough."

I interpreted it as a rejection. After handing over the salve that I'd happened to have on hand, I left the area.

It took a while before I finally realized that something wasn't right about Maryess.

She was scared of something. Her fear came across to me from the fine movements of her fingers and the thrumming of her heart. Despite that, she still performed her duties flawlessly, but I deduced that the cause of her fear must be related to the reason she'd forgotten to feed the bird back then.

When I learned from rumors that Maryess was soon going to reach her sixteenth birthday, I realized the root of her fear. It was the journey to the capital—the journey of death that most Yethma would lose their life on.

I hadn't yet found an opportunity to return Maryess's favor. And then, I thought this: *I wish to protect this person even if it means abandoning everything I've gained with my current status.*

In the corridor, I called out to Maryess to delay her before saying in one breath, "I wish to accompany you on your journey to the capital." It was a confession of both reckless abandon and determination.

Choosing to be her companion was no different from becoming her chabirone. It meant that either death would do us part, or we

would enter the royal capital together. If we managed to reach the capital, we would lose everything we'd established and built up in the outside world.

"I admit, I am surprised to hear you make such a declaration," Maryess said matter-of-factly while looking like she wasn't taken aback in the least.

She allowed me into her room and only spared a few words as she made tea for me.

It tasted entirely identical to the tea I'd had on that day—on the day we'd first conversed.

A little while later, she cut into the silence with one sentence. "It is better for your own good to stay here."

I sighed.

I interpreted it as a rejection this time as well. I'd known this would be her answer. I knew that this was a love that would never come to anything. If the alternative was to share her fate with someone like me, who was treated like a dog, then I knew that Maryess would choose to go alone instead. After all, she was a proudly solitary treasure that others could only admire from afar.

"...I will depart at sunrise tomorrow morning."

I whipped my head up. For the very first time, Maryess smiled at me.

She continued, "If you have the resolve to stay by my side until the day I take my last breath, then please, come with me."

Chapter 3: Always Add Fuel to the Fire in Moderation

"You three must be hungry. It is relatively safe once you enter the bounds of the town. Follow me."

With that, Sito—the father of Itsune and Yoshu, as well as a rebel who had once been one of the five elders—turned on his heel and began showing us the way to the heart of Helde. He was dressed in a traveler's outfit of black and gray. His black hair had been cut short while leaving a haphazard, rugged edge, a contrast to the bottom half of his face, which was covered with an overgrown beard. He basically looked like a stereotypical vagrant. His prim and proper atmosphere only remained in his eyes.

He propped himself up with rough-hewn crutches that seemed to be handmade—there was still bark left on the surface—but possibly because of his extraordinary physical capabilities, he looked as if his mobility wasn't impaired in the least.

We were currently at a place that had likely been used as a harbor in the past, and as you would expect, we hesitated to follow him. This was the man who'd attempted to murder Shravis under Sanon's instigation. Ceres, Jess, and I had all witnessed the moment Sito had divided Shravis's head like a piece of firewood.

Above all else...this situation reeked of doubt. Why was this man at our destination, of all places?

"What are you wavering for?" he asked in an aloof tone. "I have said that I will provide you with food. There is also the saying that you cannot take the head of your enemy on an empty stomach."

Uh, we didn't exactly come here to decapitate our enemy to take back their head as a trophy or anything... As I shook the moisture off my body, I said, "Did you really think we'd follow a person just because he told us to, especially a person who might kill us?"

Sito stared at me before tilting his head. “No matter how many times I witness it, seeing a pig speak the human language is a peculiar sight.”

“That’s exactly what I am, so please get used to it,” I replied warily.

I didn’t relax my guard at all, and Sito shrugged. “I am sure you saw what I am capable of in the underground graveyard. If I put my mind to it, I can kill anyone as I please, whenever I please. In the unlikely event that I wish to slaughter the three of you, whether you run away or follow me, there will only be one outcome. Not to mention that if I *did* wish to kill you, I wouldn’t have gone up the river to save you from the monster with my leg in this state. It is a simple and logical deduction.”

He had a point there. It was also true that we owed him for saving our lives. Yet I still couldn’t help but feel that something was fishy about all this.

I glanced at Jess and Ceres. They were drenched from head to toe as they huddled up against each other while watching Sito vigilantly. I had a duty to protect this beautiful scenery.

“I understand that we don’t have any options,” I said politely. “In that case, could I ask for the reason you are here?”

“The reason?” Sito scrunched up his thick, black brows. “Do you need any explanation other than the fact that I attempted to murder my lord? I am a fugitive. You should be well aware of that fact.”

“I am asking for the reason you are present in this town now, of all times. It’s as if you were waiting for us.”

“You say ‘of all times,’ but the three of you were the ones who came after I did. I selected this town as my hiding place a few days ago. Today, you have arrived, most likely due to circumstances that forced your hand. If you are going to suspect it is more than coincidence, wouldn’t it only be proper for you to explain your purpose in this place?”

That’s true. It’s a sound argument. Still, the fact that he’d gotten here several days ago might be a lie. If that were the case... “The food you mentioned is in the town, yes?”

Sito nodded. “I don’t see how I would come to a town of ruins

like this without any basic supplies. Life is a battle. You must always be prepared."

Is this guy a member of a warrior tribe or something? "In that case, please take us there."

Hearing that, Sito handled his crutches as if they were an extension of his own body before walking in the lead. We followed.

<Mister Pig, is it all right to follow him?> Jess, whose clothes were drenched and see-through, asked me with her telepathy.

<<Right now, we don't have any other alternatives. Assuming that he's telling the truth and has been here for several days, he should have spread out his belongings to a certain extent and left behind traces of preparing and eating meals. If we see that, I think we can put our faith in him for now. But if he looks like he's just arrived hot on our heels, we should doubt his statement and try to slip away one way or another.>>

<Got it. Before anything else, Miss Ceres, I shall dry your clothes.>

Jess went out of her way to inform Ceres before drying the younger girl's clothes with magic. Her choice to prioritize Ceres's attire over her own could be taken as kindness or a declaration that she wasn't going to let me see Ceres's drenched and translucent state of dress.

We advanced in a line with Sito at the forefront. As I walked, I peered upward. The sky had adopted the colors of the early evening the entire day, but judging by the position of the sun, it was roughly time for the real evening to begin.

Despite being a ruin through and through, Helde was a beautiful town enveloped in a mysterious atmosphere. What stood out to me more than anything else were the two spires that had also been featured in the painting. Both looked like sturdy structures, and they had intricate designs of different styles. One of them was a white tower with a straight shape. The other was a black tower decorated imposingly with complex sculptures. Whenever a slightly strong gust of wind blew by, there was a low humming sound that reminded me of a pipe organ, possibly because the air currents were distorted in some way near the towers themselves.

When Ceres saw the towers, she clutched her chest again as if enduring something painful. Jess rushed up to her without a moment's delay. "Miss Ceres... Does it hurt this time too?"

"Yes..." Ceres chewed on her bottom lip. "But I'm okay. I can walk."

I chimed in. "Those towers feel familiar to you. Do I have that right?"

"They do." She nodded. "It's as if I've walked near them before... Which is strange because I've never been to such a place in the past."

I knew it. There is *some kind of secret in this place. That's what my gut's telling me.* Our energy levels were reaching our limits, but it was probably in our best interest to investigate this place after a brief rest.

Stone houses lined up along the streets, and though their paint had mostly peeled off, I could spot the diverse and colorful traces of it from once upon a time. There were even parts of fresco paintings left behind on the collapsed walls.

On the other side of the townscape was a mountain with a gentle slope, and halfway up the mountainside was debris reminiscent of a large castle. It was so grand that I suspected the brick castle might have been larger than any castle I'd seen until now if it hadn't collapsed.

Under Sito's lead, we marched all the way to the town center. The heart of the town was a plaza sandwiched between the gigantic spires of black and white. The cobblestone paving was covered with alternating tiles of black and white like a chessboard, making my vision flash somewhat as I scanned the area. True to its name, the Town of Death was an otherworldly area that gave off a slightly ominous aura.

Our suspicions about Sito were cleared upon our arrival. In one corner of the plaza was an area where rocks, just the right size to serve as platforms, were scattered around—perhaps the result of crumbled stone pillars. Sito had apparently been using them as chairs and tables. His belongings had been scattered in the area, and he'd even made a bonfire pit by stacking up bricks.

At a slight distance from the dining area were the neatly skinned and butchered carcasses of serows. A quick count of the skulls told me that he had hunted at least three beasts. A part of their flesh was stored in a small snow cavern made by assembling lingering snow.

With practiced motions, Sito built a fire and boiled some water. He walked into a nearby building and returned with two matching teacups.

If he'd indeed chased after us, it would be impossible for him to prepare all these tools. He'd been telling the truth—he seemed to have been residing in this town long before our arrival.

"I suggest you have some tea before anything else," he said. "You will feel energized."

Lifting the boiling water from the fire, he then added tea leaves from a tin and left the concoction to brew for a while. Then, after pouring the tea into the two teacups, he placed them in front of Jess and Ceres, respectively. "Drink before it goes cold. It will warm your bodies."

The maidens thanked him in frail voices before meekly sipping on the tea.

"Huh?" Jess muttered. "This tea, it's a little..."

Growing concerned, I asked, "Is something wrong?"

From my rear, Sito cut into our exchange. "This is an original blend for warfare, which I have enjoyed in moderation, time and time again. It washes away your terror and raises your morale. I often drink it before battles where my life is on the line."

I started getting worried that perhaps he'd added poison. *Also, why are there two cups in the first place? Doesn't he seem a little* too *prepared?* "If possible, I would like you to refrain from serving something strange like that to the girls... Jess, if you taste anything peculiar, don't hesitate. Spit it out right away."

Jess shook her head. "No, don't worry. It's very good. In fact, its minty fragrance is quite calming."

Ceres also seemed to be savoring her cup. I sniffed the aroma that wafted my way. It seemed to be a normal herbal tea, indeed. I didn't detect any questionable odors.

“Now then, I suggest we grill some meat.” While the maidens were enjoying tea to one side, Sito beavered away to prepare a meal. “I have a board made from melting and hammering silverware. Let us have what they call ‘yakiniku.’”

I was startled by the sudden appearance of a Japanese term for a barbecue. “Pardon me, but you know of yakiniku?”

“I do. I have heard about it from Sanon. In your home nation, people feel blissful when you gather around and grill thinly sliced meat, correct?”

“Well, I can’t say that you’re wrong...”

His easygoing attitude was like that of an uncle who’d brought us along on a camping trip, and I was bewildered. However, we were fugitives that the royal court’s army was after, while he was a fugitive who had failed to assassinate the king and had gone into hiding. He was so composed that it seemed as if he didn’t have a care in the world—was it possibly because of his overwhelming advantage as a fighter?

Sito gripped a knife, trimmed the excess fat off a lump of meat, then began slicing it thinly on a wooden board. He spared a glance in my direction. “What is the staring for? Do not fear. This isn’t the meat of a monster like the one you encountered. It is from a serow that I hunted on the morning two days ago when I was strolling on the mountain. I have been saving the most delectable part of its shoulder in the snow cavern.”

Poor thing. That serow was hunted down as a mere side activity of a walk. “I’m impressed that you were able to hunt it while going around on crutches. Did you perhaps use a trap?”

“No, I used my bare hands.”

The doubt that maybe someone other than him was present had seeped into my earlier question, but his answer went beyond and above my expectations, blasting my suspicion away altogether. “You can hunt with your *bare hands*?”

“If you’d like, I can give you a demonstration.” Sito lifted his free left hand and swiftly moved it in my direction. Black scales emerged as if painting over his skin, and sharp claws extended from his fingertips.

Right. He was a Lacerte. Itsune could summon up dragon-like characteristics on her arms and legs, while Yoshu could do the same with his eyes and ears. They respectively granted them superhuman physical abilities and senses. According to Yoshu, Sito apparently possessed both transformations. They were the very reason he'd rapidly climbed up the ladder of the royal court's army—to the point of even obtaining the seat of one of the five elders.

I froze. "Please don't eat me."

"I won't."

His arm returned to normal human skin in an instant. With that same hand, he grabbed a few slices of meat and lined them up on a silver board that he'd placed over the fire. Almost immediately, the meat began sizzling. Lacerte skin appeared to be pretty tough because he didn't seem like he was perturbed by the heat at all. He sprinkled salt over the meat in one elegant motion that would put a steakhouse to shame.

Thus began the yakiniku party. The sequence of events had felt so smooth that both Jess and Ceres had missed the opportunity to decline their reservation. Sito transferred the grilled meat onto wooden boards and added toothpicks—that were likely made by shaving branches—before offering them to the pair.

"Now then, dig in," he said. "You haven't eaten in a while, have you? I can tell from your complexion."

After a moment of hesitation, Jess accepted her board. "Thank you very much." Ceres bowed deeply before following her example.

The delectable aroma of grilling meat drifted in my direction. I had barely eaten anything other than weeds ever since the night two days ago when I'd missed my chance to hold a grilled poultry party. It seemed that Jess and Ceres also raised the flag of surrender against the temptation of barbecued meat because they began dining without delay.

...What about me?

Sito's impassive, bearded face turned and looked down at me. "You gaze at me with a hungry look in your eyes."

"I-It's not like I'm pestering you for food or anything." I huffed. Seconds after my statement, my pork stomach began growling

noisily at that precise timing, just like a scene from an anime.

"I heard that you prefer your meat rare. Eat up." He handed me a thick slice of meat that had been lightly grilled.

I wanted to grumble to him that he should cook his meat properly, but rare meat *did* seem more palatable to a pig's taste buds. I accepted the food without reservation.

The taste reminded me somewhat of goat meat, yet it didn't have that strong of a gamy feel. It had been aged just right, and with every movement of my jaw, heavenly juices seeped out. I could eat this for days.

Sito treated us amicably. On top of that, he was Itsune and Yoshu's father, which significantly reduced our wariness.

Wearing his usual serious expression, Sito also ate without a word.

I glanced at him. Even now, I couldn't get a proper read on this man. If he indeed hadn't chased us here, the next most natural deduction was that his current actions weren't for some kind of ulterior motive—he was simply showing consideration for us, as we were exhausted from our journey. Assuming that he had truly been in this town for a few days, he would have little way of knowing that Ceres was running away from the royal court.

If his goodwill were genuine, it would open up the option of asking for his cooperation. Procuring his assistance in our escape when the royal court's army reached this place would be the most heartening thing.

However, I couldn't rule out the possibility that he had some other motive. It wouldn't be unusual at all for him to make an attempt on Ceres's life if he ever learned of her relationship with the Contract Stake.

Analyzing a person whom I'd barely ever interacted with before was difficult. The same thing had happened with Hortis—his pervert persona had completely fooled me, and I'd been oblivious to his goals that had been hidden behind it.

For now, Sito didn't appear to have plans of attacking us right off the bat. Maybe the ideal choice was to go along with his rhythm for now and sound out his character. If he'd actually taken up residence

here for a while, he might be able to offer hints to Ceres's sense of déjà vu that we were investigating.

Jess's cheeks were stuffed with meat as she nodded at me. She must have read the narration. I returned the gesture with a nod of my own.

The maiden must have been starving—there was a lot of meat juice around her mouth, which was adorable. Just as I thought that, Jess hurriedly wiped her mouth.

I wriggled an imaginary eyebrow, for there wasn't actually any aforementioned juice. *She read the narration without permission, which is why I made a fake one.*

This was when Sito spoke up abruptly. "I can understand your apprehension." He continued barbecuing meat. "I assassinated my lord and king—or at least, I attempted to. I am a filthy traitor whom even vultures would scoff at. Even the simple act of eating in the same setting as me must be extremely nauseating deep down."

"Thatch notch true..." Jess denied almost reflexively. Her voice was muffled from all the meat filling her mouth.

"There is a teaching my father has hammered into me countless times. Loyalty is the weapon that allows witless battle maniacs like us to survive through turbulent times. It is because we are ignorant of tactics that we must cherish loyalty, and loyalty alone, to our last hour. He said that this was a tried-and-true method to avoid being killed by others. For that reason, we should take the words of our lord as gospel. We must serve our lords with unshakable resolve and even offer up our lives for their sake. Yet I have abandoned my loyalty—I have eliminated all options to live on with my own hands."

I didn't have the means or right to deny his statement. I chose to ask about his reasons instead. "Your loyalty to the royal court was to the extent that you sacrificed your relationship with your family. So, please tell me, why did you betray Shravis just because a pig put the idea into your head?"

After a moment of thought, Sito looked at me. "To explain that, I am afraid I have to start by tracing back all the way to my childhood days."

"I am interested. Please tell me."

"I see..."

For a while, he fixed his gaze on the ground without a word. He was so quiet that I began to wonder whether something was wrong. But then, without warning, he lifted the silver board and began distributing the perfectly browned meat slices to Jess and Ceres. *Are you, like, a yakiniku director or something?*

Sito didn't just share the meat—he picked up slightly scorched serow from the board and tossed it directly into his mouth. Judging by how his tongue didn't seem to be suffering at all from the heat, not only was Lacerte skin tough, but Lacerte tongues were too. There was a chance he might even be able to breathe fire.

As he held out a chunk of rare meat to me, Sito abruptly began talking again. "There was a woman called Maryess whom I dedicated my heart to. She was a Yethma of the governor that I served when I was a boy."

Jess's and Ceres's hands, which had been busy moving the meat on their boards, stilled. I swallowed down my chunk of meat in one gulp.

Stories of falling in love with Yethma often ended in tragedy—almost all Yethma died at sixteen.

He continued in a detached tone, "When she turned sixteen and was duty bound to go to the capital, I proposed to accompany her. My longing for her was one-sided. Still, Maryess accepted my offer. We headed for the royal capital together."

As if his hands were on autopilot, they continuously sliced meat even as he shared his story. "Frankly, I was under the impression that as long as I was with her, Maryess would be able to reach the capital without incident. And indeed, I drove away the majority of the Yethma hunters with these very hands—or, to be more accurate, I killed them."

Every finished slice of meat was lined up on the silver board.

"But that, unfortunately, worked against our favor. It seemed that we ended up earning the hostility of a large-scale organization. I should have known—it should have been obvious that we would reach an outcome if I incessantly slaughtered its members. Sadly, I am a fool who wasn't able to predict that much. A large army

assaulted us in the Needle Woods. The soldier at the vanguard was a Lacerte, just like me."

Right as the bottom side of the meat began browning, he flipped the slices over. Jess and Ceres still hadn't touched the meat they'd just received.

"A thoroughly disciplined Lacerte assassin. Illicitly manufactured enchanted weapons. And finally, dozens upon dozens of soldiers. They weren't interested in Maryess's body nor her internal organs—they had come to take her life alone. Their goal was to brutally murder Maryess in front of my very eyes. Naturally, two people were a pitiful and helpless number against such forces. I sustained a serious injury almost immediately. Then, Maryess—"

His voice cut off there as if he'd run out of battery. For a while, there was only silence.

Suddenly, Sito stood up while holding the silver board and added meat to Jess's and Ceres's crude plates. Then, after a pause, he muttered, "Remind me, how far did I get into my story again?"

Bruh, this guy was so invested in the barbecue that he completely forgot what he said moments ago! "I believe you were up to the part where enemy forces swarmed you, and you sustained a grave wound."

"Ah, yes. Well... My story ends there."

The setting sun splashed down on our yakiniku venue, which was smothered by a gloomy hush.

Jess gingerly whispered, "Then, does that mean Miss Maryess...?"

"I am afraid I am somewhat reluctant to share the details. You have sharp wits, do you not? I ask that you arrive at the answer on your own."

Awkwardness hung in the air. Sito stuffed his cheeks with meat in one go. After chewing and swallowing, he softly muttered, "Even now, the smile Maryess wore on that day wouldn't leave my mind. It was the last smile she ever gave me." His automated hands had stopped grilling more meat.

He continued, "Ever since, I have led my life to this day while being unable to cast away my wish to see that smile one more time—just a single time would be enough. That is the inherent nature of

the Yethma system. I didn't want there to be any more people forced apart by it. That is why I agreed with Sanon's proposal to take the life of the last living descendant of the royal family. I wished to put an end to it all."

