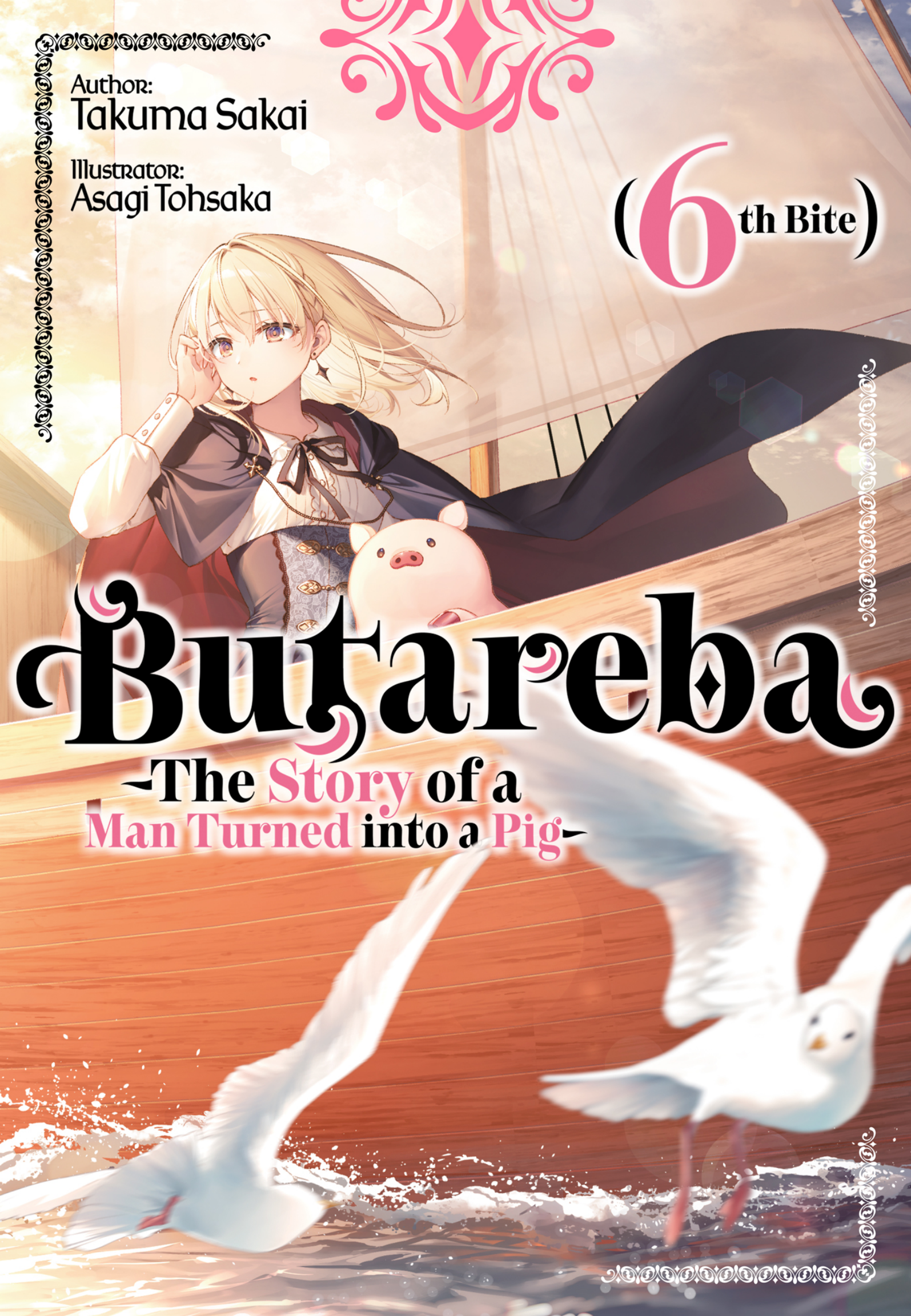
Author:
Takuma Sakai

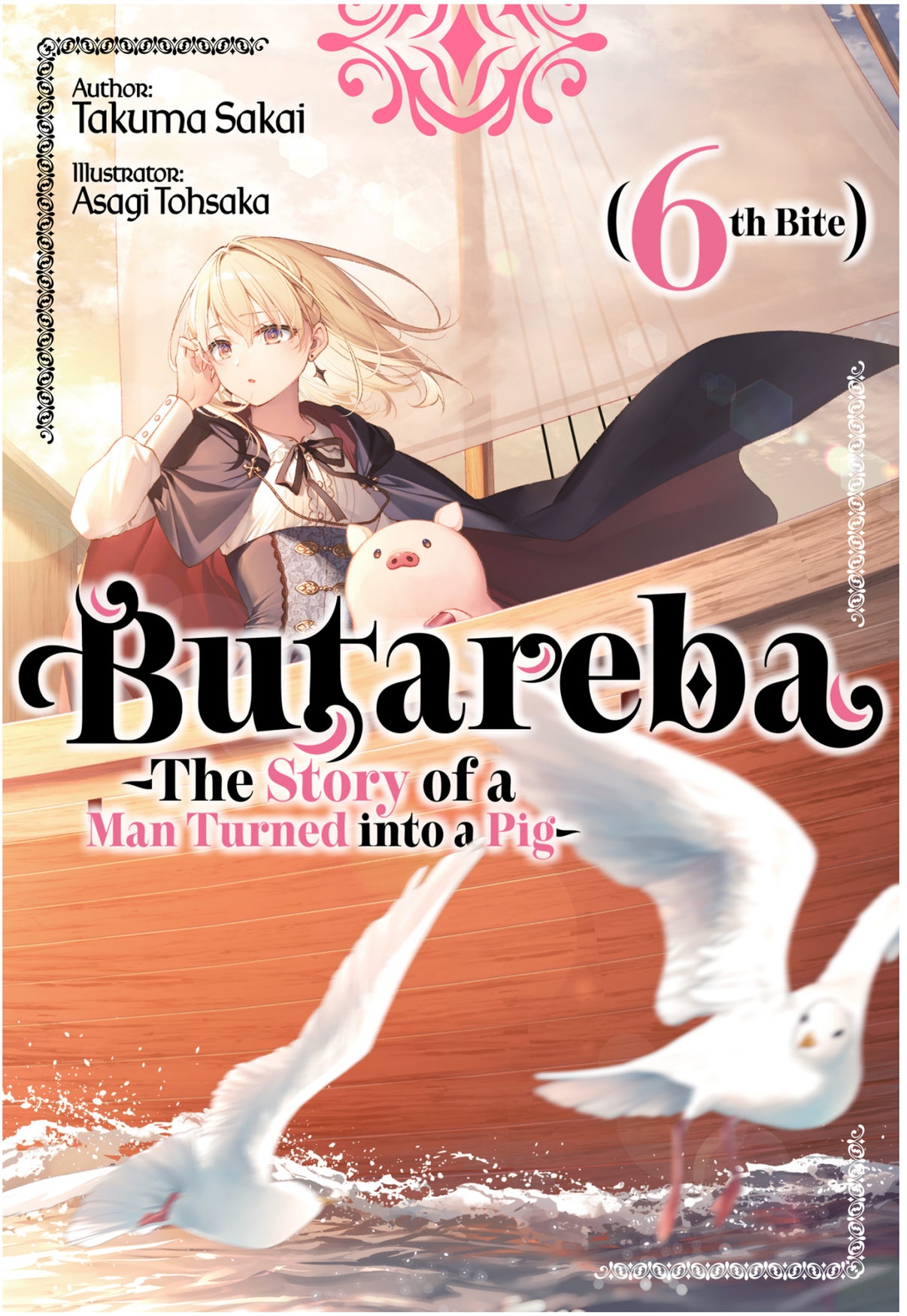
Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka

(6th Bite)



Butareba

~The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig~


Author:
Takuma Sakai
Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka
(6th Bite)
Butareba
-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-

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Illustrator: Asagi Tohsaka



(6th Bite)

Butareba

-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-


"I will definitely solve this case... I swear it in the name of my grandfather, Eavis!"
This was a serial murder referencing "The Chain Song" and simultaneously a challenge toward the royal family who wanted the collar.
With these many conditions fulfilled, the principle behind the murders was evident.
The corpses had been dealt with according to the lines of the nursery rhyme before being arranged like malicious trophies. As if that wasn't enough, each bore the *Sanguyn Cros*, which could only be carved with magic.


Butareba
-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-
"I'll become an *ace detectife!*"



Royal Year 130, Second Month, Ninth Day, Early Morning

Chapter 1: Don't Turn Down a Beautiful Maiden When She Demands You Marry Her

Chapter 2: A Mass Murder Is a Big Responsibility for a Detective's First Case

Chapter 3: Most Serial Killers Aim to Outmaneuver the Detective

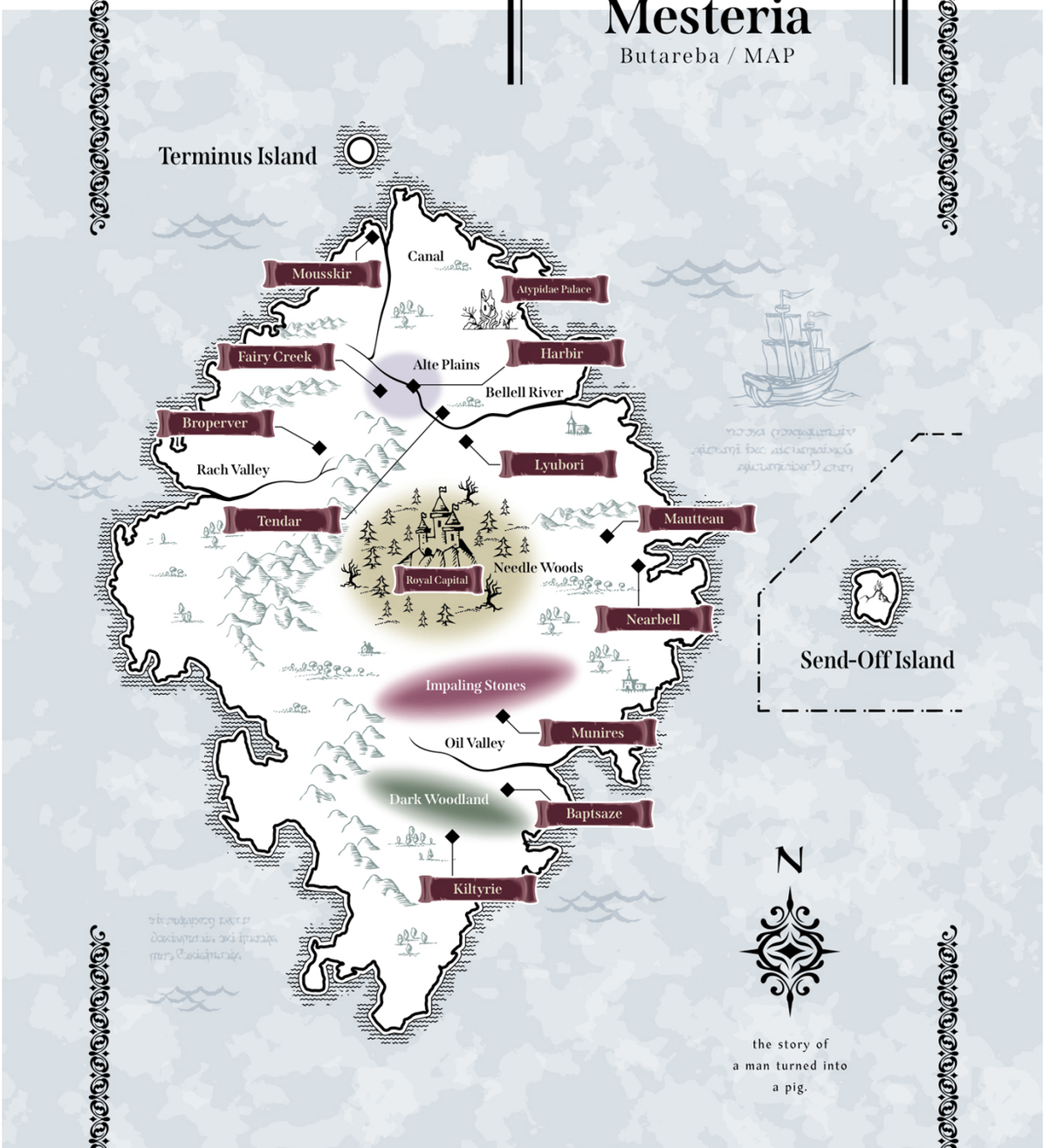
Chapter 4: When It's a Serial Murder Case with a Motif, the Detective Must Deduce the Murderer's Motive

Chapter 5: The Truth Doesn't Always Bring About Salvation

2019 CE, August 14th, Witching Hour

Mesteria

Butareba / MAP



the story of
a man turned into
a pig.

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The rusty chain leads on to far, far away,
Walk out of the jail, there you will see the chain trail, to the graveyard it paves the way.
The first ring breaks, allowing the mouse to flee,
Into the pot it goes, boiling and simmering slow, the mouse is dead, so mote it be.
The second ring breaks, allowing the fox to flee,
Down the chimney it falls, roasted right to the gall, the fox is dead, so mote it be.
The third ring breaks, allowing the brown bear to flee,
Onto the tree it climbs, until the sky strikes it down in time, the brown bear is dead, so mote it be.
The fourth ring breaks, allowing the —— to flee,
Among the people it weaves, brushing by your sleeves, right next to you the —— lives, so mote it be.

—A Mesterian Nursery Rhyme

Royal Year 130, Second Month, Ninth Day, Early Morning

Billowing pillars of steam, painted faintly in crimson by the morning sun, rose into the wintry, mint-green sky.

The cathedral in Broperver was also known as the Steam Monster. Numerous spires reached to the sky like spines, and copious amounts of steam from hot springs were spat out incessantly between their gaps, earning it this moniker. This gigantic architecture, topped with a gilded roof, almost looked like an enormous living creature in its cloak of steam.

In pursuit of her excessively barking pet dog, a young girl rushed into the plaza in front of the cathedral. “No, don’t go there! Come back!” she cried.

But her pleas fell on deaf ears—her large, scrawny dog growled lowly as it dashed across the plaza. In the middle of the circular plaza was a fountain, and like a geyser, it spouted hot, dark red water akin to blood up into the air. Its surroundings were shrouded by warm steam. The visibility was at an all-time low, almost as if there were fog.

The dog came to a stop near the fountain. The hair on its back bristled as it leaned forward. It began barking tirelessly at something unknown on the ground.

The girl quickened her sprint. Soon, an uncanny odor akin to rust blended into the pungent smell wafting over from the fountain—as if it were truly spewing blood. Unease crept into the girl’s heart. What had her dog found?

She got closer. The moment she had a better view, she was rendered speechless.

Within the haze, numerous sculptures were lying down in an orderly fashion. Or at least, that was what it seemed like at first glance, because life-sized human bodies with chalk-white skin had been arranged neatly across the cobblestone paving, almost like fruit being sold in the market. Their heads and feet were in line with each other, and it was as if the dozens of white naked bodies on display were asleep.

A grand cross, glowing crimson like lava, had been carved into

each of their chests. Though the girl had no way of knowing this, she was witnessing a spell called *Sanguyn Cros*, which used to be seared on criminals before the Dark Ages.

Before she knew it, the dog's barking had ceased. As the girl stood in a daze, she noticed something strange.

If these statues were made of plaster or marble, they should be white from head to toe. However, the ones in front of her had different body hair colors. She approached them slightly and soon realized that the hair wasn't pieces of artwork—it was genuine human hair. And the skin that should have been pure, chalky white had red patches dotted over it, as if it'd been burned raw.

There was a crunch. The girl turned around to her pet dog.

A shrill shriek tore through the air of the deserted plaza.

The dog was munching on one "statue's" arm and had torn it off. Lifted up by a large mouth, the wrist, which should have been stiff and motionless by all rights, shook back and forth like it was beckoning someone forward. White bone and vividly red muscles peered out from the part where the arm had been sectioned.

Indeed, what lined up on the plaza weren't statues.

They were all discolored, pallid human corpses.

Chapter 1: Don’t Turn Down a Beautiful Maiden When She Demands You Marry Her

I nodded to myself and said aloud, “In my humble opinion, men who wish to have younger sisters are worse than second-rate. Truthfully, having a little sister or otherwise isn’t particularly important. What truly matters is whether *you* are an older brother or not.”

The beautiful blonde maiden, who was younger than me, looked perplexed. “Um… I’m afraid I don’t quite follow…”

I eloquently gave her a lecture on my unshakable pet theory. “The state of ‘having a little sister,’ at the end of the day, is something passive. You haven’t taken the initiative to do anything. Even a pig can achieve such a shallow level.” I straightened up my pork loin with plenty of back fat in one crisp motion. “But it’s a different case for the state of ‘being an older brother.’ You’re aware of your older brother status, and you will actively continue loving your little sister forever. This is a sublime activity that only those with sophisticated intellect and love are permitted to conduct.”

Jess blinked. “Sorry, but um, Mister Pig…?”

“That’s why if someone asks me whether I want a little sister, the answer is a big, fat ‘no.’ Indeed, I don’t! For I, you see, am a person who can face reality. No matter how hard I struggle, I can’t change the fact that I don’t have a little sister. I know that. But I have the awareness of an older brother. Even if I don’t possess a little sister, I can become a little sister’s older brother.”

As she walked along the main street of the flourishing royal capital, Jess waved her hands in front of her chest, flustered. “I’m very sorry… If I’ve done anything to upset you, please allow me to apologize. I didn’t know you were that bothered about not having a little sister. I won’t ever ask you whether you want one again, I swear…”

Seeing her troubled expression, I realized that there was some kind of misunderstanding between us. “No, it’s not that I’m upset or anything.”

“Really…?”

“But of course. I have found my own way to come to terms with the fact that I don’t have a little sister in an extremely rational manner. That’s all.”

“Well, if you say so…”

It appeared that she didn’t quite understand my noble sibling doctrine, but even though she appeared baffled, Jess smiled.

You should get me, my brethren. There are people with sister complexes out there who don’t have older or younger sisters. Without a doubt, there are men in this world who, for all their lives, have believed in sibling love and have yearned for the ideal little sister they’ve tucked carefully into their heart, forever dreaming of the day she would call him “big brother”!

Jess looked down at me, and a relieved smile softened her features. “Oh, if that was what you meant, you could have just asked me. I can adhere to your desires as much as you like. Big brother, dear brother, bro, bubba… You name it. Feel free to make any requests that cross your mind, big brother.”

Oink! I let out an unsightly squeal in my mind. *There’s nothing more pleasant than a cute maiden affectionately calling you “big brother”!*

At the moment, it was morning in the capital. Jess and I were weaving across the city built onto the slope of a rocky mountain, making our way to the royal library.

Approximately a month had passed since we’d defeated the Clandestine Arcanist and returned from the Abyssus. I’d recovered my corporeal pig body and was living out a merry piggy life with Jess, a purehearted, angelic, beautiful blonde maiden, in the capital.

Mesteria had started reclaiming its peace—if you were willing to avert your eyes from a handful of fatal problems, that is.

Now, even the capital, formerly under the reign of the most atrocious king, had returned to its routine hustle and bustle. Outside some restaurants were areas with outdoor seating, and I spotted burly older dudes indulging in beer first thing in the morning.

Blissfully breathing in the wheat aroma floating over from the bakery, Jess asked me, “But just wondering… Why are you so obsessed with little sisters?”

Unable to interpret the intention of her question, I replied with an inquiry of my own. “Uh… Could you elaborate?”

“I mean, it doesn’t have to specifically be a little sister, right? If

you like interactions between a pair of lovers, I can indulge you all day long too. What makes little sisters so appealing to you?"

I snorted with my pig snout. "Isn't that obvious? It's because brothers and sisters will stay brothers and sisters no matter what happens."

Jess blinked slowly. "Um..."

Please don't look at me as if I'm an alien, ma'am. "The bond between siblings is an unchangeable, undeniable fact. Whether it be your blood ties or your history of living under the same roof, unshakable truths hold up this bond. Put another way, it's something like a timeless, binding curse. Meanwhile, being lovers is only a kind of relationship. Maybe it's easier to understand if I compare it to a spell that might come undone one day. The smallest of misunderstandings, as well as conflicts between your ideal futures, can easily cause your romantic relationship to unravel like threads."

"It will...?" Looking anxious, Jess gently placed a hand on her chest.

"That's just a general opinion at the end of the day." I shrugged. "In any case, being siblings is a bond that will tie two people together no matter where or when, almost like a chain."

"I see..." Jess nodded. "When you put it like that, it does sound a little nice."

I nodded to myself. *As long as you understand me, that's enough.*

Jess then smiled wide as she continued, "After all, if there's a chain out there that will never let you escape, Mister Pig, I'd love to have one too." The fact that there wasn't even a hint of darkness on her face made her smile even more terrifying.

"I'm not going anywhere, so you can rest easy," I reassured her.

My current low-standing position next to Jess was the comfiest place in the universe that I'd found after nineteen years of being a single, girlfriendless loner. By now, I felt right at home. Whenever I lifted my gaze slightly, I could marvel at the spectacular scenery of a secretive paradise tucked away from the world.

"I'll hold you to that promise, okay?" Jess walked forward, her navy blue skirt fluttering outward like wings with centrifugal force.

The royal library was a robust building that stood quietly on a rocky stretch slightly distant from the city's bustling heart. If we used one of the underground passages, we could have headed there directly from the royal palace where we resided. But recently, making a detour as we went while strolling around had become our new daily routine.

Yes, that's right, "daily." Lately, we'd been making trips to this library practically every single day.

I glanced over the structure as we approached. The library was constructed with white and off-white stone, and you could see the painstaking artistry invested in it. At the front entrance, a little above the bulky doors, hung a clock adorned with old-fashioned symbols. Originally, a brass pair of a short hand and a long hand would be indicating that it was morning, but now, an amputated human right arm and left arm were pointing at an absurd hora.

Sidestepping the blood that trickled down from the clock face, Jess and I entered the library.

Towering bookshelves. Enchanted, dim crimson lights. The scent of paper and ink wafting to my nose. I found myself relaxing in the cozy atmosphere.

The inner recesses of the library were under the sturdy magical protection of the royal court's founder, Vatis. As such, it wasn't affected at all by the contamination of the Abyssus.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said about the rest of Mesteria.

On the night we'd returned from the Abyssus, the Abyssus had begun seeping out and polluting the real world for some unknown reason. The phenomena we'd encountered in that eerie world had also started happening irregularly on the surface Mesteria. The speckled transformation of the sky's color was only the tip of the iceberg. Objects within the real world—for example, the clock at the library entrance—were also "Abyssusifying," so to speak.

That twisted world created by desires was slowly but surely inching toward this side.

Since the capital was under Vatis's magical protection, it still wasn't severely influenced by the Abyssus. But I heard that outside the precipitous cliffs surrounding the capital, an incident like a clock's hands transforming into human arms no matter how many times you switched them couldn't even hold a candle

to the bizarre anomalies happening all over Mesteria.

On that note, I still had the appearance of a pig, but I could now speak the human tongue with my sliced and grilled pork tongue. And so, I'd happily graduated from the double angle brackets that helped distinguish my thought-speech from the narration. I didn't know what in the world was going on with my vocal cords, but I could generally speak with the same, attractive voice I'd had when I used to be a human.

This library was a jungle of knowledge and wisdom. The protagonists of this land were the shelves crammed to the brim with timeworn books, while the aisles weaved between them unassumingly. I was directly behind Jess as we made our way toward the innermost corner of the library, an area sectioned off with iron grilles.

It was an area where only royalty and their affiliates were permitted entry. Jess placed her hand against the grille to pass the magical biometric sensor and pushed open the door made with iron bars.

Thick glass doors protected the bookshelves here. Every single one of the books in the collection here contained important information: dangerous magic, taboo topics such as soul magic, the untempered history of Mesteria, and so on. They held information that wasn't privy to the capital citizens, much less the general masses of this nation.

We walked deeper into the rows of bookshelves—arranged like walls concealing a treasure—and arrived at a reading desk. This place was completely secluded from its surroundings—a total blind spot. In an indecent doujin manga, naughty events would unfold in places like these.

"Libraries are places for reading," Jess reminded me.

Though she'd read the narration, I was undaunted. "Of course."

With a smile, Jess looked down at me. "If you want to do something naughty, let's go somewhere else, okay?"

"But I'm not going to do anything naughty," I protested feebly.

I didn't know what exactly Jess had imagined when she'd heard the word "naughty," but I was sure she'd been thinking of deeds such as testing out what would happen when you mixed together chemicals that you weren't supposed to.

Obviously, we were responsible people, so we stayed and continued what we had to do: our investigation. Books that we'd

checked through and classified one by one were lined up neatly on the desk.

Here, Jess and I were attempting to find an explanation for the phenomena happening in Mesteria. Why was the surface Mesteria experiencing anomalies similar to the Abyssus, a world of desires? Why had it started happening just after we'd returned from the Abyssus? How could we restore this steadily unhinging world to its original state?

After running into countless dead ends on our way, we were slowly putting together one hypothesis.

"'Magic—in principle, it is a system that connects the spiritual world, which is created from our desires, to the world of truth, the world we live in.'" Jess flipped open a bulky book written by an ancient mage named Aristotoes while reciting one of the statements inside from memory.

This was an ancient book written way before the founding of the royal court, before even the Dark Ages. Only the words *On Magic* were inscribed onto the cover with gold letters. Since we'd left a bookmark inside, we immediately located the page we were looking for. On it was the diagram of a clear, transparent crystal shaped like a sharp, triangular pyramid.

"'When stabbed into humans, who have the potential to perceive both the spiritual world and the world of truth, the pyramids tie the two worlds together. The blood of the stabbed will become a contract that strengthens the connection between the two worlds. Accordingly, I shall name these crystals the Contract Stakes.'"

As she read the book out loud, Jess glanced at me.

I struggled onto a chair and nodded. "Stakes are items that can securely fasten two objects to each other. And so, the Contract Stakes connect the world of truth—otherwise known as the real world we live in—and the spiritual world. That's basically what's written there, right?"

It was an established fact that if you stabbed a Contract Stake into someone's chest, they would gain magical powers. If you stabbed someone who already had magic, then it would forcefully trigger an ecdysia, a phenomenon similar to leveling up for mages where their mana pool multiplied. It was somewhat like magical molting, and one of its secondary effects was resetting all the spells and enchantments on the mage's body. Making use of that property, we'd taken down an immortal

mage.