After a moment of hesitation, to my surprise, Jess was the one who interjected. "I can empathize with your feelings to some extent, but...the Yethma were already liberated from their collars. You didn't have to kill Mister Shravis. Furthermore, he was even considering changing the royal court's traditional methods. Surely you didn't have to go as far as murdering him. Don't you agree?"

Sito didn't look up. "I have concerned myself with the royal family for a much longer time than you have. You should know what King Marquis was like. King Shravis was the same sort as his father. The royal family's blood, which holds a mighty power, is nothing but a curse. I don't know when the Yethma system might be restored again either. Someone would have to end the cycle of cruelty cleanly and absolutely at some point. That decisive moment only happened to come around on that day."

He ended his speech with this statement: "Even if Sanon never came up to me, it was likely only a matter of time before I targeted King Shravis."

By the time the yakiniku session was over, the sun approached the edge of the mountain, and the sky gradually grew dim. The starry sky, with an alarming density, started faintly seeping through the orange gradation.

Sito guided us to the bath area, stating that it was better to go before it was dark. What greeted us was a magnificent marble building. Sadly, it had completely turned into a desolate ruin that was collapsing in places. However, there was a large open-air bathtub in the courtyard. Possibly because hot spring water was gushing up from below, clear water steadily flowed out from the bathtub's rim.

While Jess and Ceres were cleansing themselves there, I, most regrettably, ended up sitting and waiting with Sito at a slight distance from the bath area. The two maidens were located at a

blind spot. No one else was around. All I could hear was Jess's and Ceres's voices, as well as the splashing of flowing water.

"Your expression seems somewhat displeased," Sito dryly noted.

"Sir, my expression isn't displeased at all, excuse me?! It certainly isn't!" *If you didn't say something unnecessary like "We'll wait here," I might have had the chance to bathe together with them, just so you know! I might have been sandwiched between those two maidens! We might have become the ultimate ham sandwich! But you ruined it all!*

"Eros is like an arrow. It isn't something you actively head out to seek, nor is it something you lie in wait for—it comes your way as it pleases."

I gave him a blank stare. "Pardon?" His sudden and peculiar comparison threw me off. *He's a man well into his adulthood. What the heck is he saying with a straight face?*

"I am suggesting that you snuff out the idea in your head because even if you head over to look at them, you will only feel empty inside."

His argument was so sound that I couldn't find any rebuttals. I slowly inhaled. "You have excellent ears. Who knows? Maybe you're also secretly listening in on the pair and getting all excited."

The bearded face, which was never brightened by a smile, gazed in my direction with a serious expression. "Do you truly believe that when they are young enough to be my daughters?"

I mean, there was *a guy who sniffed the bare legs of maidens that were young enough to be his daughters to his heart's content...* "You never know what a person is thinking on the inside, no matter what kind of character they seem to be. Perhaps I might get Jess to investigate the matter later on."

Sito maintained his stoic expression as he turned to face forward once more. "Have you not heard from my daughter and son? The mind of a Lacerte is closed off from telepathy unless we wish for it."

Oh, it is? "That's news to me. I was completely under the impression that only your physical abilities and senses were enhanced."

"The true strength of Lacerte are not our physical capabilities or

our senses but our magic resistance. We are able to go against the effects of magic. It applies to magic that attempts to expose our thoughts as well."

I glanced at Sito's crutches. *That's what he says, yet Shravis still managed to deprive him of one leg...*

He must've noticed my gaze because he said, "Ah, this, of course, is an exception. We can defend ourselves against direct spells, but my leg was likely heated up instantly by some sort of physical wave of force to the extent of exploding."

So that's what happened. By applying something like microwaves at an ultrahigh power to your target, it was possible to blow it up from a distance, just like what would happen when you put an egg in a microwave oven. If it were possible to pull off such a phenomenon with magic, it was likely almost impossible to protect yourself against such an attack. In fact, it might be a miracle that he only lost one leg instead of his life.

He added, "By applying a coating of special gold tempered with magic to my weapons, combined with the innate magic resistance of Lacerte, it is possible to break through defensive magic to a certain extent. That was why my attack managed to reach King Shravis. If it ever becomes necessary, pass on this knowledge to Itsune for me."

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you saying that you want to make Itsune kill Shravis?"

"I am not. I am merely imparting knowledge onto you."

"Well, it's unnecessary knowledge."

"I see. My apologies. Forget what I said."

Silence.

It sounded like the maidens were still enjoying the hot spring. The splashing of water reached my ears.

As I imagined the scene in my head, I considered my next words. I had a question I needed to ask to determine whether we could count on this man going forward. "There is...one thing that I'm having trouble making sense of."

"And that is?"

"You suffered the loss of Miss Maryess. You said that you didn't want any more people to be torn apart by the Yethma system.

However, if that's true, why did you hand over the Yethma that Itsune and Yoshu were close with to the royal court?"

If memory served, her name should be Lithis. She was a Yethma who had served Sito's household. One certain day, on her way back from shopping errands, a man had violated her. Under the royal court's rule, even Lithis, who was nothing but a victim, had to be punished for the crime of illicit intercourse. Possibly because of his attachment to his status, Sito had given Lithis to the royal court. In accordance with the regulations, Lithis had been sentenced to death. It was an outrageous, ruthless injustice. Due to the incident, Itsune and Yoshu had left their home, never to return.

For a good while, Sito didn't breathe a word. It wasn't like he was busy checking how well cooked the meat was. He likely simply couldn't find the right words in his mind.

"...Being in an organization changes people," he finally replied.

It was a sentence that was far more clichéd and frivolous than I'd imagined. I couldn't believe my pickled and sliced mimiga ears. "Are you implying that you turned a blind eye to the unreasonable death of your daughter and son's precious person for a reason like that? And this is coming from someone who resented such injustice to the point of trying to kill your own lord?"

"I am not asking you to understand me. I doubt you would be able to. However, the question will likely continue to linger in your mind, so I will share this detail. My wife was the daughter of someone influential in the royal court's army. I leveraged her household's influence to secure a successful career. In the scenario where I let Lithis's crime pass, not only would my position become precarious, but so would that of the entire household's. Going against the demands of the royal court wasn't an option."

Household. A successful career. Status. Are they really things that you ought to protect to the point of sacrificing someone's very life? Itsune and Yoshu had both described this man as a scoundrel who only cared about a successful career. *And they were right,* I thought.

"Were you that obsessed with a successful career...because you wanted to climb high up the ladder, approach the king, and eventually overthrow the entire royal family one day?" I asked.

If that were true, calling it confusing means and ends wasn't nearly enough to describe how twisted it was.

Sito's stiff expression shifted slightly, revealing the very first hint of weakness. "Who knows? I am afraid...I can no longer tell." Spiritless, dark eyes gazed in my direction. "That said, I ask that you relax. As you can see, I don't possess the willpower to murder the king anymore. I successfully managed to escape to the middle of nowhere like this, yes, but I have entirely lost my purpose. If I had never come across the three of you, I likely would have quietly rotted away in this place without anyone's knowledge. Kill me if that is what you wish. I am but a ghost."

There were still parts of his statements that didn't add up. Nonetheless, I didn't have the heart to pour salt on the wound of someone during his moment of weakness. I wondered whether it was time for Jess and Ceres to finish their bath.

That was when Sito asked an abrupt question. "Are my children—are Itsune and Yoshu in good health?"

I returned it with a query of my own. "Have you not talked with them directly?"

"I have conversed with Sanon and no other. I likely don't even have the right to act as if I were a father."

He was very right about that. "They...looked like they were fit and healthy. They *did* passionately run a smear campaign against you, though."

"I am not surprised."

"Uh... I'm not sure how I should react to that."

The environment darkened—the sun was sinking beneath the horizon. Sito was staring absentmindedly at one corner of the sky that had taken on the dim shade of darkness.

"Is Yoshu still clinging to Itsune like glue?" he asked.

So that guy did *use to be clingy around his sister after all.* I raised an imaginary eyebrow. "He is different now. Have you forgotten how old he is?"

"Now that is a good question. How old is he again?"

Once again, I reaffirmed that this man was a joke of a father. It appeared that his eyes no longer spared any time to look at his

children or even Lithis, who had died because he'd turned a blind eye to the matter.

This wasn't an act. It was his true, unadulterated sentiment. The person here was but an empty shell with nothing left after losing the person he loved, his family, his lord, and even his purpose.

That was the very reason I thought he was trustworthy.

Borrowing Sito's powers to escape to safety with Ceres and search for a solution that didn't involve her death... Yeah, that's definitely a valid option. I nodded to myself. *I have to go tell those two.*

"Pardon me, but may I head over quickly to check on the pair?"

Sito creased his forehead. "If I say yes, there is the risk of you blaming me when you catch sight of their unclothed figures."

"Aw, don't say that. I would never." *Yikes, how did he find out?*

Just as I was about to head to the bathtub, I unfortunately spotted Jess and Ceres walking in our direction at this time.

"Oh my, Mister Pig!" Jess exclaimed. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Both of them were dressed. *That's a shame.* "I heard footsteps heading in this direction. I figured it was about time you finished getting changed."

Jess looked at me skeptically. There wasn't a lick of filth on her clothes from the journey.

I commented, "Looks like you remade your clothes."

"Yes, with magic. More importantly, Mister Pig, take a look at this!" Jess placed her hands on Ceres's shoulders. She was so animated that I could almost hear a *"Ta-da!"* sound effect in the background.

For some reason, Ceres shyly tried to hide her frame. "Ah! Miss Jess, um, I..." The older maiden, however, gently pushed her into the light.

Ceres had also changed into clean attire. It wasn't the usual kind of style she wore, nor was it like the rustic clothing she'd worn moments earlier. What adorned her frame was an entirely new outfit that Jess had likely made from scratch.



A loose beige blouse with a red ribbon and a pair of black shorts leisurely hugged her frame. Coupled with her short hair, she looked like a boy at a glance, but this outfit maximized the beauty of her body, such as her petite shoulders, gently constricting waist, and slender legs. There was even a charm to her that gave off a slight sense of allure.

I stared unblinkingly at her. "That's what I call drop-dead adorable."

I'd accidentally praised Ceres as adorable, but Jess also nodded merrily, possibly because she assumed I was merely talking about the younger maiden's clothes. "Right?! I've always thought that such outfits would look good on Miss Ceres."

"U-Um..." Ceres let out a bewildered noise as her bashfulness took over. "Adorable isn't... I'm not really, um..."

"Please have confidence in yourself." Jess beamed brightly. "You're very charming right now."

Ceres shyly giggled in reply.

I spoke up. "Jess, did you design it yourself?"

Jess gave me a sweet and delighted smile. "I did. I chose this design because I thought it would bring out the charms of Miss Ceres's slender legs. With this, you won't be able to peer up her skirt either, Mister Pig."

I see. She's certainly a tactician. "That's amazing. You're a genius, Jess."

"Thank you." She smiled with pure, unabashed happiness. Just looking at her made my spirits lift as well.

"That said, I'm not the kind of guy who'd look up a girl's skirt, though."

Oddly enough, silence took over. *Did I say something strange?*

My ears picked up the shuffling of crutches from behind me. Sito said, "Even if you are a veteran who has braved a thousand battles, you must always start by looking the part. Whether it be cleansing your body or amending your attire, both are vital when you are about to tackle a challenge. I believe raising your morale in such a way is significant."

This man compares everything to war when he's the one

talking...

A realization seemed to have dawned on her because Jess asked, "Is that why you brought us to this bathhouse, Mister Sito?"

"Indeed." The man nodded. "You have come to this land to accomplish something, have you not? In that tattered clothing, you wouldn't even be able to secure the head of an enemy that you should be able to win against on paper. With that out of the way, you should rest and allow your body to recuperate properly."

Two spires lined up next to each other while sandwiching the plaza we'd used as a yakiniku venue. The white one had a straight shape, while the black one was imposing. Under Sito's guidance, we entered the white one. According to him, the black spire's uncanny appearance was accurate—the inside of the spire was just as creepy.

Part of the white tower's first floor was structured as a chapel, and it was adorned with a domed ceiling that loomed dozens of meters above our heads. The tower probably continued to climb upward from there to an even higher altitude. Even though it hadn't been used in a long time, it was preserved in excellent condition.

Jess adjusted her fabric-weaving magic to manifest blankets. We arranged benches in one place to create a makeshift bed where Jess and Ceres lay down. It appeared that they'd decided to sleep in the same spot. *Aw. Must be nice. I'd love to be sandwiched between them. It must smell pleasant there.*

Sito stated that he would sit near the entrance and sleep there so that he could keep watch. I curled up next to the two maidens.

It was a quiet evening.

While lying down, Jess whispered, "Miss Ceres, you mustn't give up no matter what happens, okay?" Her voice took on an even more solemn note. "Both Mister Pig and I are here to protect you. We're together forever."

"Yes..."

The quilt covering them rustled. Possibly because Ceres was shy, she had her back turned to Jess, and just now, Jess had gently wound her arms around the girl from behind. *I'd love to be sandwiched between them.*

Ceres's legs shrank back as if she weren't sure how to react. "You've done so, so much for me... I'm really happy."

"You are?" Jess replied. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Thank you for the wonderful clothes too. They're so lovely. I don't think I deserve them at all."

"Now, that's not true. I made them for you, Miss Ceres."

Within Jess's arms, Ceres shuffled restlessly. "I... I don't know how I could ever repay you for all your kindness."

"You don't need to repay me."

"But—"

"When everything's over and done with, let's show off this outfit to the others. I can't wait to see Mister Naut's reaction."

There was no reply.

I could understand why Ceres would go quiet. Naut, after all, was a guy just as unmindful about clothing as an otaku like me. Even when cutie-pie Ceres had unveiled her glasses form, he hadn't brought up her new accessory even once. All otaku, without exception, would have a cuteness meltdown over glasses, so in that sense, perhaps he was even worse than an otaku.

After yawning modestly, Jess whispered, "I'm sure he'll be delighted... I hope that I can show him that you are...energetic and healthy...as soon as I..." Her sentence began cutting out, and the pace of her speech grew slower by the second. "So you have to...escape... We'll...find a way... I promise..."

She exhaled deeply. Then, she ended her speech with a "zzz..."

"Huh? Miss Jess?" Ceres sounded confused.

I was kind enough to inform her. "She's asleep." *Hey, am I allowed to sandwich myself between them yet?*

"Wha... Huh? Sandwich...?"

Yikes, Ceres read the narration. I hope she'll ignore it. "We've been relying on Jess throughout the entire journey. She must be pretty exhausted."

"Right..." Ceres let out a shaky breath. "I left anything and everything up to the two of you..." It seemed to weigh heavily on her mind.

So that it would be easier to chat with her, I circled the bed to

Ceres's side. "It's nothing you should feel responsible about. Both Jess and I are doing this because we want to. Jess was really enthusiastic because she sees herself as your big sister, remember?"

"Big sister... Yes, that's true."

"See? That's why you can think of me as your big bro and count on me too."

"Um... I'm all right, thank you."

Aw. She turned me down.

The girl's large eyes were fixed on me. They shimmered as they reflected the starry sky that peeped through from the other side of the cracked windows.

I hesitated. "It feels like it's been a long time since we've had a one-on-one chat."

"Yes. It somehow reminds me...of the night on the first day I ever met you."

"That's nostalgic. If I remember right, you summoned me in the middle of the night."

"I can recall that I was shocked because you said you wanted to pounce on me."

I was scandalized. "Wait, you've altered that memory. I was only saying that to cheer you up—"

Out of the blue, Jess's voice rang out. "You mustn't do that." My blood ran cold.

But not a moment later, I heard her steady, peaceful breathing. She'd been talking in her sleep. *She can even pay attention to conversations around her while asleep...?*

Ceres giggled. "Your wish came true in the end, Mister Pig."

That brought back memories—I recalled an exchange that now felt like the distant past when I looked back.

On the day I'd scouted Naut as a party member, Ceres had sent us off on our journey to the capital with these words: *"I hope your wish comes true too, Mister Pig."*

My wish had been none other than my affection for Jess. She'd showered me with kindness when I'd been lying helplessly in a pigsty, and I'd fallen madly in love with her in a single day—I'd sprouted a hopeless, irresistible emotion in my heart.

Back then, I'd denounced its worth, saying that it was trifling compared to Ceres's feelings for Naut that she'd carefully nurtured over five years. If you looked at the results, however, I was still by Jess's side.

Meanwhile, Ceres's affections were in grave danger. There was the cruel truth that she could restore order to the world in exchange for her life. Then, there was the current situation, where she was at risk of becoming the catalyst for an all-out war between the royal court and the Liberators if she stayed with Naut.

Because of that, Ceres had been utterly lost about what she should do, and she'd left her place by Naut's side even though she'd been so desperate to be with him. She'd gone on the run and asked us for help.

"Let's fulfill your wish for sure too, Ceres," I declared.

"Do you think...it can come true?"

"But of course. Don't worry. Who do you think you're talking to?"

"Mister Super-Virgin, right?"

"Precisely."

I heard Jess groaning with displeasure. *Whoa, her radar's incredibly sharp.* "We should explore this town tomorrow. If you have that sense of familiarity here again, it means there must be clues. We should also be able to slowly but surely figure out the pain in your chest. Let's think about this together."

"Yes..."

From far above us, a deep humming sound—which reminded me of a low pipe organ note—resounded. It was produced by the wind blowing against the two towers. There was a mysterious quality to it—it felt both calming and disruptive at the same time.

After a moment's silence, Ceres said, "Mister Super-Virgin."

"Yeah?"

"I'm very thankful to you. I'm grateful that you encouraged me on that morning to tell Mister Naut about my feelings."

I knew exactly when "that morning" referred to. It was when I'd persuaded Naut into accompanying us on our perilous journey.

Frankly, it had been a choice I'd made out of self-interest. Ceres had special feelings for Naut. As long as he was unaware of it, Jess,

who knew about the younger girl's affections, likely wouldn't have agreed to Naut joining us. After all, it would mean that we'd practically deceived and taken Naut away in a situation that was convenient for us. It had been necessary for Naut to decide to depart—and leave Ceres behind—while knowing her feelings.

I shook my head. "It isn't something you should feel grateful for. I didn't do it because I wanted the best for you, but because I wanted whatever benefited Jess the most. I tricked you."

"No, that's not true... I don't think you tricked me at all."

"Sorry. I made you go that far, but ultimately, I wasn't able to return Naut to you in a heartbeat. I ended up tearing your relationship apart."

"U-Um, please don't apologize." Ceres's brows furrowed awkwardly. "I know myself well enough. If you hadn't driven me into a corner back then, I know that I wouldn't have confessed my feelings to him for the rest of my life. Unless someone suddenly puts me on the spot like that, I'm sure that I would have kept it secret forever and ever. I think that I wouldn't have been able to say anything, even on the day Mister Naut was going to disappear from my life."

"You think so?"

"I do. That's why... If the two of you are blaming yourselves for taking Mister Naut away with you, you...don't have to be. I don't think badly of either of you, not even a tiny bit."

"I mean, that's for the best, yeah..."

That said, the fact that she'd said she didn't think badly of us felt like it actually backed up the theory that she had negative sentiments deep in her psyche. If the possibility of feeling conflicted about us wasn't in her mind from the beginning, there was no way she could even make such a statement right now.

"N-No, that's not it," Ceres stammered. "That's not what I think, um, I..."

A reminder that it's narration. "It's an indisputable fact that Naut wasn't able to hold on to his status as a village huntsman. From your standpoint, there's no way you wouldn't at least resent us a little about it."

"Ah... That's not what I mean." She hesitated. "I...already knew."

"Knew what?"

"I knew that Mister Naut...was going to disappear sooner or later."

I gave her a searching stare. "Disappear sooner or later...?"

Ceres nodded slightly. "Mister Naut is a great person. He wasn't someone who would stay in that tiny village or end up with a meager country girl like me. I knew that he was going to leave the village one day for sure and accomplish something bigger. Neither Miss Jess nor you were to blame for him leaving, Mister Super-Virgin."

"That might be true, but calling yourself a meager country girl?" I frowned. "You're putting yourself down way too much."