In *On Magic*, we'd found a detailed explanation of the theory behind how it functioned. One term introduced in this section was the "spiritual world," which was said to be magic's source.

As I gathered my thoughts, I said, "Now then, here's a question. What if this 'spiritual world' is actually the Abyssus?"

The source of magic was the Abyssus—that world was what provided the force for spells. If we interpreted Aristotoes's description in this manner, it would lead to one hypothesis explaining Mesteria's current plight.

Humans who'd stabbed Contract Stakes into their own bodies gained special channels, allowing the Abyssus's power to flow into them. These were the primordial mages who'd obtained the ability to bend reality according to their wishes in the form of "magic." Their abilities survived to this day, distributed in their blood, and passed down to their descendants.

And who were these descendants? The royal family. The capital citizens. And finally, the Yethma.

That was how powers that far exceeded sensible physical limitations had ended up inside these humans' bodies.

Jess spoke up. "Aristotoes continues with more in-depth analysis and raises a certain concern." Her fair, slender finger pointed at one passage on the worn-out page.

Subsequently, the more Contract Stakes we use, the stronger and more intimate the connection between the world of truth and the spiritual world will become. The emergence of variants such as Lacerte is likely caused by this strengthening bond as well. If we continue to exhaust these stakes, there is no guarantee that the world will remain as we know it.

At the moment, we seemed to be the only ones in the library. Jess and I closed our mouths while staring at that page, and utter silence gently surrounded us.

The logical part of my mind was telling me that the prehistoric text's concern perfectly overlapped with what we'd done so far.

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "During the past few months, we've exhausted the last three Contract Stakes in this world."

Using the power of her husband's—Ruta's—eye, Vatis had apparently gathered every last Contract Stake remaining in Mesteria. With them, she'd obtained extraordinary magic and

had abolished the immortality of other mages, ending the Dark Ages, a time of strife where mages fought against each other.

She had left behind a mere three Contract Stakes in Mesteria. One had been left as it was. The second had been fashioned into the Destruction Spear. The third had been crafted into the Salvation Chalice.

But we'd used all of them during our battle against the Clandestine Arcanist.

The first supreme treasure we'd obtained was the Contract Stake, which had disappeared after we'd stabbed it into Ceres's chest. The artifact had been necessary to dispel a curse of certain death that Ceres had absorbed from Naut with a kiss.

The second supreme treasure we'd obtained was the Destruction Spear, which had been snatched away by the Liberators who'd attempted to use it to assassinate Marquis. This spear had pierced Hortis, who shielded his brother, and the Contract Stake had disappeared, along with Hortis's life.

The last supreme treasure we'd obtained was the Salvation Chalice, which had been destroyed by Shravis to extract its core, the Contract Stake, so that he could use it on the Clandestine Arcanist. As a result, the Clandestine Arcanist had lost his immortality, and we'd succeeded at vanquishing the most atrocious king standing in our way once and for all.

We'd paid a steep, steep price in exchange for the peace we'd sought. And during those events, we'd also used up the prehistoric treasures that had brought about magic to this world.

The day after we'd used the last stake to defeat the Clandestine Arcanist, the world had practically begun crumbling before our very eyes.

As I gazed at the Contract Stake drawn in *On Magic*, I reflected on our findings. "Because we've driven in all the Contract Stakes that connect the Abyssus to the surface Mesteria, the two worlds began merging. It's a persuasive hypothesis, all right, but the only thing we are basing it on is Aristotoes's accounts—we don't have any conclusive evidence. It'd be nice to find something that backs it up."

Jess nodded. "Right. Since prehistoric times, there has been all kinds of research about the Contract Stakes. If we go through their results individually, we might find a lead. I have full faith that once we find that clue, we'll also figure out how to restore

this world to its former glory."

She looked over at the dozen or so academic tomes stacked up on the left half of the desk. In this world, we didn't have any magic professors or GXXgle to rely on, so our only option was to go through this tower of books with a fine-toothed comb one at a time.

There was a click. Someone had opened the iron grille door.

Simultaneously, Jess and I turned around. It appeared that we had a visitor. *Is it one of the royal family? Or is it—*

A single book slipped out of the dim space behind the bookshelves. "You might find this one to be helpful."

The two of us stood there in shock, and soon, a tall elderly woman clothed in a black robe approached us from the shadows. Her long, gray hair was silky and straight. Her wrinkled fingers, adorned with a golden ring, were revealed to be what were holding up the book that had appeared out of the shadows.

She was the librarian, Vivis. A capital citizen who oversaw the royal library, she was knowledgeable about the royal family's internal affairs. A while ago, she'd given us a crucial hint that had helped us locate where Hortis had hidden a history text.

As if trying to conceal her astonishment, Jess placed a hand against her chest. "Madame Vivis... I never knew you had access to this section as well." By all rights, only members of the royal family were able to enter this place.

Vivis nodded. "Of course I do. As the manager of this library, I've been granted honorable privileges." She walked over without a sound and gently placed the book on the desk.

The inscription on the cover read: *The Mathematical Principles of Magical Philosophy*. She explained, "This is an exceptional academic book written by a mage called Newtones during the Dark Ages. He was an outstanding mage and researcher. Ever since the time of Aristotoes, people have tended to prioritize qualitative analysis of magic theory, but this mage brilliantly solved magic through quantitative analysis—mathematical calculations."

Sounding a tad mournful, Vivis added, "Sadly, only a handful of copies of this book are left."

Half surprised, half delighted, Jess placed a hand on the book. "Thank you very much. I think this might just be what we're looking for." Her hand looked restless and fidgety, as if she

wanted to flip it open as soon as possible.

In contrast to her enthusiasm, I was skeptical. Why did Vivis have such good timing? She'd brought over the right book exactly when we'd needed it.

Vivis's deeply creased face turned to me and smiled. "The thing is, recently, I keep having this irrational ominous premonition," she said in an unhurried, serene voice.

"An ominous premonition..." Jess echoed in a whisper.

The older woman nodded smilingly at her this time. "The viper in the storm—it's an old saying that has existed since long before the Dark Ages." Almost like the words of a fortune teller, Vivis's speech had us hooked. "Once upon a time, a certain man had very important business he couldn't afford to miss. But on that day, a great storm came roaring across the land. Left with no choice, the man set out into the storm and perished from the bite of a viper. Completely preoccupied with the storm in the skies, he must have been blind to the viper at his feet, which had been chased out from its den by the rain."

Letting out a noise that was a mixture of an incoherent word and a sigh, Vivis then continued, "When it comes to things like coincidences and misfortune, they sometimes come one after another to a frustrating degree and push things in the worst direction possible. I'm sure that the two of you have learned that by experience despite your wishes, haven't you?"

I nodded and agreed from the bottom of my heart. At times, misfortune called for further misfortune, almost cruelly so.

Luck treated everyone equally, but it certainly wasn't distributed equally. Lady Fortune wasn't so compassionate that she'd leave behind the same amount of fortune in a place that had just experienced misfortune. Good luck and bad luck rained down on us without favoritism. That was exactly why it was only a matter of time before bad luck was followed by more bad luck.

Vivis said, "Right now, the world has gone terribly awry, hasn't it? If something even worse happens on top of that..." She shuddered. "I keep having that bad feeling in my gut. Perhaps misfortune would accumulate somewhere without my knowledge, leading to the appearance of a viper. At this rate, I might fill my heart with overflowing anxiety, so I was planning on studying about the storm—the current state of the world."

Huh. It's just like a librarian to deal with her stress by reading academic books, I thought. I could feel her unwavering trust in—

no, perhaps unwavering worship of—books and knowledge.

Jess took a step forward in her direction. “Pardon me, but… Did you come across anything useful during your research?”

Vivis’s smile simply widened. “I’ve only been reading as a diversion, so I don’t think my humble opinions would be helpful. My role is to protect the books and hand over the ones that the royal family needs. Please keep naughty things in moderation and find an answer by yourselves.”

Jess and I froze. *Oh, wow. Sounds like she’s been overhearing our idle chatter since quite a while ago.*

Seeing our reactions, her eyes, which still retained their youthful spark despite the wrinkles surrounding them, twinkled mischievously. “The young prince Hortis often used to bring a woman with him into this place as well. Well then, I shall take my leave for now.”

Vivis vacated the area. There was the sound of the door opening and closing before the faint rustling of fabric faded into the distance.

Awkwardly, Jess lowered her gaze.

Uh, she totally didn’t need to tell us that last tidbit.

A blush bloomed on Jess’s cheek as she made an equally unnecessary declaration. “We’re not going to do anything naughty, just so you know.” Then, she dove into the book she’d received right away.

Small script in neat, calligraphic handwriting filled the pages to the brim. It didn’t look like this book was read that often because there were barely any creases or stains on the ancient paper.

“Oh!” Jess stopped flipping through the pages. Her eyes were still glued to the book as she informed me, “Look! The heading here says ‘Contract Stake.’”

I propped my front legs on the desk and peered into the book. There were characters that looked like mathematical formulas, accompanied by dense, detailed analysis. Jess read through the text astonishingly fast.

I looked up at her. “You know how to read math formulas?” I didn’t know how to decipher the advanced algebra in Mesteria.

With a wry smile, Jess shook her head. “I don’t. I’m only reading the commentary that’s written on the other parts of the pages.”

After I told her that she didn’t have to account for my reading

speed, Jess continued flipping through the book at a pace almost in tandem with her breathing in and out. Mind you, these were large pages crammed with tiny writing. I couldn't keep up at all. If she was truly able to digest the contents as she went, she had awe-inspiring speed-reading abilities.

She huffed. "Even if you butter me up, you won't get anything from me…" Her hand stilled. "Oh!" Her face was the picture of concentration. She looked as if she'd almost forgotten to breathe as only her honey-brown eyes moved swiftly and meticulously across one part of the page.

I started looking over the same section. The first thing I saw was a bolded, emphasized word with fancy marks: "Spercritica."

"Mister Newtones apparently analyzed one of the Contract Stakes he obtained with innovative techniques," Jess summarized. "His findings led him to conclude that there were originally one hundred and twenty-eight stakes. That's what's written here."

It was astounding that the man had managed to deduce the total number just by analyzing one stake. *That aside… This means a whopping one hundred and twenty-eight objects were in Mesteria that contained the unspeakable power to transform humans into mages, huh?*

Swallowing audibly, Jess continued, "Furthermore, he referred to Aristotoes's *On Magic* while he did his calculations. If, by some chance, someone finds all the Contract Stake with some kind of method and consumes them all… In theory, it will cause the world of truth and the spiritual world to approach each other to an excessive degree." Her slender finger moved to point at the word "spercritica."

I narrowed my eyes. "And spercritica is the term for that, huh?"

"Yes. Intensifying supernatural phenomena, destabilization of the world, the materialization of muddled and chaotic desires… All the phenomena listed seem to describe the current chaos in Mesteria perfectly."

I blinked. "This researcher is someone from the Dark Ages, right?"

"Yes… If I remember correctly, he should be someone from roughly two centuries ago… Look." Jess immediately opened another book and confirmed the year of Newtones's death.

"Since he was able to predict our current situation despite

being alive such a long time ago, it sounds like his conclusion is pretty trustworthy. Has he written more? Like how we could stop a spercritica?"

For a while, Jess flipped back and forth through the book. She turned to me and shook her head. "No, he doesn't go that far." Looking disappointed, she continued turning the pages.

I absentmindedly gazed at her frantic, imploring expression for a while before I called out to her. "Well, simply finding a reason is already a great achievement. You should give yourself a pat on the back."

"...Right."

"Our next task is to figure out how to stop this spercritica state, huh?"

As Jess nodded, she suddenly looked over at the clock on the desk, as if she'd realized something. "Ah, looks like our time is up. Shall we return to our room for now?"

There was only approximately one hora before noon. We had a very important ceremony scheduled for today.

We shut the book, arranged everything neatly, then left the library behind us.

On our way back, Jess told me about Newtones's death, which she had just read about.

The mage hadn't attempted to use the Contract Stake on himself; instead, he stored it away for research purposes. But then, he'd been murdered by his friend who'd wanted the stake, and it had been snatched away from him effortlessly, almost saddeningly so.

Jess changed into a formal dress in her room. She proceeded to groom my fur until it was neat and tidy. Now that we were all dressed up and presentable, we made our way to the Golden Cathedral.

The route from the palace to the Golden Cathedral was paved with stunning white marble—a pathway for the royal family's exclusive use. Together, we walked down the gentle incline that was decorated with rose bushes and sculptures.

Jess's dress was made with cream-colored fabric adorned with intricate embroidery, and it oozed subdued elegance. Its form flatteringly tightened as it reached her waist before mellowing out into a somewhat puffy, graceful skirt. The hem of her dress was long enough to cloak her shoes. Jess was a princess at the end of the day—she held herself with such dignity that it was

hard to imagine she was only sixteen.

Today was the eighth day of the second month—the birthday of Prince Shravis, who'd lost his father during the battle at the beginning of the previous month.

But it wasn't just his birthday. His coronation ceremony was also scheduled for noon today.

It was precisely four months after the death of Eavis, Shravis's grandfather. The reign of the tyrant Marquis, who'd succeeded the throne after him, had lasted only a mere two months before the Clandestine Arcanist, who Marquis had failed to kill, snatched away the late king's body. One month after the possession, Marquis's body had been eradicated alongside the wicked usurper by the tyrant's own flesh and blood.

And today, that very same person, Shravis, would sit on the throne he'd succeeded, almost as if he'd tumbled down onto it by accident.

Clear, cloudless skies soared above our heads, almost as if celebrating the young king's enthronement. But because of the spectacular view, we could also clearly see the dark green speckles polluting the uncanny blue sky.

"To think that Mister Shravis is already going to become the king..." Jess whispered. "It almost feels unreal."

I nodded. "Agreed. Too much tragedy has befallen the royal family. He must have it rough too. He lost his grandfather, uncle, and father in succession, and as if that weren't enough, now he has to govern this chaotic country."

"Yes... I'm very worried about him." Jess chewed on her bottom lip.

Jess expressed her concern, but she was in the same boat—she was the daughter of Hortis, the younger brother of the late king, meaning that she'd also lost her grandfather, father, and uncle in succession. That said, she'd only learned of her blood relatives recently, so she didn't seem too severely traumatized by her loss.

The Golden Cathedral emerged from below as we descended the elegant stone steps. It was a majestic building of obsidian black stone, and golden ornaments traced its edges, almost like a display of the royal family's authority.

The Golden Cathedral was the tomb of each generation's king, and it was also where the important rites of the royal family were held. It was essentially the heart of the royal court. During the

past few months, it had been destroyed twice: once during the sibling quarrel that had ended with Hortis's death and again during the final showdown with the Clandestine Arcanist. But both times, it had been magically restored to its former glory.

"I thought we'd have a big crowd around, but it looks like I was wrong," I commented as I scanned the cathedral's deserted surroundings.

Jess nodded. "The coronation is pretty much a private ceremony. The royal family's affairs are a secret to most of the capital citizens."

"Oh, they are?" I inclined my head. "But why?"

"The Mesterian royal court is built on the principle of secrecy. That also applies to the chosen ones who have the privilege of living in the royal capital—they will only be given information about what is absolutely necessary."

That made sense, now that I thought about it. The court was secretive to the point that outside the capital, all information about the situation inside the capital was shrouded in mystery. It wouldn't be strange if similar restrictions were placed within the capital that prevented information from spreading to people who weren't involved.

This was the first time Jess and I had ever attended a coronation. According to Jess, there were barely any opportunities for the bastions of the royal court to all assemble in one place other than the coronation ceremony. Accordingly, the king's announcement during the coronation and his subjects' statements in response played an essential part in Mesterian politics.

There were countless grave problems that the royal court had to tackle from now on. The glaring one was the contamination of the Abyssus, yes, but there were also topics like the Yethma's treatment and restoring public order. Today, the coronation would likely become a significant turning point for the royal court's policies.

Underneath the sky that had grown moldy, we continued our journey down the tranquil path toward the gigantic cathedral engulfed in silence. Shravis had likely arrived long before us and was preparing inside—I didn't spot a single soul other than us around.

Several times, Jess waved the hem of her skirt with her movement, allowing it to flutter in the air as she sent me

meaningful gazes. But like a pig, I maintained my expressionless face and only stared back into her eyes, unable to interpret what she wanted from me.

Her patience seemed to run out because she pursed her lips sullenly and stared hard at me. “It’s my first time wearing this dress. You could have at least told me what you think, you know.”

Ah, I see. So that was what her glances meant. “I described your outfit in the narration. I said you looked elegant and graceful.”

She harrumphed. “But you can speak with your own mouth now, so I want you to say it directly to me.”

“...You look elegant.”

“Is that all?” She gazed at me hopefully.

Seeing that, I gave it some thought. At the end of the day, my thoughts could basically be summed up in a single sentence: “Cutie-pie Jess, you’re killer cute!” But knowing Jess, she would likely deny that statement on the spot.

Jess interjected, “I mean, you can’t blame me for doing that. I’m not cute or anything...”

She read the narration! I knew it was futile to debate with her about this, so I intentionally refrained from making any rebuttals. When it came to having a troublesome personality, we could give each other a run for our money.

She continued, “Just so you know, this dress is special. I tailored it myself and requested Madame Wyss check the design thoroughly, ensuring it was fitting for a solemn ceremony. She even took out time from her busy schedule to teach me lots of things, such as how to color threads and magical embroidery techniques.”

That reminds me of a few times late at night when I noticed Jess was up to something just before I went to bed. She looked like she was staying up later than me, busy with some unknown project. After Queen Wyss had lost her husband, she’d been swamped with work to govern the royal court, but it sounded like she’d still made time to teach Jess magic.

As someone who had barely any vocabulary in stock for praising a girl’s outfit, I had to work my brain a little harder. “Now that you mention it, I can tell that the embroidery in your dress is fairly delicate and detailed. The thread you used has this mysterious, enchanting luster... Is it depicting roses?”

Looking somewhat delighted, Jess smiled. “Thank you! So that I could reflect all the light on the spectrum of visible light to

create a silver iridescent look, I crafted it in a multilayer film structure with layers of embroidery threads featuring gradually differing thicknesses. Unfortunately, these aren't roses, but carnations."

When Jess got all excited like the teenage girl she was, I could only describe her as cute and adorable once again. I didn't know whom she'd taken after, but the way she described things sounded a lot like a science nerd who liked to dive deep into the weeds... *But, well, that just makes her even more charming.*

I nodded to myself. "It's wonderful to be passionate about something."

"Regarding fashion, Madame Wyss is extremely knowledgeable and kind enough to teach me anything I ask about!" Elated, she clapped her hands together. "Oh, but I was the one who designed the multilayer film structure to create structural color through thin film interference by myself. I imitated the mechanism behind the elytra of scarab beetles."

"That's amazing," I praised wholeheartedly. "You came up with the idea all by yourself?"

"Yes. You were the one who opened my eyes and taught me that we can learn many things from other living organisms, Mister Pig."

Huh. I never thought that the lecture I gave her on imitating other living organisms once upon a time would come in handy for something like this. However, I knew that making her cosplay as a bunny girl back then was the right thing to do.

Jess blinked, gazing at me with innocent eyes. "*Cospray?*" she echoed.

I glanced at her and changed the topic. "I must say, you really love studying, huh?"

Hearing that, Jess nodded enthusiastically. "I do. I love studying so much that it might only rank one place below you."

Just like Jess wasn't used to being called cute, I wasn't used to someone directly expressing their affection for me. My piggy mouth was talking before I knew it, making a statement I didn't actually believe in. "It's one place below me? You sure you want to rank it that low?"

Jess stared hard at me. Then, she turned away sulkily and looked forward. Her strides quickened, and she almost left me behind. I ran as quickly as possible with my tiny pig trotters to catch up with her.

“Speaking of clothes,” I began, “is it really okay for me to show up stark naked?”

The kindhearted Jess looked over her shoulder, willing to respond. Her eyes were directed to my plump and rotund body.

My pig body was covered with pink bristles from head to toe. Since she brushed me every day during her baths, I looked fresh and clean like a plush toy, but it didn’t change the fact that I was literally in my birthday suit.

She paused before finally saying, “I think it should be fine because you’re cute.”

I’m not cute, though…

Some time into our silly banter, we arrived at the Golden Cathedral. As people associated with the royal family, we entered from the rear entrance.

The cathedral hall was a vast and somber chamber. A lofty ceiling that demonstrated the royal family’s prestige. A ground covered with marble tiles of various colors that combined to make geometric patterns. Stone coffins along the walls where the sacred remains of the previous sovereigns rested.

We walked past the altar where Vatis was enshrined. Then, we went along the wall, marching in front of the coffins until we were standing to attention beside the throne.

The golden throne was still empty. Wyss, the new king’s mother, stood on the other side of the throne across from us. She was adorned in a tasteful, dignified dress with a white theme, looking youthful and enchanting. However, her body was notably gaunt, possibly a remnant of the time when she’d been held captive by the Clandestine Arcanist. Yet her delicate frame also further accentuated her bountiful chest—of course, I couldn’t care less about that. *So please, Jess, don’t give me that look.*

Wyss bowed slightly in greeting toward Jess, who’d just arrived. Jess bowed in return. With this, all the direct associates of the royal family had assembled, apart from the king himself. Since I was likely seen as Jess’s pet, this would mean that, including the king-to-be Shravis, the royal family only had three members.

For over a century, the royal family had depended on two factors to govern an entire nation: the authority of their divine blood inherited from Vatis and a rigorous policy of secrecy. It likely wasn’t an overstatement to say that these factors had

brought them just as much tragedy as it had glory, leading to their sorrowful state today.

The extensive hall in the Golden Cathedral was smothered by utter, stifling silence.

Not counting the three of us, six other people were present. Unlike us, they faced the throne and were positioned in the direction of the front entrance from the throne.

One person stood slightly apart from the other five, and I could never mistake him for anyone else. He was tall, he was lithe, he was blond, and he was a handsome hunk—he was Naut, the leader of the Liberators. With a scowl, he stood leaning on one leg with a hand on his hip, waiting for the ceremony to begin. I didn't have to be a mage to read his mind. He was likely thinking something along the lines of, "This is so annoying. Hurry up and get this over with already."

What I didn't recognize were the remaining five. *Who are they?* All of them wore the same white robe and were waiting on one knee while bowing reverently. When I observed them closely, I realized that one of them was somewhat familiar. Long, straight silver strands—it was Vivis, the librarian.

Now that I think about it, she mentioned that she was "leaving for now" earlier in the library. Why is a librarian present in a ceremony like this?

Jess communicated to me silently, <The five people over there should be the five elders. From what I remember, even among the privileged classes, they are ranked at the very top.>

<<The privileged classes?>> I repeated quizzically, marking the narration with double angle brackets to indicate it was a question.

Jess dipped her chin minutely in a nod. <Yes. It refers to a group of people among the capital citizens who have been granted special privileges. They are exempt from some of their obligations and have less strict restrictions on their magic. They also don't have to abort male children or hand in their female children. Specifically, the people in these classes are those involved in five branches of work that require sophisticated expertise: commanding officers, nursers, artificers, intelligence officers, and higher librarians. Each profession's branch has an elder leading them, and collectively, they are the five elders.>

Her explanation was eloquent. Vivis was probably the elder of the higher librarians in that case.

During our wait until midday, Jess gave me a thorough rundown of the system in the capital.

Most of the capital citizens consisted of Yethma who'd overcome their trial to enter the royal capital on their own merits and their chabirones. They weren't permitted to raise their own children, and their families only lasted one generation. However, citizens involved in a special handful of professions were exempt from their obligations because they were vital for maintaining the government. They would pass on their duties to their children and grandchildren within the royal capital and were even permitted to adopt children.

The professions considered essential to the royal court were the five privileged classes Jess had explained to me earlier. Their titles were mostly self-explanatory.

The commanding officers were the superior officers within the royal court's army. They were entrusted with the direct management of the military according to the king's wishes. They played a vital part in the royal court's military strength.

The nursers were citizens entrusted with the management of Yethma. With only a handful of exceptions, the girls born in the capital would enter their care before these infants could even release their first cry. Then, they would be reared as Yethma in an enclosed area in the capital's underground. The nursers were most definitely a vital part of this country since they were involved in the Yethma system that formed the foundation of this nation's government.

The higher librarians were citizens who managed documents, archives, and the legal system of the royal court. Within the current royal court that upheld a meticulous policy of secrecy, you couldn't afford to make light of those involved in information, especially information to do with untampered history and the law.

The artificers were craftspeople who inherited the royal court's magitech. Whether it be the ristae distributed all over Mesteria, the Yethma collars, or the enchanted weapons utilized by the royal court's army, they were in charge of producing them all, playing a vital part in Mesteria's technology.

Lastly, the intelligence officers dealt with threats to the royal court's government and secrecy. It was a job that involved almost everything imaginable, whether it be erasing memories or assassination. They were essential to protecting the royal

court's secrets.

The elders of these five classes had assembled here and were waiting for the new king's enthronement. Even among the privileged classes, they received extra special treatment as the king's close attendants. According to Jess, they had no restrictions on their magic.

The mages residing in the capital had no collars. In exchange, they would be fitted with silver rings, also called blood rings, on the aorta—near their heart—that pumped out blood to the rest of their bodies.

Yethma collars sealed away their wearers' magic and sense of ego, but the blood rings' seal was only limited to magic. To sum it up, the capital citizens weren't allowed to perform magic above a certain limit enforced on them, meaning they were half-mages in practice. This system preserved the asymmetrical balance of power between the royal family and the capital citizens. It was also an insurance that prevented revolts, and even the privileged classes weren't exempt from these blood rings.

That, however, didn't apply to the five elders present. Out of consideration for the demands of their professional duties—where they had to utilize their powers to the fullest—and as a sign of faith, Shravis had apparently removed their blood rings personally after Marquis's passing. Though the elders' mana pools were inferior, the five of them were allowed to use magic freely, like the royal family. This was likely an unprecedented privilege.

If you looked at it from another perspective, however, it was a sign that the current royal family had declined to the point that it couldn't function properly without going to such extremes.

After Jess had finished her explanation, I remained sitting obediently like a pet and waited for the new king's arrival. Naut would change his posture from time to time, but the five elders were as still as statues, as if demonstrating their allegiance.

Noon arrived. The clear and sonorous toll of a bell began resounding throughout the hall.

At long last, Shravis walked out unhurriedly from the recesses of the cathedral.

One month had passed since we'd reclaimed the capital from the Clandestine Arcanist. During this period, Shravis had been devoting all his time and energy to tackling affairs such as the war's aftermath, handling the royal court's secret operations,

and magic training. We barely had any chances even to see him.

It was the first time in a long time that I got to see him in person, and something about his atmosphere seemed different from how I'd remembered him. Was it because of the majestic purple robe he wore? …*No,* I realized. *That's not all.*

His tightly curled hair had grown out to a relatively long length, possibly because he hadn't cut it in a while. His bushy brows drew straight, unmoving lines, almost as if emphasizing his serious nature. Furthermore, his body, which already had a sturdy build to begin with, had become more toned, to the point that I could make out his brawn through his loose outfit. On top of all that, even his aura felt different, which might be the fruit of his magical training. He exuded a strength that prickled at my skin, reminding me of his father, Marquis, and his grandfather, Eavis.

Shravis already held himself with the authority of a king. The moment I realized that, I suddenly felt a little worried. Did Jess and I really have the right to be here?

I spotted Jess swallowing visibly next to me.

In a steady, unperturbed pace, Prince Shravis walked all the way in front of the throne. He then turned around to face the six lined up on the front entrance side and stood with his head held high.

The five capital citizens remained kneeling and deepened their bows. Naut was still standing, but he crossed his arms behind his back. It was probably his way of tentatively showing respect.

When the low groan of the bell finally ceased, Shravis slowly sat on the throne.

Absolute silence fell over us, heavy and oppressive. I almost got worried that my pork stomach might start grumbling out of anxiety.

A cool, deep voice solemnly announced, "With this, I have succeeded the throne from my father. From this moment forth, I am the sixth king of Mesteria."



Roughly a hundred and thirty years had passed since Vatis had founded the royal court. The status of king, which had been passed down from parent to child without allowing for any collateral family, had ended up on the shoulders of the royal family's last child barely half a year after the passing of Eavis, the fourth king. The weight of the throne now belonged to a boy who'd only just turned nineteen today.

Straightening his back assertively, Shravis looked over the handful of ceremony participants. "We all know the circumstances that led to my coronation—there is no need for any congratulations. Though my succession was all too swift, I ask all of you, my subjects, to continue supporting our royal government."

The five capital citizens bowed so low that their foreheads touched the ground.

Shravis continued, "I would like to take the opportunity of my coronation to review and affirm our government's policies henceforth." Shravis stroked the throne's armrest somewhat obsessively while clearing his throat several times.

What were they going to do about the mayhem in this world? How were they going to restore public order that the Clandestine Arcanist had utterly wrecked? And…how were they going to liberate the Yethma?

The essential groundwork to decide their direction going forward would be done right here, right now.

It was then that Shravis said, "Be at ease, everyone."

Hearing that prompt, the five elders lifted their heads, though they still knelt. They were nothing alike in looks, but all shared the same determined, solemn expression.

"As all of you are already aware, Mesteria is facing a crisis like never before," Shravis stated matter-of-factly. "A mage survivor from the Dark Ages has pushed the royal court to the brink of collapse. It was only four months ago that grandfather succumbed to his fatal curse. My father, who succeeded him, was robbed of his own body by the same mage, and I was forced to flee from the capital. We nearly lost the royal court for good."

Shravis's emerald eyes shifted onto the six people in front of him one by one. "Before all else, I must voice my gratitude. Even when the most atrocious mage usurped the throne, the five of you feigned obedience but resolutely didn't give him your true loyalty—you defended the order and secrets of the royal court to

the very end. And I must also thank the Liberators, who have given me your aid and fought to reclaim the royal capital by my side."

The six responded with a collective bow.

"However," Shravis continued, "our strife is not over yet. Peculiar phenomena are occurring all over Mesteria at an alarming frequency. Reality itself is distorting, magic has become unstable, and order itself has been disturbed. There are only two paths available to us. Either we restore this world to its former state, or if that proves impossible—we will have to find a way to restore order in this new world."

Shravis ended his statement there. Pin-drop silence followed.

With his spine still straightened with dignity, Shravis turned to face the five elders. "Vivis. What is your opinion as the elder of the higher librarians? Is there any hope of turning the tables on our difficult situation?"

At the young king's query, the elderly woman with gray hair raised her head, which bore a kindly expression. "Lady Jess is investigating the origin of these peculiar phenomena. Though I am admittedly unfamiliar with this field of knowledge, I am assisting her from the sidelines whenever I can. As for whether there are any solutions, I believe my lady should be able to ascertain that in the near future."

"I see. I will leave the matter in your capable hands." Shravis gazed at Vivis, then in our direction for confirmation.

Due to the secrecy of the royal court, it was always short on hands. Even when it was a pressing investigation, if secrets to do with magic were involved, only a select few higher librarians—including Vivis—could likely delve into the matter. Either Wyss had to squeeze time out between her work while borrowing their help, or Jess had to shoulder the burden—they were the only ones up to the task.

When we nodded, the ghost of a smile curled Shravis's lips. He cleared his throat before he continued, "In any case, we, the royal court, must maintain our authority and initiative in this country. Concurrently, we must make our people know that we are the ones holding the reins. Three stages will be essential to achieving that."

As he explained, he lifted three fingers one by one. "Firstly, we must exterminate the survivors of the Nothen Faction that revolted against us. Secondly, we must revive the lost order and

peace of the nation. Thirdly, we must recover the support of our citizens.” This was when he folded two fingers and held up a single finger again. “Sito, what is your take on the first stage as the elder of the commanding officers? Do you think it is possible to weed out every last member of the Nothen Faction completely? I want you to announce your candid opinion in this setting officially.”

A man with shortly trimmed black hair lifted his face. With a small, black beard creeping onto the tip of his jaw, Sito was a man in his prime who had a stern aura. A simple look at his neck and arms told me that he’d tempered his body thoroughly like a steel weapon. He likely didn’t stop at giving directions to his troops—he must have thrown himself into the midst of battle countless times beside his soldiers.

“The Nothen Faction have lost their supreme commander and greatest weapon. By now, they don’t even qualify as a threat,” Sito said. The impression I got from his tone was that of a responsible and honorable character. “They are a gathering of ruffians and thugs. Even calling them a ‘faction’ is an insult to that term. The problem, however, is locating them. They have begun mingling with ordinary citizens and residing in their midst. It’s evident that it will take time to eradicate them all.”

Despite my initial impression, he treated people he perceived as enemies like pests that ought to be exterminated—probably a testament to how much he’d immersed himself in the world of battle.

Shravis inclined his head. “I understand. I would like to assist you as well, but if my duties as king increase, it will accordingly make it more difficult for me to head out to the front line or places where I am necessary. I ask that the army persist in your efforts to eradicate them.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Shravis’s eyes shifted from the man’s black hair to the adjacent woman. “Now, for the second stage, reviving lost order... We are attempting to diverge from our traditional methods, but it appears that Liedes, the elder of the nursers, has some reservations about that.”

The slim woman addressed had stiff, bristly blonde hair tied into one bunch. White strands were mixed within—she looked like she was in her fifties. She appeared rational with her clearly defined features, but her mimetic muscles were unmoving, like a

mask. I couldn't even sense a hint of emotion from her outward appearance.

I was certainly interested in what she would say as one of the people involved in the most fundamental part of the Yethma system. It seemed that Naut shared the same opinion. Though there weren't any ripples in his expression, he inclined his head and pointed his ear at the woman.

Liedes asked, "Is this perhaps about how we have ceased distributing Yethma?"

Shravis nodded. Casting down her eyes slightly, Liedes continued, "I have no intentions of voicing any objections against your policies, my king. But if I were to be honest, I believe it will not be sustainable to maintain your ambiguous attitude."

What made Shravis different from the previous kings, above all else, was the fact that he was willing to listen to the beliefs of the Liberators and was trying to end the Yethma system. The "shipment" of Yethma had been temporarily suspended during the Clandestine Arcanist's reign, and Shravis had let it stay that way.

A criticizing note weaved into Liedes's tone. "It is a simple calculation. The Yethma, of which we have sold over a hundred every year, will suddenly stop being available on the market. At this rate, there will be an excess of girls with magical talent in the capital. In addition to that, the murder of Yethma is now prohibited. However, the current situation doesn't allow us to call them back to the capital, meaning roughly a thousand Yethma have been left to roam free in the wild. Your Majesty, what are your plans for them?"

Liedes's statement made her sound as if she were counting sheep, not people, and Naut looked blatantly displeased. But he held it in and didn't utter a word.

Faced with that question, Shravis placed a hand on his chin. It appeared that he couldn't give her an answer right away.

The royal family had decided to put an end to the brutal treatment of Yethma. It was likely a prudent move. However, there was the problem of what they should do with the Yethma already in existence. There were the "pre-distribution" Yethma between the ages of only a few months to eight years old who were being nurtured in the capital underground. Then there were the "employed" Yethma between the ages of eight and sixteen who were working as servants around Mesteria. There

were roughly a thousand Yethma in each group, making it a total of approximately two thousand. What should be done about them?

Until now, the royal court had kept the numbers of mages in Mesteria to a manageable degree by enforcing a brutal journey on the Yethma's sixteenth birthday—they had to reach the capital on their own merits while evading the many hunters out for their lives, and this trial had effectively culled their numbers. If the royal court was going to allow these girls to survive from now on, though, they would have to figure out where these Yethma could go.

After mulling over the matter for a while, Shravis spoke up cautiously. "On the debate of our treatment of Yethma, including the technical problems involved, I must consider it urgently, yet also with the discretion it deserves. My apologies for being unable to give you an answer right now, but you have my appreciation for your advice."

Liedes bowed deeply before raising her head again. "With all due respect, may I make one more statement?"

"Very well. You may speak your mind."

Having received Shravis's encouragement, Liedes placed her right hand—which had a golden ring on it—against her mouth before clearing her throat. She straightened her back and opened her mouth. "My king, your open-minded approach is something I highly identify with as someone responsible for raising little children. However, I must request that you never forget the reason that spurred even a wise monarch like King Eavis to stubbornly maintain the Yethma system."

The thin lips on her rational features were pressed tightly together before she continued, "The concept of Yethma was a necessary evil created to end the Dark Ages. It was also a revolutionary system that didn't just allow us to preserve the heritage of mages—which is as priceless as it is dangerous—simultaneously, it provided the masses with submissive, pliant slaves to serve as outlets for negative emotions and undesirable tasks. If we end the Yethma system, the number of dangerous mages in this world will dramatically multiply. The people who have lost their outlet will likely end up imposing their injustices on each other instead."

I remembered Eavis making a similar statement. *"As long as humans exist, there will always be sacrificial lambs who draw the*

short straw." No matter how we felt about the matter, this was the truth that this nation had learned through its history.

Liedes's speech slowed with emphasis. "This is my earnest plea, Your Majesty. No matter what you decide, please avoid the second coming of the Dark Ages at all costs."

Shravis stole a glance at Naut. The hero of the Liberators didn't display any outward anger—in fact, he wore an impassive, blank mask. But there could be no louder declaration of Naut's scalding fury.

The new king replied, "Of course. I hope to continue our debate over this matter with all our hearts and souls."

Ending the debate there, Shravis shifted his gaze to the person beside Liedes. After a pause, he said, "Now then, regarding our treatment of Yethma, we must solve a challenging technical problem first. Ganes, I believe you are the most suitable for explaining it as the elder of the artificers."

The person who lifted his face was an elderly man with a glossy shaved head. The corners of his lips were downturned stoically, and you could feel the temperamental aura often attributed to craftsmen reeling off him. He had an ample storage of fat all over his body, but the thickness and contours of his arms displayed his toned muscles too. Since his job description involved crafting enchanted wares such as weapons, ristae, and collars, it probably involved a lot of manual labor, similar to a blacksmith.

Ganes politely replied, "Because King Eavis and King Marquis have passed away successively, we have lost the traditional method of removing Yethma collars, which is the one-of-a-kind *Cæg* spell passed down through the generations of the royal family."

Marquis, the last person who had known how to remove the collars, had perished in the Abyssus before he had the chance to pass that enchantment on to his son. At this rate, even if we did decide to liberate the Yethma, it was unfeasible in practice.

At the skill level of Shravis and Wyss, as well as the current level of magitech, it was impossible to remove the collars already equipped on the Yethma. We wouldn't be able to release these girls from their slave collars that sealed away their magic and sense of ego.

The artificer elder continued, "Us artificers can manufacture collars using the molds that Lady Vatis left behind. Attaching the

collars to others is also possible with the royal family's aid. However, I am afraid we have now lost every practical method of removing the collars other than beheadings."

Shravis nodded solemnly. "In summary, even if we can increase the Yethma population, we cannot decrease it, which creates a rather troubling conundrum." His emerald eyes turned to Naut.

The huntsman stared right back into Shravis's eyes. "Oh? I can talk now?"

"Yes, Naut." Shravis inclined his head. "I request that you express your opinion here as the leader of the Liberators. Speak your mind."

Furrowing his eyebrows, Naut said in a low voice, "What we want to say hasn't changed one bit. Stop this rubbish Yethma system at once. Take off those collars." His faction was evidently a single-issue party.

The five elders stared intently in Naut's direction. After all, the preceding discussion had just made it clear that Naut's demand was unattainable.

However, nothing could daunt the hero of the Liberators. "We united to liberate the Yethma, who are being treated unjustly. That'll never change—not in the past, present, or future." Sapphire eyes filled with resolute determination were fixed on Shravis. "During the war with the Nothen Faction, we chose to enter an alliance with the royal court. But that was because we deemed that the Yethma's situation would only get worse under their reign—and because we saw at least a hint of empathy and willingness to meet us halfway in you, Shravis. If you do not intend to realize what we set out to do, that will mark the end of our alliance."

It felt as if the temperature in the cathedral fell with his harsh words.

That was when a frosty voice rang out. "Please just consider this as me playing devil's advocate, but I am afraid there is something I don't understand."

Everyone turned around to face the man with straight, shoulder-length golden hair that was impeccably neat. It was the elder of the intelligence officers who had yet to make any statements. Though he wore a composed expression, he was shrouded in a piercing aura that reminded me of a knife's edge. I noted that he was raising one hand slightly. There was a golden

ring on his middle finger.

That was when I realized something. I'd seen the same object on Vivis's and Liedes's hands—all five elders had the same golden ring on their right middle fingers. *Is it some kind of special symbol given to the five elders?* I wondered.

"Meminis, I would love your input as well," Shravis encouraged.

The man's pale blue eyes, reminiscent of a blizzard, glinted coolly. "Our greatest enemy is no more. The royal court's army should be sufficient in terms of military strength. I fear that...I cannot see the purpose of maintaining an alliance of equal status with a gathering of mere commoners who foist an unreasonable demand on us." I caught a glimpse of a cold and unmoving heart, almost like an icy rock, hidden behind his calm tone.

Shravis inclined his head slightly, indicating that Meminis's opinion was heard. "Perhaps I have neglected to give all of you a proper explanation about the reason behind our alliance. To begin with, above anything else, the Liberators were willing to assist us when our nation was on the brink of collapse, even if it was partly to serve their own agendas. We owe a debt of gratitude toward them, and they are my cherished friends—that reason played a large part too, but of course, I didn't decide to form an alliance solely based on that. There is one more imperative cause that spurred me on."

Meminis dutifully waited for Shravis to finish his speech.

The new king explained, "During this disorder, the Liberators formed an intimate communication network across the entire nation—their splendid capabilities were something to behold. Influential people with admirable characters in every corner of Mesteria came together under the ambition to end the injustice running rampant in our society, and they expressed their support of the Liberators throughout the war."

I'd heard that this had been a plan cooked up by Sanon, a black pig who'd teleported to Mesteria like I had. Using Naut's reputation as a hero, he'd undergone a grassroots-like movement in all parts of Mesteria, cultivating an influence that had a greater effect on the royal court than pure military strength alone.

Shravis continued, "The Liberators invested every effort into our joint battle against the Nothen Faction, and they have the

overwhelming support of our people. Conversely, we, the royal court, may possess authority, but we lack the people's support. This alliance isn't just necessary for the reasons I have mentioned, but also for the third stage I brought up earlier: recovering the support of our citizens."

"I see... With such considerations, my king, I have no objections." That was all Meminis said before he lowered his eyes.

Naut spared a fleeting glance in the elder's direction before speaking up, looking like Meminis's statements didn't bother him in the slightest. "Before he died, Marquis apparently mentioned that there are other methods to remove Yethma collars. I demanded the royal court investigate the details." Naut paused. "Can I bring up this topic again here?"

Nodding, Shravis raised his hand slightly to cut Naut off gently. "I shall take the initiative to make the announcement." He then turned to face the five elders once more. "In response to the Liberators' appeal, I have asked mother to prioritize researching a way to remove the collars above everything else. Her search has yielded some results."

Wait, she was doing what*?* My eyes widened. Jess and I looked at each other. It seemed that she hadn't a clue either.

Shravis turned to face his mother, who was standing at attention to one side. "Mother, may you do the honors?"

Wyss stepped slightly forward ever so slowly. "For roughly the past month, I have been sorting through my late husband's possessions. He hid most of them from the Clandestine Arcanist's prying eyes, and they remained untouched. Among them were articles that were only passed down to the kings of each generation. One of them had a very intriguing account about an artifact called the 'First Collar.'"

I've never heard any of this before, I thought with some degree of confusion. Naut, however, didn't look particularly surprised. He must have known from the very beginning.

Wyss said, "The Yethma collars are enchanted items that Lady Vatis personally developed. The very first collar she created was, exactly like it sounds, the First Collar. This artifact is concealed somewhere within Mesteria. According to the description,using the blood of the royal family on the First Collar can destroy all the collars."

"Destroy all the collars?" Liedes, the nurser elder, immediately

raised her voice in protest. Then, catching herself, she inhaled deeply. “Pardon my rudeness, but if you do something like that without preparation, it would mean unleashing over a thousand mages into our world, which is already filled with terrible chaos.”

Wyss and Shravis patiently listened to her statement. That was when Ganes, the artificer elder kneeling next to Liedes, added his own opinion. “That would be dangerous. The rules of magic are already unsteady due to the influence of the Abyssus. Even ristae that have been meticulously calibrated are spontaneously activating throughout these lands. Additionally, we, the capital citizens, are paying utmost attention so that our magic doesn’t go berserk.”

He continued gravely, “Giving an entire thousand inexperienced mages free rein over their magic in the current circumstances…would be out of the question, I believe. Even if you consider crafting more collars and sealing them again, it would be almost impossible to monitor all the girls without omission even once after they have left our management.”

Shravis accepted their opinions with a purely peaceful attitude. “Of course, I am aware of the problems that may arise. I am not declaring that we should use the First Collar immediately. There are plenty of things we must establish before we can commit to such a decision, such as finding ways to restore the world from its chaotic state, taking measures so that we don’t have an excess of mages, and creating systems where we can collar those who abuse their power. But in any event, it is in our best interest to secure a method to remove the collars, is it not?”

He has a point, I thought. Though it was sad that Jess and I had been left out of the loop, he’d likely made the correct decision as the king. While keeping those he knew would object in the dark, Shravis had privately investigated a way to remove the collars before reporting his findings without delay—this would be a display of earnestness for the Liberators, with whom the royal court wished to maintain their alliance by any means necessary.

“Well then, my king,” the intelligence officer elder, Meminis, began in a subdued, distant voice, “have you located its hiding place?”

Shravis slowly shook his head. “Regrettably, there weren’t any clear descriptions detailing its whereabouts.”

Oh boy, this again? I whined in my mind, but it was probably

Vatis's personal fetish, so I had to roll with it. She must have presented hints about its location with a cryptic message just like before.

After a pause, Shravis announced, "That said, the Liberators have already begun their search with a human wave tactic, using what little clues we have."

Ganes, the artificer elder, stroked his bald head in surprise. "They are already investigating?" He hesitated. "You mentioned clues, Your Majesty, but is it all right to provide this information to people of the lower classes?"

Shravis's response blindsided everyone present. "Indeed. After all, it is a nursery rhyme that everyone is familiar with."

The interior of the Golden Cathedral, which was about to grow heated with debate, returned to deathly silence.

I blinked. *Nursery rhyme?* When I peered up, I spotted the sparkle of curiosity only limited to Jess's eyes in contrast to her stoic expression.

After looking at the faces of everyone present one by one, Shravis finally shattered the stillness. "The clue that indicates the location of the First Collar is the nursery rhyme titled 'The Chain Song.'"

Once the coronation ceremony was over, Jess and I rushed back to her private quarters. Even though she'd dressed beautifully for the day, she took off her dress and flung it onto her bed before hurriedly changing back into her everyday clothes. Then, she fetched a book and returned to my side.

Just in case you were wondering, I'd described the scene as if I'd watched Jess while she undressed, but naturally, I hadn't actually been looking at her. While Jess had been changing in her bedroom, I, being a gentleman, had waited in the adjacent living room. When I'd peered into her bedroom afterward, I'd observed that she'd abandoned her dress on her bed and had come to a natural conclusion.

No, my latest personal hobby isn't pricking up my sliced and pickled mimiga *ears with my eyes closed while fantasizing about Jess changing her clothes. And no, I didn't have the thought that, "Hey, you know what, picturing the scene can actually be more fun than seeing it with my own eyes because it leaves room for my imagination to work with." I really didn't have such thoughts—cross my heart.*

“You are *such* a pervert,” Jess huffed.

Feeling euphoric at her comment, I clambered onto the sofa like always. Jess joined me and opened the book on her lap.

This was the optimal posture we’d arrived at for a pig and a human girl to peruse a book together. Here, I could observe Jess’s legs whenever I wished to, and Jess would occasionally stroke my back with her free hand.

“Here it is, look.” Jess pointed at the page she stopped at. “This is ‘The Chain Song.’”

It turned out to be a children’s picture book. On the page was pastel-colored artwork of animals in half-hearted cartoon proportions that left a lot to be desired dancing merrily together.

The nursery rhyme’s verses were written on the two-page spread in large script.

The rusty chain leads on to far, far away,
Walk out of the jail, there you will see the chain trail, to the graveyard it paves the way.
The first ring breaks, allowing the mouse to flee,
Into the pot it goes, boiling and simmering slow, the mouse is dead, so mote it be.
The second ring breaks, allowing the fox to flee,
Down the chimney it falls, roasted right to the gall, the fox is dead, so mote it be.
The third ring breaks, allowing the brown bear to flee,
Onto the tree it climbs, until the sky strikes it down in time, the brown bear is dead, so mote it be.
The fourth ring breaks, allowing the —— to flee,
Among the people it weaves, brushing by your sleeves, right next to you the —— lives, so mote it be.

I frowned. “The verses are pretty ominous… It talks about a jail, graveyard, and dying animals.”

Jess tilted her head. “You think so? My impression is that descriptions like these are quite common in fairy tales and nursery rhymes.”

“Huh, that’s true. Maybe the most brutal and blunt words are also the easiest to digest, making it easier for children to understand,” I theorized while mulling over the rhyme. I then pointed out what bothered me above everything else. “Hey, what’s this redacted part that should be enough to fit a word or

two on these last two lines? You can't recite the rhyme like this."

"You're meant to insert any word you feel like when you sing it," Jess explained. "For example, you could do *allowing the demon to flee*~." Solely for the verse, Jess sang it properly with a melody and rhythm.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. "Oh? You can sing it, Jess?"

"Yes, of course. It's a famous song."

"Okay then, could you sing the rhyme from the beginning to the end?"

"Sure, I don't mind!" Jess cleared her throat, sucked in a deep breath, then...averted her gaze from me before exhaling just like that.

I blinked. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing, I'm just, um..." She smiled shyly as her cheeks gained a dust of pink. "I feel somewhat embarrassed singing in front of you, Mister Pig."

"But from what I heard just now, you're not tone-deaf, are you?" I asked. "I don't think there's anything to be embarrassed about. Plus, you've got a lovely voice."

"I don't think my voice is lovely or anything..." It was Jess's bad habit to shoot down any compliments she received instantly. "Ah, sorry." She hesitated. "But when you say it's nice, I feel more pressure, and it's even tougher to work up the courage to sing. I'm sure you know what I mean."

That makes sense. "Yeah, I see where you're coming from. My bad." I nodded. "I was only curious what sort of song it was, so you don't have to force yourself to sing. The lyrics are all the materials I need for my deduction."

Shravis's explanation during the coronation ceremony had been crystal clear: This nursery rhyme indicated the location of the First Collar.

It apparently dated back to all the way before the Dark Ages, so I suspected that Vatis had left behind clues to match the rhyme. She had united Mesteria and established the royal court approximately 130 years ago. According to Jess, the woman had developed the Yethma collars after that. If Vatis had truly left clues behind, she must have created them between the founding of the royal court and her death roughly 110 years ago—sometime during those twenty years.

Days were short during winter, but a glance outside the window told me we had time until the sun sank beneath the

horizon. Today was Shravis's birthday, and Wyss had invited us to join them for dinner. However, the dinner would start somewhat late because the king and his mother were on a tight schedule. I could thoroughly contemplate the matter until then.

Thinking that, I looked up at Jess. "What do you think? Have you noticed anything after looking at these verses?"

Jess hummed pensively. "It's mentioned that the chain trail leads all the way from the jail to the graveyard. This part stands out to me. Is it indicating some kind of route?"

"I thought the same thing. The jail is the starting point, and if you follow the 'chain,' you'll arrive at the graveyard, the goal—the hiding place of the First Collar. That's one way to interpret it."

Jess's finger traced the boundary of the artwork featuring the dancing animals. "In that case, would that mean the rest of the lyrics are irrelevant?"

I considered her question for a while. "No, I don't think that's the case. Since it's mentioned that the 'nursery rhyme' indicates the location, in the scenario that the rest of the song isn't significant at all… How do I put this? It would feel sacrilegious if it were a piece of art. On top of that, I'm sure you've got tons of jails and graveyards scattered across the entirety of Mesteria. It would be unreasonable for Vatis to demand that we narrow it down without any other leads. Of course, if there's a jail out there with a profound connection to some sort of chain or an iconic jail that comes to mind immediately if you hear the word, you could make a case for that argument."

"Hmm…" Jess shook her head. "I'm drawing a blank."