Her statements reminded me of myself from a little while ago. The people we yearned for were so brilliant, so dazzling, that we couldn't help but think we weren't worthy at all. That assumption had festered to the point that I'd ended up throwing myself off a cliff.

I continued, "Ceres, you're someone irreplaceable to Naut. I'm certain that you know him better than anyone else."

Ceres shook her head minutely so that she wouldn't wake Jess up. "But I'm not useful to him at all..."

"That's ridiculous. You're able to heal Naut with magic. Plus, you're capable of even taking up the position of his support that Rossi used to fill. Your magic to chase away the royal court's army was impressive, you know."

"I-It was...? Hee hee."

The way she shows her embarrassment is so cute. "Ceres, you can have more confidence in yourself, trust me. Unless you trust that you're able to fulfill your own wish, even wishes that can be granted would be snuffed out halfway. You should keep persisting without throwing your self-assertion out the window."

"Yes... Thank you."

Within the resulting stillness, Ceres's eyelids slowly fluttered closed. I could only hear the low bellowing of wind passing through the two towers. Suddenly, the darkness felt awfully terrifying.

I didn’t know what awaited us down our path. But I knew that I had to persevere again tomorrow—for Ceres’s sake too.

When I woke up, Jess was miffed. Real miffed.

“Mister Pig, why are you asleep between the two of us?”

I opened my eyes to see the legs of maidens to my left and right. I was wedged between Jess and Ceres like a ham sandwich. “Oh, this? I moved here because I wanted to protect Ceres from your poor sleeping habits, Jess.”

“Mnyah...” Ceres mumbled cutely with bleary eyes. I had to finish this conversation while she was still half asleep.

I continued, “You kept kicking Ceres, so I came between you two as a shield. It definitely wasn’t because I wanted to sleep between two girls or anything. I would never.”

Jess’s cheeks, which had fresh marks left from just getting up, puffed out with displeasure. “When you are truly sacrificing yourself or someone else, you actually say the opposite, Mister Pig. If you meant to serve as her shield, you would say something along the lines of, ‘I’ve always wanted to sleep between two girls. It’s been a dream of mine since I was a child.’ out of consideration for me.”

She’s...right about that? “Then I’ll make a correction. Truthfully speaking, I’ve always wanted to sleep between two girls. It’s been a dream of mine since I was a child.”

“I see. Well, your dream came true. Good for you.”

Huh? Is it just me, or is her tone a bit frosty?

“Mnmeow...” Ceres muttered. Her slender legs tangled around me and fiddled with my face. If she’d been wearing a skirt, it would have been a recipe for disaster.

The scrutiny in Jess’s gaze was escalating to a relentless extent, and I hurriedly slipped out from the bed. I looked around—Sito was sitting down near the entrance in the exact same posture as last night.

He saw me walking up to him and stood up. While arranging his clothes, he asked me, “What are your plans for today?” He paused. “If you do not wish to answer, that is fine too.”

“We are considering exploring this town. If it’s all right with you,

could you accompany us?”

“Certainly. I don’t mind. It isn’t like I have anything else to do.”

After getting ready, we headed outside. A vermilion sky peered through the gloomy clouds.

I decided to confide in Sito about our circumstances. As we walked down the streets, I gave him a succinct summary of our story.

The Contract Stake dwelling within Ceres’s chest had displayed alarming reactions. She should never have come to this town before, but oddly enough, it had felt familiar to her. This sense of déjà vu went hand in hand with an ache in her chest, where the stake had stabbed into her. We wanted to find a solution to this condition, one way or another.

I shared as much as I could with him while hiding the piece of information that the world would be restored to normal with Ceres’s death.

“I see,” Sito said after listening to my speech. “I had the feeling that was the case.”

That wasn’t a response I’d expected. “You had the feeling that was the case? What in the world do you mean by that?”

“On the night I came to this place, I went to that castle.” He lifted a finger to point at the crumbling castle stretching out across the mountainside.

“Why would you do that?”

“Anyone would be curious about such vast castle ruins.”

His tone was apathetic—I wondered whether he’d truly been intrigued by it. Doubt began building up.

He continued, “While I was out on a walk, I analyzed how enemies had captured that castle.”

“You really love war, huh...” I sighed.

Jess chimed in. “Mister Sito, did you find anything there?”

Sito replied with a subdued nod. “When I went to the castle, I abruptly heard a man’s voice. He said to remain there for just a while longer. I followed his directions, and not long after, the three of you came tumbling and splashing down the river.”

Huh. Well, Momotaro was born from a giant peach that floated

down a river. I guess I'm Butataro born from a giant pig. "A man's voice..." I trailed off. "Who was it?"

"I don't know." There wasn't any hesitation in his reply. "He was a man who had a distinctly archaic speech. I attempted to search for the owner of the voice, but I couldn't find him. Even someone of my capabilities couldn't locate him with my eyes and ears, which means that the man doesn't possess a physical body. He was likely one of the anomalous phenomena that are prevalent throughout the nation."

Jess and I traded glances.

His use of the word "archaic" piqued my interest. The man we'd been investigating, Ruta, was Vatis's husband and Jess's distant ancestor—someone from roughly a century ago.

The Contract Stakes. A man from another world who held the key to it all. Ceres's enigmatic sense of familiarity.

Something was telling me that all the pieces of the puzzle were slowly starting to click into place.

It appeared that Ceres recognized the path leading to the castle. The cobblestone paving here was blanketed with alternating black and white tiles reminiscent of a chessboard, just like the plaza. My feet moved forward on autopilot.

"Now this is a mysterious color scheme." Jess looked at the ground and asked inquisitively, "What kind of significance do you think it has?"

"The plaza between the towers had the same kind of pattern, right?" I commented.

Sito was the one who offered an explanation. "This is apparently called the path of indecision. It is likely a path meant for those who cannot make up their mind between black and white."

When I turned around, I could see the black and white towers. This path led all the way from the plaza between them up to the castle ruins along the mountainside. It was a design that almost felt nasty.

"Did you walk down this path because you were also having trouble deciding something?" I asked.

He never answered me.

The path turned countless times, but it gradually wound its way up the mountain and eventually led inside the castle. Though it was technically a castle, most of its structure had collapsed—merely brick walls remained.

It was an uncanny place. Despite there being a murder of crows flitting about in the surrounding forest, they obstinately refused to enter the bounds of civilization. It should make sense for at least mice to be around, but I didn't sense the presence of any animals along the path. The path of black and white stone was almost like a funeral home.

There were no hints of life in the collapsed castle—merely pitiful and desolate walls. I had no way of knowing what the town used to be like, but in the present, it indeed embodied the title of the Town of Death.

Ultimately, the path came to an end at a plaza surrounded by towering walls.

A stunned whisper slipped out of my mouth before I knew it. "This place is..."

It was an otherworldly area that looked as if it was meant for some kind of ritual. The floor was dissected cleanly into halves of black and white by a straight line, and we were on the white side.

At the center of the plaza, which marked the boundary between black and white, stood a ring made of gray stone. It was just large enough for people to walk through, and its atmosphere reminded me of cogon grass rings—which were used for purification rites—that would be placed at shrines in early summer.

Right in the middle of the ring blazed a silver flame.

No—it was a colorless flame. I wondered whether its creator had designed it to match its monotone surroundings or if the color scheme of the environment was what matched the flame. As if fuel were being incessantly supplied from the ground, the fire continued burning vigorously even in the ruins.

"Ah..." Ceres pressed on her chest and stared at that structure with wide eyes. "Miss Jess, Mister Super-Virgin, I..."

"Do you feel like you recognize it?" I prompted.

With her eyes still widened, Ceres nodded. “Very much so... The sense of familiarity somehow feels like it’s stronger than ever before.”

It appeared that we’d indeed come to the right place. The triangle design on the castle part of the painting, which we’d seen in Fortress Lussier, had likely meant to indicate this place.

As he gazed at the flame, Sito said, “This is what we call the Flame of Partings. It is what gives Helde its identity as the Town of Death.”

Meekly, Ceres spoke up. “May I ask...what you mean by that?”

“This fire, which burns eternally without dying out, has encouraged numerous farewells until now. And in most cases, it has incinerated those who come here without leaving a trace.”

A sinister atmosphere fell over us. *So this flame burns to take lives, huh?*

Sito’s description seemed to have reminded Jess of something because she said, “I think...I know about it. A silver flame that burns within a ring... There should be an old legend that corresponds to it.”

Judging by Sito’s reaction, it appeared that even he wasn’t aware of it.

Jess continued, “I’m afraid I don’t remember all the details, but...” Somberly, she began narrating the old tale.

It was a story passed down through the generations from a time in the distant past—eons before the Dark Ages.

Once upon a time, a poor boy and a wealthy mage girl fell in love. Their difference in status dictated a fate set in stone—their love would never bear fruit. The opposition of those around them was rigorous, and they were criticized even when people merely saw them together. The girl’s household foisted one-sided, cruel treatment on the boy.

The girl soothed the boy however she could, further earning the boy’s affections. To return the favor, the boy saved the girl, further earning the girl’s affections. As they grew increasingly drawn to each other, the people around them became even more invested in trying

to pull them apart.

The pair advanced down the completely opposite direction from the will of society, and at long last, they left their town as if to run away from everything.

During their journey, they arrived at a certain area, as if guided there by fate. It was a most mysterious place where a silver flame blazed within a stone ring. Legend said that those who passed through the flame could bid farewell to any and all destiny they were shackled to.

The pair didn't hesitate to cast away their miserable fate. Hand in hand, they walked through the ring.

The silver flames burned the lovers—and only the girl came out from the other side. The boy, ensnared by the flames, was thoroughly consumed by the fire and disappeared.

The truth is, there was a world of difference between what the two wished to cast away. The boy had despaired at his own fate and wished to cast away the world altogether. Just as he'd desired, he was burned to nothing by the flame.

Meanwhile, the girl wished to throw away her own status so that she could have a future with the boy. Therefore, what the flames burned in her was her magic, which her status was based on. Thus, the girl survived.

It was said that the girl led her life as a normal human being until the very end, never forgetting the boy in her heart.

"That's one bleak story with no solace..." I muttered. Just listening to it made me glum. "There isn't even a moral of the story that you can learn from. It's a tale of a boy and a girl suffering pitifully, that's it."

"It likely wasn't a tale someone created to serve as a lesson to begin with," Sito replied frostily. "I suspect it is based on a true story. For that reason, there is no moral, no nothing. There is no better proof than the silver flame in the story burning right before our eyes."

He had a point there.

Jess gently placed her hand on Ceres's shoulder. "In that case,

would it mean the fire really possesses the power to break people away from their destiny?”

If this flame could truly serve as a solution to the stake embedded within Ceres’s body, it was the most ideal scenario possible. *That said...*

“The question is, what exactly is ‘destiny’ referring to?” I frowned. “The term’s too vague to try and interpret. Lots of people died because of this fire, yeah? It would be a disaster if Ceres disappeared just like the boy in the old legend.”

Jess pressed her lips into a thin line. “Right...”

“This fire doesn’t always necessarily incinerate lives,” Sito explained fluidly. “It burns the destiny you wish to cast away the most. In the case of those who wish to cling to life, even if it means severing their own destiny to achieve it, this fire will solely consume the destiny in question, whether it be magic or love. However, that doesn’t apply in most scenarios, and the fire will destroy its target’s entire existence, alongside their destiny, to nothing.” He concluded, “For those who are wavering between the choice of life or death, this flame will give you the answer.”

I scrutinized him. “You are rather well-informed about this fire.”

“That is only natural. I came to this land searching for it, after all.”

My eyes widened. *Wait. Sito didn’t accidentally end up here while seeking refuge?*

Just as that question popped up in my mind, I suddenly sensed a presence. I turned around.

Right behind me was a human cloaked in a midnight black robe from head to toe—no, I only assumed they were a human because of their form. Truthfully, I didn’t know what exactly they were. Underneath the hood was pitch-black darkness. The sleeves concealed their hands, and even their feet were hidden by the robe’s hem.

Anyone would agree that they were a suspicious figure.

Sito went into action without a moment’s delay. He reached out toward the shape’s throat at a speed that rivaled a bullet—and his hand passed through the robe as if nothing were there in the first

place.

A man's voice rang out from beneath the hood. "No matter who you may be, touching an apparition is beyond the realm of possibility."

Sito twitched in response. He seemed to recognize the voice.

I recalled how he'd brought up a voice that had instructed him to stay here—a voice with an invisible owner. A voice that spoke using somewhat archaic language.

"Who are you?" Sito barked sharply. His thick brows scrunched tightly together. "Reveal your face."

"I possess no face that you speak of. You and your companions likely would not recognize my visage either."

The man replied cryptically, almost as if he were a philosopher giving us a lecture. Somehow, he reminded me a little of my journey in the Abyssus.

He continued, "I am no longer within this nation. The traces I have left behind on this plane are the being conversing with you right this moment."

Jess nervously asked, "Are you...Mister Ruta...?"

The shadowy figure nodded. "Indeed."

Ruta was the name of Vatis's husband, who was said to have hailed from another dimension. His blood flowed in Jess's veins as well.

As if gliding across the floor, what proclaimed to be Ruta moved in front of Ceres. The maiden took a step back as if frightened.

Ruta said, "You are the one who harbors the last stake within your body, are you not?"

Ceres nodded minutely in response.

Seeing that, he added, "I was aware that such a phenomenon would take place. Before I departed from Mesteria, I left behind several clues. You fellows have successfully followed my trail and have reached this place."

The mood was austere, and it didn't feel right to interrupt him. But I couldn't fight the question in my mind. "Are you perhaps referring to Ceres's—this girl's sense of déjà vu?"

"Very much so. All over Mesteria, I have left behind clues that

indicate this place. I have also infused the three remaining stakes with my memories related to those areas. It was all so that whoever harbors the very last stake would find the clues and be guided to this settlement."

So he's saying the hints that helped us find this place—the Town of Death painting in Fortress Lussier and the symbol that indicated this castle—were things he prepared, huh?

"Once all the stakes are consumed, it would bring about a phenomenon that you refer to as spercritica in this country," he explained. "Simultaneously, abnormalities will arise within the one who harbors the final Contract Stake. Naturally, people would conclude that slaughtering the host would solve everything. All these events have already played out in the distant past of my birthplace. I wished to avoid someone being murdered for such a reason."

I see now. Ruta wanted to show the host of the last Contract Stake a path to salvation, and we have treaded that exact path, which led us to this destination.

"Still, if that was your goal, why didn't you inform Vatis about it?" I asked. "Rather than leaving clues like this, it would be more productive to leave information behind in the royal family's written rec—"

Ruta cut me short. "I did not wish to tell that person about this place. This chamber is somewhat special. I went through that monument and returned to my original world—I bade farewell to my wife and child."

His seemingly handless arm lifted to point at the silver flame. "That is the grave of a man who hailed from my world in the ancient days—a millennium ago, at the very least. Similar to how I can perceive the stakes' locations without any obstruction, those who have come to this plane of existence from my world are granted an almost godly power that surpasses the realm of magic. The remains of the man who rests here blaze with a fire that will not die out for eternity. They possess the power to burn away destiny into nothing."

Is Ruta saying that he wanted to return to his original world so desperately that he incinerated his fate? What kind of fate, exactly, did he want to escape from?

As if he'd seen through my question, the shadowy figure said, "Vatis did not want me to return. The soul magic she utilized to tie me down was incredibly potent, and even someone with my powers was unable to escape on my own merits. Therefore, my only choice was to thoroughly incinerate myself with a force that is superior to magic."

Jess placed a hand on her chest and asked in a small voice, "Why... Why would you want to run away?"

"I thought that I could transform Mesteria into a better place with the power of my eye. I was conceited—I believed that I could manage it with my strength. But as a result, I brought about a great massacre and even spurred on the birth of the class you call Yethma. I deemed that I must not allow such godlike power to remain any longer within this country."

The shadowy figure slowly raised his head. Though I couldn't get a full view of his face, I caught a glimpse of only his eyes. In the place where his left eye should be was a gaping black hole that reminded me of a skeleton.

Ruta's Eye. It was the eye that could see the location of the Contract Stakes—the eye that had granted overwhelming power to the royal court's founder. It was also the eye we'd used to obtain the remaining stakes.

"It is time to cut to the heart of the matter." Ruta spread his hands and faced Ceres. "Removing the stake from your body is a simple task. All you need to do is pass through that flame. You will part with the destiny that is driving you to your death. The fire will incinerate all your sources of magic without a trace. The Contract Stake will vanish together with your destiny as a mage."

A cool breeze swept across the chamber. Slowly but surely, joy welled up in my heart.

Our journey—our escape hadn't been for nothing. By following Ruta's trail of clues, we'd managed to find a way to avoid Ceres's death.

"That's terrific!" Jess exclaimed, delighted. "What wonderful news, Miss Ceres!"

The harsh and grueling flight to this abandoned town had all

been worth it. I looked up at the younger maiden. “Then you can go back to Naut’s side. That’s great.”

“Um...” Ceres, looking like a deer caught in the headlights, darted her eyes around in several directions.

Ruta asked, “Is something the matter?”

Ceres hesitated. “Do you mean, um, if I pass through this fire, I can no longer use magic?”

“Indeed. You must brace yourself for the price you must pay. You can only choose one—losing your life or losing your magic.”

“Wha...”

Something wasn’t right about Ceres.

She looked at the fire and took several steps back. It was almost as if she shunned the hand of salvation we’d finally found.

It was true that losing her magic might come as a shock to her. Still, it should be much more preferable than death. *Why is she hesitating after coming this far?*

I frowned. “Hey, Ceres. What’s wrong?”

Ceres shook her head vigorously. Then, without warning, she turned her back on the fire and broke into a run.

“Miss Ceres!” Startled, Jess yelled in shock, but Ceres still didn’t stop.

In the blink of an eye, her petite frame disappeared to the other side of the castle’s rubble.

Being Useful to You Is What I Live For

Even now, the roaring fire back then blazes vividly in the back of my mind.

That ferocious fire had burned down Baptsaze—the village I'd grown up in. It was so blinding that I was at a complete loss about what to do. I was astonished. I never knew fire was such a dreadful thing.

But at the same time, a part of me rejoiced just a little over that blaze.

The fire had set me free. While I had been tied down to the village, Mister Naut had become a captive. It wasn't like someone powerless like me could help in any way, but the fact that he might die at any moment, whereas I was stuck in Baptsaze, unable to do anything, was unbearable to me.

The fire had burned down the village that was kind enough to raise me, as well as Madame Martha's inn. I was a very bad girl for feeling just a little happy about it.

But if it weren't for that fire, I wouldn't have been able to go out and find Mister Naut. I wouldn't have grasped freedom.

I left Baptsaze. I headed north with Mister Rossi, Mister Sanon, and Mister Super-Virgin.

Mister Naut managed to escape from his confinement even without my help. It was only to be expected of him. That was the kind of person he was—someone who could live resolutely even without me.

In a peaceful harbor city called Nearbell, I met up with the Liberators. When I heard that Mister Naut was going to arrive very soon, my heart began pounding rapidly at once. I could see him after just a little while—I could see Mister Naut again! Just the

thought made my heart swell with happiness. Almost immediately, though, a bulky, heavy anxiety assaulted me.

What did Mister Naut think of me? What did the hero of the Liberators think when he looked at a measly country girl like me?

While I had been leading a mundane life in the village, Mister Naut must have braved relentless battles that I couldn't even fathom. While I had been washing dishes in the inn, Mister Naut had been crossing swords with his life on the line in the arena in the North.

And so I thought, I must be quickly turning into a smaller and smaller presence within Mister Naut's mind.

It was unavoidable.

Mister Sanon listed the things I could do, such as healing with black ristae. Mister Super-Virgin cheered me up by saying that as long as I stayed by Mister Naut's side, I wouldn't become an insignificant presence to him. Even I replayed the countless days I'd spent together with Mister Naut in my mind.

But just like I'd thought, it still wasn't enough.

Mister Naut had been fighting nonstop throughout his life while chasing after the deceased Miss Eise. Swords made with Miss Eise's bones always hung from his hip.