Hearing that, I cast my eyes down at the picture book. If I wasn't imagining things, the animals dancing amicably together seemed to have somewhat hollow expressions on their faces. "Okay, then, let's suppose that the rest of the song also has clues for now and entertain that possibility. It counts first, then second, and so on, meaning it might be a message telling us to go to several places."

I recalled how we'd taken a sculpture tour around the capital to solve the riddle of a certain perverted middle-aged dude who tended to saunter around in his birthday suit. One of the lines in his riddle had been "look for two little fruits that are rather slight." Perhaps there were metaphorical descriptions in our new puzzle as well.

For some reason, Jess looked at me with glacial eyes. "Yes.

They were what we found after using eyes as our guide. I remember."

Right, that was part of the perverted dude's message too. If you followed a sculpture featuring a well-endowed woman's line of sight, you would arrive at the sculpture of a girl with a small chest. Behind the girl's back were paths that spread out like wings, and going up the left one led us to the fountain we sought. In summary, it was the type of riddle that required you to go down a route while relying on landmarks. Maybe a taste for riddle rallies ran in the royal family's blood.

Lowering my gaze from Jess's chest region, I focused on the verses again. "Assuming that's the case, we can't get anywhere unless we find the first place mentioned… Let's see… The mouse flees… It went into the pot, then boiled and simmered slowly to its death…" I frowned. "It's going to be challenging to pinpoint the place from just this."

Jess nodded. "I think that might be why Mister Shravis chose to rely on the Liberators. After all, they might eventually find something that matches the description if they search through the jails in all kinds of settlements individually."

"Yeah." Just after I said that, a thought occurred to me. "Hey, I know it's a famous nursery rhyme and all, but was it *really* wise to tell the Liberators the hints to the whereabouts of the First Collar? We might be in for mayhem if someone finds it ahead of us."

After hesitating for a while, Jess lowered her voice somewhat. "From Mister Shravis's perspective, that's probably an acceptable outcome as well."

I blinked. "What?"

"Based on the description Madame Wyss found, only the royal family's blood can activate the First Collar and release the Yethma. Other than us, no one can release the Yethma collars of their own accord. Even in the scenario where someone else discovers the First Collar, in the end, they will still need the royal family's approval to use it."

I see. Still, there's one more problem… "But what if someone finds it ahead of us and hides it elsewhere? We won't be able to liberate the Yethma then."

Jess faltered even more this time before she replied, "This is just my guess, but I have the feeling that Madame Wyss and Mister Shravis wouldn't mind even if that outcome comes to pass

by some chance."

Oh. No wonder Jess hesitated so much before answering me. "Now that you mention it, it's true that we and the Liberators are the ones who wish for the Yethma's freedom, not the royal court."

The Yethma system was convenient for the royal court—it provided a steady supply of pliant slaves who wouldn't complain no matter what undesirable things were forced upon them, and it also helped preserve the mage race. The royal court had proactively maintained this injustice to stabilize their society while ensuring their kind didn't die out.

Jess nodded, conflicted. "Yes. Furthermore, by passing on this information to the Liberators, in the unlikely event that the First Collar goes missing, the royal court can pin the blame on them instead. Mister Naut and all his comrades are aware of that and are likely handling this information with considerable discretion."

That makes sense. I nodded to myself. *The Liberators are employing the human wave tactic, but it's not like Naut and the executive officer need to tell their subordinates of lower ranks about the artifact that the nursery rhyme leads to. The leaders can just make their lackeys search for places that match the description.*

"Looks like Shravis has become quite the tactician," I commented.

Jess shook her head slowly. "No, I believe Madame Wyss was the one who came up with this plan. She has been supporting the royal court from the shadows ever since King Eavis's reign, so she must be extremely capable… Not to mention how incredibly clever she is."

Though I hadn't witnessed Wyss's shrewdness in action, that was the impression I vaguely had of her as well. *I don't know how to describe it, but that dazzling, well-endowed sunflower mama always has her wits about her, and you can't let your guard down. She's got this aura that reminds me of Hortis and Sanon—she's likely many levels smarter than us. My gut tells me that I mustn't make an enemy of her.*

There was a time when we'd lied to Wyss to fish out the location of the indecent cavern from her, and back then, she'd almost exposed our secret plot. I'd hurriedly suggested that it might help nurture the relationship between Shravis and Jess, and it was only then that I'd managed to trick her. *And because I had to resort to that, Jess was extremely miffed at me…*

An unimpressed voice rained down on me. “A dazzling sunflower, hmm? Well, *sorry* for being a violet hiding in the shadows.”

When I raised my head, I saw Jess folding her arms in front of her chest and looking at me. Evidently, she was extremely miffed.

Uh, I’m not so depraved that I’d get raunchy thoughts about my friend’s mother, so you can rest assured. Promise.

The royal family members were pitifully few, but the palace they lived in was pointlessly spacious. As we walked down a long corridor, I gazed at the uncanny night sky packed to the brim with stars.

Our destination was the great hall—soon, the birthday party of the new king, Shravis, would be held there. Saying that she ought to dress for the occasion, Jess had changed back into the fancy outfit that she’d worn during the coronation ceremony.

“Speaking of which, when is your birthday again, Jess?” I asked.

Jess smiled. “It’s the sixteenth day of the sixth month—the day you entered my life, Mister Pig.”

When Jess had reached her sixteenth birthday, as a Yethma, she’d been obligated to depart on a rigorous journey. On that exact day, I’d woken up in a pigsty. I remembered that I’d collapsed from food poisoning in December of modern-day Japan, which meant that there was around half a year’s discrepancy between my birth world’s calendar and Mesteria’s.

All the minor details aside, it should be fine to declare that Jess’s birthday was June 16th. “Got it. I’ll remember that.”

“Are you going to celebrate it with me, Mister Pig?”

“But of course.”

“Whaaat?!” She gasped. “Really? Oh, I’m so, *so* happy right now!” She clasped her hands in front of her chest and shook her shoulders in excitement.

Wanting to celebrate it is good and all, but preparing a present will be the hard part. Maybe I’ll hold a pen in my mouth and draw birthday art for her or something.

Having read the narration, Jess inclined her head quizzically. “Birthday art?”

“Basically, you draw a portrait of the birthday person as a congratulatory gift,” I explained.

“That’s so interesting! Is that a part of the culture in your country, Mister Pig?”

It’s mostly part of the birthday celebration culture for characters from fictional works such as anime, but…I suppose she’s not wrong. “Pretty much. Anyone would be happy if someone’s willing to draw a lovely picture for them, right?”

“Yes, most definitely!” Jess nodded enthusiastically. “I’ll look forward to how you’ll depict me, then.”

I huffed. “I’m going to draw you as a beautiful maiden, obviously.” *As for whether I have the skills to achieve that, that’s a different question. With my pig mouth, drawing a smiley face might be the best I can do.*

“I’m not beautiful, though…” Jess paused. “By the way, when’s your birthday, Mister Pig?”

“If you use the calendar from back in the world I was born in, it’s October 16th.” *My brethren, I’m counting on you to make it a great day for me!*

“Okay, I’ll bear that in mind!” she happily exclaimed. “It’s pretty far off, but I’ll make sure to give you a grand celebration.”

Seeing her soft smile, I felt as if my pork cheeks were melting into goo with fondness. *Sorry about that, my brethren. I’ve got plans for my birthday now. Listen to this—a beautiful maiden will celebrate it with me, heh!*

We were indulging in silly banter as we walked, and that was when I heard footsteps closing in on us from behind. I turned over my shoulder—it was Shravis. He’d removed his purple ceremonial robe and had returned to his casual attire of black trousers and a white shirt.

“Sorry for taking up so much of your time. I appreciate it.” The handsome Prince Charming amicably placed a hand on Jess’s shoulders without regard for personal space. Up close, I could make out his toned physique clearer than when he’d been sitting on the throne—he had definitely built up more muscle. The probability of a scrawny four-eyed super-virgin putting up a good fight against him was less than zero. His golden locks, which had grown out somewhat, had gone past exaggerated curls and into the hair explosion territory.

Possibly because he read the narration, Shravis snapped his fingers near his head and fixed his hairdo. “I’ve been training all this time,” he casually explained as he walked alongside us. “Now that father is no longer in this world, it’s my duty to demonstrate

our divine authority."

A draft in the air carried an intense scent to my snout. I glanced up at him. "Are you wearing some kind of cologne?"

Shravis grinned proudly at me, as if to say, *I've been waiting for someone to ask me that.* "I'm the king now, after all. I tried putting on the cologne my father used to wear."

Ahh, so that's what I was smelling. I'd instinctively thought that the scent was a bit disagreeable for no particular reason.

There was a dominant, somewhat feral fragrance in the air that you'd usually find on the business suit of a corporate executive. It was strong, as if to completely mask the earthy smell that probably came from his training. To the sensitive nose of a pig, if I had to decide how I felt about it, I would say it was unpleasant.

"...It doesn't suit me, I see," Shravis said in a low, dejected voice.

Jess smoothed things over right away. "That's not true. I think it's a mature and very distinguished fragrance!"

"Right? The matter of it smelling pleasant or otherwise aside, I felt like I needed to mask my inexperience somehow, and I thought this was a good way."

Shravis was still nineteen—we were the same age. In my opinion, there was nothing wrong with giving off the impression that he was wet behind the ears, but now that he'd become the king of an entire nation, perhaps some things simply had to change.

"That reminds me," I scrutinized him from head to toe. "I haven't seen you in a while, but I'm very sure that you weren't this beefy last time."

He grinned with pride. "It's not just my body that's gotten sturdier. Through practical combat and training, I've already reached my tenth ecdysia. Jess, you were on..." He trailed off.

"I'm still on my ninth," Jess replied. "I haven't used much magic after I returned from the Abyssus."

"Looks like I've finally caught up and got one up on you. Still, I'm three years older. I've got to work even harder."

When the pair with golden hair walked shoulder to shoulder, they almost looked like siblings with a healthy rivalry. Well, they *were* truly blood-related cousins, so that description wasn't too far off. For some reason, the pace of Jess's ecdysia was more accelerated, and judging by that exchange, Shravis felt an

underlying sense of pressure because of it.

A mage's number of ecdysias directly correlated with the strength of their magic. A Contract Stake wasn't the only way to evoke ecdysias—when young mages used their magic extensively and pushed themselves, they might also trigger one.

A mage's mana pool multiplied with every ecdysia. If a mana pool at zero ecdysias was equivalent to one soldier's combat potential, one ecdysia would be equivalent to two soldiers, two ecdysias to four soldiers, and so on. Basically, a mage's mana pool increased exponentially.

According to this calculation, Jess had combat prowess equivalent to roughly five hundred soldiers, while Shravis was equivalent to approximately a thousand. *Honestly, the numbers are so astronomical that they don't really sink in.*

On that topic, Vatis, who'd experienced forty-three ecdysias, possessed war potential that rivaled somewhere between eight trillion and nine trillion soldiers, and the records stated that she had been powerful enough to submerge nearly every island of Mesteria. *That makes me wonder... How many soldiers' strength is necessary for sinking an island? I'll be honest, I can't imagine it at all.*

Curious, I asked, "Hey, Shravis, it sounds like the pace of your ecdysia has accelerated all of a sudden. Did you discover some kind of secret key to success?"

Shravis nodded, looking elated. "I think a big part of it stems from the peculiar contamination of this world. That said, when you sincerely wish to become stronger, your magic will also strengthen and try to develop even further. And when your magic becomes stronger, it will also provide more power to your wish, in turn boosting your magic once again. I figured out that it was essential to put myself in this cycle."

"I see. I never realized that was an option. It's ingenious," Jess muttered with admiration.

At the end of the day, magic was a power that fulfilled your desires. Shravis was taking advantage of that attribute by using magic, which should be the output, to reinforce his desire, which was the input. Now that the input had strengthened, his magic would grow too, leading to a cycle. For example, it was almost like the positive feedback loops you could see in plants, which regulated hormones to quickly grow exponentially.

The beautiful maiden looked at her cousin worriedly. "But

your health is very important too. You mustn't push yourself too hard."

Hearing her concern, a small smile softened Shravis's features. "Got it." After walking in silence for a while, a whisper slipped out of Shravis's mouth. "Still, I have to say that, just like I suspected, being a king is a demanding responsibility. The coronation ceremony was my first task, and I was already anxious." He dragged out a long sigh.

I gazed at the young king, who looked exhausted. "In my eyes, you listened to the opinions of your subordinates patiently while also assertively expressing your own opinions. I think you did a splendid job out there."

"You think so? You're very skilled at praising people," Shravis said.

You're the one praising me for something unusual, I thought in the back of my mind.

That was when Jess smiled wide. "I think so too. Whenever he finds the chance, Mister Pig keeps saying that I'm cute or beautiful... I don't think that's true at all, though."

Depending on the situation, a loner could take Jess's statement as a sappy, slightly unwelcome bragging session about her love life, but Shravis replied with a straight face. "No, in my opinion, you have charming looks and a beautiful, splendid soul."

Perhaps I shouldn't have expected anything less from Mister Deadpan Reply. There had been no hesitation or embarrassment whatsoever.

Meanwhile, Jess was turning away from him bashfully.

I didn't know how I should feel about this. *What in the world am I being forced to watch right now?*

While I was thinking about what I should do with the situation, we arrived at the royal hall.

The door opened—the tantalizing aroma of roasted meat, herbs, and the faint smell of oil filled my nostrils. The room was bright, illuminated by an enchanted chandelier. Breathtaking fresco paintings were displayed on the extraordinarily lofty ceiling while towering marble sculptures lined up along the walls. This room was too majestic to be a simple dining room, but despite its size, the temperature was nice and warm even in winter—there must be some sort of magical air-conditioning.

This was where Jess and I had first encountered Eavis and

Shravis. It was also where Jess had been released from her collar and the king had revealed several shocking truths.

The layout hadn't changed at all since then—an elaborately designed round table sat in the middle of the hall. Wyss was already sitting on our side of the room and looked over her shoulder at us. She was still wearing her dress.

"Come, hurry over and take a seat," she called out in a warm and dignified voice.

To our right, she'd prepared a special chair with a high seat made especially for my pig body, and I asked Jess to lift me onto it with her magic.

Shravis, the birthday boy, sat to our front—across the table from Wyss. Meanwhile, Jess settled down next to me.

Wyss smiled. "Well, everyone is here now."

On the round table was a display of a lavish dinner for three. A magnificent heap of colorful fruits was also placed in front of me. Even from what little I could see, the meal for the humans already consisted of a mind-boggling number of delicacies, but on top of that, there were dishes covered with silver domes concealing their contents too.

A black bottle decorated with intricate patterns slowly drifted up from the center of the round table. "This is a bottle of Royal Year 111 wine made in Rach Valley," Wyss explained. She flicked her right hand casually, and the cork pulled out of the bottle by itself before the bottle moved fluidly in front of Shravis. Then, it tipped carefully to pour purplish red liquid with a hint of dark brown into a wide wineglass.

Almost as if an invisible waiter were holding it, the wine bottle then gradually drifted in front of Jess. Before my eyes, it poured a glass for Jess. When I inhaled, I caught a whiff of evaporating alcohol, as well as a fragrance that was complex like a flower bouquet but mellow like honey.

Finally, the bottle poured wine into Wyss's glass before settling on the table. I spotted the engraving of "111" and realization dawned on me.

It was currently Royal Year 130. Today was Shravis's nineteenth birthday, so the grapes that had gone into this wine had been harvested in Shravis's birth year. *Did Wyss go out of her way to order this when her son's coronation was scheduled? Or did she tuck it away carefully ever since the day the wine was bottled and ready?*

Wyss sent a fleeting glance in my direction, possibly because she noticed my twitching pig snout. “There isn’t any for you, I’m afraid. Please entertain yourself with apples instead.”

I nodded slightly to indicate my understanding. It would be a disaster if I ruined my pig liver with ethanol.

Meanwhile, Jess looked extremely intrigued by the vintage wine. She peered into her glass with excitement dancing in her eyes.

Clearing her throat, Wyss began, “Everyone, we have gathered here today for my son’s nineteenth birthday. At the same time, it is also the day you have become the king of this nation, Shravis.” She raised her wineglass with her slender fingers and stared straight into her son’s eyes. “I have kept this wine and aged it since a time when you couldn’t even speak. I initially planned on opening it when you turn twenty, the traditional turning point of adulthood, but…I’m certain that today is more fitting as a turning point in your life. Furthermore, considering the distorted state of this world, its taste might change if I left it to age.”

With his emerald eyes that he’d inherited from his mother, Shravis stared back solemnly at Wyss. Sensing the serious mood between the two, Jess and I straightened our backs.

Wyss said, “Royal Year 111 was a year with many pleasant, sunny days. It’s commonly agreed that Rach Valley harvested the finest batch of grapes since the founding of the royal court. And that year was also the happiest in my life.”

Shravis’s brows moved minutely, but he didn’t say anything. Or perhaps he *couldn’t* say what was on his mind.

His mother continued, “I pray that Royal Year 111, the year you were born, will also become a year worthy of celebration for the royal court and Mesteria. That is my sincere wish for you as your mother.”

Wyss raised her glass high, Shravis followed suit, then finally, Jess did as well.

The new king replied, “I am elated from the bottom of my heart for the heartfelt words you have prepared for me today, mother. I shall hold myself with the resolve necessary for a king and invest all my efforts into my duty.”

After exchanging glances as a cue, the three took sips from their glasses. The wine must’ve been exquisite because Jess widened her eyes slightly. Wyss and Shravis, however, stubbornly

maintained their impeccable smiles as if they were trying to prove a point.

Maybe deep down, they want to exchange honest words, like "Happy birthday" and "Thanks, mom." I couldn't help but feel that the crushing burden of their titles as the king and the king's mother was compelling them to be overly decorous around each other.

Wyss placed her glass on the table and was about to move her hand to her cutlery to begin her meal. However, something interrupted her.

Without warning, the hall grew dark. The light from all parts of the chandelier appeared to have disappeared at once. Not even giving me time to stand at the ready in alarm, the candlestands on the round table lit up. Wyss looked utterly baffled, and across from her, Shravis stood up with an unruffled expression.

Within the dusky candlelight, Shravis unhurriedly walked forward until he was next to Wyss. "You don't have to stand up, mother. I also have a little something for you today." He took his mother's left hand in one fluid movement and gingerly slid a ring onto her middle finger. "My apologies for planning something like this without advance notice. But to me, my birthday isn't just a day where you celebrate my birth, mother, but a day where I express my gratitude to you as well."

For a while, Wyss was speechless. Unable to look directly at Shravis, Wyss stared at her ring and tried to speak calmly, but she wasn't finding any success. "I have been wondering what you have been secretly working on recently... I have never... I never thought you were preparing something like this."

Her son's sturdy, large hand enveloped the mother's delicate one. Shravis gently said, "This is a ring I crafted by mixing Lady Vatis's gold into pure platinum before enchanting it with the most sophisticated magic I could manage. Please wear this in place of the wedding ring that you took off."

Wyss could only make faint, incoherent noises as she tried to find her voice again, but her lips didn't move.

Shravis continued, "You have endured the demanding duties of the royal family, withstood my father's tyranny, and valiantly raised me to be the man I am today. Thank you. This is a token of gratitude from the bottom of my heart." A faint, warm smile softened the youth's face.

Seeing him, I reflected on my own actions. *I've never done anything like this for my mother,* I thought with a tinge of remorse.

Having regained her composure at long last, Wyss spoke up. "Shravis… Become a great king, my son."

"I will."

After Shravis gifted the ring, the chandelier lit up once more as Shravis returned to his seat.

When light returned to the royal hall, I saw that Wyss's eyes had turned slightly red.

Knitting her brows slightly at my gaze, Wyss cleared her throat. "Now then, shall we eat? The food has gotten a little cold." She swiftly spread out her hands.

The next moment, several balls of fire burst out of thin air and danced across the circular table, going around to warm the food that ought to be hot.

Dinner was simply *très, très bien*. The dome covers were removed, revealing artistically arranged meat dishes underneath them that would even put fancy French cuisine to shame. The fish dish was just as outstanding. An exquisite combination of herbs had been blended into the cream-based sauce. The aroma itself was enough to bring about a sense of bliss. That said, a pig like me couldn't dine on these, so I could only enjoy them with my eyes and nose while tuning in to Jess's food review.

Our time spent eating was pleasant, but throughout the entire meal, I felt that something wasn't quite right, as if I had a thorn stuck somewhere between my pork spareribs.

This sense of unease had started during the coronation ceremony. It stemmed from the treatment Jess and I had received—especially Jess. Only the king's closest attendants had been summoned to the coronation ceremony, and we'd even been invited to a family dinner celebrating the king's birthday. *It's almost as if…*

Soon, Wyss's matter-of-fact statement turned that anxiety into reality.

"By the way, Shravis." Wyss had become just a tad talkative with wine, and after most of the plates were empty, she called out to her son as if she'd been looking for the opportune time. "May I ask about the current status of your engagement?"

They didn't quite choke on their food, but Shravis and Jess stilled their hands simultaneously and stopped chewing.

Wyss said, "You are nineteen, and Jess is sixteen. I believe it's

not all that early to arrange your wedding."

Dumbfounded, my jaw stopped moving while I held a whole apple in my mouth.

After a moment of hesitation, she continued, "It is also the King's duty to have offspring. You ought to start making an effort early on."

A stretch of awkward silence filled the air. The two people in question finally managed to swallow their food. Wyss had likely interpreted their reactions as embarrassment because she continued handling her knife and fork.

Slowly searching for the right words, Shravis began explaining what he'd learned to his mother. "Mother, about that… As a matter of fact…" Though his speech faltered, it was also accurate and easy to understand.

Shravis began by reporting that Jess was actually Hortis's secret child—in other words, they were cousins, and it wasn't right for them to marry each other. He'd learned that fact when his mother had been taken captive, and he'd been hesitant about broaching the matter after they'd reclaimed the capital, leading to this delay.

Wyss was likely doing everything she could to maintain her composure—before she said anything, she used her hands to pour the last of the wine into her glass. Her hands were trembling minutely, and she even poured all the blackish sediment that had settled at the bottom of the bottle.

"I…was completely unaware." Dragging out a long sigh, she drank what little wine was in her glass in one go, sediment and all. "A superior mana pool, a talent for working with fine detail, a sense of endless curiosity, an enthusiasm for reading, and an interest in sensual topics… I *did* feel that she awfully reminded me of someone I knew, but I would have never thought… To think that Jess was that man's daughter…"

I blinked. *Hold on a hot second, what did she just say?*

Part of her sentence piqued my intrigue, but this certainly wasn't the right mood for a deadpan retort.

Shutting her eyes, Wyss hung her head slightly. Then, she lifted her chin again and regained her usual calm expression. "I understand."

Silence.

She continued, "I have grasped the situation. I'm certain King Eavis must have been aware of this as well. I don't know what

kind of intentions he had, but it would be utterly unthinkable for a person with the gift of foresight like him to carelessly choose someone of such descent as your fiancée by accident… This must be a meaningful process of some sort as well."

"Mother…" Shravis looked at her worriedly.

"I can empathize with the two of you—I can see why you struggled so much with bringing up this topic. This was something out of your control."

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "Madame Wyss, I'm so sorry. I should have told you much earli—"

"This is just my opinion." Wyss raised her voice and interrupted Jess. "But I doubt a marriage between cousins would be beneficial to the royal family. Let's treat the engagement as something that never happened. We shall search for a new bride from the ground up." Wiping her mouth, she rose from her seat.

"Mother, I could never apologize enough for failing to report this—"

"Shravis. Thank you very much for the present." Her gaze was sharp, as if she didn't want to hear any of this right now. "I'm afraid I am tired. I shall retire for the night. But the food is beautiful, so please don't waste it. May the two of you finish it all."

Impassively making that declaration in one breath and not giving any of us a chance to reply, Wyss disappeared from the royal hall.

As for us, who'd been left behind, we finished our dinner like we'd been told. The mood was awkward, and we barely exchanged any words.

Just before we returned to Jess's quarters, Shravis smiled apologetically at us, the empty bottle of birthday wine in his hand, before vanishing toward his quarters.

On our way back, we decided to make a slight detour, getting some fresh air outside as we walked.

"It was his birthday, but it ended on such a miserable note…" Jess placed a hand on her chest, looking heartbroken. "I can't imagine how distressed both of them were."

I deliberately offered an opinion I didn't believe for a second. "You didn't hear their thoughts? They're a mother and son with hearts of steel. They might not seem like it, but they might be surprisingly unaffected."

Jess shook her head slowly. “I didn’t. They both use techniques to guard their minds at all times.”

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *I’d love to master that too.*

The starry sky with abnormal density blasted light at us from all directions, leaving only a faint, tiny shadow beneath my trotters. With the royal palace’s imposing stone walls as the backdrop, we wandered around the garden as we gradually made our way back to the inner depths.

Jess’s hand reached out and gently touched my back. “But… There’s one silver lining.”

“What’s that?”

The answer I received was plain and simple—almost too straightforward. “With this, my engagement to marry into the royal family is officially off the table.” When I looked up, Jess was pressing her lips into a line as she gazed in my direction. “I…would be lying if I said I’m unhappy about that fact.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.”

Not knowing what to say, I looked forward absentmindedly as I continued walking.

“Are you implying that you’re not happy, Mister Pig?” I could hear the displeasure in Jess’s voice.

I did some soul-searching as I listened to her. Obviously, I’d be lying if I stated that I wasn’t happy that there was no chance of Jess marrying that King of Deadpan Replies. *But I’ll be honest, I still can’t think that far into the future yet. The different worlds we were born in, our backgrounds, and the very different appearances we have… There are still more than plenty of challenging barriers we need to overcome if we want to be together.*

“I can just search for a path with you,” Jess declared. “We can carve out our own path to a future where we are never apart.”

That was narration, mind you. “How do I explain this…” I hesitated. “Frankly, I still don’t fully comprehend things like marriage or being together with someone for a lifetime. Right now, the only thing that matters to me is being able to stay with you, Jess. For me, that’s enough.”

Jess’s hand, which remained on my back, pushed my fat slightly. “Mister Pig, didn’t you promise to marry me?”

For a moment, I thought my ears were failing me. “Huh…? I did?”

She nodded firmly. “On the night of the New Year’s Festival.

Are you going to play dumb?"

"I'm not, but I'm confused..." *I honestly don't remember this at all.*

The maiden huffed. "You promised me. I remember it vividly. Mister Pig, you agreed to give me your, your... Um... V-Vir..." For some reason, she suddenly began stammering and mumbling incoherently. Her face turned red.