There weren't any gaps within Mister Naut's heart. There wasn't any room for someone like me to slip inside.

I'd even thought that I might have faded from his memory completely. The days we'd spent together might have been effortlessly blotted out by the numerous harsh destinies that fell upon Mister Naut's shoulders. I couldn't dispel these thoughts from my mind.

Those trifling days that had been the definition of happiness to me must have been trifling in the true sense of the word to Mister Naut.

Whenever I had just a slightly negative thought, my mind would quickly spiral down a bad direction. It was my bad habit.

As it turned out, Mister Naut hadn't forgotten me. When we'd reunited on that ship, he'd called out my name without hesitation. And then, he said... He said to tell him whenever I felt like heading

home.

I'd known from the beginning that to Mister Naut, I was simply insignificant. To him, I was someone inconsequential who could go home whenever I felt like it.

I did what I could. With the black rista Mister Yoshu provided me, I healed Mister Naut's wounds. His injuries vanished without a trace.

Ever since, I'd frantically run after Mister Naut with everything I had. I was determined to do everything within my power for him. That was my grounds for staying by his side.

That was why, when Mister Naut had collapsed from the curse in the Send-Off Island, I hadn't hesitated.

Mister Hortis removed my collar, and I shouldered the deadly curse in Mister Naut's stead. I was wholeheartedly willing to die if it were for his sake.

Dying meant that I couldn't stay with him. But maybe he might carry even one small part of my body on him, like Miss Eise. I would be really happy if he did, even if it were wishful thinking. That was what I had thought.

In the end, I didn't die. My companions used one of Mesteria's supreme treasures, called the Contract Stake, to lift the curse. I wasn't quite sure exactly how it worked, but I'd become a mage after my collar was removed, and if you used the stake on a mage, it would bring about an occurrence called ecdysia. The curse apparently vanished in the process.

Just like that, I gained the power to wield magic.

Magic was difficult. It wasn't something you could master overnight. In the beginning, I practiced healing, which I'd already been doing for some time. But now, I could heal wounds without using a black rista.

I quickly grasped this skill. Mister Naut was someone who always sustained injuries, so my magic came in handy. I didn't have to perform it through prayers—I could heal any wound instantly.

Under Mister Sanon's encouragement, I also tried out mimicking the effects of enchanted gadgets that Mister Rossi had once used. Mister Naut had hunted and gone into battle with his buddy, Mister Rossi, for a long time, so it would be convenient if he had someone

around who could fulfill the same role, or so Mister Sanon had thought.

I'd attempted freezing the ground, turning it into a marsh, summoning tiny explosions, and producing sound that humans couldn't hear. Each of these techniques was somewhat subpar, but with time, I'd managed to use them to a certain extent. The Contract Stake must have strengthened my magic.

My spells could be used over and over without relying on tools, and I could adjust them depending on the situation. As I'd hoped, they proved very useful. Personally, I wasn't clever, nor was I quick-witted. However, thanks to the fact that either Mister Sanon or Mister Yoshu always accompanied me, I was able to support the Liberators simply by using magic as I was instructed to.

I heard that there were even battles won because of my magic. Of course, these were only conclusions drawn after the fact, and I believed that the Liberators would have won even without me. Still, their praises made my heart swell with joy.

Mister Naut seemed stunned at my growth. He never put it into words, but he must have changed his opinion of me for the better. The bumbling Ceres, who'd only known how to cry, had matured to the point of helping him in battle like Mister Rossi and healing his wounds in the blink of an eye whenever necessary.

Magic became what I lived for. It was because I had magic that I could be useful to Mister Naut. It was because I had magic that I could remain a special someone. I was thankful for the fact that I wasn't born as a normal girl but as a Yethma.

At long last, I found a reason I could stay by Mister Naut's side while holding my head high.

Chapter 4: Look into Someone's Eyes When You Talk

I found Ceres crouching down behind some forlorn, crumbling rubble. Her back was turned to us, and it looked so tiny. Jess and I approached her slowly.

"Miss Ceres..." Jess carefully called out.

Ceres's hanging head drooped even more.

Jess and I traded glances. The older maiden looked baffled.

I turned back to the younger girl. "Hey, Ceres. What's wrong? If anything is bothering you, we're all ears."

No response.

I hesitated. "If you don't want me to know, Jess will talk to you one-on-one."

Jess said, "If you don't want me to know, Mister Pig will talk to you one-on-one."

Our spontaneous teamwork gave her no room to escape. Ceres slowly shook her head. "Th-That's not it... I'm so sorry, that's not why I'm hesitating..." Her voice was small—so small that the wind threatened to blow it away.

"If you don't want either of us to know, we'll disappear," I said.

The out-of-place joking banter wasn't able to spur even a chuckle from Ceres. "If I'm alone, I'll only end up talking to myself..." She turned to face us. Her eyes were red and puffy, but they shed no tears.

In one fluid movement, Jess settled down next to Ceres as if it were the natural thing to do. "Miss Ceres, please take a seat as well. Let's think over this together."

The meek Ceres sat down right beside Jess for the time being. I lay down on Ceres's other side.

"I..." Ceres chewed on her bottom lip. "My head's a mess... I

don’t know what I should do...”

“If that’s so, let’s take this opportunity to sort through your situation.” Jess smiled warmly and lifted her index finger. “I shall prompt you with questions. Miss Ceres, please give me brief answers.”

Ceres nodded.

Jess continued, “To start... Miss Ceres, what is causing you distress right now?”

“It’s...the Contract Stake.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the Contract Stake is in my body...there’s chaos all over the country, and I’m causing lots of trouble to everyone.”

“Okay, how can you stop this then?”

Ceres anxiously looked in the direction she’d run from. Sito hadn’t come to this area. “Either I die...or I part with my magic by passing through that flame.”

“Are you going to choose the first method, Miss Ceres?”

Feebly, the younger maiden shook her head.

Jess followed up with, “Well then, are you going to choose the second method?”

Ceres didn’t nod. Jess turned to look in my direction, solemn.

I concluded, “In other words, you don’t want to let go of your magic. Do I have that right?”

After a pause, Ceres nodded.

Jess was wrought with emotion—she seemed like she was about to ask Ceres “Why?” at any time, but I stopped her with a look.

As I gazed at Ceres’s profile, I grasped her true feelings. There was a chance that this was something Jess, of all people, wouldn’t be able to understand *because* she was Jess. She was brilliant, like the protagonist of an isekai novel; she always looked forward to the future, like the heroine of a heartwarming morning soap opera; and she was strong, like a Disney princess.

I slowly exhaled. “Without magic, you will lose your worth that justifies your place by Naut’s side. That’s the conclusion you arrived at, right?”

“That’s not true!” Jess fervently exclaimed. “That could never be

true!”

Just like you’d expect, Jess shot down that opinion—just like how she’d done for me once upon a time.

The problem was that these words were meaningless unless they came from Naut. When you have low self-esteem, like me and Ceres, it wasn’t very effective, even if we received objective encouragement. I knew that very well as someone who’d been in the same shoes.

Ceres fixed her eyes on the ground while looking distressed.

“Hey, Jess,” I said. “That silver flame will incinerate the fate of those who dare to make a stand against their destiny, just like the mage girl in the old tale. Those without this courage will be burned alongside their very existence to nothing. Unless Ceres is able to make a determined decision from the bottom of her heart, this method might end up achieving the opposite of what we want. Encouragement from just you and me isn’t enough.”

“Then... What do we do?” Jess looked at me anxiously.

Is it possible to summon Naut here? That’s probably a tall order. At the very least, it’s not something we can achieve immediately. But I can’t think of a solution other than—

“You seem to be facing a conundrum.” The next thing I knew, Sito was standing before my eyes. “You left me behind with that uncanny man. I was ill at ease, and my feet carried me here on instinct. I didn’t mean to listen in or anything of the sort.”

Still hiding his expression behind his bearded face, Sito’s obsidian eyes shifted onto Ceres. He then looked at Jess and me before saying, “Could you give me a moment of privacy with Ceres?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Wherefore art thou asking that?!” I charged forward to stand in his way and shielded Ceres.

“Do not fear. It isn’t like I possess any unsavory intentions like you do, and naturally, I don’t wish her harm either. I simply thought of telling only Ceres about my secret as a special exception.”

“Hey now, I’ve never had any unsavory intentions toward any maidens...” I hesitated. “Can you swear that you’re telling the truth?”

“I can. Have faith in me. Lacerte do not lie.”

You’re talking as if you’re a character featured in one of those

"one always lies, one always tells the truth" puzzles... It's not going to help me at all. And hold on, what's this about a secret?

"Mister Pig." Jess's voice cut into my thoughts. She stood up. "Let's try putting our trust in Mister Sito."

Seeing her earnest eyes, I decided to trust Jess's judgment that we could have confidence in Sito.

She then turned to the man. "In that case, we shall be waiting in front of that flame. Please come over once your conversation is finished."

"Understood."

Jess and I returned to the Flame of Partings, like she announced. This time, the ghost was nowhere to be found.

Eventually, Sito brought back Ceres with him. She was unscathed.

After inhaling to steady herself, Ceres declared, "I've made up my mind. I...will walk through that ring—that fire." Her tone was firm.

"Really?!" Jess exclaimed with delight.

Ceres nodded. "If there's even the smallest of possibilities...I will choose it, no matter what kind of relentless path it might be. That's what I've decided. It's much better than losing everything I have."

"Thank goodness..." Jess smiled. "I completely agree. I think that's an admirable decision."

Making a decision meant choosing something—and permanently parting with something else. It often came with pain or distress. When faced with an overwhelmingly agonizing destiny, it can sometimes feel preferable to run away altogether rather than make a decision. However, in reality, it was better to decide what you would lose for yourself rather than lose everything by fleeing in the other direction.

Ceres's change of mind intrigued me. "What in the world did you say to her?" I asked.

Sito slightly shrugged his shoulder that wasn't propped up by the crutch. "As long as you are alive, you will be able to turn the tables eventually, regardless of how bleak the situation may seem. That is all I conveyed to her."

It appeared that he had no plans of sharing his secret with me.

That aside, turning the tables, huh? I feel like he's not giving the Naut/Ceres ship much of an opportunity to sail, but ignoring that for now, I like his philosophy. As long as the chances aren't an absolute zero, it's very much worth aiming for it. Just the fact that Ceres had gained such motivation was more than enough. No matter what kind of secret Sito shared with her, it was inconsequential.

Ceres stood before the fire. Her low stature made the ashen stone ring look towering in comparison. The flame illuminated her face with ferocious white light. I didn't know whether it was because the fire was hot or oppressive, but Ceres solemnly knitted her delicate brows together.

The wait doesn't last long.

The young maiden took a determined step forward. The silver fire flared up vigorously and engulfed her entire body.

Jess let out a startled "Ah!" My eyes were also glued to the flame. For an instant, I was terrified that we'd lost Ceres for good. By now, the fire had grown to the point of enveloping the large ring.

However, Ceres returned to the world of the living. When she emerged from the other side, she walked with resolute strides that I'd never seen on her before.

Next to me, I saw Sito lifting his head, and I looked up at the sky as well. My eyes widened. "The sky is...!"

Jess followed our example and craned her neck. "Ah..."

The sky that had been a shade of vermilion dissolved into a shade of blue. *Hold on, is blue the right word for it?* It might have been more accurate to call it pale aqua, or perhaps it was a color with a more complicated name that I didn't know of.

What I could say for sure was that it was the true color of the sky that had almost faded from our memories.

The moment Ceres returned to our side, Jess rushed up to her and threw her arms around the younger girl. "You did it!" she cheered.

"Yes... I'm so sorry for all the trouble I caused you."

Feeling relieved, I also trotted toward the pair. "All right, let's check Ceres's chest. That'll tell us whether the stake is actually gone."

I spoke completely seriously, but sure enough, my proposal was rejected. Jess confirmed that the glowing fissure on Ceres's chest had vanished. I, unfortunately, was not qualified to check it for myself.

Oh well. I'll still take it as a win. The stake within Ceres's body had vanished, and order had been restored to the world without the younger maiden's death. Nodding, I said, "Looks like it's mission accomplished. It somehow feels anticlimactic—like it was over all too soon."

Hearing that, Jess inclined her head. "Um..."

"Yeah?"

"Mister Pig, you're still talking."

Interpreting that as a roundabout way of saying, "Shut up," I felt remorseful about angering the kindhearted Jess to this extent. "My bad. I won't show any interest in Ceres's dignified chest for the rest of my life. I swear."

Jess's expression turned conflicted. "No, that wasn't what I meant... By normal standards, pigs shouldn't be able to speak in this world."

Oh, right. I almost forgot. My eyes widened.

If spercritica were truly over and done with, shouldn't I need to converse by adding double angle brackets to the narration again? Why was I able to speak without any difficulty?

A voice cut into the silence. "My fears were not unwarranted." I turned around—the shadowy figure wrapped in a black robe looked down at me from underneath the hood. "The fact that I am capable of still appearing here means that this country has yet to restore its order completely."

Yeah. Not to mention that there's a talking pig too.

"What in the world is going on?" I asked.

Ruta fell into silent contemplation for a while. He then took out a piece of paper from his inner chest pocket. Possibly because he placed importance on a sense of unity with his attire, the paper was pure black. He handed it to Jess.

"What might this be?" Jess looked down at the item.

"I have inscribed the last missing fragment that is necessary for

restoring this world."

Jess immediately turned the charcoal black paper over and checked for any writing. Judging by her reaction, she hadn't found anything.

The shadowy figure added, "I have made it invisible to the naked eye for now. When you have found your resolve to learn of it, you may rinse it in the Spring of Oblivion." Meaningfully, he turned his face just a tad in my direction.

Leaving us with those ominous words, the robed figure disappeared like wisps of smoke without even waiting for a response.

When the sun began climbing down the sky, the azure canvas gradually changed into the crimson shade of sunset.

We were able to make our way back to the plaza between the towers before the day grew dark. Just like the previous night, we prepared to rest in the white tower. As a natural course of events, our plans for the next day became the topic of our conversation.

Leaning against the wall, Sito dispassionately said, "No matter where the three of you head from here on forth, I shall follow. Many perils await you on your journey. I am certain that I will be useful."

"That would be a great help," I replied before I began pondering. *Where should we go next?* "The chances of having a proper discussion with Shravis seem pretty shaky, considering what happened at Fortress Lussier. We finally managed to free Ceres, yeah, but it would be meaningless if the royal court didn't believe us and still tried to snatch her away. Before anything else, we need to arrange a proper setting for negotiation."

Ceres was already asleep. Jess sat down next to her on the bedding and suggested, "How about going up to the Liberators? They should put in every effort to protect Miss Ceres. Even if the royal court's army changes policies and considers an offensive stance, it might be possible to start a negotiation in the form of proposing a ceasefire."

"It's not a bad plan. It's not bad at all, but..." I trailed off.

If at all possible, I wanted to avoid anything that might trigger a

new conflict. Once the royal court's army learned that we had entrusted Ceres to the Liberators, there was a very real possibility of them starting a war at once. In that scenario, there was no guarantee that we could successfully start peace negotiations.

But at the same time, Shravis was turning a deaf ear to us right now. I didn't have the assurance that we alone were enough to convince him that Ceres's problem had been resolved.

Failure was fatal. If Ceres were murdered, even though her death was no longer necessary, it would be the most nightmarish tragedy. I had to carefully craft our plan so that such a future would never come to pass.

Sito spoke up. "I see. In such situations, swiftness is of the essence. You must strike so quickly that the opposing army doesn't even have time to react." It appeared that he'd mostly grasped the circumstances from our exchange.

He proposed his strategy. "We shall start by heading straight to the Liberators and entrusting Ceres in their care. Once the delivery is complete, the two of you will head to the royal capital right away and propose negotiations for peace with His Majesty. In the meantime, Ceres, alongside a group of Liberator elites that includes myself, will depart from our base and head to the royal capital in secret. If we move with a speed that doesn't allow others to pursue us, there is no need to fear any attacks."

He continued, "The moment arrangements for negotiations are complete, we shall enter the capital and protect Ceres as we head to the negotiation venue. This way, it should be possible to avoid a confrontation between the royal court's army and the Liberators. Once His Majesty sees that Ceres has lost her magic with his own eyes, I am certain that he will comprehend that her murder is unnecessary."

"Huh, I see, I see." Jess looked convinced.

But is it really going to go that smoothly? "Will you be able to enter the capital?" I asked. "You will be executed the moment you are discovered."

Sito replied, "That is a simple matter. I should be able to manage one way or another. Have you forgotten who I am?"

An accursed dad with a beard who lives as if he's from the Warring States period...? After a moment of indecision, I nodded. "Your point is clear. In that case, let's go with that plan for now."

There was still the doubt of whether he would truly be able to deal with the problems down his path, but that wasn't exactly something I should worry about. In the worst-case scenario, I could even help Ceres escape while Sito served as a decoy.

The sound of a cowbell reached my ears. Relief washed over me.

I found myself inside a café. It was a place I'd visited before. It had a calming, retro atmosphere, and cups were arranged neatly on display along the walls. The shop itself was bustling, but strangely enough, I couldn't make out any of the conversations exchanged around me.

A voice called out to me. "Noble Pig." A girl wearing a hospital gown sat alone in the booth seat tucked away in the deepest recesses of the establishment. It was my second encounter with her, and I wasn't all that familiar with her appearance yet, but I could recognize her as Blaise from her distinct way of addressing me.

I looked around. "Where are the others?"

Instead of giving me an answer, she motioned for me to sit down across the table from her. I clambered up onto the seat and obediently crouched down. *She asked me to sit here... Does that mean Philopon isn't around today? Uh, this doesn't count as cheating, hopefully?*

"I have attempted to summon you several times until now, Noble Pig," she said. "But possibly because you were occupied, you were reluctant to respond to my summons. Partly because of that, I believe Hiroko and Mister Sanon are unable to come today."

"Ah, so that's what happened... Sorry about that. It's been a bit hectic lately, and for the past few days, I haven't found much time to sleep in peace. I didn't have any dreams."

When I'd lain down between Jess and Ceres, I'd felt dreamy all night long in reality, so having a dream had been the last thing on my mind.

Wanting to get in touch with Kento about handing Ceres over, I'd

made sure to procure ample time for a good night's sleep, and my efforts had borne fruit. The problem was that the key pig, Kento, had not yet arrived. *If he isn't going to show up at all, will I have to ask Blaise to be the messenger?*

I wanted to have a proper discussion with Kento before we took any action—partly so that we could safely contact the Liberators too.

I didn't know how she interpreted my expression, but Blaise worriedly gazed at me. She said, "It seems like Mesteria is currently facing a terrible crisis."

"Yeah. It's getting better bit by bit, though."

"It only takes a split second for the world to change for good, but it takes an unimaginable amount of time to change it into the world you wish for with your own hands. You and your companions are trying to spur on such a transformation for the better, yes? It is very admirable."

"You think so?" I paused. "Thanks."

I was slightly taken aback. *I didn't know she was someone who could hold such opinions.*

The Blaise I'd encountered in Mesteria had been crushed by despair. She had been a taciturn, pessimistic girl who'd only wished to go to a different world. But originally—before the suffering that had been forced on her—she must have been a thinker who'd even contemplated the ways of the world.

She inclined her head. "Noble Pig, if I'm not imagining things, you don't seem to be in the most jovial mood."

"Is it *that* obvious?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Well... Let's say that I've got lots of things on my plate right now that I have to think about."

Blaise leaned forward toward me just a tad. "I presume one of them is about Miss Jess?"

"...What makes you think that?"

"When I requested that you return to this world, you appeared to be very conflicted about the matter. I suspected that you might be wavering about leaving Miss Jess behind as a consequence."

She was right on the mark. For a while, I was stunned

speechless. "N-Not really, that's not what I... Remember what I said? I've got a mission I have to accomplish in this world."

"Is that so? I was under the impression that you were someone who cared much more about being able to stay with Miss Jess than the fate of the world, Noble Pig."

I was at a loss for words once again. She was completely right—that was the person I'd become, for better or worse, ever since the end of that northbound journey with Jess.