Oh yeah, I think I know. At the last stop of our journey to find Salvia, we did *have a conversation like that in our lodgings in Mousskir, the northernmost settlement of Mesteria.*

The New Year's Festival in Mesteria was like a three-in-one package of Christmas, Japanese New Year, and the Bon Festival. One of Mesteria's customs was to exchange presents with your most precious people. However, a pig like me had no presents to offer. Within that unique atmosphere of our happy journey together and it being the end of the year, Jess had dropped a bomb on me by saying, "Please give me your virginity."

Yeah, I remember now. She'd gone on to offer the same present in return, but it had somehow completely slipped my mind due to one event after another, like the ham sandwich incident in the bathhouse and the Abyssus.

"Th-The point is, we pledged our personal fidelity to each other!" Jess's face turned cherry red, but her tone was dead serious.

I hesitated. "True. I guess that's one way you could interpret it."

"If we don't marry each other, we can't fulfill that vow. Therefore, it's perfectly valid to say that we're engaged."

What an excellent use of syllogism. "But there's no rush. Before we think about marriage, what's more important right now is figuring out how to stay together in this unstable world."

Jess shook her head fervently. "We aren't siblings like you said before, Mister Pig. We also don't have a kind of connection that's solid and unbreakable, like a chain. If we want to be together forever, wouldn't we need a robust embodiment of our bond, like marriage?"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

Sometimes, Jess was stubborn about the most unusual things. *There's nothing wrong with that, though. It's one of her charm points.*

She continued, “If you don’t marry me, you will remain a super-virgin for the rest of your life. Are you fine with that?”

Hey, isn’t that “super” prefix uncalled-for? “Well… That’s kind of a part of my identity by now.”

“Sheesh. Don’t evade my question.” Fixing her gaze on me, Jess puffed out her cheeks. She was peeved, real peeved. “I’m not an unreasonable person. I’m not saying that I want to get married right away. What I’m trying to say is, let’s search for a path that will lead to our happy wedding!”

The Flawless Beautiful Maiden That Was Once the Prince’s Fiancée Is Vigorously Pushing Me to Marry Her. Makes a great light novel title. “If that’s what you meant, I’ve got no objections.” I hesitated. “But if we decide our marriage before we’re even ready for that stage, wouldn’t that achieve the complete opposite of what you want? Yes, marriage is a robust embodiment of a bond like a chain, but a chain is heavy and can overwhelm you instead of forming the connection you want. I’ll be honest, I still don’t really understand the full implications of marriage.”

I paused and looked at her. “Jess, do you? Do you truly know the weight of the word ‘marriage,’ and are you ready for it?” Even though I wasn’t Shravis, I’d given her a strict, dead serious reply.

For a while, Jess looked like she was considering my question carefully. After walking for a small stretch, she shook her head honestly. “No, you’re right… I don’t think I’m prepared either.” She placed a hand against her chest.

If she had any concerns, directly tackling them was the best solution. “Sounds like you’ve got a few things you’re worried about too, huh?”

Hearing that, Jess looked at me with uneasy eyes. “Yes. In terms of age, it isn’t all that early for me to marry, but when I think about it thoroughly… You’re right. I still can’t really imagine what marriage is like. I think it would be a lie if I said I was completely ready.”

“Right? It’s the same for me.” I nodded. “Before we consider marriage seriously, we need proper preparations. We aren’t ready yet. Therefore, if we want to get married, we must lay the necessary groundwork first.” *An eye for an eye, a syllogism for a syllogism.*

Jess looked at me with imploring eyes. “If so…what should I do? What *is* the necessary groundwork for marriage? I’ve only

focused on my studies until now and haven't done anything like domestic training…"

That's a good question. What are the detailed steps that we must take before we're prepared? Hmm…

As I pondered, Jess continued, "I was a servant for a long time, so I can take care of the house to a certain extent, even if I might not be the most skilled. I can also look after animals. But cooking was the work of the chefs, so I don't have much experience… Hmm, what else… Oh, I'm also a complete amateur regarding nightly activities."

Bruh, nightly activities?! Excuse me, ma'am, what do you even mean?! "Nah, when I said preparations, I wasn't really suggesting that you should undergo the kind of traditional training associated with brides. I mean, even if you *did* train for homemaking, it won't be useful for changing our dicey situation."

Pressing a finger on her lip, Jess inclined her head quizzically. "Well then, what kind of preparations do you think are necessary for me, Mister Pig?"

It was a difficult question. *Let's see, what should Jess do if she wants to make our marriage a reality…? Just throwing out ideas, but what about becoming capable enough to provide for a kept husband for an entire lifetime? If a kind girl like Jess is willing to look after me for the rest of her life, it'd definitely be a dream come true.*

"I think I've got it." I nodded to myself. "Before anything else, I think you should become capable enough to lead a respectable life on your own merits. If you aren't confident that you can manage your own life properly, it will be difficult to even consider marriage, where someone else's life is involved on top of your own."

Jess hesitated. "Um, I heard the narration, in case you were wondering…"

Oopsies. "Jokes aside, I *do* want you to better yourself in any way you can, Jess. Not as a bride but as an individual. I sincerely want you to become independent and capable enough to even survive in a volatile world like this."

Jess looked like she wasn't fully convinced. "But I can use magic," she argued. "With these powers, I would never have difficulty surviving and putting food on the table." As she spoke, she lit up a brilliant flame above her hand.

Feeling a sense of impending danger—*Is she going to roast*

me?—I pointed out something. “Even magic is becoming unreliable, though. Who knows? One day, you might be unable to use it freely like you can now. Plus, once the Yethma are liberated, magic might stop being a priceless, special skill.”

“Oh, true, I never thought about that…” The flames died out. “Then, what in the world should I do…?” She appeared to have started wholeheartedly considering the question.

Jess was an earnest girl—a very good girl. But all I was doing was arguing against everything she said and shooting her opinions down. I started feeling a vague sense of disgust with myself.

I also tried coming up with something. “Well, if I have to nominate a single thing that’s useful no matter what world you’re in, it’s probably your brains.”

She blinked. “Brains?”

“To be more precise, having a rational mind—possessing the power to see through all the world’s noise and find the truth. No matter your world or situation, there is only a single truth. The power to clinically identify this one truth should be valuable everywhere you go.”

Jess digested my words for a while before blinking at me. “That makes sense. After all, you’re the living example of someone who’s used your brains to solve all kinds of problems.”

Now that she mentions it, she’s right. I’d come to a world of sword and sorcery in the body of a pig, which placed significant restrictions on what I could do, but my little pink cells had come in relatively handy despite that.

“Having an inquisitive mind for knowledge is your virtue, Jess,” I replied. “For now, let’s focus on polishing your critical thinking skills.”

Jess’s face lit up with a big smile. Believe it or not, she was satisfied with this answer. “I agree. I’ll be more confident if I master the ability to deduce the truth. This is my homework to become a bride, I see!”

After declaring that, Jess faced forward. It was as if she had promptly begun her hunt for hidden truths that might be lying around somewhere out there.

This was the precise moment our ears picked up the sobbing of a woman.

Both of our strides ground to a halt. Together, we scanned our surroundings. The fragrance of roses drifted over, delivered by

the chilly night breeze.

I narrowed my eyes. The path ahead led to the rose garden under Wyss's management.

The next thing I knew, Jess was sprinting toward the rose garden. Though I didn't have the gift of foresight like Eavis, I had a good inkling about the voice's identity. Though a part of me thought that we shouldn't be poking our noses into other people's business, I ran after Jess dutifully.

Surrounded by brick walls on three sides, the rose garden was tucked away like a secret hideout. Rosebushes were arranged in calculated locations around the area, and even though it wasn't the right season, I spotted red and white flowers blooming here and there. At the plaza's center was a large fountain, and the edge of its circular reservoir served as a cozy bench.

Wyss was sitting with her face buried in her hands, and her shoulders were shaking. When she noticed Jess running over, Wyss impulsively turned in the opposite direction.

"Madame Wyss..." Standing to one side, Jess called out to the woman worriedly. Behind her, I did my very best to blend into the background.

I heard Wyss clearing her throat several times before turning to face us. Her eyes were somewhat red and puffy, but her dignified expression didn't crumble. "It's unsafe for an unmarried young lady to wander outside late at night. Come now, hurry back to your room."

Jess's hands, which were crossed behind her waist, fidgeted. "I'm sorry, I..."

"If it's your blood relationship that's bothering you, please don't take it to heart. Facts are facts—it's out of your control. It only boils down to whether I can reconcile with it. Nothing more..."

Jess nodded. "In that case, I wish to do everything I can to help you during that process." Sitting quietly beside Wyss, Jess placed her hand on the queen's lap.

Meanwhile, I took a few steps back. My intuition told me it was better to stay out of it. Jess's compassion for others was her virtue, but such gestures sometimes weren't welcome.

Jess gently said, "Please tell me what's on your mind. To me, Madame Wyss...you are someone precious to me, like my real mother."

Wyss's eyes widened. She stared at Jess unblinkingly with eyes startlingly similar to Shravis's. "That's only because…I believed from the bottom of my heart that I would become your mother!"

Her voice was trembling. I could tell that her heart was just as shaken.

"All of you deceived me this entire time with your silence!" Wyss snapped. "I can tell that you have become better and better at concealing your thoughts. You worked very diligently to never leak a single word of your birth in front of me, didn't you?! You put in every effort to lie to me, didn't you?!"

Wyss's voice was raised with hot fury. Though Jess's eyes grew teary, she didn't back down. "I'm very sorry. I knew you placed such expectations on me, so I struggled to tell you the truth."

On this matter, I was an accomplice as well. The engagement between Shravis and Jess had been a convenient relationship that allowed Jess to stay under the royal family's protection. I was the one who'd first proposed that she should hide her blood relationship with Hortis. That was why I'd deliberately avoided Wyss so that she wouldn't read my thoughts—whenever the queen mother was tutoring Jess about magic, for example, I would typically retire to Jess's bedroom and have a snooze.

Wyss opened her mouth wide in a scream. "You struggled to tell me? Do you think that suffices as a valid excuse?! Do you even know how I felt?! Why in the world did you think I've been spending so much time educating you—" Her emotions got the better of her, and she only snapped out of it when she'd gotten that far. With a start, she held her tongue.

Jess was still looking at Wyss. The young maiden was frozen in place, stunned.

A wintry breeze blew across the gap between them.

Wyss's eyes grew moist with tears. "I'm sorry. That wasn't what I…"

Shaking her head, Jess quietly said, "It's all right, I understand. The reason you were so kind and considerate to readily teach me all kinds of things…was because I was Mister Shravis's fiancée. It was due to the fact that I was to be the mother of the future prince." A single tear streamed down her cheek. "After all, without such a status, I don't have the right to receive your kindness…"

Jess's words were cruel, but they were the undeniable truth. She had received special privileges ever since she'd entered the

royal capital because she'd been the future king's fiancée. Without that relationship, they would have put a blood ring on her as an ordinary capital citizen, and under the royal court's management, she would have led an uneventful life with a dull pig.

The moment the king from two generations before, Eavis, had selected her as the prince's fiancée, her fate—and mine—had changed for good.

I recalled what Wyss had said during dinner.

Eavis had possessed the gift of foresight. He'd declared that himself, so there was no doubt. If so, had he known that Jess was Hortis's secret child and intentionally selected her as the prince's fiancée? Did he do all that because he'd foreseen such a future?

Wyss searched for her voice for a while and finally found it. "No... Forgive me, I went overboard. You were a wonderful student." She took Jess's hand and lifted it until it was in front of her ample chest. "No matter what my incentives were, I enjoyed my time teaching you. That is also an undeniable fact."

"Madame Wyss..." Jess's voice was shaky.

"It appears that Hortis owes me a favor. Take pride in the fact that the queen herself taught you the ways of magic," Wyss said. "Devote yourself to your duty as the king's relative and return that favor."

Jess nodded resolutely. "I will."

There must be something on Wyss's mind because she shut her eyes for some time before opening them again. "I will never repeat what I'm about to tell you. Promise that you will tuck it into the innermost depths of your heart and never breathe a word of it." It appeared that she was more or less aware of my presence—she also spared a warning glance in my direction.

Sensing the change in Wyss's mood, Jess nodded solemnly once again. "Understood. I promise."

The stillness of winter descended upon the plaza of roses that was like an isolated, miniature garden. Only the sound of water splashing down from the fountain shook our eardrums.

The silence stretched on until Wyss sucked in a deep breath—she'd found her resolve. "My wish...is that Shravis finds happiness." She spoke slowly, her words spilling out a little at a time. "I could never tell him that directly. As the queen mother, it is something I mustn't say. But as Shravis's mother, I..." She spat out her following words. "I could never—*never*—care less about

him becoming a great king."

I wondered why she was confiding in Jess about all this.

Wyss continued, "When I arrived at the royal capital, King Eavis saw promise in me. After that, he erased all my memories involving the people and places that mattered to me outside the capital. He didn't seal them. He *erased* them. Even my own name was wiped from my memories so he could select a new one. The only things I had left were my body, memories without names, faces, or backgrounds, and only the most trivial knowledge."

I never knew, I thought with a sinking heart. I couldn't even believe such heartlessness was possible, and bloodcurdling chills ran down my spine. At the same time, my rational mind also understood why the royal family had wanted to do that. Lingering sentiments outside the capital and a Yethma's tragic journey to the capital weren't just unnecessary for the queen consort—they were, in fact, harmful. This was an elementary deduction when I considered what had happened to Jess, who only had her memories sealed instead of losing them forever.

Was there a chance that each generation's queen consort had undergone the same thing? Did the royal family wipe the memories of every single one of them, forcing the queens to devote themselves to the royal family's work and their role as vessels for the kings' children?

"I couldn't even remember the name of someone so very precious, the name of someone I swore never to forget," Wyss whispered feebly. "To me...Shravis is the only thing I have in the world."

Her statement was a trigger that revived the statements I'd heard from Shravis once upon a time.

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

"Indeed. I grew up hearing my mother tell me that I'm the only one she loves in this entire world."

Releasing Jess's hand, Wyss gently placed her own hands on the younger girl's shoulders. "My child is being crushed by the responsibility that comes with the title of king. If something

unexpected happens, I worry that he might fall apart at any time… So please, Jess, I’m begging you, from the bottom of my heart, please don’t leave Shravis all alone. Please save my dearest child.”



Jess didn’t reply—or possibly, she couldn’t reply. Eyes glistening with tears, she slowly nodded.

Wyss whispered, “Now that I have learned of your background, I know I have no right to give you orders as the queen mother. So, this is my request as Shravis’s mother.”

“Madame Wyss… I…”

Tears brimmed and overflowed uncontrollably from the mother’s eyes. She pressed her forehead against Jess’s. “Please, Jess, please… My child is the only thing I have.”

I had a dream that night.

Someone’s voice was calling me in the darkness. I couldn’t hear it clearly, but it was beautiful—it sounded like it was praying.

“…back. Please, you must…come…this world…”

The woman’s voice echoed, repeating like ripples on the ocean. It was distant, fragile, like it might shatter at any time, but it was most certainly directed at me.

Wanting to hear it more clearly, I began walking toward it.

I looked down. I was walking on two legs. This was a sensation I hadn’t felt in a long time.

As I kept walking, I began seeing a light ahead of me. The voice was, undoubtedly, coming from that direction.

Without warning, I choked.

Some kind of hard, cold metal was constricting my throat. Feeling as if it were going to crush my trachea, I held my neck and came to a stop. Before I knew it, there was a silver collar around my neck.

A rusty chain was attached to the back of my collar. It stretched all the way into the opposite direction of the light—into the endless darkness.

This time, I heard a vivid voice.

“No, don’t do this. Stop.”

A silhouette emerged from the darkness on the other side of the chain. It was Jess.

“Don’t go, please…”

Jess was crying.

I looked down. In her hand, she was gripping the other end of the chain.

When I blinked open my eyes, I saw Jess was sitting up and

peering into my face worriedly. Bright light was sneaking in from the gaps in the curtains. *Oh. It's already morning.*

"Mister Pig, did you have a nightmare?" Jess asked with a slight frown. "You're looking awfully pale."

I tried twisting my neck and felt no collar restricting its movement. "No, I'm fine… I'm a pig, remember? My face always looks this awful."

Just as Jess was about to say, "You know that wasn't what I meant," something suddenly interrupted us.

There was a somewhat rough knock on the bedroom door. Startled, the two of us practically jumped up.

"I'm coming in." With that greeting, the door opened. Shravis appeared, having already changed into his formal attire. His eyes landed on Jess, who was glomping me in her nightgown, and he quietly averted his gaze.

Clearing his throat, the king said, "Sorry for waking you. Could you come with me right away?"

His emerald eyes wavered for a moment before they stared directly at us. "I have terrible news. Jess, pig, I need your help."

Chapter 2: A Mass Murder Is a Big Responsibility for a Detective's First Case

We landed in a town with a familiar landscape. A mountain that spewed out steam like puffs of smoke. A dazzling cathedral built at its base. Streets blanketed by steam that smelled slightly of volcanic gas.

Indeed, it was the hot spring paradise in West Mesteria: Broperver. It was also the sacred place that was the setting of an erotica novel titled *ImoMachi: Is It Wrong to Fall in Love with Your Little Sister?*

Personally, though, what left the biggest impression on me was how Jess suddenly started taking off her school swimsuit…

"*Skool shwimsuit*?" Shravis, who read the narration, asked in a baffled tone, but neither Jess nor I answered him.

We'd departed from the capital on a flying dragon, shortening our travel time so much that it was still morning. Ominous dark clouds smothered the sky, but the town was warm and cozy thanks to the hot springs. We couldn't make the dragon land in the middle of town, so we'd climbed down from the dragon on the outskirts before using the streets to make our way toward Broperver's central plaza.

According to Shravis, there had been a sinister mass murder incident at our destination. If an intelligence officer's reports were accurate, there had been thirty-nine victims. All of them were what you'd call hoodlums, and the intelligence officer believed they were likely the survivors of the Nothen Faction, which had once been under the Clandestine Arcanist's command. Before the Nothen Faction had risen to power, these people would have belonged in the category of "Yethma hunters" and "black marketeers."

The culprit was yet to be identified.

However, there was one striking clue in this case—a particular symbol that had been left on the corpses. It was this very symbol that had spurred the king to take things into his own hands.

After receiving news of this case, Shravis had personally come

to investigate the crime scene while bringing Jess and me along. Wyss, meanwhile, stayed behind in the royal capital and was doing her part to deal with this crisis by giving directions to her subjects and gathering information.

Surrounded by thick steam akin to fog, we pressed forward in the town built of black stone. The smell in the air was slightly different from what I'd remembered. If I remember correctly, it felt somewhat rusty—somewhat like *blood*.

Shravis sighed apologetically. "I've only just succeeded the throne, but I'm already in this mess... I must be incredibly incompetent to immediately resort to asking you two for help. But we must solve this case by any means necessary. I'm afraid I will be causing you a lot of trouble."

Jess shook her head fervently. "Please don't say that. I want to help you in any way I can!"

Her tone was so vigorous that Shravis actually looked taken aback. "You do...?"

"Yes! I just happened to be looking for an opportunity to see through the one truth!" she announced. Maybe my words last night had influenced her.

Baffled by her declaration that had come out of nowhere, Shravis tilted his head quizzically. "The truth? And why is that?"

"It's my homework to become a bride!"

A brief moment of silence. I could practically see three question marks floating above Shravis's head.

Choosing not to delve too deeply into it, Shravis smiled at her with a shred of bewilderment. "That's good to hear. I'd be grateful to have your help on this case."

"Understood!" Jess chirped, balling her hands into determined fists in front of her chest. "I swear I will drag the truth out into the light!"

Behold, my brethren. This is the precise moment when Ace Detective Cutie-Pie Jess was born.

Having read the narration, Jess turned around at me curiously. "*Ace detectife*?"

I explained, "Detectives in my world are people who identify the truth. They use their deductive skills to solve mysteries. The most capable ones are given a special title: ace detective."

Jess's eyes gleamed with excitement at my words. "I see! In that case, I'll become an *ace detectife*!"

In our current situation, Shravis was likely the client while I was her assistant. No matter how you looked at it, tackling a mass murder of thirty-nine people for her first case was a lot to bear, but it wasn't like we could pick and choose our client's cases.

After making that bold announcement, Jess turned to me and added in a small voice, "If I become an *ace detectife*, it's also one step forward toward our marriage, isn't it?"

My hunch told me that there was some sort of misunderstanding. That said, Jess's spirit to become an ace detective was admirable. "Well then, let me list the requirements to be an ace detective. First, you've got to have a signature phrase, and—"

Jess listened to my lecture solemnly. Even though the situation was sinister, her strides as she marched toward the crime scene were spirited and reassuring.

We walked within the stench that grew more intense with time before eventually arriving at the grand plaza in front of the magnificent cathedral. A path served as the entrance to the plaza, and hot spring fountains were positioned on both sides. Based on my memories, they should have spurted out milky white water, but now, the water was dark crimson—the color of blood.

Judging by the rusty smell, the water must contain iron. Perhaps there was truly blood mixed within it. The pollution of the Abyssus appeared to have extended even to Broperver's hot springs.

The chilly winter air sank into the plaza from the sky. A cloud of steam, remarkably denser than its surrounding columns, rose from the clearing. When we approached it, a familiar shadowy silhouette noticed our presence. It wasn't the person's figure that tipped me off, per se, but the greataxe on her back.

Shravis called out to her. "You're already here. That was fast."

A woman's jovial voice replied, "Welp, it's a direct summons from the king himself. I'll even show up and dive into your bedroom if you want me to." She was tall, and her black hair was tied back into a ponytail. It was Itsune, one of the Liberators' executive officers. Her defining trait was the sharp, aggressive look in her eyes. Despite the wintry season, she was in a revealing getup that exposed her shoulders and navel.

Blinking, Shravis deadpanned, “Why would I call you to my bedroom?” His response reeked of his status as an oblivious virgin.

Grimacing, Itsune put the matter behind her. “We happen to have an operation we’re busy with on our side. Naut and Yoshu went to northeastern Mesteria last night and are busy there, so they can’t rush over. Hopefully, you aren’t unhappy that I’m the only one present.”

“Of course not. I’m grateful that you were willing to come to my rescue.” Shravis smiled and quickly pressed forward. Itsune glanced at Jess and me before walking next to Shravis, though keeping a small distance from him.

I heard a youth’s voice call out, “Mister Lolip.” That was when I noticed a petite beast was right near me. This tiny boar had gained the ability to speak the human language with his animal mouth, just like me.

It wasn’t that strange when I was doing the talking, but when an animal actually spoke before my eyes, I instinctively felt a bit creeped out. For some reason unknown to me, the boar was wearing a ribbon and a frilly dress. Behind him was a girl with braids who was wearing a green dress.

They were Kento and Nourris. Likely, they were here as Itsune’s attendants. They approached our side, and we began walking in one row.

Jess was the first to speak up. “Miss Nourris, have you been faring well?”

Still walking, Nourris unhurriedly bowed. There was a smile on her innocent, freckled face, and she also directed it at me. “Yes. Thanks to your efforts, there haven’t been any great conflicts. Everything is nice and peaceful.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Jess cast her eyes down at the boar. “By the way, may I ask what those are?”

The boar was dressed up adorably like a doll. On his right ear was a large pink ribbon, and around his body was a pastel blue dress explicitly tailored for a quadruped. The sewing was somewhat coarse, possibly because it was handmade, but you could tell that the tailor had invested great attention to detail.

Nourris clapped her hands together merrily. “Mister Kento has been very delighted by these, so I’ve been making clothes for him!”

The boar looked at me with dead eyes, as if sending the

message, *Please don't say anything, I beg of you.* The soul residing within this beast was †DarKnightDeaThWaLtz† keNto, a male high school student going through a minor edgy phase. I'd never known that wearing frilly dresses was one of his hobbies.

"Goodness, you made it yourself!" Jess gasped. "It's so lovely!"

Nourris's smile widened. "That's so nice of you to say. Thank you very much." She proceeded to stroke the dressed-up boar enthusiastically. "Congratulations, Mister Kento." A bulky silver collar wound around her throat.

From Nourris, we learned that the three of them had only just arrived in Broperver as well and hadn't inspected the crime scene yet. Weaving between the royal court's soldiers standing on alert, we advanced further into the plaza.

My nose could detect that the concentration of iron ions and sulfur compounds dissolving in the steam was evidently increasing.

Shortly, we arrived at our destination. The scene that awaited us was so morbid that my imagination had paled in comparison.

The cathedral's front doors were left wide open, but none of the lights were on. Only darkness peered back out at us. In front of the door, thirty-nine naked corpses were lined up on the black cobblestone paving, all arranged so that they faced chest-up.

What stood out the most were magical marks on the bodies. A spell of some sort had carved a glowing crimson cross onto their chests. It was almost as if lava pools were staring at us from within their flesh. Under the overcast sky, they also reminded me of a grotesque holiday light display that someone had put together in poor taste.

When I approached them, I observed that the skin on each corpse had discolored into an unnatural white.

"Yikes, it's so gross." Even as she spoke, Itsune scrutinized the bodies unblinkingly. The closest corpse to us was a skinny man who had eerie tattoos all over his body.

"What a curious incident," Ace Detective Cutie-Pie Jess used the signature phrase I'd taught her and observed the corpse without even a hint of apprehension. "So this crimson light is…"

Shravis crouched down next to the nearest carcass. "Yeah. It's a spell called *Sanguyn Cros*…" He did some kind of analysis before he got back onto his feet. "Looks like it's the real thing."

I wasn't used to dead bodies and stayed behind Jess, dragging my feet about approaching the corpses. Meanwhile, Nourris

attempted to touch a dead body with childlike curiosity, but the boar tried to stop her by holding the hem of her skirt in his mouth.

Shravis took this opportunity to give an official explanation to everyone present. “The bodies were discovered around sunrise today by a girl who was taking her dog out for a walk. After learning more or less all the details from her, an intelligence officer wiped all of the girl’s memories related to this incident.”

A part of me skeptically thought, *What will we do if something comes up and we want to ask her a few more questions?* But the royal court was likely prioritizing their airtight secrecy above all else. Judging by how we were the only ones at the plaza besides the soldiers standing at attention, I was probably on the mark.

That demonstrated the gravity of the matter. The situation was severe enough for the king himself to come out to the crime scene, and at the same time, it was also a case they wanted to solve behind closed doors.

“All the victims are survivors of the Nothen Faction,” Shravis explained. “Their skin has turned pale due to high temperatures—they were very likely boiled in a significantly scorching spring somewhere in Broperver. The biggest issue, however, is these crosses.”

Itsune inclined her head quizzically. “You mentioned something about *Sanguyn Cros*? How’re they a problem?”

Underneath the dark gray clouds, the scarlet crosses illuminated Shravis’s face from below. “These enchanted symbols were carved onto criminals during the Dark Ages,” he uttered solemnly.

Working up my resolve, I went up to Jess’s side and inspected one corpse’s chest. A deep cut on the torso ran along its median line. Then, roughly below the ribs, another incision overlapped perpendicularly with the first. Normally, gashes should reveal scarlet flesh within them, but they were glowing bright crimson instead, almost like lava gazing up through a fissure in the earth.

“And?” Itsune raised an eyebrow, baffled. “What’s wrong with these symbols meant for criminals?”

Shravis turned to look right into Itsune’s eyes. “Can’t you tell? Only mages are capable of engraving these. A mage who has committed murder is at large, hiding somewhere unknown.”

Silence.

It appeared that the significance of the situation still hadn’t

sunk in for her. “But the casualties are the survivors of the Nothen Faction—people we actually want to off if we’re given a chance. What’s so wrong with an unknown mage somewhere doing the heavy lifting for us?”

“The fact that an unknown mage even exists outside our knowledge is a grave concern,” Shravis replied.

This was when Itsune finally caught up. “Ahh, gotcha. The only mage left to do as she pleases outside the royal family’s management would be Ceres now. Just putting it out there, but if you’re wondering about her, she should be clinging to Naut like glue. She definitely doesn’t have the spare time to get up to stuff like this.”

“Of course, I don’t suspect Ceres.” Shravis shook his head, looking somewhat anxious. “A harmless little fawn like that girl could never be a murderer. Furthermore, she’s probably clueless about spells that date back to the Dark Ages. The criminal possesses a mana pool that can kill such a great number and is also knowledgeable about the customs of the Dark Ages, which should have been erased from history by the royal court.”

My back fat shuddered. That only meant one thing—a terrible mage like the Clandestine Arcanist might still be lurking somewhere in Mesteria. They’d committed mass murder before arranging the corpses in a display, as if leaving behind some kind of message.

Jess placed a hand on her chin and began mulling over the information we had. “If that’s true… There could be other survivors of the Dark Ages, or the Clandestine Arcanist had children. In any case, this is an emergency.”

Shravis nodded gratefully. “We can’t rule out either possibility. This means that yet another powerful enemy shrouded in mystery has appeared before us.”

Listening to their conversation, I recalled what Vivis had said to me yesterday.

“Right now, the world has gone terribly awry, hasn’t it? If something even worse happens on top of that… I keep having that bad feeling in my gut. Perhaps misfortune would accumulate somewhere without my knowledge, leading to the appearance of a viper. At this rate, I might fill my heart with overflowing anxiety, so I was planning on studying about the storm—the current state of the world.”

Magic was currently unstable within Mesteria, and now, an unknown mage had committed homicide. It sounded exactly like the situation Vivis had prophesized. My pork heart pounded with apprehension.

Shravis's eyes reflected the glow of the maroon crosses as he continued his explanation matter-of-factly. "Presently, I don't even have the slightest idea who the culprit might be. That said, judging by the amount of mana left in the carved crosses, they seem to be a considerably strong mage… For now, we shall refer to them as the Cross Executioner."

Hearing that, the boar snorted, sounding somewhat thrilled.

Which made sense, seeing that it was the kind of name that would tickle Kento's fancy. The royal family certainly had a unique taste for naming things, whether it be the Cross Executioner or the Clandestine Arcanist, which Eavis had apparently come up with of his own accord. It was likely only a matter of time before I gained a title like the "Promiscuous Pink Beast."

Gazing at the sinister corpse, I asked, "Shravis, you came all the way here in person because you need to identify this Cross Executioner person as soon as possible, right?"

"Indeed." He nodded. "My apologies for always relying on your aid, but I would be very grateful to have the help of everyone present. As the king, I have a duty to deal with this case. But regrettably, I also have a significant heap of work I ought to attend to in the capital. It might be difficult to find a swift resolution without your generosity."

Itsune touched the handle of the greataxe on her back before smiling wryly, revealing her fangs. "Pursue the hints left by a nursery rhyme, chase after a bloodthirsty, murderous mage… You're quite the demanding king, ain'tcha? Make sure to pay us handsomely as thanks."

She sounded like she was joking, but Shravis nodded earnestly. "But of course. Once the situation settles down, I plan to grant the Liberators an amount of territory that befits your achievements. As for the executive officers, I shall consider special privileges on top of that as well."

Raising an eyebrow, Itsune repeated, "Privileges? Are you gonna make us your subordinates or something?"

"No." He frowned. "The royal court and the Liberators are in

an alliance of equal status, remember? I won't induct you into the royal government and make you my subordinates. That isn't fair. I will give you and your comrades political influence, then entrust some of my subordinates with you."

Pausing briefly, Shravis added, "That said, the position of my queen is still empty. If you have any wish to fill it, please notify me."

Utterly stunned by that startling statement, Itsune stared at Shravis with her mouth wide open. Possibly because of the light from the bloody crosses, a faint tint of red seemed to be on her cheeks.

A few seconds trickled by in stillness.

Wearing a small smile, Shravis shook his head. "No, don't take me seriously. That was a joke. The royal family isn't permitted to marry non-magical folk."

Itsune dragged out a big sigh. "Sheesh, you surprised me there. When you're the one talking, it doesn't sound like a joke at all."

I nodded internally. *I totally agree.* "I think it's best for Shravis to abstain from joking for a while. That aside...let's get started right away. It's time to hunt for clues pointing us to the Cross Executioner's identity."

Jess's eyes lit up hearing my proposal, and she nodded eagerly. "I will find the trail that leads us to the culprit's identity —" she paused dramatically, "—and determine the one truth!"

Oh, that reminds me, Jess has taken up the detective role.

After making that confident declaration, Jess looked at me and asked, "But, um... Where should I start?"

Looks like our resident detective needs some help. I suppose I'll make full use of my knowledge of the mystery genre and teach her the decorum of an ace detective. "You start by tracing the paths the murderer has taken and looking for any evidence they've accidentally left behind. You can count on me—I'll back you up as your assistant. The sharp nose of a pig just might come in handy."

As it turned out, my sharp piggy nose was completely and utterly useless.

Due to the irritant odor of volcanic gases and the pungent stench of blood wafting over from the hot springs, I couldn't distinguish any of the other scents left behind at the scene of the

deserted corpses.

So, we had to resort to Plan B—following the next big lead left on the corpses other than the bloody crosses. And our second big lead was the thermal denaturation of the bodies' surfaces. All thirty-nine carcasses arranged here had turned an unnatural shade of white with heat. However, their skin hadn't been charred. Therefore, they'd likely been either steamed or boiled at high temperatures.

When I got to this point of my explanation, Jess raised her hand. "But isn't there a chance they might have been heated by magic?"

A very good point. "Yeah, that's certainly a possibility." I nodded. "The hair of the corpses is wet. I suggest we examine the moisture's composition."

The hot springs are likely acidic, so it'd be nice if we had something like litmus paper. Just as I thought that, the boar grunted loudly.

Kento announced, "The water content in their hair is, undoubtedly, acidic. It also contains ferric cations. It should almost certainly have its origins in the local hot springs."

He'd taken me by surprise and beaten me to the punch. "That's amazing. How did you figure that out?"

The dressed-up boar puffed out his chest proudly. "I used my acute biological chemistry sensors [sense of taste]. You seem to be the type who enjoys sniffing, Mister Lolip, but I'm the type who prefers licking. I did a trial by licking the spring water and the hair from a handful of corpses. All of them were ninety-nine percent the exact same taste—almost completely identical."

I blinked. *Wow. Licking a creepy hot spring the color of blood, then the hair of dead bodies? He's got guts that rival the scientists of the Middle Ages. That aside...* I frowned. *What does he mean when he says he's the type who prefers licking? Does he mean it's his preferred method of bonding with his owner?*

I mean, yeah, I find pleasure in sniffing things, so I'd never lick Jess. Meanwhile, Sanon seems like he licks and sniffs, so you could say he's gone beyond Kento and me. Maybe it's about time I start considering a change of policies...

Realizing that Jess was giving me a gaze of scrutiny, as if she were looking at a pervert, I changed the subject. "Now then, Jess. In our situation, where do you think is the best place to search?"

Switching from her "Alert! Pervert!" mode to detective mode,

Jess began voicing her thoughts unhurriedly. “Judging by their looks, they were boiled at considerably high temperatures. Bathing in a normal hot spring wouldn’t lead to such results.”

She paused and then continued. “I believe the primary scene of the crime is somewhere near the spring source. Based on what I can remember, the hot spring water is collected in the cathedral before it’s distributed throughout the town. When it arrives in the settlement, it cools down to a pleasant temperature you can bathe in, so I think it’s unlikely that the murders happened inside the town.”

That makes sense. Her answer is close to a perfect score. Maybe she doesn’t need an assistant.

Shravis asked, “If so, would that mean the murders happened over in the mountain?”

Jess nodded. “Yes. I can’t be completely certain, but I think the chances are high. I’ve visited this town before and discovered an outlet in the mountain where the water gushes out. The fresh spring water in the reservoir there was bubbling and boiling hot.”

At this point in our discussion, I heard Itsune call out, “Guuuys!”

I turned around to see Itsune peering into the cathedral from the doors that were left wide open. Collectively, we moved over to her.

Itsune had activated the enchantment on her greataxe, which was shining bluish-white. Her weapon shed light on the extensive, circular hall. The gilded walls and the lustrous black floor gleamed as they reflected this glow. For a moment, I’d thought I was inside an uncanny kaleidoscope.

“It’s dark in here,” Shravis whispered before summoning countless orbs of light with his magic. The spheres radiated warm light as they began drifting toward the ceiling.

Soon, the entire interior became brighter, lighting up the gruesome relief sculpture sitting at the center of the hall. It depicted youngsters about to bathe being dragged into the depths of the water by numerous skeletons. The sculptor had crafted it out of black rock with a glassy texture, and there was something so lifelike about it that it didn’t feel like a mere sculpture.

Perhaps it was because pained groaning from the throats of the youngsters, whose faces were contorted with fear, echoed

throughout the cathedral. Apparently, such bizarre phenomena happened occasionally due to the pollution of the Abyssus. *It's spooky, so please stop it.*

On the pedestal of the relief sculpture was an epigram inscribed in shiny golden letters.

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

These words embodied the will of the local governor, who was keeping an iron grip on his monopoly of the hot spring through fear. *Yeah, I think I discussed that with Jess during our last visit.*

Itsune pointed at the ground beneath her feet. "The door was open, so I quickly searched and found tracks on the floor." Her finger then slid forward until she was pointing to one side of the sculpture.

I scrutinized the ground and noticed that tiny water droplets had left a trail behind. Countless little roundish dots were connected in one long belt, suggesting that dripping hot spring water had walked across the floor. The moisture itself had already evaporated, but it had left reddish brown deposits that had likely been dissolved in the hot spring.

The boar wasted no time and licked the ground. "Indeed, this is sediment from the hot spring as well. It appears that the perp has no plans of hiding the actual site of the murders."

I seriously couldn't bring myself to lick the ground, but volcanic gas was sparse here, so I sniffed the surroundings as well. There might still be some kind of compound, which could be detected through scent, that offered leads about the criminal. Unfortunately, I didn't discover any particular smell that stood out.

The trail left behind by dried water—no, the trail left behind during the crime led all the way to a room deeper inside.

"Mister Pig, let's take a look!" Jess exclaimed enthusiastically and began following the tracks before anyone else.

"Wait!" I yelled. "Jess, what will you do if the criminal's still around? They are an unidentified, powerful mage. All of us need to stick together."

Hearing that, Shravis walked to the forefront of our group. "Leave it to me. I will protect all of you without fail." He promptly began marching forward, his heels clicking against the ground.

The trail left behind by dripping spring water gradually became broader and more vivid as we progressed. Assuming the culprit had floated the wet corpses with magic to transfer them to the plaza, the amount of dripping water should decrease the farther they traveled from the original crime scene. In other words, the primary crime scene was at the end of this trail.

It eventually led us to a hatch door that was large enough to remind me of a whale's mouth. The door was at the center of a gloomy room that likely wasn't frequently used. As if beckoning us in, the door flipped up vigorously.

The water trail continued inside the hatch—it came from the basement. Even though it was winter, hot, humid air flowed from its depths. My nose picked up the stench of iron ions and sulfur compounds. Evidently, hot water was further inside.

Underground, what awaited us was a much more spacious chamber than I'd ever expected.

"This place is..." Shravis muttered to himself as he distributed orbs of light in this new area.

At first glance, I almost thought this chamber was an arena. Someone had dug into the stone to hollow out a vast, circular underground chamber. Instead of a flat floor, the ground was a concentric set of stairs that gradually descended as you approached the center, like a mortar receptacle.

Located in the very center of the chamber was an enormous bathtub. But what filled it wasn't warm water that released faint, pleasant puffs of steam, but boiling scarlet water that bubbled as if it were jumping up and down.

As I observed my surroundings, I noticed rows of cramped jail cells along the walls divided into numerous smaller sections. The bars were all coated with gold—was it to prevent corrosion from the volcanic gas or a special upgrade for locking away mages?

I noted that due to the incline of the ground, each cell should have a good view of the bathtub in the center. The lofty stone ceiling must have vividly reverberated the screams of prisoners who'd been forced to soak in the boiling water.

This place was a colossal underground jail and a merciless execution site—or a torture chamber.

Possibly out of the pitiful amount of conscience the owner had left, there was a small white statue of Vatis on the opposite side of the entrance we were at. It could have served the

purpose of relieving terror through faith.

Jess licked her index fingertip slightly and raised it to read the direction of the wind. “It seems fresh air is being pumped in from behind Lady Vatis’s statue. A consistent strong gust is blowing from that direction to ours.”

I’d also realized that fact, since a beautiful maiden’s fragrance had been consistently flowing in my direction ever since she started standing in front of me. “So it’s structured in a way that poisonous gases wouldn’t accumulate. Interesting. That begs the question—was it out of kindness or cruelty?”

Volcanic gas, which was denser than air, tended to collect at low altitudes. The incessant wind of mercy blowing over from behind the Vatis’s statue was efficiently clearing it away—a design to prevent the criminals from death by poisoning. Many air vents were on the ceiling, and the chamber seemed structured so air would flow out from there.

This underground jail had been designed with meticulous calculations during its construction—calculations to torment the convicts without killing them once and for all.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone present,” Shravis commented, commanding his orbs of light to fly around in circles, lighting up the confinement cells along the walls. Tattered rags and human skeletons were left in a messy clutter, but I couldn’t spot any living human beings.

I frowned. “It might be some kind of trap. Be careful. You might end up being cursed like Eavis was.”

Shravis looked over his shoulder and smiled at me reassuringly. “It’s all right. We’ve already finished analyzing that curse, and even I can detect it beforehand.” As he spoke, Shravis placed his hand against the stone wall. “Besides, there are traces of Lady Vatis’s magic in this chamber—it’s under the protection of a powerful enchantment. Even if someone possessed a tool like that Arcanist’s staff, they couldn’t pierce through the ground and walls here.”

Itsune raised an eyebrow. “Not even my greataxe?”

Shravis nodded decisively. “You may try, but you’ll end up having to sharpen your blade again.”

He then walked down the stairs, heading toward the bathtub in the center of the room. We followed after him.

The wind of mercy blowing in from behind Vatis’s statue was likely cool because it came from the outside. The cold air that

was relatively denser slipped down underneath the warm air. After sweeping down until it reached the bathtub's surface, it heated up and rose again, blowing against our faces. It was a relatively strong gust.

Jess's skirt ended up making quite a lot of grand maneuvers because of it. But due to the headwind that mingled with hot steam, I couldn't open my eyes to the fullest, which meant that I wasn't able to enjoy the wind's blessing.

As we went lower, the heat's vigor intensified.

Shravis's glowing orbs shed light on the boiling red water. A strong metallic stench reminiscent of blood attacked my nose. Condensation slicked the stone floor. If I slipped, I feared I might tumble down into the bathtub.

"Please don't accidentally fall because you keep trying to get a peek at other people's underwear," Jess said in a somewhat frosty voice.

I snorted. "I *am* being careful. I'd like to avoid becoming dwaeji gukbap, after all."

By the way, there's a candidate for botan nabe—that's boar stew, if you're wondering—right next to me. Kento was doing everything he could to stop his owner from peering into the bathtub with childlike innocence.

The bathtub wasn't quite a tub, per se, for it had no proper edge. Instead, the very last step of the stairs expanded out like the side of a swimming pool. It was the perfect area to leave prisoners lying around before the main event. A simple kick across the slippery floor would be enough to send them flying into the boiling water.

As he watched the bubbling water surface, Shravis noted, "It seems safe to declare that this place was used to murder those criminals."

I pictured the murder scene in my mind, and a certain question soon surfaced. "No, strictly speaking, it's not here."

Shravis inclined his head quizzically. "Why not?"

"Try imagining this—what would happen if you tossed a living human being inside?"

"They'd die."

I winced. "I mean, yeah, that's the end result, but…I don't think they'd die immediately. A good reference to think about is the classic scene where the evil metal guy in the 'Hasta la vista, baby' movie melts down.'"

A moment of silence.

Kento's voice rang out from behind. "I'm afraid they probably wouldn't understand a reference from modern-day Japan…"

Oh, right.

Just as I thought that, Jess gasped next to me. "I understand now! Anyone who had been thrown into the hot water would try to flail about to escape from it. And even if they didn't do that, they would struggle and writhe in pain. But the bodies lined up in the plaza were all lying down neatly with their hands and legs straight! That makes no sense."

I nodded to myself with satisfaction. *I expected nothing less from our ace detective.* "Precisely. If they were boiled alive, their corpses would be frozen in positions that match such circumstances——they would appear to be struggling or in excruciating agony. But those corpses almost looked as if they were asleep. Which means…" I paused meaningfully. "Jess, do you know?"

Ace Detective Cutie-Pie Jess hummed to herself thoughtfully before lifting a single index finger. "For example… They could have possibly perished through a method that didn't inflict any visible injuries first. Then, once they died and their bodies had stiffened, they were boiled in the water. How does that sound?"

It was a rather persuasive deduction that even took rigor mortis into consideration.

Placing a hand on his chin, Shravis fell into contemplative silence.

I added, "Well, there *is* the chance that because the murderer wanted to line the bodies up neatly from the beginning, the culprit petrified these victims alive with magic and boiled them that way. But in the end, the only difference this makes is that the culprit can inflict agony on their targets. They had to kill a pretty significant number of people at once—I doubt they'd go through the extra trouble. In my opinion, it makes more sense for them to murder the victims before the boiling process."

Looking intrigued, Jess raised a question. "If so, why did they do such a thing? Why would the culprit deliberately boil people that were already dead?"

Shravis inclined his head, looking somewhat baffled. "That's a strange detail to pay attention to."

Jess explained, "It's my bad habit to never trust general impressions but concentrate myself too much upon details."

Her statement made her sound just like a character in a detective story. Naturally, I'd taught her this line as well.

Y'know, this is seriously getting interesting. I think we've got a real murder mystery on our hands with all the questions we've raised so far.

Thirty-nine corpses of scoundrels arranged in rows in the plaza. The symbol of criminals engraved with magic. The mysterious reason that caused the criminal to deliberately boil the dead bodies. Curious, very curious.

As it turned out, Ace Detective Cutie-Pie Jess's first case might not just be a ghastly mass murder—it might also be quite a difficult case.

Jess placed a hand on her chin and was deep in thought. She certainly looked the part of a detective. As I admired her profile absentmindedly, the white Vatis statue far behind her entered my vision. Vatis placed her left hand on her chest and raised her right hand high into the air, which was her standard pose.

But something didn't seem quite right about it. And this sense of wrongness intensified as I observed the item.

When I finally identified the reason, my entire body shuddered with shock.

Jess blinked. "Mister Pig...?"

"Hey, Jess," I began gravely, "all Vatis statues are in the same pose, right?"

"Yes, they are. Why?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Is that thing included in the pose too?"

Hearing my statement, everyone's attention zoned in on the statue.

The perceptive Jess was the first to let out an "Ah!" of astonishment.

Because if you were to look carefully at Vatis's right hand, which was raised high above her head—you would discover that she was holding a *rusty chain*.

Nothing was a coincidence, or so my intuition told me.

I recalled the verses from "The Chain Song" that I'd read yesterday.

The rusty chain *leads on to far, far away,*
Walk out of the jail*, there you will see the chain trail, to the graveyard it paves the way.*
The first ring breaks, allowing the mouse to flee,

Into the pot it goes, boiling and simmering slow*, the mouse is* dead*, so mote it be.*

The nursery rhyme was a clue that indicated the location of the First Collar, which was necessary for the Yethma's liberation. And perhaps that was where the culprit's motives lay—that was the reason they'd gone out of their way to boil their dead victims.

Broperver was likely the first location that corresponded with the nursery rhyme's hint, the place that Shravis had asked the Liberators to search for on their quest for the First Collar. Furthermore, this incident happened exactly on the day after Shravis's coronation.

The criminal, the Cross Executioner, evidently knew about the First Collar.

Therefore, there was a very high chance that the corpses arranged brazenly on the plaza were a message—the murderer was throwing down the gauntlet to the royal court.

We investigated Vatis's statue thoroughly. According to the mages, it was constructed by powerful magic, which made it significantly robust. This meant that it and the chain were likely relics left behind by Vatis.

The rusty chain extended down from the statue's right hand and crept into the opening from where cold air was blowing in.

There was no collar nearby. Our quest wasn't quite over yet.

Jess said, "Mister Pig and I suspected we might have to go around the places listed in 'The Chain Song' to find the artifact, and if that's true… This clue should lead us to a second location, then a third, then a fourth, and so on."

I nodded in agreement with Jess's analysis. "I'm pretty sure that this chain is our lead. We've got to hurry up and find the next one." Before I knew it, I'd begun talking at a rapid pace. "The Cross Executioner caused such a scene on the exact day after Shravis announced that we'll find the First Collar through 'The Chain Song.' At this precise timing, they went out of their way to imitate the rhyme's lyrics to boil corpses here of all places. I highly doubt they are ignorant about the First Collar's existence. If they get their hands on it before us, I shudder to think of the consequences."

Kento began a swift and passionate rant of his own. "If they snatch away the First Collar, we will lose the only key [method] to

liberate the Yethma, yes? That is absolutely—*absolutely*—out of the question."

In appearance, he looked like a cute boar wearing frilly attire, but in truth, he was a youth with an extraordinary ardor toward releasing the Yethma—or, more precisely, releasing Nourris from her slave collar.

During Kento's first teleportation, he'd appeared near a certain Yethma. And yes, that was Nourris. The Nothen Faction had attempted to forcefully collect Nourris as property and make her work as their slave, and Kento had resisted them. However, his attempts had failed. After he'd been killed, his consciousness returned to modern-day Japan.

Nourris's memories had been wiped some time afterward, and she didn't remember anything about Kento. Even so, Kento was still fixated on setting this girl free after their reunion.

The Yethma collar was no different from a slave collar that sealed away these young girls' innate magical powers and robbed them of their will to cherish themselves. It was a cruel contraption, and Kento, as well as the Liberators, were risking their own lives to abolish it once and for all.

One such Liberator, Itsune, placed her hand on Shravis's shoulder. "What's wrong, Your Royal Majesty? Calm down a bit."

Hearing that, I looked at Shravis. He wore apathy on his face as always, but his fingertips were trembling. "I... I *am* calm!" the young king argued in a vehement tone that certainly didn't sound calm. "My hands aren't shaking with fear—they are trembling with indignation. A wicked mage has stolen our information and even wishes to snatch the First Collar... As if that weren't enough, they have committed a murder that is no different from a mocking taunt! They have taken an entire thirty-nine lives and carved the symbol of criminals from the Dark Ages onto them! And all of this happened on the evening of my coronation!"

His shoulders heaved as he panted with fury. He continued, "We mustn't allow them to do as they please. This is a dangerous world where even small ristae have the risk of activating spontaneously. We cannot allow such a rebel to exist!"

Though his tone was rough, his point was sound.

This wasn't a simple murder. This was a murder committed by a mage who held animosity toward the royal court.

Compared to the time when an immortal mage had

possessed Marquis's body, this still felt preferable. But there was no mistaking it. This was a crisis for the royal court—no, all of Mesteria.

I approached Shravis and said, "We have two clear goals. The first is to hopefully find the First Collar before the Cross Executioner. The second is to determine the Cross Executioner's identity. In the unlikely event that the worst-case scenario comes to pass and that criminal gets their hands on the collar before us… We must capture them by any means necessary and retrieve it."

Shravis nodded. "Indeed. We cannot allow a mage that turns on the royal family to go unchecked. I, King Shravis, swear I will slay them with my own hands without fail."

I blinked. *Did you hear the first half of my statement?*

Jess appeared to have sensed something because she took a step forward and stood in front of Shravis. "Before anything else, let's see where this chain leads. It should give us the next clue that will help us find the collar. The Cross Executioner might have realized that as well."

Unlike his attitude toward me, it seemed that Shravis couldn't ignore a beautiful maiden. He let out a slow exhale before nodding. "Right. The ideal method to explore this air vent will likely be summoning a light orb that interacts with the chain and rises up with it. Jess, could you perform the spell so that I can react with magic in the event of an emergency?"

"Yes, of course!" Jess chirped and manifested a white glowing sphere on her palm. She commanded it to approach the chain in Vatis's right hand, and as if coiling around the chain, the light orb vanished into the air vent.

I see. This way, we can simply head outside and find the shining part of the chain.

"Let us make haste," Shravis said, turning on his heel swiftly. "We are in a race against time." He briskly retraced our path past the cells lined up along the walls.

As I chased after him together with Jess, my mind went to the murder case on our hands.

We'd figured out the reason the criminal had boiled the dead bodies. This was a murder staged to allude to "The Chain Song," and the murderer had only followed the nursery rhyme's imagery.