After a moment of indecision, I thought that knowing Blaise, maybe I could afford to be honest with her. I said rapidly in one go, "To tell you the truth, you're right on the money. The fact that my body in my original world is on the verge of death is a serious problem, and I know that. Plus, I know that in the event I *do* end up dying, I'll cause a great load of trouble for Philopon and the others. But in the end, I can't give up on my place by Jess's side."

I sucked in a deep breath and looked at Blaise. "Hey, Blaise. What do you think I should do?"

Seconds passed, then minutes. Blaise slowly spoke up. "I don't know the right answer. I'm afraid that I won't be able to give you appropriate advice either."

Yeah. That's the answer I kind of expected. The only people who thoroughly knew the circumstances surrounding Jess and me were, undoubtedly, Jess and me. It was wrong to seek out an answer from someone else—much less Blaise, whom we'd barely conversed with until now.

It was then that Blaise continued, "But there is one thing I wish to say to you."

"What is it?"

She curled her lips into a gentle smile. "When you are lost about which direction you should go, I suggest you search for a star that can serve as your guide." Those words somehow rang a bell. "Do you know of Salvia, the northern star? It is the wishing star that shines brilliantly in Mesteria's northern skies."

"I sure do. It's that red, stunning star, right?"

"Yes. Whenever you have lost your way, the wishing star will point you in the right direction. If there is ever a day you lose sight

of how you should live on, Noble Pig, I suggest you search for your own wishing star."

"Interesting..." My own wishing star—I knew very well what the "star" in my life was. "Thanks. That is good food for thought."

"I am happy if I was able to assist you in any way."

Blaise slowly bowed, and the collar of her hospital gown loosened to a terribly precarious degree. My eyes were glued to the brilliance of the sunflowers that bloomed in full glory. The radiant illumination of the colorful lamps surrounding us revealed all the details of the ample spheres—

A voice rang out abruptly from my side. "Holy guacamole [Merlin's beard]!"

Frantically, I turned my face. A boar adorned in a frilly dress was looking up at us from the ground.

"Kento!" I exclaimed. "You're here."

My original goal had been to talk with him, but due to the unfortunate timing, I ended up speaking as if I didn't welcome his arrival.

"Yes. I have just arrived at this place. Now, if you will excuse me," the boar said as he scrambled up the same sofa and settled down next to me. At point-blank range, he looked in my direction. "I shall keep this date [confidential meeting] a secret from Miss [cutie-pie] Jess, just in case."

Uh, those are some pretty...acrobatic, for the lack of a better word, wordings that correspond to his translation brackets.

He continued, "I have finally managed to see you. There were many things I wished to discuss with you, Mister Lolip."

"Same here."

From across the table, Blaise watched over us fixedly while sipping on her tea.

As a pig and a boar, we gave brief reports of recent developments to each other. Kento was a teammate I could trust. We told each other as much as we could and tried not to hide anything.

I shared information about my journey with Ceres and how we'd bumped into Sito. Kento explained as much as he knew about the current situation of the Liberators. It sounded like their executive

officers were presently stationed in Munires. They were apparently somewhat reluctant to give him information, but he was capable of seeing and talking with them in person, which meant that he could relay my requests.

I told Kento that I wished for the Liberators' help in arranging a meeting with Shravis where we could demonstrate Ceres's innocence. Kento nodded reliably. "If it is for little [cutie-pie] Ceres's sake, I am certain that everyone will lend you their aid. It is also heartening to have a trump card like Mister Sito on your end...though there are some lingering concerns left."

"What do you mean by lingering concerns?"

"Well, he is exceedingly reliable as a warrior, but Miss Itsune and Mister Yoshu despise their accursed old man [Mister Sito] from what I can remember. There is a chance they might drag their feet about meeting him."

"That's true..." I frowned. "Then, for now, don't tell anyone about him being with us. I'll make them meet without prior warning and say that I brought him along of my own accord."

"Understood. The next question would be where and when that meeting will take place, I suppose."

As I looked into the boar's cute, round eyes, I gave it some thought. There was something I had to be careful about. "Speaking of which, there was something that bothered me."

I explained that Shravis had learned of Ceres's disappearance alarmingly quickly. There was the possibility that he might be wiretapping or spying on the executive officers of the Liberators. We'd be in a bind if Shravis discovered Ceres's location before we could negotiate with him. Taking Ceres thoughtlessly to the capital without any preparation was a risky move.

"Oh, that." Kento didn't seem all that surprised when he heard my suspicions. "Everyone seems to have suspected the same thing from the movements of the royal court's army. When we investigated the matter, the man who was providing us with our base of operations turned out to be secretly tipping off the royal court's army. We have moved elsewhere, and I believe we should still be safe for the time being."

Kento spoke lightheartedly, as if he were talking about the weather, but I was stunned at the considerably vicious moves Shravis had pulled. He'd given Jess a bracelet that served as a GPS tracker, and he'd practically wiretapped the Liberators' hideout. At the very least, these weren't things you would do to your friends or those you were trying to reconcile with.

He's truly changed, I thought with a hint of misery.

I sighed. "Sorry about that. We've been trying to tell Shravis to be more amicable, but lately...even getting in touch with him has been a challenge."

"Please don't take it to heart. I am in a similar position. Thanks to Nourris, I am permitted to stay among the Liberators, but they have been excluding me more and more from important conversations... I cannot begin to describe how ashamed I am of my inadequacy."

After gritting his fangs with frustration at himself, the boar turned to face me again. "But, well, just to be safe, I suggest we avoid meeting up at the base [hideout] we are using. Please come to the westernmost corner of Munires—behind the Water Church is a plaza with a fountain, where we shall meet. I shall arrange for someone to head there at the time we agree on."

"That'd be great. Can we meet up at noon in two days, counting from daybreak after tonight?"

"You are in quite a distant place, I see... Very well." Kento nodded. "I shall make sure to pass on that message. A good number of the soldiers of the royal court's army seem to have been dispatched to other lands, but you will come bringing a fugitive [cutie-pie Ceres] and a traitor [Mister Sito]. Please act with utmost caution."

"Thanks. I'm counting on you."

For a while after that, we enjoyed delightful otaku banter while dragging Blaise into our chat—it wasn't anything worth making a written account of—and before I knew it, morning had arrived. The sunlight roused me from my sleep.

The sharp Jess began sniffing me. "For some reason, I feel like I can smell cheating from you."

I desperately tried to defend myself from her onslaught of

accusations.

We traveled for two entire days before arriving at Munires, the commercial city of southern Mesteria.

Munires was a nostalgic place—it was the city where we'd met the captive Blaise on our very first journey. Even now, rows of towering buildings fought for space along the streets while passersby and carriages busily came and went along the broad main street. When I looked up, I was elated to be greeted by a normal blue sky.

It was a lovely noon with fine weather, but we chose to go down gloomy back alleys to make our way toward our destination.

While walking vigilantly to try and keep a low profile, Sito asked, "We have a meeting arranged with representatives of the Liberators in this city, yes?"

A man missing a left leg and going around on crutches stood out like a sore thumb. If anyone from the royal court discovered him, he'd likely be arrested immediately as the criminal who'd attempted to assassinate Shravis. It would also be problematic if they discovered Ceres while investigating Sito.

"Yes," I replied. "The appointment is right at noon, so it is just around the corner."

Sito slowly exhaled. "I have been in your care, and you have my gratitude."

Jess shook her hands, as if to say that she didn't deserve such thanks. "No, you were the one who helped us time and time again, Mister Sito. We weren't able to assist you in any way..."

"That isn't true," Sito declared without hesitation. "For the longest time, I have lived for my own sake. It must be the will of heaven that I was granted an opportunity to take action for others after I had lost everything. All because the three of you came to my side, I was finally able to find a new purpose. I am thankful for that."

I couldn't quite make sense of what he was talking about, but I nodded out of obligation for now.

I didn't remember doing anything for Sito. But if he felt grateful toward us, it was a most welcome discovery.

As he walked behind Ceres like a parent, Sito muttered as if

talking to himself, "There is one lesson I have learned after experiencing the lowest and highest places of society, from rock bottom to service in the royal court."

It was surprising for him to share information about himself like this voluntarily.

He continued, "Ultimately, those who can come out on top in the world always tend to be aggressive and self-serving characters like I am, even though by all rights, kind people who can care for others like you fellows ought to be the ones steering the direction of society. That is the conclusion I arrived at after living as I pleased for roughly fifty years."

The man almost sounded like he was leaving behind a will.

Jess looked like she was searching for ways to refute his point, and Sito gazed at her solemnly. He said, "I pray that the three of you can survive through more respectable—through more *agreeable*—methods than I have, even if only a little." He paused. "If you have the opportunity, could you indirectly pass on this message to my children as well?"

Hearing that, Jess was bewildered. "I'm certain that Miss Itsune and Mister Yoshu will be present at the meeting. Are you not going to consider telling them in person, Mister Sito?"

"A man like me is not qualified to preach to or lecture my children. I don't even have the right to have a decent conversation with them." After shaking his head, for some reason, a tinge of joy wormed into his tone. "I am counting on you. The three of you are my hope."

The Water Church, our destination, came into view ahead of us. We ended the conversation here.

Only after Jess scouted the surroundings and confirmed it was safe did we make our way to the goal. At the plaza with the fountain, the meeting place we'd agreed on, a particular pair of siblings stood in wait for us.

The moment she saw the man with crutches who hid his face, Itsune didn't hide her shock. "Huuuuh?! Hey, no one told me anything about this!"

Yoshu also knitted his brows together in displeasure. "What's the

meaning of this?”

The two of them were equipped with their large, signature weapons, and they were ready to brandish them at a moment’s notice.

“Now, I suggest you reconsider,” Sito said. “You have never won against me before, not even in arm wrestling.”

“When the heck are you talking about?” Itsune sounded appalled.

Yoshu was quick to back her up in an icy tone. “Could you not act as if you’re a father after everything you’ve done? Thanks.”

Faced with flat-out rejection from his children from the get-go, Sito sat down next to the fountain with a shrug.

An accursed joke of a father who prioritized a successful career above all else. A traitor who had offered up their precious someone to the royal court. To Itsune and Yoshu, that pretty much summed up everything Sito was in their world.

After glancing fleetingly toward their father as if they were looking at an unkempt stray dog in the wild, the pair smiled at Ceres.

Yoshu was the first to speak. “Thank goodness. You came back in one piece.”

After a moment of hesitation, Ceres whispered, “Thank you...”

“I heard y’all looked after her?” Itsune turned to us.

Though Jess faltered, she nodded. “Yes. Though I wouldn’t say that we looked after her... It was more like we were running away together.”

Yoshu looked at me with his usual sanpaku eyes. “Kento gave us the news. So the thing with the stake is pretty much settled?” Those same eyes then shifted to look up at the sky. Clouds whimsically dotted the invigorating spring sky.

“You have that right,” I replied. “All that’s left is to negotiate with Shravis and fully convince him that there’s no need to kill Ceres anymore.”

Itsune let out a big sigh. “Now that’s a pretty tall order, if I say so myself. His Majesty seems like he’s seriously not in his right mind at the moment.”

“It’s necessary if we want to protect Miss Ceres.” Jess bowed

deeply. “Please, we desperately need your help.”

Yoshu waved frivolously. “It’s totally fine, though. I mean, that’s why we’re here.”

The siblings no longer paid even a lick of attention to Sito, who sat motionlessly to one side.

“But is it really gonna work out?” Itsune asked. “We don’t mind taking Ceres there, but do you have any assurance that guy’s truly gonna listen to you? I’m sure even you guys have heard about the Ginnokis, yeah?”

“Ginnokis...” Jess echoed in a low voice.

I’d realized that it was a somewhat sinister word, especially after what happened to Ezalith. Still, the only information we’d grasped was that it was a policy that involved inviting Yethma to migrate to the royal capital. We had our hands full with other stuff, so we hadn’t had the time or heart to think too deeply about it.

Yoshu was the one who gave us an explanation. His tone was stern. “It’s still not too bad around this part of the South, but the members of the royal court’s army have started forcefully transporting former Yethma to the royal capital in succession. What the girls themselves want to do doesn’t matter—they’ll be dragged away kicking and screaming. Calling it an ‘invitation’ is a joke. As long as you’re a former Yethma, without exception, they’ll try to take you back with them. Even a handful of girls who were involved with the Liberators have already been kidnapped.”

“So it’s just like I feared...” I clenched my jaw with frustration at myself.

Ezalith, who’d been taken away at Fortress Lussier, was one of them. She’d earnestly said that she hadn’t wanted to separate from the senior, but the royal court’s army had discovered and transported her—and it must be all our fault.

The royal court was smoothing over appearances with a nice word like Ginnokis, “invitational migration.” But in reality, it wasn’t something kind like an invitation at all. It was a one-sided project that only pretended to be a policy toward peace and harmony.

Yethma freed from their collars were essentially mages, and they were left unchecked across Mesteria. The royal court must have

deemed the current situation too risky and therefore had to intervene.

Furthermore, Ceres posed the greatest threat to the royal court at the moment. Shravis must still believe that the world's pandemonium wouldn't die down as long as she was alive.

Looking shaken, Jess placed a hand on her chest. "That can't be... Mister Shravis is doing something so cruel...?"

Itsune sighed. "It looks like you trust the king, Jess, but he's that sort of guy at the end of the day. We dunno whether he'll actually pay attention to what we say. I can't afford to take Ceres there thoughtlessly, and even if I *do* go, who knows whether he'll be willing even to see us to begin with?"

Itsune's logic was sound. Jess, however, objected with tears prickling at her eyes. "Mister Shravis is willing to listen to the opinions of others. In truth, he's a very good-natured man."

"That's what I used to think too. But I turned out to be wrong," Itsune confessed.

"Mister Shravis... He lost his family one after another, and both responsibility and work crashed down onto his shoulders all at once. Even magic in the world is going berserk in a perilous direction," Jess whispered. "He's only lost his grip on himself because too much has happened. At his heart, the rational and considerate part of him must still remain, I'm sure of it. He should be able to come around if we take the time to explain everything to him."

Jess was a remarkably kind girl. She was well aware of what Shravis had done to us, but she was still trying to take his side. For a moment, she was the spitting image of Hortis, who'd defended his brother once upon a time.

"That's what you and that stark naked dude say, but we aren't that naive." Yoshu's tone was cold. "We're objectively basing our judgment on what he's done to us. Well, in his defense, we used overly forceful methods and drove that guy's mother into a corner... But he tried to dupe us, and now, he's even going down a different path from the liberation of Yethma. In the end, that guy's no different from his heartless, inhuman father."

"That's not true..." Jess shook her head. "The one who raised

Mister Shravis isn't King Marquis but his mother. Madame Wyss devoted a lifetime's worth of love to him and has taught him everything he knows. I have also learned many precious lessons from Madame Wyss. I'm sure that he will understand if we talk to him."

Sito reacted slightly by moving his head. Possibly because he noticed my curious gaze, he muttered in a subdued voice. "The two of you are nothing like me either, yes? There is no law that a child must take after their hopeless father. After all, a hopeless father does not attempt to teach or guide his child, and his child would never stop to reminisce upon him."

After making that speech—I couldn't quite tell whether it was persuasive or not—he stood up. "If you have misgivings, you can simply do this. You can head to the capital to hand me over as a criminal. You can use that as a pretense. If you come knocking at his door with the offering of a rebel, choosing to run away would wound his dignity. Even His Majesty should choose to make an appearance. There, you will blindside him and show him Ceres without warning. The moment he witnesses that there is no magic within Ceres, I am certain that the king wouldn't attempt to take her life on the spot."

The siblings didn't breathe a word.

I was the one who spoke up. "Are you honestly fine with this?"

"Fine with what?" His gaze shifted in my direction, as if to ask, *Is there a problem?*

"I mean..." I briefly cast down my eyes. "If you do that, you will be walking into certain death."

"That is a trifling matter. I will manage one way or another."

Will he really?

Itsune was still turning away when she said, "Welp, if that's what he wants, I'm down. Even if he does get executed, it's not like we'd be bothered."

Yoshu voiced his agreement. "Yeah. In fact, this might be exactly what we want. This guy ought to have a taste of his own medicine and understand how it feels to be offered up to the royal court."

Sito nodded. "All right, it is settled then."

The man himself had spoken—thus, neither Jess nor I had any

objections.

And just like that, the Lacerte family of three joined our operation to deliver Ceres to the capital as escorts. Meanwhile, Jess and I had to rush back to the capital so that we could finish up preliminary prep.

"Um..." That was when Ceres finally spoke up. "May I ask where Mister Naut is?"

The siblings' gazes locked for a moment.

"He went off somewhere," Yoshu answered.

A startled "Huh?" slipped out from Ceres's mouth.

Yoshu scratched his head. "Ah, well, we know the general area he's in, yeah. We just can't contact him right now. But I think he'll come back very soon. Probably."

I didn't know whether I could take his words at face value. There was a chance that he might be lying because he didn't want us, who were closer to the royal court's side, to know Naut's whereabouts. However, it probably wasn't right to doubt them now, especially since they were willing to go out of their way to help us.

I looked up at the siblings. "Well then, Itsune, Yoshu. I'm counting on you."

Yoshu turned around to face me. "We'll bring Kento and Nourris as our companions. If you ever need to contact us, do it through Kento."

"Got it. Jess and I will go to the royal capital first and communicate to Shravis that the Liberators will take Sito there one way or another. We'll do everything we can so that you can walk into the capital without having to worry about your safety. I'd like your party to head there relatively quickly too."

"Sure thing," Yoshu replied.

"Miss Ceres, please be careful every step of the way," Jess emphasized.

Ceres nodded. "Um, thank you for all the things you've done for me. Truly."

Jess beamed. "If you're ever at a loss again, be sure to count on your big sister."

"Yes, big sister..." The younger maiden smiled sheepishly.

Big sister.
"Big sister."
"Big sister. Big sister. Big sister. Big sister. Big sister. Big sister—"

As I busily enriched the little sister folder in my mind, before I knew it, everyone except Jess and I were gone.

The east side of the Needle Woods had been completely transformed into a black scorched field. The trunks of trees that survived the fire stood chaotically across the singed earthlike stakes. Everywhere that I could see had been transformed into such a wasteland—it was a devastating scene.

A single path had been hurriedly cleared through the destroyed forest, leading to the royal capital. The horseless carriages of the royal court's army came and went down it. They appeared to be incessantly carrying something into the capital, but it wasn't possible to figure out what they were transporting simply by looking at them from the outside.

The royal court's soldiers were assembled near the mouth of the carriage path. The valiant Jess marched up to the group, negotiated with them, and procured one carriage that would transport us into the capital.

Now that Ceres wasn't with us, it seemed that we weren't wanted fugitives in their eyes, but people who belonged to the royal court's inner circle. They investigated us and our surroundings scrupulously, and in the end, they permitted us to use a carriage. I was extremely grateful because I would have been rather depressed walking across the wreck of a forest devastated by fire.

The path was straight without any branches or curves, meaning that getting lost wasn't a concern. The covered wagon smoothly drove along the path with Jess's magic while going clickety-clack. Jess and I sat side by side, staring at the capital on the other side of the air that still carried a hint of a burning scent.

We'd roughly progressed down one-third of the path when the ceiling of the carriage abruptly tore open, and something fell—there hadn't been any warning. Following a strong impact, the mysterious

object was then buried inside the lumber that had been stacked in the loading area of the carriage.

For a moment, I'd thought that someone had catapulted a giant stone at us or something similar. I turned around to check on the wagon. "What was that?"

"Shall we stop the carriage?" Jess asked.

The response she received didn't come from me, but from the "something" hidden in the pile of wood. "Keep going." It was Naut's voice.

Jess clenched her hands. "Understood." She didn't stop the wagon.

I tried turning around again, but all I could see was the collapsed pile of lumber. A humanlike shape was nowhere to be found. "It looks like you're buried under all that. You okay in there?"

"I'm fine, don't sweat it... In fact, it works out in my favor that they can't see me from the outside." It was unmistakably Naut's voice.

Jess also addressed the pile of timber. "Mister Naut... May I ask why you are here?"

"I was lying in wait and keeping watch. If they're gonna transport Ceres or any Yethma we know, they'd go down this path for sure."

I see. Everything clicked into place. The wagons were constantly carrying some kind of baggage into the royal capital, and considering the current circumstances, this "baggage" was most likely Yethma. This wide path was used as a route to move "invited" Yethma from all over the country into the capital.

"Ceres isn't here?" Naut asked.

Jess replied with her telepathy. <She isn't with us. She's with Itsune and the others.>

<Huh...>

<<Did you jump in because you thought we were transporting Ceres?>> I asked.

<Yeah, you could say that,> Naut replied. <Thanks, that's all I wanted to know.>

I picked up the rattling of moving lumber.

<Please wait!> Jess detained him. <Miss Ceres will head to the

capital very soon. She should be coming in secret, so it might be easier to find her if you wait in the capital rather than going back and meeting up with her.>

<She's coming here? In this situation? Why?>

Jess and I traded glances. My opinion was that we shouldn't share too many details inside the carriage.

Pulling off our reply for now, we continued heading into the capital with one furtive passenger.

Within the bounds of the city, we alighted from our vehicle. Naut was, in a sense, a sight to behold—he had soot all over him. He must have wandered around the Needle Woods after it had burned down. We guided him to the baths before we moved to Jess's lab, where we didn't have to worry about the walls having ears.

The lab was of a robust make so that it would hold up even if someone accidentally blew up their spell. Rock had been hollowed out to form this chamber, and there were only a handful of small windows just for formality's sake to allow light inside. Here, we shared as much as we could about Ceres with Naut.

"I see... That's good to hear. You have my thanks." He clicked his tongue with vexation. "But what a blunder..."

Jess anxiously inclined her head at his reaction.

He shook his head. "No, I'm talking about something on my end. I set fire to the Needle Woods to prevent Ceres from reaching the capital, even if the chances were slim. But from the sounds of that, I was too late. In fact, I only put Ceres in danger and made her experience something terrifying."

Jess placed a hand over her mouth in shock. "Mister Naut... *You* were the one who burned down the Needle Woods?"

He shrugged. "I was. I put together my plan, intending to burn it down from the beginning. I calculated the places where I would ignite the trees, and before that, I'd already arranged fuel to be stationed there to liven things up. Honestly, I had planned to do it later, but Ceres went missing. So, I acted on my plan, thinking that I had to do it right away. An all-out war against a certain royal court is unavoidable anyway."

It was naturally too much work for one man. According to him,

he'd carried out the operation while giving directions to his subordinates. *I'm going on a tangent here, but Naut is seriously impressive. He once proudly boasted that he would burn it to the ground one day, and he actually did it. Wow.*

"So you thought that if you set fire to the Needle Woods, Ceres wouldn't be able to reach the capital," I summed up.

"Pretty much. But Ceres moved faster than I expected. To think that she'd beat me to the punch..." He sighed with somewhat fond exasperation.

Jess gently asked, "Have you been searching for Miss Ceres the whole time after that?"

"I have."

But he hadn't been able to find her, and he hadn't had any clues either. Ultimately, he'd ended up monitoring the royal court's army while being caked with soot all over. Yoshu must've known this outcome, which was why he'd said that Naut had gone off somewhere.

A soft smile tugged at Jess's lips. "If you tell Miss Ceres that you've been looking for her all this time, I'm sure that she will be delighted."

"Huh?" Naut scrunched up his brows. "She doesn't have to know. Knowing her, she'd start blaming herself, thinking that she caused me trouble."

I couldn't deny that was the truth from one perspective. Ceres was a girl who'd definitely say, "I'm so sorry for all the trouble I caused" before anything else and bow profoundly at the man.

However, Jess refused to back down. "It's all right even if she does that. Please tell her."

Naut was just as stubborn. "Why should I?"

"If she learns that you were willing to put in the effort to look for her all this time, Miss Ceres will be overjoyed." Her tone sounded as if she were teaching the ABCs of love to a younger boy.

"I refuse. I'm not a guy who'd say something that makes her feel obliged to pay me back like that."

"I see. In that case, I will tell her."

Naut looked slightly taken aback at Jess being as stubborn as a

mule. “Why are you gonna tell her?”

“Because you won’t.”

He practically growled a menacing “Ah?” in response.

Guys, please don’t fight...

That aside, Naut’s brusque tendencies were the same as ever. He didn’t voice his own feelings, only smoothly pulling off what he ought to do in silence. Rather than acting on his words, he was a guy who acted *without* words. It was both a merit and a fault of Naut. When dealing with someone like Ceres, who would inevitably feel anxious about her opinion of you, there were times when you should take the initiative to express your feelings for her sake.

Humans were indeed troublesome creatures, but that was just life, and we had to roll with it.

Together with Naut as our new companion, we began tackling the tasks that needed to be done.

Our attempts to communicate with Shravis, sadly, all ended up in vain. The walls that surrounded Shravis’s location regenerated no matter how many times we exploded them, standing obstinately in our way. As if he were a terrorist, Naut suggested, “The guy might show up to stop you if you go around wrecking the city.” But Jess never nodded in agreement.

Ultimately, we decided to communicate our demands to him through Vivis, the higher librarian elder.

The results, however, were disappointing. Though the color of the sky had returned to normal, there were still anomalies dotted here and there across the world. There were talking pigs, and the hands of the royal library’s clock were still bleeding arms. Even the paper that we’d accepted from Ruta, which should have information about the last missing piece, was impossible to decipher because we couldn’t figure out what the Spring of Oblivion Ruta mentioned was.

Unless normalcy was restored completely to the world, Shravis apparently had no plans of changing his attitude.

According to Vivis, Shravis’s orders were forceful and left no room for negotiation.

“The moment you discover former Yethma, capture them and

bring them back to the capital."

"Ceres will be executed immediately after arrest."

She said that he wasn't going to budge even one bit from those policies.

Neither Jess nor I could figure out how things had come to this. If he were at least willing to listen to what we had to say, we should be able to persuade him that Ceres didn't have to die. Why wouldn't he even agree to talk to us? Why was he trying to get rid of us from his world so one-sidedly?

Seeing our shock, Naut frostily said, "It just means that's his true colors." But in my eyes, his expression held a note of sorrow at the fact that a former friend had betrayed him.

The purehearted Jess's face rapidly sank with despair over time, and watching her from right by her side was heartbreaking.

Ultimately, we weren't able to settle things amicably. It appeared that our only option was to go with the original plan and use the rebel Sito as a tool to achieve our goal.

Unlike our efforts, this plan proceeded smoothly, just like Sito had anticipated. Perhaps we shouldn't have expected anything less from a man who'd watched over the royal family so closely.

After we told Vivis that the Liberators were going to bring a criminal, she came back to us and handed over a letter she'd accepted from Shravis. The letter had no greetings, no warm words —only a time and a place.

Tomorrow. The hour of sunset. The Golden Cathedral.

Within the interior of the towering cathedral, where the kings of each generation were enshrined, stood a newly built, thick glass wall. The front entrance was the only way we could get in—after going inside the doors and walking forward slightly, we ran into a glass wall that stood in our way.

The transparent glass wall was gigantic, spanning all the way up from the floor to the ceiling. Major structures of the cathedral, such as Vatis's casket and the throne, were all on the other side of the barricade.

Shravis's message was clear: *I'm willing to see you in person, but I have no intention of letting you come over to my side. Present the criminal to me in silence.*

That must be what this glass wall meant.

With Jess's assistance, Sito and the others entered the capital. Sito wore black from head to toe, and robust chains restricted his hands behind his back. It was decided that Naut would walk in the lead while bringing Sito with him. Itsune and Yoshu trailed behind the pair. They also had a companion—a girl who pulled her hood over her eyes, Ceres.

To avoid unnecessary risks, Kento and Nourris, who'd traveled here together with the party, were going to stand by outside the cathedral as lookouts. Jess and I were with the group inside the cathedral, ready to offer our assistance.

There was only one goal today: Making Shravis confirm that Ceres no longer had to die. Nothing more, nothing less. It was the reason Sito was here—it was the reason Naut, Itsune, and Yoshu were here. Sito would stake his own life to create an opportunity for us to communicate with Shravis, while the three Liberators would protect Ceres, who was the key person in all this. Jess and I also had to keep our guards up so that we could snuff out all opportunities for the unexpected to strike.

A little before sunset, we assembled inside the cathedral and waited. Sito stated that we didn't have to be so wary—as if to back up his words, there didn't seem to be any signs of a surprise ambush. The vicinity of the cathedral was silent, just like we'd confirmed beforehand. Even if something changed about the situation from here on out, Kento and Nourris, our trusty lookouts, would report back to us.

Within the tension, the bell that indicated sunset resounded.

There wasn't anyone on the other side of the glass yet. Apprehension that something wasn't going as planned began hanging over us like a gloomy cloud.

Abruptly, Sito raised his face. His mouth, covered by his beard, moved. "He has arrived."

I couldn't see anything. I scanned the surroundings again, but

Shravis was nowhere to be found on the other side of the glass.

Jess's eyes moved rapidly before stopping at the area around the throne. "Oh!"

Realization sank into me at her small gasp. The air itself was fluttering like a heat haze—the scenery flickered, as if hiding something near the throne.

The distortion vanished like a gust of wind, revealing the king on his throne.

It was Shravis. Clad in his purple robe, he looked like the picture of dignity. His cold eyes glinted on his pale face as he stared down at us. There wasn't even a hint of a smile on his lips—in its place, he pasted on a purely indifferent expression that was identical to his father's. On his right middle finger was a shining ring made of translucent crystal.

I could no longer find traces of the friend who had fought alongside us through thick and thin. It would be much easier to believe that someone had taken over his body.

A detached voice that didn't allow for any objections rang out from the other side of the wall. "Say your last words. I will only wait for that long." It seemed that the glass was enchanted to carry his voice through it.

Sito pushed Naut's shoulder until the swordsman was behind him. Now, the older man was standing alone in front of all of us.

Even while his hands were bound behind his back, Sito knelt profoundly with his body propped up on a single leg. He bent forward to show respect, as if offering up his head. "Most recently, the color of the sky has been pleasant, and it has been exceedingly comfortable for days on end. It is likely proof that you are respectably governing this world, Your Majesty."

"Make haste. Get to the point."

"I am certain that a shrewd king like you would never overlook such a transformation. This world is undoubtedly heading in a better direction, and I am aware of the reason. I have brought the cause to this very place."

With a signal from Sito, Itsune and Yoshu swiftly escorted the hooded girl to his side.

Ceres raised her face. What enveloped her from head to toe was a bulky robe that looked as if someone had woven together fine chains like chain mail armor. The siblings stood right behind her, serving as her bodyguards.

Upon seeing Ceres, Shravis furrowed his brows. Sito immediately raised his arms as much as he could protectively in front of the young maiden and said, "Now, surely you are not going to lay your hands on an innocent girl before you punish a sinner, are you? I ask that you compose yourself and take a good look at her. This girl no longer possesses any magic. The stake has already been removed from her body."

Shravis lifted his right hand—the hand with the ring—and placed it on his chin. He gazed down at Ceres from the throne. He contemplated Sito's words without as much as a ripple in his expression, looking just like a sculpture.

Sito fluently continued his declaration in a deep, sonorous voice. "With all due respect, it would be egregious for a king who cannot even understand such simple logic to pass judgment on me. If you do not state that you will pardon this girl, I shall perish before your eyes while cursing and speaking ill of this nation, my king, as well as your progeny with the most abusive language known to man."

At last, he tied up his speech with, "If you state that you will pardon this girl, I will admit to my sins here and perish while giving you my blessings, Your Majesty. It is a simple choice. Please consider it."

This man's point was identical to when I'd provoked Marquis as he strangled his own son. Just like his father, Shravis held a strong pride within his spirit. With that knowledge in mind, Sito was choosing what should be the most impactful words to Shravis.

At the same time, my heart sank. Because making such a statement was no different from Sito closing off all paths to survival with his own hands. Ceres might be saved, but Sito's fate remained unchanged—he was the one who'd already set that fate in stone.

One question after another rushed through my mind in a flurry.

Or is there some way for him to escape to a safe place even in this situation? Does he possibly have some method of taking down

Shravis, who's wearing a ring of immortality on the other side of a thick wall? Even if he does *manage to get away, will this man have to live with the dishonor of a traitor and the disgrace of an atrocious liar for the rest of his life?*

Was Sito...planning on throwing away his own life from the very beginning? Did this loyal retainer, who cast away his loyalty—his way of survival—come here with the resolve to sacrifice his life?

For a while, Shravis examined Ceres with his vivid jade eyes. I could tell that the young maiden was trembling. Next to me, Jess placed a hand on her chest and solemnly watched over the proceedings.

This cathedral had always been the site of unexpected and tragic events. It would be ideal if the king pardoned Ceres and ended things at that, but knowing this place, there was a chance that the situation might get complicated.

It was all in the hands of Shravis—the hands of a youth who had transformed into an absolute monarch whose true feelings were impeccably walled off from us now.

After a lengthy silence, Shravis came to a decision. "Very well." His tone was cold and apathetic to the bitter end. "There is no longer anything within this girl. I have no reason to take her life either. I will command all her pursuers to withdraw."

"...Yes, Your Majesty. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart for your prudent decision."

I could tell that the tension in the air, which had reminded me of ice, had thawed just a little.

Ceres was no longer in grave danger. She didn't have to go on the run anymore. On top of that, she was no longer a catalyst for war between the royal court and the Liberators. We'd accomplished our biggest goal.

Out of the corner of my vision, I saw Jess's hand glide down from her chest with relief.

The only question left was how to tie things up here.

Just like before, Shravis gazed down at Sito with distant eyes. "You have gone out of your way to come to a place like this. Is that all you wish to say?"

I felt as if lightning had struck and scorched all my internal organs in an instant. *"Is that all?" How could you say that? We've gone to such lengths so that no one has to take Ceres's life—we desperately set up this meeting in person for that very sake. Sito is even risking his life to come here.*

Shravis. A bitter taste filled my mouth. *Shravis, have you become a man who can't even understand our wish?*

Sito's tone didn't change from his steady one. "If you are willing to lend an ear to me for a while longer... Will you please allow me to choose the manner in which I die?"

"A traitor is worth less than even the fodder of dogs," Shravis spat. "You will merely be executed in accordance with the rightful proceedings." That was all he said before he started to stand up from his throne.

Sito lowered his head slightly and called out to the young king to detain him. "Though I cannot remember when, I was taught that there is a tradition in a foreign land called 'seppuku.'"

Sanon seriously keeps teaching people uncalled-for stuff, I thought. *Shouldn't yakiniku be enough?*

He continued, "A true valiant warrior will die by cutting open their abdomen when they take responsibility for their own failure, or so the tradition dictates."

Shravis, who'd been in the middle of standing up, sat down once more. "Is that so? And?"

"I have committed a sin by making an attempt on your life, Your Majesty, and I shall atone with my very life right here."

Behind him, Itsune let out a "Hey!" She sounded shaken.

My composure wavered too. *Does Sito plan on disemboweling himself and dying here? While we're all present?*

"The people here have no involvement in my folly at all. Will you please forgive the Liberators as well with the offering of my life?"

His appeal held an overwhelming fire within that stunned me. His voice might be low, but nothing stopped it from resounding clearly within the cathedral.

On the other side of the bulky glass wall, I could see Shravis's features contorting with loathing. "...Your life doesn't have such

value.”

This time, Shravis rose to his feet in one swift movement. He turned on his heel, and his robe fluttered.

Sito opened his mouth wide to holler at Shravis’s retreating form. “Listen!” It was almost like the roar of a dragon. For a moment, I thought as if the entire cathedral was rattling with its echo.

Shravis stilled with his back turned to us. I couldn’t see his face, but my intuition told me that he must be frightened. Or at least, that was what I hoped.

“Your Majesty,” Sito began with deference once more, “I can swear on my life that I did not try to take your life for the Liberators’ sake. I have detested the royal court for a long time before Naut’s birth. I lost the person I wholeheartedly loved because of the system that the royal court has created—the royal court snatched her away. I have abhorred the royal family to an unbearable extent for many years on end, long before the Liberators were founded.”

Confronted with the hatred of a man he’d used to consider a loyal subject, Shravis’s shoulders trembled. “If so, you could have killed us much earlier. Why didn’t you? You are a Lacerte—it should have been possible for you to act whenever you wished. After the passing of my father, you had more than countless chances before you.”

“I certainly detested the royal court. For the longest time, a fire blazed within my heart, threatening to swallow the royal court whole at a moment’s notice. But...I didn’t allow it to, because you were a part of it, Your Majesty.”

“Explain yourself.” Shravis still had his back turned to us, but it looked like he was listening attentively to what Sito had to say. “Why did you abstain from revenge because I was present?”

Sito’s gaze was fixed squarely on Shravis. “Your Majesty, your eyes... Your eyes inherited the strength, wisdom, and compassion of your mother. I decided to put my faith in them just once.”

Shravis’s head whipped around. Indignation contorted his face, which was bright red with emotion. “What would a filthy traitor like you even know about my mother?!” Stomping violently, as if venting his anger on the ground, Shravis marched forward until he was right in front of the glass wall.

“Speak!” Possibly because it was laced with his mana, Shravis’s voice exerted more pressure than its actual volume.

Next to me, Jess took a step back. That was how intimidating Shravis felt.

“What would a filthy traitor like you even know about my mother?!” Shravis hollered.

A mage and a dragon were clashing before our eyes. Tension that threatened to shatter the thick glass at any moment took over the entire cathedral.

“I know.” Composure never left Sito’s voice. “I know everything about her...that you don’t know, Your Majesty.”

A moment of silence.

Though it was brief, that single moment was enough time for me, and likely Shravis, to arrive at the truth.

Oh. So that’s how it is.

When he was a youth, Sito had failed his journey to the capital and had lost the love of his life, Maryess. After hearing that story, I’d assumed that Maryess was a stranger who had passed away long ago. *But if she didn’t die...if Maryess is someone we know very well, then—*

“What are you talking about? Speak.” Uneasiness was seeping into Shravis’s voice.

Meanwhile, Sito never wavered. “Dying without sharing that truth is my own way of taking revenge against the royal family, my king.”

In one fluid movement, Sito tore apart the chains binding his hands behind his back. Black scales covered his hands, gleaming strikingly like obsidian.

“I ask of you,” Sito said. “Please direct all the love you have received from your mother to those who are here.”

“Wait.”

But Sito didn’t wait. He stuck out his right thumb toward his own belly and stabbed his dragon claw, sharp as a blade, into his clothed abdomen without a lick of hesitation. He moved his right hand, pulling it to one side. Sticky, dark crimson blood gushed out from his black clothes as if someone had opened the seal of a bag. Blood splattered drop by drop onto the floor with a geometric design.

“Please watch over my death with your very eyes,” Sito muttered like the groan of a wounded beast.

Shravis’s jade eyes widened. “S-Stop! Wait!” He tried to reach out his hands and was blocked by the glass wall he’d built with his own magic.

While Shravis struggled to interfere, Sito pulled out his bloody right hand from his stomach and placed it against his own neck. His irises transformed into gold, and his pupils narrowed into slits like a reptile’s. He stared straight into his former lord’s eyes.

The next moment, Shravis’s form was painted over by crimson that hid him from my view.

I could only watch as the blood, which had spurted out from Sito’s neck, drew a beautiful arc as it dyed the entire surface of the glass.

All I Ever Wanted Was to Stay by Your Side

No matter how long I searched, I couldn't find Maryess's remains. I desperately went around asking everyone there was to ask. Some Yethma hunters remained stubbornly silent, and I tortured them by shredding their fingers and smashing their arms. However, I never got my hands on any clues leading to Maryess. I allowed my raging fury to take me over countless times, and the number of deaths on my hands rose to several dozens.

And yet, I still couldn't find Maryess. I knew she was a shrewd woman—I thought that she must have entered the capital.

Therefore, I gambled on that slim possibility and fumbled around for a path to a successful career. I would rise up the ranks no matter what it took, enter the capital, and find Maryess. That was the vow I made to myself.