But if that was true, why hadn't the murderer simply followed

the rhyme and killed their targets by boiling them? Arranging an exhibition of corpses that had perished while writhing in agony from heat would have been much more impactful as a message toward the royal family. The mouse within the rhyme must have perished similarly in its attempts to escape the pot.

If the Cross Executioner had indeed boiled the dead bodies after killing them, why had they done that? Was it because they had merely wanted a neat arrangement? But then again, they were taking inspiration from the nursery rhyme—it felt somewhat sacrilegious to put in the effort to change the method of murder deliberately. What in the world was the Cross Executioner even thinking?

The likelihood of this scenario was slim, but the Cross Executioner could have magically frozen their targets in the "stand at attention" pose before murdering them by boiling. If this was the case, however, what purpose did that serve? Did the perpetrator have some kind of fixation on the corpses' specific pose? *I've encountered a handful of perfectionist criminals obsessed with bilateral symmetry in crime novels. Does the Cross Executioner have some sort of obsessive-compulsive disorder too?*

As we walked down the corridor, Jess pointed out, "Mister Pig, you are putting in a lot of thought about the Cross Executioner's way of thinking."

Uh, that was narration, ma'am. "When it comes to murder cases like these, articles left behind at the crime scene aren't our only leads," I advised as her assistant. "As someone aiming to become an ace detective, it's good to keep this in mind. Evaluating the criminal's character through their murder methods can help you determine their identity. If you can figure out what they were thinking or feeling as they committed the crime, you will naturally paint a picture of the kind of person who was responsible."

It was basically the method of criminal profiling, so to speak.

Jess blinked. "Okay...?"

She didn't seem very convinced, so I decided to give her a lecture. "Let's use a simple example to show you how effective it can be. Say that I was killed, and someone carved the words 'pig with no self-restraint' on my stomach. What can you infer from that?"

Jess inclined her head. "I can infer that you were a Mister Pig with no self-restraint."

Uh, no, I don't mean me... "The criminal killed me because they were displeased with my lack of self-restraint. And then, after a meticulous investigation of my recent behavior, you learned that I had a secret meeting with cutie-pie Ceres the previous evening. It was just the two of us."

She narrowed her eyes. "You are a Mister Pig with no self-restraint, I see."

"Exactly. Therefore, you can deduce that the criminal is someone who would feel bitter toward me about this fact—that is to say, you, Jess."

"Huuuh?!" Jess gasped. "I would never kill you! I do think I'd punish you, but I wouldn't go that far..."

Oh. She'd punish *me?* "Like I said, this is only an example. In this manner, you can speculate the reasons that led to the Cross Executioner choosing such a method of murder, and these reasons can become clues that will help you narrow down the culprit."

"Interesting." I finally had her attention, and the look in Jess's eyes shifted. Thoughtfully, she placed a hand on her chin. "This is just my opinion, but..."

"Go on," I encouraged her.

"I think the Cross Executioner isn't actually a merciless person."

Now that was a criminal profile I'd never expected. She was the one who ended up surprising me instead. "What makes you think that?"

"I believe it was a mercy killing."

My eyes widened. *Now that she mentions it, that* is *a possibility.* "The culprit didn't want to cause their victims unnecessary suffering. Therefore, they killed their targets through a peaceful method before the boiling process. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes. Perhaps they might not be used to taking lives," Jess said. "Rather than avoiding unnecessary suffering, there is also the chance that the Cross Executioner didn't want to see people in pain."

Shravis, who walked at the front, frowned and turned around. "Are you sure about that? They've murdered thirty-nine people. How could you describe the murderer with a word other than heartless?" His hands were clenched into tight fists. He almost looked as if he wanted to find someone he could punch.

“There, there. You can rest assured,” Itsune interjected from his side. “Whether the perp is compassionate or cruel, it’s not like our job will change. The moment we find them, we’ll make them spill every piece of info they know. And once we’re done, we’ll slice their head off cleanly to be rid of them.”

When we circled to the opposite side of the cathedral, we discovered a rusty chain that the rain gutter had camouflaged. U-shaped metal fixtures, reminding me of staples, were hammered into the outer stone walls at regular intervals to fix the chain in place.

Jess’s magical light slowly traced the chain and rose. It seemed to stretch all the way up to the roof. Requesting that the other members stood by on the ground, Shravis, Jess, and I decided to get up and check out what was there.

Shravis effortlessly floated the three of us into the air, and we gradually soared. Jess hugged her thighs—she seemed to be conscious of her skirt. Meanwhile, I was flailing my feet around because the sense of weightlessness made me restless. Heights weren’t my cup of tea—especially when I was being lifted up by magic without anything below to support me.

The Broperver cathedral was a towering building with countless gilded spires on the roof that clustered close to each other like trees. Between the spires were structures that reminded me of slender chimneys, and steam billowed up from there. Visibility was low due to the steam, and the extensive stretch of spires beneath us almost looked like a black forest enveloped in fog.

“Jess, speed up the light,” Shravis requested.

In response, Jess carefully moved her right hand. Following her movement, the white light following the chain weaved more quickly between the spires like a slithering snake.

Eventually, the light began climbing up one of the spires and reached its summit. From what I could see, a bronze weather vane was at the very top.

“Let’s head over!” I exclaimed with a hint of thrill in my tone, but our bodies had already begun a gentle, parallel motion in that direction before I’d even spoken a word.

We landed on a flat part of the roof near the weather vane. Upon further inspection, I realized this structure certainly wasn’t any ordinary weather vane.

For starters, this spire was lower in height than the others, making it a blind spot in the area around the cathedral. Since it was positioned in a place that couldn't be seen from the vicinity, unless the architect had made an incredibly silly design mistake, this weather vane wasn't purposed for showing wind direction.

Furthermore, the rusty chain was connected to the weather vane. Jess's light orb had stopped at this structure, so this was the same chain Vatis's statue held in the underground arena-style jail.

Above all else, the design of the rooster wasn't ordinary in the least. From the neck up, it was a rooster, yes. But from the chest down, it was modeled after a reptile, reminding me of a snake or a lizard. Its beak, opened wide to cry out loudly, also revealed a snake's forked tongue.

Jess frowned. "This is...a cocadrilla."

Shravis and I looked at her blankly with an expression that practically asked, *Come again?*

"Um, it's an imaginary creature that only exists in fiction," she explained. "It can breathe fire, and any living creature that is struck by the fire will turn into stone. I remember seeing it in collections of ancient myths and legends."

You can always count on Jess! All her reading has definitely borne fruit—her treasure trove of knowledge is pretty sizable.

Shravis nodded before climbing up a little onto the spire roof. When he got high enough to reach the cocadrilla, he gingerly touched it. Then, he decisively grabbed the flattened rooster head and attempted to turn it.

"It's fixed in place," he reported.

Jess and I observed the cocadrilla's feet. There, I spotted an arrow pointing in the same direction as the rooster's beak.

"It's pointing...northeast," Jess said before shifting her gaze to the same direction. Both of us couldn't make out anything due to the snow-white steam.

"I'll clear away the fog," Shravis said before quietly thrusting his palm toward the northeast. He clenched his open hand. There was a powerful burst of force that dissipated, sweeping away the steam instantly.

Blasting away clouds to reveal the sun, extinguishing steam in an entire area... Bruh, aren't you mages a bit too overpowered? I thought as I gazed at Shravis, who turned toward us with satisfaction.

The cathedral's spires offered us a panoramic view of the northeastern plains that filled our vision. The striking morning sun peeped through the gap in a cloud, blazing down on the landscape and our profiles. Next to me, Jess raised her finger and pointed at something. "Mister Pig!" she exclaimed.

If we followed the line of sight that the weather vane indicated, there was a single place of interest. Far in the distance was a great river, Bellell River, and along the water's edge was a conspicuously large city.

I blinked. "Isn't that near where Fairy Creek is?"

"Yes, it's the Alte Plains!"

Shravis fixed his gaze in that direction and nodded. "Indeed. It's a city called Harbir, which is located at the heart of the Alte Plains."

We traded glances and nods.

Shravis said curtly, "We shall leave the crime scene in the army's hands and depart at once."

With three new members in our party—Itsune, Nourris, and Kento—we decided to go straight to Harbir. Our method of transport was the royal court's dragon, which we'd used to come here from the capital.

Box-shaped seats were installed on the enormous back of the dragon covered with black scales. Perhaps comparing it to a roller coaster car might make it easier to imagine—it was a car for four human passengers, two in the front row and two in the back row. Accordingly, Kento and I had no choice but to curl up and squeeze ourselves next to our respective owner's legs. I earnestly relished the sensation of being sandwiched between Jess's calves during my air trip.

A path that had once taken us from morning to early evening by carriage was only a mere thirty minutes for a dragon. It felt as if moments after the dragon had finished ascending into the sky, it immediately started descending. In the blink of an eye, we alighted in the apple orchard where the trees had lost all their leafy coats.

On our journey here, we'd barely exchanged any words. Our relentless reality hung over us like a haze, amplifying our insecurities.

The Cross Executioner had carried out their mass murder on

the night of Shravis's coronation. They'd proceeded to reference the nursery rhyme and boil the corpses. On top of that, the scene of the crime was a place with a clue that should lead us to the First Collar.

Without a doubt, the Cross Executioner was issuing some kind of hostile challenge toward the royal family. There was also a very high chance that they knew of the First Collar, which we were trying to locate.

Where in the world did the information leak from? I frowned. We hadn't a clue about our enemy, but they had an alarming amount of intel about our side. Just the thought made pig bumps rise on my skin.

For the time being, we hadn't found any evidence or leads that could be used to identify the Cross Executioner. Our only option was to hope that the murderer hadn't found the First Collar yet while we hunted for the artifact at top speed. If our enemy gave themselves away during that process, we might find the chance to track them down. Meanwhile, if they somehow got to the collar ahead of us… I trembled. *That's a nightmare.* We would have to arrest the Cross Executioner by any means necessary and snatch back the artifact. That would likely lead to a major battle.

In times of unrest like these, the most crucial thing to do was consolidate our side with people we could trust.

Pulling out of my retrospection, I watched as the dragon took off immediately after dropping us off. It headed north to pick up Naut and Yoshu.

Shravis turned on his heel, and his invincible robe, handmade by his grandfather, fluttered in the air with his motion. "Let's go." He began making his way toward the city.

The sun must have climbed high into the sky because it had gotten brighter. However, the sky was still cloudy and gloomy.

Marching forward with firm determination, Shravis explained, "Harbir is a large city that prospers from the trade on the Bellell River. With the river running through the middle, the city is split into the northern and southern parts, and several churches are dedicated to Lady Vatis in both parts. The best place to start is probably the large church at the heart of the city…" He hesitated. "But in the end, we might end up having to search blindly through the churches one by one."

Jess asked, “Should we split up into smaller groups? Or do we keep going as one big group?”

Shravis didn’t hesitate. “We’ll split up into two groups. I want to evenly distribute our fighting power so that either group can defend themselves in the event of an attack. Which means that Itsune and I will have to go separate ways.”

Itsune hummed. “So that means I’ll go with Nourris, and Jess’ll pair up with you? We’re pretty clueless about Vatis, so I’m a bit worried we might miss stuff when we go around.”

Hearing that, Shravis mulled over it for a moment. “That’s a good point. Jess and the pig both have the necessary knowledge. Pass Nourris and Kento over to my side. Jess and the pig will go with you, Itsune. Nourris can heal me if necessary, and Jess should be able to support you in battle to a certain extent.” He turned to Jess. “You can heal as well, yes?”

“Yes.” Jess nodded. “I can heal anyone, just to a moderate amount.”

Healing magic was a special branch of magic where the strength of the caster’s wish to heal their target corresponded directly with the results. Due to her collar, Nourris had to rely on ristae. But possibly because she was a girl with a big heart, she could apparently heal anyone to a reasonable degree, provided they were one of the Liberators or allies. Partly because of that, the executive officers placed a lot of trust in and expectations on her, which was one of the reasons she always went along on their missions.

Meanwhile, Ceres was pretty much a dedicated healer for Naut—she could heal him back to full health in the blink of an eye. Jess was apparently quite a fussy person about her targets as well. However, because her magic itself was overpowered, she could heal any target to the same extent as Nourris unless there were extreme circumstances.

As an aside, Jess had told me that Wyss excelled at healing magic that wasn’t dependent on emotions. The older woman could manifest complex body tissue effortlessly, as if she were weaving clothes. That was how she’d managed to heal me instantaneously back when we’d first arrived at the capital, even though I was less than a vulgar pig in her eyes.

We trod across the apple orchard and entered the city. The soil path was eventually replaced by cobblestone paving, and the one-story houses also gradually grew taller to two-story

buildings, then three. As we approached the city's heart, I could tell the streets were growing progressively prosperous. The number of passersby increased as well. Near the river, the gaps between buildings became cramped too. The riverside cityscape was even more extreme, with four-story and five-story buildings lined up in tight rows, leaving no space between each other.

Every building was constructed with red bricks, and the entire city had the bustling mood of a lively harbor. According to Jess, this city was some distance downstream from the place we'd walked to from Fairy Creek last time. It was apparently the most prosperous area within the river basin.

"The city is huge!" Jess exclaimed as she raced to the river, and I followed suit.

Possibly because it was a city of trade and commerce, all kinds of people went back and forth on the streets, even with the winter winds, conversing with each other enthusiastically.

But it wasn't as merry as it seemed when I tuned in to their conversations. They talked about how apples in a warehouse had been eaten up in a single night by some kind of slime mold they'd never seen before. How precious wine had discolored into pitch black. How ships had burned down because of ristae activating spontaneously. Displeasure from every corner filtered into my ears.

Spercritica was a phenomenon we'd unwittingly spurred into action, and as a result, the Abyssus was slowly eating into our everyday life. It was undoubtedly negatively influencing the lives of the innocent Mesterian citizens who hadn't done anything to deserve such a disaster.

The water's edge was guarded by stone levees, allowing us to look down upon the leisurely great body of water from a slightly elevated position. Wooden ships, loaded with stacks of wooden crates, came and went on the inky black water's surface. The traffic was high—the vessels that entered and left the city sailed on their right-hand sides and practically formed lines to prevent collisions.

Harbir was dissected into northern and southern parts by the Bellell River, which flowed from west to east. Right now, we were on the city's southern side. The brick cityscape had even extended its reach to the vast island in the middle of the river. Two prominent stone bridges crossed the river: one connecting the southern part to the island and the other connecting the

island to the northern part. Both stone bridges were magnificent arch structures, lofty enough for moderate-sized sailing vessels to go under them.

I faced the river and looked to my right, admiring the stone bridge near us. I noticed the city's name had been carved into the bridge's side in large print: *Harbir*. It was written in fancy, old-fashioned script—this city's initial development appeared to have begun quite a long time ago.

Ships were moored around the stone bridges, and people were busily loading and unloading their cargo. On the side of the island facing us was a timeworn stone pier. Meanwhile, on our side—the southern side along the river—a wooden pier that appeared to have been added afterward extended out from the land. Both piers were lively with activity and the traffic of people. From what I could see, there seemed to be a rule dictating that ships going downstream moored at the stone pier on the island side while ships going upstream stopped at the dock on our side.

I narrowed my eyes. "If we're looking for the heart of the city, I've got to say that the river island's an obvious candidate. I can see a few impressive buildings on it too."

Hearing that, Jess nodded and turned to Shravis. "Mister Shravis, we'd like to start by searching that island."

"Very well." Shravis inclined his head. "In that case, we shall begin our investigation from the southern side of the city." He drew two swirls in the air with both hands and manifested a pair of white spiral shells. Both were palm-sized. One swirled clockwise while the other swirled counterclockwise, and they were almost identical in shape, as if someone had reflected the same seashell in a mirror.

He held one out toward Jess. "If you find anywhere matching the description or sense that anything's off, contact me at once. Call my name into your shell's aperture, and I will respond with the other. These shells have a connection, and I can sense their locations whenever necessary. I will come to your rescue instantly."

Shravis's voice was taut with tension. Since there had been a murder in Broperver, it wouldn't be surprising at all for there to be another murder in this place, the next stop mentioned in the nursery rhyme. It was obvious what would happen if Jess and I stumbled upon the scene of the murder—we might have to

square off against the Cross Executioner, who'd already slaughtered thirty-nine people.

Jess nodded profoundly with steely resolve, accepting the shell and looking at Shravis. "You too, Mister Shravis. If you encounter anything that stumps you, please don't hesitate to call us anytime."

There was a pause before Shravis abruptly muttered, "You're too kind." His statement seemed to have come out of nowhere. Then, he corrected his wording, as if to smooth things over. "I'm the king—an absolute monarch with divine blood running in my veins. I'm indeed counting on you, Jess, but you do not need to come rushing over when I'm in a crisis."

Jess's brows furrowed slightly with concern. "But Mister Shravis…"

"I will deal with my own emergencies. I swear I will not fail to protect Nourris and Kento as well. If you rush over to help me, you will expose yourself to danger, Jess. That is absolutely out of the question." He gently patted Jess's head before walking into the streets with Nourris and Kento in tow.

"Well then, Jess, time for us to get started," Itsune announced, marching over to the stone bridge without any hesitation. "You too, low-life swine."

I blinked. *Low-life swine?*

Jess and I watched Shravis's retreating form for a little while before we followed Itsune.

The stone bridge leading to the island was the most impressive of all the bridges I'd seen so far in Mesteria. Smoky gray slabs of rock, which had been quarried meticulously, were stacked up compactly into a magnificent arch. It was wide enough for horse carriages to pass by each other. As we approached the middle of the bridge, the slope mellowed out, and I could see numerous people coming and going. Since there were no steps, it was also convenient for transporting goods via vehicles such as wagons and carriages.

At the ends of the bridge were stalls selling various things. I spotted someone gnawing away at the apple they'd just bought. The delectable aroma of grilling meat wafted over from somewhere. Before I knew it, it was already near lunchtime.

Though a leather cover concealed the blade, Itsune's greataxe still attracted attention. We crossed the bridge with quick steps.

"I know you said the island's our best bet, but it's still huge,"

Itsune pointed out. “Where do we start our hunt?”

I answered through Jess’s telepathy—a talking pig would stand out like a sore thumb, after all. To make it easier for her to identify my thought-speech, I labeled it with double angle brackets again. <<Our first stop is the churches. The old ones—those constructed over a century ago are ideal.>>

Jess added, “It must be quite a majestic building. It should also be under magical protection, meaning that the effects of the Abyssus should be minimal.”

When we passed by the middle point of the bridge, the upward incline shifted into a downward slope. From the bridge’s summit, we had an excellent sweeping view of the river island.

As a whole, it was shaped like a large battleship. Possibly to prevent erosion by the river’s currents, the island’s perimeter was guarded by steep stone walls. Inside the stone walls were rows of many large buildings without windows.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. <<There sure are a lot of buildings. Makes me wonder what they use this island for.>>

Jess peered down the bridge and began her speculation. “The bottom of the bridge is linked to the pier. Perhaps the buildings lining up along the river are warehouses?”

<<I see, so that’s why they don’t have windows.>> I hummed thoughtfully. <<We’ll ignore the warehouses for now.>>

Having reached the end of the bridge, we took our first step onto the island. A small plaza welcomed us. All the roads were paved with ashen stone, and the buildings surrounding the plaza had clusters of barrels and wooden crates littered around them. Many of the people present appeared to be involved in trade—they either carried enormous burdens on their backs or pulled wagons along.

“Huuuh.” Itsune sounded disappointed. “What a shame. I don’t see any buildings that fit the description.”

Jess and I nodded in agreement. After scanning our surroundings, Jess noted, “There looks to be one more plaza behind this area. I can see a dome roof. Shall we investigate there first?”

<<Good idea.>>

We got across the plaza and made our way to the next one. A handful of fountains were scattered along the streets, but every one was buried under climbing rose plants that bloomed sinister blue flowers. None of them were spouting water. *Is there*

someone on this island who has a terrible grudge against fountains or something?

Though by now, landscapes looking a bit odd were already our new norm. We only spared a glance in the fountains' direction before passing by without stopping.

What we had to search for was a building that should be under the protection of Vatis's magic. Like Jess had mentioned earlier, the sign to look out for was the lack of Abyssus pollution.

The next plaza seemed to be the heart of the island. It was a spacious, open area featuring a prominent church with a dome roof. The church was a rather dazzling piece of architecture, and the emerald roof formed a gorgeous contrast against the walls' white stone material.

Beyond the church was an old castle that reminded me of a defensive stronghold. It was a grand but generally boring rectangular shape without anything decorative to admire. Positioned at the castle's four corners were fortified towers that looked like the rooks in chess.

We made a beeline for the church. The rusty front doors were reluctant about letting us in, so Itsune kicked them open with brute force. I'd happened to be observing her bare legs at the time, and I'd noticed that during the instant she'd exerted her strength, her skin had turned blackish. *What was that about?*

An unimpressed voice echoed in my mind. <You are a pig with no self-restraint, I see.>

I am so, so sorry, ma'am.

I'd already been expecting this when I'd seen the rust on the doors, but the church hall was deserted. The shattered stained glass windows were left as they were, while the long benches for worship were coated in dust. The chandelier was slanting at an angle—it was the furthest thing from functional.

"This is awful..." Jess whispered.

Itsune smirked. "You haven't noticed, Jess? The churches in pretty much every town are like this right now." Her foot kicked one of the books left carelessly on the ground to move it out of the way. "While that Arcanist guy had royal authority, the people's faith in the royal court plummeted to hell. Safety in the streets didn't even exist, and the royal court hasn't put ristae or Yethma back on the market either. It was the natural outcome. Plus, there's also this... Abyssus, was it, thing? Everything around you has gone absolutely haywire on top of all that. There's no

way anyone would have any faith left in Vatis."

We continued walking down the central aisle toward the altar on the other side of the hall.

One of the stained glass windows had been spared from damage. It depicted a sickly, gaunt patient—who was nothing but skin and bones—being treated by a woman with golden hair.

As Jess observed it, she deduced, "The illness featured in this panel might be the Emaciation Plague."

Now that was a terminology I'd never heard before. "Emaciation Plague?" I repeated.

"Yes." She nodded. "It was an epidemic that broke out in the Bellell River's drainage basin settlements roughly ninety years ago. The disease earned its name as the Emaciation Plague, for the sick would lose weight from intense vomiting and diarrhea before perishing. Perhaps this church was built in the memory of those dark times."

Ninety years ago... That's after Vatis's death, which means there's a lower chance of us finding any clues here.

At the center of the altar, as you would expect, was a white sculpture modeled after Vatis. I frowned as I scrutinized it.

"It's completely ruined..." Jess muttered.

Vatis's statue was sullied with dust and chipped in many places. It was a sorry sight to behold. The statue's right hand, which should be held high above her head, had snapped and fallen onto the ground. When I looked closer, I noticed the statue was covered with cracks.

"Gimme some space here," Itsune said before she held her greataxe at the ready in one fluid motion. With the leather cover still on, she swung her weapon like a bat at Vatis's statue.

There was a dull clang before the statue was smashed into pieces without resistance.

"Looks like this isn't the place we were looking for," I concluded. Jess nodded in agreement.

If it were a valuable hint toward the location of the First Collar, Vatis should have protected the statue with magic. However, it had been destroyed way too easily. It wasn't our lead.

"Just putting it out there, but don't get the wrong idea." Itsune repositioned the greataxe onto her back. "It's not like I've got any bitterness toward the royal court or anything." Seeing the surprised look Jess sent her, Itsune raised an eyebrow. "Of course, back in the day, I hated the royal court's guts and wanted

to tear it to the ground. But Shravis turned out to be a good guy. If he gets to make decisions for the royal court, I feel it's fine to continue our alliance with them."

The Liberators' calling was in their name—they wished to free the Yethma, and the royal court had been the mastermind who'd stubbornly maintained the unjust Yethma system this whole time. By all accounts, the royal court and the Liberators should clash like fire and ice.

However, due to the emergence of a common enemy, the Clandestine Arcanist, the two factions had formed a temporary united front. Even now, this alliance continued, held together by the bonds between the leading youths on each side.

"It would be wonderful if you could keep up that alliance from now on as well!" Jess placed a hand on her chest and appealed earnestly.

Itsune began walking toward the exit. "No matter what you might say, Jess, I do what I want to do. But if the royal court's willing to preserve our current relationship, we won't abandon our alliance. Naut thinks the same way."

There was a moment of silence before her feet ground to a halt, and she looked over her shoulder. "Oh, right. I don't think I ever mentioned why I hated the royal court to you guys, have I?"

Jess also came to a stop. "I've heard a little bit of the story from Mister Pig..."

Even though we hadn't requested that she say anything, Itsune began narrating her tale. "The family I was born into is actually a part of the royal court's army. We basically inherited this position called field commander, where we took orders from the royal capital and directed troops based on our instructions. And, well, we were relatively well-off. When I was still a kid, a Yethma called Lithis served our household. She was kind, honest, and looked cute with her braids."

In the back of my mind, I vaguely recalled that Nourris also braided her hair.

Itsune continued, "So the story goes like this. One day, on her way back from a shopping errand, Lithis was assaulted by a piece of trash who can't tell right from wrong. We had no idea where she went and assembled a bunch of people to look for her, which wasn't the best idea..." She grimaced. "Well, let's just say that the guy who found the scene had a loose tongue, and her violation became public knowledge."

Jess covered her mouth, horrified. There was only one fate for Yethma who'd suffered such cruelty.

The older woman shrugged. "Dad executed the piece of trash on the spot. However, according to the royal court's rules, Lithis also had to be punished. I think you already know, but that punishment is, of course, the death penalty, even though Lithis clearly hadn't done anything wrong."

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "That used to be the law for Yethma, I remember."

"It was a deranged law, no doubt about that. Dad had a relatively respectable status. Even though he couldn't enter the capital, he was in a position where he could send messages there. If he had put his mind to it, there should have been a way he could've avoided Lithis's sentence. But, well, he obeyed the orders of his oh-so-mighty superiors and handed Lithis over without a struggle. It was all to keep up appearances. That man was a hopeless idiot who only had a successful career, a successful career, and an even more successful career in his mind. Lithis was executed immediately."

Itsune caressed her greataxe. Lithis's bones had been implemented into her weapon's grip. "And so, Yoshu and I ran away from home. I'll be honest. Back then, I hated the royal court and dad like crazy—to the point of wanting to murder them."

"It must've been an agonizing experience for you. I can understand your anger."

The woman sighed, as if to say she didn't need sympathy anymore. "But I could tell that Shravis was different. He's a guy you can reason with. Even when we tried to kill his father, he stood up for us."