I leveraged my past connections and joined the royal court's army. I had to start from the bottom of the ladder, but I made full use of my loyalty, endurance, and above all, my abilities as a Lacerte to rush up the path of a successful career.

The first fortune that fell into my lap was the fact that I had the chance to be acquainted with the daughter of a high official. Her father was a field commander—in other words, he was the man with the highest status possible among the royal court's army stationed outside the capital.

I handed money to a homeless vagrant as an incentive to assault her before rescuing her myself. It was a simple performance I'd set up alone, but because I killed the vagrant on the spot, I was the lone soul who was aware of the truth. Just like I'd schemed, the field commander took a liking to me.

Around the time I ascended to a fitting rank, a union of marriage

was decided between me and that daughter. There were no men in her family, meaning that I wedded into her household. Now the son-in-law of a field commander, my sprint toward a successful career accelerated.

We even produced two offspring. Possibly because I didn't take much care of them, they didn't turn out like me and grew up into admirable children.

The second stroke of luck came suddenly in an unexpected form. One day, when I returned home for the first time in a long time, our household's Yethma, Lithis, came out to greet me.

I was surprised. It was late into the night when everyone within our dwelling should have been asleep. Lithis wasn't dressed in her nightwear, but in an outfit that she should wear during the daytime. Even her hair was still braided.

"You are still awake?" I asked as I put away my overcoat in the wardrobe. "If you don't sleep properly, it will impact your work."

There was no response. Mystified, I turned around to face her.

Lithis was gazing quietly in my direction. She was scheduled to leave this house after a year or two, so she should currently be fourteen or fifteen. I couldn't say she was the most astute girl, but she had an earnest and kind heart. Based on what I'd seen and heard, the children had become rather attached to her.

That very same girl was now observing me intently, as if peering into my very soul, which was rather strange. Was she a girl who would make such an expression?

"What is the matter?" I asked. "If you wish to say something, speak freely without reservation." Seeing her standing motionlessly was just a tad uncanny.

"It seems that the stories of being unable to read your mind are true," Lithis said in a low voice.

An ominous premonition struck me, and I transformed my right hand into its dragon form. "Who are you? What have you done to Lithis?"

"Do not jump to conclusions. I am not here to cause you any harm. This Yethma is currently sleeping upstairs." As they said "this," Lithis—or rather, someone that took on her appearance—tapped

their own chest.

Unable to grasp the situation, my mind fell into a chaotic frenzy of speculations. I'd assumed that someone was controlling Lithis with drugs or something similar, but it appeared that wasn't the case. *If so, what is this creature in front of my eyes?*

"When we choose to transform our appearance, we often choose Yethma as our disguise. People don't keep their guards up around Yethma, and above all else, you can get a good grasp of a person's true nature by observing how they interact with a girl in a vulnerable position."

The unknown entity sat down on a nearby sofa and leaned back before crossing their legs. Lithis would never act in such a manner. I analyzed their statement. *This person is someone who can transform their appearance... That means—*

My eyes widened. "Your Majesty?" I hurriedly knelt and bowed my head. If I were truly conversing with the king, it would mean that my behavior was incredibly insolent.

"To be precise, I am not the king, but the prince. Currently, I am mainly responsible for tasks outside the capital."

"Yes, Your Highness. Please pardon my terrible rudeness."

I didn't know his true age, but I bowed profoundly. If I were to do anything out of line here, there was even the possibility that everything I'd built up until now would come to nothing.

"Sito. Are you a faithful man?"

The words he announced with Lithis's voice were cold. They held a weight to them that I couldn't fully react to.

"Yes. I have single-mindedly devoted my life to serving the king and Mesteria to this day."

"That is splendid to hear. To tell you the truth..." Appraising eyes looked over me. "One of my subordinates has been remarkably delighted by your achievements. He is eager to adopt you as his child. Lacerte blood is precious—are you willing to come inside the capital?"

This offer had come out of nowhere, and I was struck speechless. "M-My word..."

"Naturally, you would have to leave this household. It seems that

you still have small children, but you likely will never see them again. If you are against the idea, you may speak freely. A refusal wouldn't displease me in any way. It merely means that I will have to erase your memories and take my leave."

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The horse of fortune had no tail I could latch on to if it ran past me—unless I seized this chance, my dearest wish after my parting with Maryess would never be realized. The next opportunity would never come around for the rest of my life.

There was no hesitation in my heart. "I would certainly love to accept that offer with a grateful heart, Your Highness," I replied.

"Very well. I shall test the extent of your loyalty next. Prove to me that you will dedicate your life to the royal family."

Leaving me with only those words, the prince in Lithis's form stood up and walked off without ever turning back.

Three days following this conversation, a vagrant assaulted Lithis. She had been violated and was terribly wounded in both body and heart. I wasn't the one who discovered the scene, meaning that I was powerless to cover up that fatal truth. Although it was morally outrageous, in accordance with the mad regulations of the royal court, we had to execute Lithis in addition to the vagrant in this situation.

I immediately interrogated the criminal. Tearing off a single finger was enough for him to spill the entire truth. He'd apparently received a great fortune from an unknown woman, who'd told him to assault that Yethma.

After squeezing all the information out of him, I tugged the man down onto cobblestone tiles and punched him until his entire body was flattened like a dark red carpet. When I was cleaning up, I found a large mass of gold that had fused and transformed into the shape of a flat dish under pressure. It seemed that he'd stuffed a bag full of gold coins into his clothes.

Without doubt, it was the work of the prince. *This* was what he'd meant when he said that he'd test my loyalty.

There was only one path I ought to choose.

After presenting Lithis to the royal court, I was invited into the

capital some time afterward. During the wait, Lithis had been executed. My children had vanished somewhere with her bones.

I didn't know whether he meant it in some sort of cruel jest, but the prince who came to fetch me took on Lithis's form again. I thought that he was a monster—a heartless monster. Even so, I couldn't give up on Maryess. I devotedly prostrated myself before him and yielded to him.

In the capital, I was certain that I had a chance to come across Maryess. That was the one and only thing propelling me forward.

I held out the mass of gold, which had been reduced to a flat plate, to the youth. After giving it a fleeting glance, the prince said, "Keep it. It is a pittance that I cast away to begin with."

It appeared that he had no intention of hiding the fact that he'd spurred on the vagrant. To demonstrate my loyalty, I bowed deeply and held up the golden dish. This was a fool's way of life—my way of life.

After the prince left, a man with long hair tapped on my shoulder. "The royal court is an appalling entity, but I ask that you don't despair," he said. "As long as you are alive, even if it means enduring the harshest storms, you will be able to turn the tables one day without a doubt."

Just like the man said, something that could be qualified as turning the tables happened in my life—the third and last fortune came knocking on my door.

I came face-to-face with that person—I could never mistake her for anyone else. The moment I saw her face, I raised my voice in spite of myself. I knew those jade eyes—I could have never predicted that Maryess had become that prince's consort.

However, considering the extent of her strength and intelligence, it was only natural that she'd be chosen as the spouse of royalty. Even after the twenty-four years that had trickled by, Maryess's beauty remained just as enchanting.

"Consider my orders to be no different from the prince's—my husband's orders. However, if you have any objections, do voice them. Unlike that person, I have ears that are willing to listen."

The first words we'd exchanged in a long time were dictated in a

businesslike manner while her gaze remained fixed on her paperwork.

"You—" Her sentence abruptly broke off there as she looked in my direction, perplexed. She tilted her head quizzically. "Well now. Why are you shedding tears?"

"...It is nothing. My deepest apologies. The wind was notably fierce during my journey, and so was the sand."

"Is that truly acceptable as a soldier serving the king? Get your act together."

Realization dawned on me. I arrived at a fatal and hopeless truth —Maryess didn't remember anything. Even when she looked at me, she didn't display any interest. Her voice was so very indifferent.

I ended up withdrawing from the room without even being able to hold a proper conversation with her.

Her memories had been erased. Her name had also been changed to Wyss, one that sounded appropriate for the royal family. I learned that erased memories had no chance of ever being recovered. It was the ruthless measure that they also performed on Yethma. Apparently, all the queens of each generation had gone through the same rite of passage.

Elation that threatened to boil over and grief that almost tore me apart surged up together like a raging torrent, stirring up my heart into one chaotic frenzy. If it weren't for a Lacerte's power that prevented people from reading our minds, as well as my iron mask that I'd forged over many years, my reaction probably wouldn't have ended with a single stream of tears.

During our second meeting in person, I asked, "How have you been faring recently? Are you in good health?"

She grimaced in reaction. "Why do I have to inform you about such matters?" There was annoyance in her tone.

"...It was a greeting out of courtesy."

"Is that so? There hasn't been a single issue with my work, and I am personally the picture of health. Now, if you don't mind, can we move on to business?"

"Pardon my rudeness. Please do."

Maryess gave out instructions in a detached tone, without even a hint of a smile on her lips. I could only listen to her words in silence.

Later on, I learned that Maryess even had a child with that monster. Hatred burned in my heart toward the royal family that had forced us apart not merely once but twice.

However, I decided to continue working loyally under the royal court. Taking revenge wasn't going to lead to anything constructive. Even if I told Maryess about everything now, it wouldn't lead to anything constructive.

And so, I chose to do nothing. All I ever wanted was to stay by Maryess's side. Just being able to see her alive and safe from nearby was enough for me. Simply listening to her aloof voice giving me orders made me feel that there was meaning in life.

But deep down within my heart, which no one could read, I always immersed myself in a most secret dream. Maybe one day, she might brew that tea again for me by some kind of mistake. Maybe she might smile at me once more—just a little was enough. Even if it were a careless blunder, I would welcome it.

However, such things never happened in reality, not even once.

Maryess died in front of my eyes. She made the wretched choice to sacrifice her own life for her son—for the royal family. In that moment, I couldn't move, as if I were petrified in place.

Most of my life ended in that instant. A stunning upset that would turn the tables would no longer happen.

I must at least put an end to it all, or so I thought.

I had to end the injustice that was the Yethma system, which tore apart those who loved each other. I had to end the royal court that was the root of it all.

And so, I attempted to kill His Majesty with my own hands—the one and only youth that inherited Maryess's blood in his veins.



Chapter 5: Don’t Wait to Communicate Important Matters

Jess and I decided to leave the cathedral for now.

“I can’t believe this... Madame Wyss is...” the beautiful maiden muttered in a daze.

After the shocking suicide, Shravis disappeared behind the other side of the wall with his face still pale as a ghost. Sito’s decapitated body refused the effects of any and all types of healing magic, and he breathed his last.

The western sky after sunset depicted a natural and vibrant gradation from scarlet to dark navy. As for the starry sky I could see in the east, it didn’t have the nauseating density it had before. It was the nostalgic night sky with twinkling stars scattered whimsically across its canvas.

As I admired the scenery, I reflected upon Sito’s words.

“Their goal was to brutally murder Maryess in front of my very eyes. Naturally, two people were a pitiful and helpless number against such forces. I sustained a serious injury almost immediately. Then, Maryess—”

A group of Yethma hunters had attacked Sito and Maryess on their journey to the capital. When he’d gotten to this point, the man had prioritized the state of the grilling meat and ended the story there, so we’d been completely convinced that Maryess had been murdered.

The truth, however, was different. His speech hadn’t been cut short by the barbecue. Sito had ended the topic on purpose. He hadn’t wanted us to realize Maryess’s identity, even if the chances might be slim.

"Even now, the smile Maryess wore on that day wouldn't leave my mind. It was the last smile she ever gave me."

He hadn't been lying, per se, but his phrasing had almost been like a narrative trick. Sito had mentioned that Maryess wore a smile during their parting—and it must have truly been the last smile he'd received from her. Ever since, Maryess had never smiled at him.

She hadn't smiled at him a single time, even though he'd been right by her side.

"Miss Maryess made it into the capital by herself, I see," Jess said wistfully.

This was when I recalled Shravis's words from once upon a time.

"My mother bid farewell to the person she loved and reached the capital alone as a Yethma."

I cast down my eyes with sorrow. "Then, her memories were erased, and they even changed her name. That was how she became Wyss, the prince's consort."

On the night of Shravis's birthday, Wyss had been emotional to the point of crying in front of us as she told us about her story. After she arrived at the capital, and Eavis saw promise in her, he'd erased all her memories of the people and places she'd known until then. It wasn't a seal like Jess's case, where it would return after the spell was lifted, but a total wipe that couldn't be reversed. She'd even forgotten her real name.

"I couldn't even remember the name of someone so very precious, the name of someone I swore never to forget."

"From time to time, Madame Wyss brought this up to me," Jess whispered. "She said that she couldn't forget the fact that she had an irreplaceable, precious person in the past, even if she tried. But she couldn't remember that person's face or name, and it haunted her for a long time..."

“You said something along the same lines a while back,” I noted.

“Yes... In my case, I was able to recover my memories, but she...”

When I’d teleported to Mesteria for a second time, I’d come across an amnesiac Jess, whose memories had been sealed away by King Eavis. I recalled how anguished she’d been back then—it was easy to deduce how Wyss felt for much of her life. And in a tragic twist of fate, Wyss passed away without knowing that the missing person in her memories had been near her this whole time.

Sito had kept that secret in his heart and defended it until his very last moments.

Tears streamed uncontrollably down Jess’s cheeks. “Madame Wyss... Mister Sito... How can there be such a tragedy? Such an outcome can’t be right.”

“Yeah. This world is filled with things that can’t be right but still happen.”

“Mister Sito’s dedication to a successful career...wasn’t for his own selfish gain either. All he wanted was to reunite with Miss Maryess, who might have entered the capital. And yet...”

Yet, when he encountered his beloved after achieving a successful career, she’d already forgotten everything about the past. As if that weren’t enough, she’d married into the royal family that was the root of all evil in their relationship. Meanwhile, he’d recently lost all the family he’d built up. His daughter and son called him an accursed old man and scorned him. He never reconciled with his family until his death.

Jess’s face was drenched with tears. “There’s something I’ve noticed.”

“What is it...?”

“Mister Sito served Miss Ceres and I some tea when we arrived at Helde, and the taste felt somewhat familiar to me. Just now, I realized where the nostalgia came from. His tea was remarkably similar to the tea that Madame Wyss brewed for me once upon a time.”

“Oh...” He’d glossed over the situation by stating it was a war tea, but perhaps Sito had reproduced the tea that Wyss—that Maryess

had made for him. “Speaking of which... He happened to have two pretty teacups on hand. I was thinking back then that it was suspiciously convenient for him to prepare cups for both you and Ceres in a town of ruins, but this must mean...”

“Maybe he carried them around with him, intending to drink tea together with Miss Maryess.” She wiped her tears. “Mister Sito went to that town—he went to the Town of Death to die.”

After losing his dearest Maryess and attempting to assassinate his lord, having lost his purpose, Sito had drifted to Helde. He’d been attracted there by the fire that was said to possess the power to part someone from their destiny, and that was when a mysterious voice had detained him.

“He was in such a situation, but he still chose to help us out?” It was a harrowing thought.

“Right. He even risked his life to assist with our operation to appeal to Mister Shravis to spare Miss Ceres’s life.”

“We owe him a big thank-you.”

“Yes...”

The fact that he’d tried to murder Shravis wasn’t forgivable by any means. His choices to abandon his family and to offer up the life of an innocent girl for his successful career were likely unforgivable as well.

But his earnest wish, hidden behind those choices, and his achievement of sacrificing his own life for our sake, weren’t going to be blotted out by those sins. We mustn’t forget them, no matter what.

There was the heavy creaking of opening doors. Itsune and the others walked out of the cathedral.

“It’s over,” Itsune announced. She looked in our direction and rotated her neck in a stretch, exasperated. “A granny and a middle-aged dude hopped over and checked on that dude and Ceres. The royal court’s apparently gonna take custody of that guy’s corpse. Ceres’s already a free woman. Mission accomplished.”

Ceres had taken off the bulky chain mail she’d been wearing over her torso until then. This was something Kento told me afterward, but the armor was seemingly meant to nullify the invisible

microwave attack with its metal mesh. She'd come fully equipped and ready for any situation, but I was glad that it was never put into use.

Under the watchful gaze of Jess's red and puffy eyes, Yoshu waved while looking disgruntled. "Oh, if you're concerned about that dude, don't worry about it. We threw our father out of our lives a long time ago. We might be related to him by blood, but we wouldn't think anything of something minor like that man dying."

Itsune added, "Yeah, that guy was seriously a failure of a father. In fact, it's a weight off our shoulders that he's kicked the bucket." Itsune moved her greataxe onto her back and curled her lips into a grin. "Frankly, I'm never going to forgive that guy for the rest of my life, but well, after what happened today, I think I managed to understand him for the first time. I'm glad that he had a proper reason for abandoning Lithis and us. It's just a little less objectionable than him not having a reason."

Yoshu also joined in on the banter in an unfeeling voice. "Right. He wasn't a piece of trash beyond understanding. He's a piece of trash we can slightly understand."

The sister approached us and placed a hand on Jess's shoulder. "Hey, Jess. As people who've been left behind, let's lead at least more respectable lives, all right?"

"Miss Itsune..."

"I'm sick and tired of stuff like people dying or killing people or snatching things from others or having things snatched away by others—I'm sick of this cycle of misery that keeps going. Even if someone has the most complicated circumstances, I wanna put a stop to these kinda things. I've got a request for the two of you. Pass on our message to that pigheaded king in one way or another."

Naut marched up to us. He gazed solemnly at Jess, then at me. "The Liberators have decided to seek peace with the royal court. For now, we want to restore our relationship to what it was like before the so-called Cross Executioner showed up. Tell that cherry boy that when he's up for it, we're ready to do that whenever."

Jess sucked in a deep breath. "Yes, I will! Thank you very much!"

I nodded. "Thanks, Naut."

Hearing that, Naut scowled. “I’m not doing this for you guys or anything. This is something we thought over and decided together for our sake.”

Before we knew it, it was well into the night. There were no clouds—above us was a stunning starry sky that we hadn’t been graced with for a long time. In the plaza before the cathedral, Jess and I faced the executive officers of the Liberators.

“Well then, we’ll head back to the south,” Naut announced brusquely. “We owe you one for your help this time.”

Just as he was preparing to start his journey back home, suddenly, Jess rushed up to him. “Please wait a moment!”

Naut looked like he hadn’t expected her to detain him. He turned around, baffled. “What is it?”

Jess took a step forward and lowered her voice. “Isn’t there something you should say after seeing Miss Ceres?”

She had me worried for a moment there, but that’s what she wants to talk about? Now that I thought about it, Ceres was still adorned in the pants that Jess had manifested back then. Naut had been with Jess and I until today, so it should be his first time seeing Ceres in this getup after she took off her chain mail earlier.

At the abrupt mention of her name, Ceres’s gaze darted all over the place with panic. Seeing that, Naut tilted his head. “Something? Be clear.”

“Have you not noticed anything?”

Naut let out an irritated “Aah?”

Ceres interjected in an apologetic and embarrassed voice. “U-Um, Miss Jess, I’m all right...”

Jess firmly shook her head. “Mister Naut, you’ve been looking for Miss Ceres all this time, ever since she went missing, right? Today, you finally managed to meet her again. If there’s anything you’re thinking after seeing her, you ought to properly put it into words.”

Itsune grinned with amusement as she took a sidelong glance at Naut.

As for the man himself, he averted his gaze slightly and practically whispered, “Well... It’s nice to see that you’re in good health.”

With just that, Ceres's face went as red as an apple, and her eyes grew damp.

Jess nodded. However, she placed a hand on her hip—she clearly still wasn't satisfied. I pitied Naut, but when Jess had her mind set on something, she wasn't going to budge even one bit.

Naut scrutinized Ceres as if he were playing a game of spot the difference before adding, "Come to think of it, I haven't seen you much in this outfit before."

Darn. Close, but no cigar. He just needs one last step forward.

Yoshu cleared his throat exaggeratedly, as if to encourage something.

A faint shade of crimson took over Naut's ears. "You...look good in that, I guess," he muttered while sounding slightly embarrassed.

Ceres stood there motionlessly. Tears began spilling down from her large eyes.

"Wh-What's wrong?" Naut was taken aback.

The young maiden wiped her tears furiously. "I'm sorry... I'm just so happy."

The swordsman walked forward until he was right in front of Ceres and gently patted her head. Their height difference, which was more than one head's worth, became apparent under the starry sky.

For a while, Ceres let Naut pat her head as he pleased while looking down at the ground. Then, she abruptly looked up to face him. The distance between them was so great that she couldn't meet his gaze unless she craned her neck to the point of stretching the skin beneath her jaw until it was taut.

Tearfully, she said, "Mister Naut... Thank you for everything. I was a very fortunate girl." Though she sobbed, her voice was firm.

Something felt slightly odd about her tone.

Jess let out a startled "Huh?"

Wait, that reminds me, why is Ceres talking in the past tense?

Even the oblivious Naut seemed to have noticed that something was different about Ceres. "Ceres... What's this about?"

Ceres's large eyes were brimming with steely determination. I could see her delicate throat bob as she swallowed. "I was originally

planning on telling you after we get back to Munires, but...”

She paused to take a breath.

At long last, she said, “I’m thinking about going home to where Madame Martha is.”

A chilly night breeze galloped through the plaza.

No one could have predicted Ceres’s words. There was a crack in Naut’s composure. “By going home, you mean...for now?”

“No. Forever.”

“Forever? Why?”

“I mean, I... I can’t use magic anymore.” Ceres wasn’t crying. She was staring unblinkingly up at Naut. “Without magic, I no longer have the right to stay with all of you. It looks like...I can’t use my powers of prayer with ristae either without magic. Now, the best I can do is to cook for you. But other people can also cook. I’m not useful. I’m only dead weight.”

“That’s not necessarily—”

As if to speak over Naut’s denial, Ceres said, “It’s okay. I thought over everything properly and decided this by myself. Madame Martha is currently starting a new business in Munires. I heard that she still needs workers. I should be more useful over there.”

Naut went silent. “Is that what you really think?”

“Yes... So, Mister Naut, I have to say goodbye.” When she got to that point, Ceres hung her head, as if all the strength had left her body. She turned her back on Naut as if to slip out from under his hand. I could see small streaks of tears dripping down from her cheeks.

As if she were in a hurry, Ceres began walking. Jess turned to look at me. Her brows were slightly furrowed in worry, and she looked stunned. “Mister Pig... What do I do? Miss Ceres is...”

“I... It’s something Ceres decided on, so there’s not much we can do...”

We were powerless to change the tides. Ceres’s life was the definition of earnest and pure. She left no room for us to intervene.

This was something I had learned on our recent journey. The best we were able to do was to run away with her, accompany her,

and offer her encouragement. Try as we might, the life Ceres led was her own story to write.

What we had done was snatch Naut away from her, drag her into the turbulent tempest that razed Mesteria, and even take away her magic in the end. Even if we tried to make up for it in some way, it was ultimately all out of our hands.

I wanted to bring Ceres at least as much happiness as we've taken from her. Yet...

Yet, there were pitifully few words we could say to a person whose story had already had a set ending.

Jess's legs took a step forward, preparing to break into a run. That was when Naut yelled, "Wait!" He chased after Ceres's back and threw his arms around her from behind. "Wait. Why're you trying to walk away like that? Listen to what I have to say before you end the conversation." For once, his voice was trembling.

Ceres didn't reply, but she appeared to give the barest of nods.

"There's something I haven't said all this time," Naut confessed. "I haven't told anyone about it because I'd sound like a total moron."

Without caring for the gazes on him, Naut continued, "I'm only here today because of you—because you were there for me, Ceres."

The girl motionlessly stood in place within Naut's arms. "That's...not true."

"It *is*."

"E-Even without someone like me, Mister Naut, you—"

"I'm begging you here, Ceres. Come on, don't speak badly of my precious person by saying 'someone like me.'"



Ceres looked down and held her tongue.

"I'm a guy who rarely ever says things that I think I don't need to say out loud. I wouldn't go outta my way to take action just to show my feelings. I know I'm probably a hard guy to read, but don't get the wrong idea. To me, Ceres, you're more indispensable than anyone else."

After steadying his breath that grew erratic, he continued, "Until you came to the village, I lost sight of what I should live for. You should know what happened."

Five years ago—or maybe six years ago by now—Ceres had gone to Baptsaze. It had been immediately after Naut tragically lost the person he admired, Eise. When Ceres had been picked on because she couldn't do her job like she wanted to, Naut had saved her. That was what I'd heard.

"You lost Miss Eise, and..." Ceres whispered.

"That's right. Back then, I thought that I might as well just die. There were even times when I wanted to die. But a certain someone helped me realize that I shouldn't die. And that was you, Ceres."

"I-I haven't done anything—"

"There's no chance of that. Put your hand over your heart and think hard. Have you really done nothing at all?"

Ceres dutifully reached her petite hand toward her chest, which Naut was embracing. She placed her hand over her chest, which had lost her magic alongside the stake that had been stabbing it, and began pondering.

However, it appeared that she couldn't come up with anything. I didn't know the answer either.

What in the world had a powerless girl, who had been eight at the time, done to drag a youth out of the depths of despair that he'd been chased into? What in the world *could* she have done to accomplish such a miracle?

"I..." Ceres swallowed. "I'm sorry, I really haven't done anything. I wasn't able to do anything."

"You've got that wrong." Naut sounded even more resolute. "Come on, think about it. You needed me, Ceres. That's why I decided to keep living. I didn't have any family. You were the only

one who looked overjoyed to be by my side. Your very existence was my salvation."

"That's..." Ceres's eyes widened. "I...saved you?"

Still hugging Ceres, Naut continued, "If it weren't for you, I would have rotted away for sure in that village. Because you were there, I could tell myself to work hard and keep going. I thought I might be able to see you smiling yourself silly, so I continued hunting. The times have changed, our situation has changed, and now, there's less time I can spend with you, but that's the one thing that hasn't changed even now. To me, if the horse that drives my carriage forward is my feelings for Eise, your very existence is what held the reins all this time, Ceres."

Ceres's hand was trembling minutely on top of Naut's arm.

"You went through plenty of painful things. You went through plenty of injustices. That's why you can go ahead and despair at this accursed, ugly world. But I'm begging you here, just don't despair at yourself. You...are more than irreplaceable simply by being willing to stay by my side. That's what I think, at least."

I couldn't see Naut's face, but I could tell that he was crying from his voice.

Slowly, he whispered as if praying, "So *please*, Ceres. Don't disappear from my life again."

Like a broken dam, Ceres wailed at the top of her lungs. The pair's voices echoed within the desolate plaza.

Naut tightened his hold on the petite frame that looked like it was about to crumble at any time.

After the night was no longer young, Jess and I were walking down the deserted streets of the royal capital.

"Just having her by his side is enough... What a wonderful relationship they have," Jess whispered.

The night sky tonight, which had fewer stars than before, felt dim in comparison. That said, the moonlight was bright enough to serve as a guide for walking outside.

"I think so too," I replied. I could never say out loud that I felt the same way about Jess.

"Just the thought makes me want to jump with joy."

Excuse me, that was narration, ma'am.

Jess beamed at me. "It's the same for me. Just having you by my side is enough, Mister Pig. I don't wish for anything more."

"...That's great to hear."

"I won't tolerate any cheating, though."

"That's the last thing I'd do. When have I ever shown interest in other girls?"

Jess narrowed her eyes and gave me a skeptical look. "Now, who was the one constantly squealing and making a fuss over Miss Ceres during the entire journey again?"

"That was, well... I mean, Ceres is, like, a little sister to me."

"That's unacceptable."

"It is?"

"You only need one little sister, Mister Pig, and that's me."

She might be right about that. I decided I would go along with that conclusion.

We were currently headed toward a certain fountain on top of a cliff. But it wasn't anywhere new—a long time ago, we'd gone there to fetch water that would remove the bangle from Rossi's left foreleg, which Hortis had put on to seal his own magic. Jess and I had gone on a journey of riddles to find the place.

After investigating a whole lot of different things, we learned that the fountain in question was apparently the Spring of Oblivion that Ruta's ghost had mentioned.

Jess was tightly gripping a piece of the paper, which was black from corner to corner. It was a token that an apparition had entrusted to us while saying that he'd inscribed the last missing fragment to restore the world. He'd mentioned that it would be revealed if we washed the paper with water from the spring.

It was a simple matter. I didn't know what that ghost's intentions were, but it seemed that stumping us wasn't one of them. He merely must have had some kind of reason for not wanting to tell us the truth back in that place.

People often had a motive when they asked others to solve mysteries. I wondered whether his motive would become clear of its

own accord when we learned of the last missing fragment.

We followed the route dictated by Hortis's riddles and climbed up a flight of stairs. The statue of the winged girl brought on a wave of nostalgia. We were supposed to turn right here. It was a roundabout path that circled the area directly underneath the cliff.

Jess was reluctant to pass through that area. It was an understandable reaction—this cliff was also the symbol of bitter memories to me. I hadn't known how much Jess had needed me. I hadn't known how important it was just to stay by someone's side. Being the fool I had been, I'd selfishly thrown myself off that cliff.

Many things had happened since then. Unable to return to modern-day Japan, I'd been resurrected by Jess's soul magic, but I'd been reduced to what was essentially a defective ghost. After that, by going on a journey in the Abyssus and returning to this side of Mesteria, I'd regained a corporeal body by pretty much abusing a bug in this world's programming. Later on, Mesteria had been turned on its head, and I gained the ability to speak the human language with my own mouth.

As I pressed forward with Jess, Shravis succeeded the throne before I knew it. A serial murder case began and ended in the most devastating manner possible. We were currently further down the path paved by that pivotal incident. However, following the events involving Ceres and Sito, the world should have been set in motion toward a more preferable future, one step at a time. At least, that was what I wanted to believe.

Finally, information about the last missing piece to settle things once and for all was within Jess's hand.

I prayed that this piece would restore order to the world. That Shravis would stop identifying Yethma as threats more than he had to. That the royal court and the Liberators would make peace—that everyone would start looking in the same direction again, and take action to make this society a better place. I couldn't stop myself from having these thoughts.

Stories always ought to finish with a happy ending, where we all live happily ever after.

We arrived at the fountain. There was a patch of exposed white

rock within the overgrown grass, and crystal clear water vigorously gushed forth from it. We would wash Ruta's paper with this water.

Jess slowly inhaled. "Mister Pig, are you ready?"

"Of course." No matter what might be written on the paper, I had confidence that together, we would be able to accomplish it one way or another.

Jess crouched down beside the fountain and lifted the charcoal black paper until it was in front of her face. I waited motionlessly by her side.

Delicate white fingers plunged the black paper into the fountain.

"Whoa..." she muttered spontaneously.

A gigantic cloud of inky black spread inside the water, leaving you wondering how in the world a piece of paper had managed to hold this much ink. The once-clear water was tainted black in the blink of an eye. Almost immediately, I could no longer see the white rock at the bottom of the fountain. I couldn't even make out Jess's fingertips as they were engulfed in jet black and darkness.

The entire spring was dyed black in the blink of an eye. The water's surface was darkness itself—it even absorbed the moonlight that shone upon it. What kind of truth was such an extreme darkness cloaking within?

I was so focused on the spring that I only realized Jess had taken out the paper after a moment's delay. I looked up. "Is there any legible text on it now?"

There was no response. Jess stared at the small piece of paper in a daze.

I stretched my neck. "Let me have a look."

Suddenly, the beautiful maiden clenched her fist and crushed the paper within her palm. Inky black water dripped down from her fair hand.

I frowned. "What's wrong?" An ominous premonition seized me, and my body started going cold.

In the tiniest voice, Jess asked, "Mister Pig... You aren't hiding anything from me, right?" Her tone was dead serious.

A chill ran down my spine. The ominous premonition amplified, and my breathing grew strained. *But... The secret I'm keeping from*

her—the thing I haven't been able to tell her isn't all that grave, I thought. I *had* told myself it was time to inform Jess about it.

Finding my resolve, I said, "To tell you the truth, Blaise told me this. I fainted in my original world, and only the part that counts as my soul has traveled to this world. The body I've left behind over there is about to reach its limit... Well, to be blunt, my body in the other world is apparently going to die very soon."

Jess remained frozen in place. There was no reply.

I continued, "But that's okay. I decided to stay with you, Jess. It doesn't matter what happens to my body in that world. I'll always choose to stay in this world." I gazed into her eyes. I wasn't sure what she was thinking, but they were slightly damp with tears. "Staying by your side is more important than anything else. Right?"

Abruptly, Jess vigorously gave me a tight hug. Her arms were trembling.

Frowning, I gently prompted, "What's on your mind?"

"Mister Pig. I have done many atrocious things so that I could stay with you." Her hoarse voice whispered into my ear. "Among them, what goes against the laws of nature the most...was to restore the body of a spirit by traveling to the Abyssus and coming back to Mesteria. It's an action that breaks down the boundaries between the real world and the world of desires—it's taboo by nature."

A sinister hunch began eating into my mind. I'd regained a tangible body by abusing the bug in the world's system. Then, there was the fact that mayhem still wrecked this world, even though it should have returned to normal since Ceres had abandoned the stake in her body.

I didn't need her to spell out what those two facts were hinting at when you joined the thoughts.

Before anything else, I should have asked myself why Ruta's apparition hadn't readily told us the missing fragment back then. I should have asked myself why he'd thought that we needed to find our resolve first.

It was at this point that something caught my eye—the raven black water was running across the white rock surface, but it was

somewhat odd. Like ink, the flowing water was forming the Mesterian script in clumsy handwriting.

Abandon your flesh of falsehoods and atone for your sins.

The only thing I could do was numbly call out her name. “Jess.”

“Mister Pig...”

I didn’t know what I ought to do in this moment other than to cling to the warmth of her trembling cheeks.

It’s got to be a lie. This can’t be real.

I finally made up my mind that I won’t ever leave her behind. I swore that I’d stay by her side.

Yet, Ruta’s message was brutally clear. To return this world to normal, I, who’d regained a body through unnatural means, had to revert to a mere spirit.

I needed to become a being that could never feel the warmth of Jess’s skin for the rest of my life.

Afterword (Seventh Bite)

Hello, it's been a while. Takuma Sakai here.

Volume 6 was published in May, which means that this ended up being my first book in seven months. I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting each time. Our society transforms at such a dizzying speed that it feels like countless things have happened during these seven months. I hear that a lot of things have happened to a certain company—is it truly all right? (If this sentence isn't deleted in the final version, then I feel like it should be doing relatively well.)

I would like to thank all my wonderful readers for picking up this book despite the relatively long interval.

Now then, as for the number of pages in the afterword section that keeps ballooning over the volumes without knowing the concept of a limit, believe it or not...

There are merely four pages this time!

Small-format paperback books have seventeen lines on each page, meaning that I can only write sixty-eight lines in total. How unbelievable!

For example, just this one line would account for one point four seven percent of the entire section when calculated.

If I used up two lines, it would round up to approximately three percent. What a waste. This isn't the time to be squandering space on such calculations.

I'm extremely anxious whether I'll be able to fully convey the ardent feelings that are burning hot in my liver within such a measly number of assigned pages. However, I've heard that even the price of paper has gone up recently, so I suppose I'll have to live with it. I will steel my resolve and craft an afterword with the highest density possible. I hope you will bear with me.

I would like to start by giving you a report of recent happenings

on my end.

To tell you the truth, starting from volume 7, a new member has joined the competent editor Anan-san on the *Butareba* crew, M-san! (Due to various reasons, I am keeping their name anonymous for now.) M-san has been reading this series since their student days—I couldn't be a more fortunate author. Now that I have to communicate more often with the publishing company for reasons such as preparation for the anime, I can't begin to express how helpful the brilliant M-san has been.

By the way, M-san was the one who suggested a calendar as the optional bonus that comes with volume 7, which you can purchase on certain sites. (Thank you very much to those of you who have bought it!) Truthfully, if my progress on the manuscript wasn't desirable for this volume, there was a chance it might have been published in January. Therefore, I was just a tad relaxed in terms of time when I worked on it, but when I heard that the merge would be a calendar for the entirety of 2023, I was fired up with motivation to finish it, thinking, "I must publish this volume before the end of 2022 somehow!" M-san... Given what you're capable of, you are a terrifying person.

Now then, I've mentioned it in passing earlier, but preparation for the anime is steadily progressing as well. We have the honor of borrowing the help of many, many people to produce this adaptation. Information should be released soon, so please look forward to it!

What I'm personally most excited for is, of course, the pig's perspective, otherwise the low-angle shots—I mean, how they are going to adapt the "narration" that's used in *Butareba*. In the manga adaptation, Minami-sensei has implemented it in a remarkably natural manner that's fitting for that medium. The novel is originally mostly written in first person, and most of the story is told from Mister Pig's point of view. That's why the reader can accept the narrative technique that the narration is equal to the protagonist's inner voice. However, in media such as manga and anime, the story is expressed in both subjective and objective manners, and the point of view also becomes much more complex. Within such limitations, it

must be a considerable challenge for the production team to find ways to help the readers and viewers enjoy the story without feeling that something is stilted. To put it another way, how they are going to manage the perspectives of the story is going to be a problem they will have to solve. But perhaps that might be the interesting part for all of you. I believe that perspective is the most vital part of storytelling.

(Of course, I'm not talking about the low-angle shots, but the narration!)

That aside, this might not be the right place to write about this, but... Believe it or not, the publishing company Sekaisha has released my new work! The title is *Nanoka no Yoru wo Nukedashite* (*Breaking Free from the Night of the Seventh*).

The summary of the story goes like this: A group of four men and women, who have the worst chemistry possible with each other, are trapped in a school at night by a supernatural force. To escape their imprisonment, they must uncover the secrets behind the seven mysteries of this school.

The girl looking all triumphant on the cover is the heroine, and I have to say, whether it be the designs of cutie-pie Jess, cutie-pie Ceres, or this girl, the author's personal fetishes somehow seem to be seeping through on their own.

I would be elated if you would check this out too!

(Not my fetishes, by the way. I mean my new work!)

It would be boring if I only rambled on about myself, so I would like to talk about cutie-pie Ceres to tie things up while avoiding spoilers. She's the official sub-heroine throughout this series, sandwiched between two pigs on the cover of volume 2 and sandwiching Mister Pig with cutie-pie Jess on the cover of volume 7.

Ceres is a girl who is slender, fainthearted, withdrawn, loyal, devoted, earnest to a fault, and ordinary. You could say that she's the type who sounds like she'd never make it into a history book.

This volume is a story that focuses on her. The most ironic twist of fate comes knocking at her door without warning. All she's ever

done is single-mindedly chase after the back of a person during her every waking moment, but the government ends up chasing after her. She even becomes the catalyst for a great war despite her wishes.

The way the world works is that even though it's usually in a distant place that's completely out of reach, the moment it decides to change, it approaches you while putting on the guise of a friendly face. Then, it would readily snatch away your routine life as if it were the natural thing to do. During such an occasion, how in the world can we save a person struck by misfortune like cutie-pie Ceres? That thought fleetingly appeared in my mind while I was in the middle of writing the manuscript.

That aside, cutie-pie Ceres is so incredibly adorable. I'm over the moon that I have the honor of requesting Tohsaka-sensei to draw lots of cutie-pie Ceres in this volume. Her new outfit is a delight, of course, but the greatest masterpiece has to be the tentacle—

Oops, I'm out of space. Well then, see you again in volume 8!

Takuma Sakai—November 2022


(7th Bite)
Author:
Takuma Sakai
Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka
Butareba
-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-

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(7th Bite)

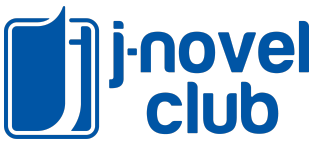
Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-


This is the journey of two beautiful maidens and a lone pig going on the run.
This situation we're in... It's practically identical to that famous rom-com trope where a man and a woman have to hide in a broom closet! It isn't a ham sandwich at this point. It's more like a pressed sandwich...
There was no mistaking it—it was the ultimate situation known to man where beautiful maidens were pressing all kinds of things against me from the left and right.


Giant octopus tentacles assault two beautiful maidens!
“Jess! Ceres! Are you okay?!”





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