I recalled something Shravis had said during Marquis and Hortis's flashy sibling quarrel in the capital. *"I truly wish from the bottom of my heart to make Mesteria a better place together with people like you, who have your own opinions instead of just accepting the status quo."*

Because of these words, the Liberators had been willing to protect him even after the Clandestine Arcanist had taken over the royal court.

Absolute power wasn't what made a great king. What a ruler needed was kindness for his own people—a warm heart.

"As long as he quits his weird jokes, he's a pretty nice guy, but

unfortunately, his sense of humor is unsalvageable," Itsune muttered while opening the front doors wide again with the foot sweep trick. "Okay then, where next?"

When we returned to the plaza, powdery snow had begun fluttering down from the sky.

I surveyed our surroundings. <<Hey, what's that castle on the opposite side? It looks pretty ancient. How about we check it out, just in case?>>

Jess nodded. "Yes, it does look quite old, like it has easily lasted for over a century."

The three of us cut across the plaza to the building that had caught my eye. The old castle was constructed with stacks of large, solid stone blocks. Its four rectangular walls, joined at perpendicular angles, rose vertically from the ground. The castle certainly didn't seem like it welcomed visitors with open arms.

Regarding position, it was slightly farther back from the main flow of human traffic. Possibly because it was part of the scenery to many, no one paid any mind to it. It must be an abandoned ruin. The same could be said for the church it was facing. Despite being at the heart of a city, both served as nothing more than mere decorations on the side of a path.

As we approached, I got a better look at the castle. It was four stories tall, and there were small windows with iron bars starting from the second story. For a moment, I thought I saw a flash of red light from inside a fourth-story window.

I blinked. <<Hmm...? Jess, did you see that?>>

"Huh? What are you referring to?" She reacted instantly by pushing down the hem of her skirt. This maiden's trust in me was pitifully nonexistent.

<<Jess, it's impossible for you to see your own *Les Panties* with a skirt on,>> I said, exasperated. <<I'm talking about something on the fourth story of that castle.>> Using my snout, I indicated the place in question.

Jess steadily gazed in the direction my nose was pointing at. Itsune narrowed her eyes and focused on the same place.

This time, there was clearly a second flash of light in one of the windows. The light appeared a third time and gradually increased in size.

My eyes widened. *Wait, that's—*

"It's a fire!" Jess gasped. "The fourth floor is on fire!"

Even while we watched, the fire spread ferociously in leaps

and bounds.

It might just be a complete coincidence, but such “excellent” timing still gave me the creeps. *Not to mention, it’s* fire… Recalling the nursery rhyme verses, an ominous premonition sent chills down my spine.

Jess fished out the seashell from her robe’s inner pocket and called out to Shravis. “Mister Shravis, there’s a building on fire right beside us!”

As if he’d been waiting for our message, the young king replied almost instantly. *“I’ll head over right away.”* The call ended with a click.

The next thing I knew, Itsune had pulled out her greataxe and was sprinting toward the old castle. *Should we wait or charge in?* Without Shravis around, it wasn’t wise to get separated from Itsune. On the spur of the moment, we decided to chase after her.

<<I have a bad feeling about this. Jess, make sure to keep your guard up.>>

“I will!”

I also made full use of my wide pig’s field of vision, watching for any suspicious people. Frankly, I felt it was pure madness to rush in after seeing a fire, but I decided to put my faith in Shravis, who’d said he’d come to our rescue immediately.

The castle’s front entrance was a portcullis that looked like someone had bundled up a bunch of spears. But it was fixed in an elevated position, as if to beckon guests in. My eyes widened with shock as I peered through the gate.

Inside the castle’s courtyard, stone statues of outlandish monsters stood on both sides of the gate, reminding me of the Nio statues you sometimes see protecting temple gates. These monsters were none other than cocadrillas—mythical half-rooster, half-serpent beasts that could petrify living organisms with their fiery breaths. This place was evidently connected to the weather vane in Broperver.

We passed through the gap between the cocadrillas, but a wooden double door blocked our way. Itsune kicked it as hard as she could, forcing it open. Someone appeared to have barred it on the other side, but the bar had split into clean halves under the force of Itsune’s furious kick before being sent flying.

Itsune held her greataxe at the ready. Its sharp blade crackled with bluish-white sparks, and the pungent smell of ozone

prickled at my nose.

If someone's holding a tea party inside or something, we'll probably give them a big scare, I commented in the back of my mind, but it turned out that I'd been worried for nothing. There was no human presence within the hall, which had exposed stone walls and floor. It was a dust-colored area; the only noteworthy things were the countless enigmatic furnishings covered with cloths. Perhaps the castle's owner was a person with questionable taste because along the walls were stone statues depicting humans tormented by pain.

To our left were stairs leading up.

"There might still be someone up there. Can I charge in?" Itsune asked Jess.

Not a second later, there was a thud. Something had fallen behind us.

Outside the broken door was Shravis on one knee, positioned as if he'd just landed from somewhere high up. His robe fluttered with the wind—he was just like a superhero you'd see in American comics.

"Sorry for my late arrival," he said brusquely.

I gaped at him. *Whoa, this guy seriously came instantaneously.* Catching myself, I asked, "Where's Nourris and Kento?"

"To make haste, I've parted ways with them for now," he explained. "They'll catch up soon. I've already told them this location." Climbing to his feet, Shravis marched forward until he was next to Itsune. Suddenly, he looked up. "I can sense traces of magic above us. We must proceed with caution."

Itsune raised an eyebrow. "If I see anyone, can I cut them down?"

"Don't hesitate. But if possible, don't damage their head. It might come in handy for procuring information." As if he were testing out a stun gun, Shravis lit up both of his hands with lightning. Thunderous crackling and buzzing boomed out. He was ready for battle.

"Um, what should I do?" Jess asked meekly.

Shravis looked over his shoulder. "Stay by my side. Don't stray from me."

Itsune and Shravis observed each other, then traded nods. They promptly began scaling the stairs. Shravis summoned a floating round mirror ahead of them and advanced while vigilantly watching the path around the corners.

As I raced after them, I called out to Jess. “Let’s take utmost care. The two of us will watch our rear. If you see anyone, you’ve got to use your robe for protection immediately.”

Jess looked back at me solemnly. “Please don’t worry. I will protect you, Mister Pig.”

Uh, I meant for you to protect yourself, but… I hesitated. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

The worn-down stairs were somewhat slippery. The castle was currently abandoned, but many people had likely used the stairs in the past. Tentatively, I sniffed the stone beneath my trotters but couldn’t pick up any notable scents other than ours. *If the Cross Executioner is truly here, maybe this wasn’t their invasion route. But that’s strange. From what I could see, this castle only has one set of stairs…*

All kinds of thoughts ran through my mind as I lagged one step behind Jess. I was putting my wide vision to good use, watching our rear and Jess’s absolute territory with the utmost attention.

“If you want to see my absolute territory, you can look all you want later on, so please focus on watching our surroundings instead,” Jess interjected.

Wow, that’d be great.

Countless hooks had been hammered into the wall of the stairway, and hanging from them were plenty of disturbing metal fittings, such as rusty manacles and shackles for feet. They must be vintage items from a long time ago, judging by their damaged state—they were in such bad shape that they were likely unusable.

We arrived at the second floor. It was a simple layout consisting of two spacious parlors. I looked into one of them and shuddered.

Daylight from the cloudy sky flowed in from small windows, faintly cutting into the dark interior. I almost regretted seeing what they illuminated.

Pointed wooden horses. Chairs with thorns all over. Cages in the shape of a human. Cutting instruments akin to saws. Axes. Awls. That was only a small portion of the countless metal devices in shapes I was too aghast to describe.

Indeed, they were all torture devices—vestiges of brutality that people had designed with the sole purpose of causing agony to others. What made it even more ghastly was how these

devices were surrounded by stone statues of humans in various positions of pain.

Many of these tools were rusty or broken, possibly because quite a lot of time had passed since their previous use. At the same time, what was likely human bones were scattered haphazardly across the floor—concrete evidence that these tools had indeed served their purpose.

"How can anyone be this heartless…?" A whisper of grief slipped out of Jess's mouth, but her eyes were observing the countless torture devices as if savoring every detail, unable to hide their sparks of curiosity.

Shravis hurriedly went over to look into the second room before coming back. "There were fetters chained to the walls in the other parlor, but I didn't sense anyone present."

Not a moment after he'd spoken, Shravis abruptly halted his walk like a carnivorous predator that had spotted his prey. His right hand swiftly moved to point at one place in the room. Electricity burst from his hands for an instant like a lightning strike, and instinctively, I shut my eyes. When I opened them again, I saw smoke rising from a charred wooden chair.

He frowned. "I thought someone was hiding there, but it seems that…it was only a hand."

I stretched out my neck to get a closer look. On the armrest of the chair with fetters was a grotesque severed hand convulsing uncontrollably—it was *alive*. The fingers were stretched out, as if seeking help, and it soon died in that pose within a shackle.

"It's likely the Abyssus's influence," Shravis coolly voiced his deduction. "Human bones left behind regained their flesh due to the pollution." He then promptly returned to the stairs and headed up to the third floor.

The faint smell of blood drifted down from the stairs, and concealed behind it were the more subtle notes of scorched wood and flesh. Frankly, I wasn't all that motivated to move upstairs, but I sprinted up after Jess.

The third floor had an identical layout to the second. There were two parlors: one with an assortment of torture devices, the other dedicated to chaining people to the walls. I'd already suspected as much, but human parts, which looked like they'd been freshly amputated, were scattered around carelessly on the ground, thrashing frantically like animals on the brink of death. I even saw a hand that crawled around while leaving behind a trail

of blood.

"Sheesh, talk about gross…" Itsune spat in a hushed voice.

Jess observed the room. "There are more body parts here than on the second floor. Why is that?" She sounded intrigued.

I inclined my head. "I don't know, but if we assume this is a pattern, the fourth floor is probably even gorier than this."

Even while I was speaking, the two leading the charge were already racing up the stairs. This stairwell was the only way up to the fourth floor. There was a chance that the arsonist might still be present.

With every floor we progressed, the smoke's smell intensified. Seemingly out of nowhere, the phrase "like pigs flying into a flame" flashed through my mind. *This might be a trap. Is it really wise to keep going? What if the Cross Executioner is waiting for us inside the flames? I know that Shravis and Itsune are strong warriors—but what if our enemy came with a foolproof strategy?*

I frowned. "Shravis, don't be too hasty. Make sure to keep your guard up to the end."

Shravis didn't turn around at my warning. "Rest assured. Who do you think you're talking to?"

A blond virgin king of deadpan replies? I guessed tentatively.

A moment of silence. Shravis muttered, "You're talking to the king of this country."

We climbed toward the fourth floor. Possibly because the former residents had an overflowing passion for torture, a cramped assortment of tools was even displayed around the stairs. Numerous large-scale devices, which were elaborate to a curious degree, made the stairway look no different from a jungle. I didn't know whether it was to stir up terror or humiliation, but some of these tools even had graphic carvings modeled after the human body. I caught sight of a handful of ornaments that I didn't really want Jess to taint her eyes with.

Everywhere, bones rattled noisily, and fettered living limbs in all kinds of nauseating forms convulsed. Simply standing around here made me feel like the repulsive atmosphere would even eat into my heart like rot.

That was when Shravis pointed straight forward. "I see a door."

Immediately at the end of the stairs was a parlor with a single large door. Judging by the squarish outer structure of the castle, the builders had likely divided this level into two with a long

rectangular wall. It was easy to deduce that there was likely an even larger space on the other side of the door.

As we approached it, I scrutinized the structure. It was a robust metal door with no contortions, firmly separating us from the other area. However, I could catch small glimpses of the crimson light of flames through the gaps between the metal and the masonry wall. An unpleasant roar resounded from the other side, coupled with the disagreeable odor of charred wood and flesh leaking through. Though it hadn't been designed as such, the entrance likely served the purpose of a fire door.

"The smell of smoke is very strong…" Jess commented before covering her nose and mouth with her sleeve.

Seeing that, Shravis spread out his hands. The small windows on the surrounding walls were unlocked with magic, and they swung outward vigorously one after another. Cool air flowed in at once. His hands then quietly glided until they faced forward—toward the door that separated us from the fire.

Don't tell me… My eyes widened. "Wait! Don't open it!"

But my warning was too late. A deafening metallic clang shook my eardrums.

My mind almost went completely blank with distress, but I still did the one thing I ought to do. "Get down!" were the only words I screamed before swiftly huddling up against Jess.

Two things happened almost immediately: Jess responded to me, and the fire engulfed our environment in the blink of an eye.

For some reason, I sensed water droplets splashing onto my butt while I was relieved by Jess's weight that was spread evenly on my back.

The booming of the fire was so intense that, for a moment, I'd thought it had burst my eardrums. The next thing I knew, we were lying on the ground as water poured down on us from above. The fire spread to the torture devices nearby, trapping us within a sea of flames.

The phenomenon that had occurred was a back draft—a frequent occurrence in light novels. If you released the door of a burning room, carbon monoxide produced by incomplete combustion would mix with the outside air, causing explosive combustion.

Though Shravis was spectacularly drenched from head to toe, he looked composed while standing within the flames. "My apologies. I could protect us from the fire but not the blast." It

seemed he'd instantly manifested a water shield because only the floor around us was soaked. His reflexes were admirable, but he looked just a tad comical with all the water dripping from his frame.

"What about Miss Itsune?" Jess stood up and scanned our surroundings, water trickling down from her hair.

For some odd reason, Itsune was nowhere to be seen. My heart leaped to my throat.

"Itsune!" Shravis shouted fiercely.

The next moment, a voice replied from behind us. "I'm okay! I only fled to the third floor!"

My heart sank back into my chest with relief. But at the same time, a question popped up in my mind—how had she managed to race down the stairs in such a short span of time? And amid the blast at that? Had she tumbled down or something?

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Shravis asked.

Itsune's voice reached us from downstairs with no issue. "Me, hurt? Not in a million years." However, the blast had thrown timber onto the stairs, stacking it into a huge mound. We couldn't go back down.

I'd assumed that Shravis would remove them with magic, but contrary to my expectations, he instructed "Wait downstairs until I put out the fire." And then he took a step forward—toward the *door*.

I gaped at him. "Have you gone mad? This place is still on fire, mind you. It's better to evacuate for now."

As he walked, Shravis shook his head at my warning. "There's nothing to fear. In the face of divine power, a small fire of this scale is no different from a candle's flame."

Uh, didn't you just accidentally trigger an explosion?

"Jess, pig; follow me," he said.

Jess and I looked at each other. After seeing our respective expressions, we decided to press forward.

Shravis had allowed his anger to get into his head—we couldn't afford to let him go alone. After he'd ascended the throne, I felt that Shravis had become rather bold—in a bad sense. Though it was true that his magic was dependable, it wasn't prudent to be overconfident, in my opinion.

But we soon learned that his magic deserved its title of divine power, for with every step the young king advanced, the fiery wall blocking our way shrunk back as if intimidated. Bit by bit, it

died out.

Following Shravis, we walked through the door, which was still steady and open despite the blast. The abhorrent sight that greeted us was exactly what I'd expected—but it far exceeded my imagination as well.

A sea of fire blazed dazzlingly. Great quantities of timber were scattered about, feeding the monstrous flame. The stone-built parlor reminded me of a chapel, and a single, thick stone pillar stood in the middle. A chain was coiled around it like a snake—and restrained within it was a handful of humans bundled up together.

No, perhaps it would be more accurate to call them formerly human. Toasted thoroughly by the intense blaze, they'd turned charcoal black from head to toe, forming a stark and uncanny contrast with the crimson crosses glowing on their chests.

Even Jess, who'd been brimming with curiosity about corpses back in Broperver, looked sick at this appalling sight. But possibly because of her pride as an ace detective, she refused to look away.

I wasn't used to the sight of dead bodies at all. I could sense acidic saliva secreting from the back of my barbecued pork tongue. With every inhalation, the aggressive odors of charcoal, tar, and scorched flesh assaulted my nose.

These aren't real dead bodies. This is just a horror movie. I narrowly managed to maintain my grip on sanity by telling myself that.

I inspected the pillar. There were metal fixtures on it for putting a chain through like hangers, which meant that this pillar was designed to restrain people with a chain.

When I lowered my gaze, something caught my eye. Near the pillar's base was a large hole that allowed air through. In the present, a significant amount of timber had been distributed to burn the entire room to the ground. However, I suspected that originally, the user was meant to leave just enough fuel in the hole to steadily smoke and roast the restrained humans.

Next, I craned my neck. The ceiling above the pillar was dome-shaped, and right at the middle summit was a large air vent—it appeared to serve as a chimney. Smoke from the fire that scorched the humans should flow outside from there.

It was clear by now: This room was designed to burn humans to death indoors. And not just one human at a time but multiple.

I couldn’t even fathom why anyone in their right mind would craft such an abominable space.

Like a tourist at a church, Shravis surveyed the charred bodies before slowly walking down the pathway down the center of the parlor and heading deeper inside.

From what I could perceive, the Cross Executioner was nowhere to be found. Even now, bits of timber were on fire here and there. The burnt corpses confined to the pillar stared steadily at the youthful king.

Abruptly, Shravis halted his footsteps and turned around to face us. Maintaining an impassive expression, he asked, “Jess, will you be my sister?” He spoke in his usual tone, almost as if the idea had come to him on a whim.

For a moment, I thought my ears were failing me.

I gaped at him. Illuminated by the inferno, his green eyes were now shining scarlet.

“Huh…?” Looking bewildered, Jess stared back into his eyes.

“Will you be my sister?” he repeated. He didn’t look like he was joking around—his expression was sober and solemn. The drenched youth, surrounded by fire and dead bodies, certainly didn’t look like he was in his right mind.

I frowned. “That’s not funny, even as a joke. What are you babbling at a time like this?”

“I’m not joking.” Shravis took a few steps toward us. “I’m making an earnest proposal.”

All words left my mind, and I froze. I could only ask him an absurd question that popped up in my head. “Are you saying that…you want someone to call you big brother?”

The youth blinked. “Hmm? What in the world is the merit of being called big brother?” he fired back his usual deadpan reply as if everything were right with the world.

But the fact that he could act as per usual, even in a dire situation like this, was what made him seem terrifying instead.

“Jess has divine blood in her veins—she has the qualifications to become the king’s younger sister.” Walking up all the way in front of our eyes, Shravis gently placed a hand on the beautiful maiden’s shoulder. “If the worst-case scenario ever comes to pass, Jess…could you succeed the throne after me?”

The worst-case scenario. At long last, I figured out what the youth was getting at. Within this unstable world, the crown had practically tumbled into the young Shravis’s lap because of the

successive passing of his blood relatives. What he desired was a person with whom he could share that heavy responsibility with—someone who could shoulder the burden in his stead if worse came to worst. What he was asking for was the bond of siblings—a chain that could robustly connect Jess to him.

Though he'd been conducting himself with dignity as a king, he was likely rather distressed inside after facing such a gruesome scene. An unidentified mage, the Cross Executioner, was leading us around by the nose and had yet again slipped away from our grasp. We'd come looking for the perpetrator, but a ghastly pile of corpses had been waiting for us instead.

Likely taking everything into consideration, including the above points, Jess shrank into herself apologetically. "I'm so sorry, um... I think I need some time before I can give you an answer..."

Seeing her at a loss, Shravis smiled at her, resigned. "You are strong, clever, beautiful, and kind above all else. I hoped that if I couldn't take you as my wife, I could at least have you as my sister, but...as someone in my position, declaring such wishes openly is a coercive and violent deed." He cast down his eyes and turned on his heel. "My apologies. Please forget everything I said."

With large strides, he walked toward the other side of the room. The only thing Jess and I could do was follow him in utter silence.

At the end of the pathway, Shravis stopped. I lifted my gaze to see a Vatis statue that had turned inky black after a shower of soot. She placed her left hand on her chest and raised her right hand high—and her right hand was gripping a rusty chain.

I recalled the lines of "The Chain Song."

The second ring breaks, allowing the fox to flee,
Down the chimney it falls, roasted right to the gall*, the fox is* dead*, so mote it be.*

The situation was a perfect match. The second place with a clue leading to the First Collar had been chosen as the site of the second murder. Furthermore, the corpses had been dealt with according to the lines of the nursery rhyme before being arranged like malicious trophies. As if that weren't enough, each bore the *Sanguyn Cros*, which could only be carved with magic.

With these many conditions fulfilled, the principle behind the murders was evident. This was a serial murder referencing “The Chain Song”—and simultaneously a challenge toward the royal family who wanted the collar.

I was also confident that a third murder case was waiting for us down our path, and I knew exactly where it would happen: at our destination with the next clue, which this Vatis statue would indicate.

Chapter 3: Most Serial Killers Aim to Outmaneuver the Detective

As we followed the chain trail, I explained to Jess and Shravis, “The criminal is notably cautious. Despite there being facilities available to roast people without causing a major fire incident, they burned large quantities of excess timber to set the entire room on fire. They must have planned on destroying all the evidence. Because of that, I couldn’t detect any conclusive scents, even with my pig nose…”

I sighed and continued. “The culprit’s escape route was likely the chimney, but after such a copious amount of smoke and hot wind have passed through it, there probably isn’t any evidence left.”

Jess frowned. “Right, we only narrowly escaped being dragged into the explosion of flames too.”

I nodded in agreement. “It’s a simple trap, but that might have been part of the culprit’s aim.”

The chain led outside, passing through the chimney as it went, then hugging the rain gutter as it descended to the ground. Even here, staple-like metal fittings were securing the chain firmly in place. On top of that, the chain was under magical protection.

The trail didn’t stop there. It extended toward the north through the drainage before eventually crawling onto the railing of the northern stone bridge like a snake. Partway onto the bridge, it changed course and turned downward, guiding us to one section of the ancient pier on the island’s side.

Like the southern side, piers also surrounded both ends of the northern bridge. On the opposite shore was a wooden pier where cargo was being loaded and unloaded as well.

Evading the gazes of the merchants, the three of us furtively inspected the chain.

“Is the clue under the water…?” Jess wondered out loud as she gripped the dangling chain. She attempted to pull it slightly, but it didn’t even budge. It was surprisingly bulky.

Shravis assisted her immediately, and together, they hoisted

up the chain. It was so hefty that Shravis even had to reinforce his muscles with magic. Hanging down on its other end was a large anchor. Even after we cleared away debris like algae and mud, it only revealed a rusty metal surface identical to the chain itself.

"What does this even mean?" Shravis scrunched his eyebrows together.

Perhaps because she wanted to help her cousin in any way possible, Jess speculated earnestly. "At the Broperver cathedral, the chain led all the way to the weather vane modeled after a cocadrilla, which meant two things. It pointed toward Harbir and subtly informed us to keep an eye out for the motif itself. It's probably not a coincidence that we saw stone cocadrilla statues in the old castle earlier. Based on that, we could theorize that the next clue is located in a place with the same kind of anchor as this one."

Shravis released the chain and returned it to the river. "I see... If that's the case, we don't know where to go. The chain was sagging downward. But I highly doubt there's something hidden beneath the riverbed."

I gazed at the murky water surface. "Well, since it entered the river itself, it likely means that the river is our hint."

The young king hummed thoughtfully. "You mean it's telling us to follow the river?"

Hearing that, Jess pointed out the problem in his theory. "But unlike the weather vane, the river has two directions—upstream and downstream. Which way should we go?"

"Yeah..." I frowned. "There's nothing that indicates the right direction."

Jess and I were stumped, and upon seeing that, Shravis looked somewhat taken aback. "The water in a river flows from upstream to downstream. If we abide by the laws of nature, wouldn't heading downstream be the logical approach?"

I inclined my head. "You might be right. But...that argument alone feels a bit weak."

"Agreed." The beautiful maiden racked her brain for ideas. "Do we have any other hints...?"

It probably wasn't caused by carbon monoxide poisoning, but my head felt heavy and clouded. One incident had ambushed me after another. My nose was overstimulated by volcanic gas and black fumes. Even accumulated weariness was whittling me

down. The same could be said for Jess. But we had to *think*. We couldn't afford to make any mistakes here.

Anxiety bled into Shravis's tone. "What are you so conflicted about? What's wrong with deciding that it should be downstream?"

I shook my head. "There's nothing wrong with that. But there's a slim chance that it's actually located upstream, and in that scenario, the amount of time we waste will be grave. If this lost time leads us to the point of no return…" I cast down my eyes.

While I spoke, fear seized me—perhaps the situation was already unsalvageable. After all, the criminal had the leeway to plot a theatrical series of murders. The Cross Executioner must have come prepared. We thought that we were tracking the culprit down step-by-step. But maybe we were actually dancing to their tune instead and were unknowingly guided here. We might be exactly where they wanted us. What if they truly obtained the First Collar before us? In the scenario that they tossed it into the ocean, we would permanently lose a method to liberate the Yethma.

But it's not like we have any other choice right now. We can only do everything possible to make up for their head start. The only way forward is to follow the "chain trail" that Vatis left behind to get our hands on the information we sorely lack reliably.

At the very least, we've got to figure out this riddle…

Without warning, a hand reached out and took hold of my jaw, tilting it upward. My eyes widened. The king's face was right in front of me.

"We have no time," he said solemnly. "If you're that torn, how about we split up?"

We assembled at a plaza and carried out a brief strategy meeting. Besides the three of us, the participants were Itsune, Nourris, Kento, and also Yoshu, who'd rushed over by riding on the dragon. Naut was apparently in the middle of a mission and couldn't come right away.

The Liberators were undercover, searching for the survivors of the Nothen Faction. Naut was the commander who was directing the final showdown. However, because it was the royal court's emergency, he would aim to meet up with us as soon as his duties were done and dusted.

We huddled together in one corner of the plaza, and Shravis

kicked off the meeting by summarizing our findings. “The other end of the chain drooped into the Bellell River this time. We believe that the next clue is likely downstream, but we can’t rule out the possibility of it being upstream. Which is why we are considering splitting into two groups.”

Yoshu, who’d only just arrived, raised one hand slightly in question. He had the same black hair as his older sister, Itsune, and his bangs cloaked his sharp sanpaku eyes. Fair-skinned, lithe, and equipped with a crossbow that never failed to strike its target on his back, he was one of the Liberators’ executive officers.

He asked, “I know we’re going to follow the river, but is there some kind of landmark we should keep our eyes out for?”

“It seems that an anchor is our lead,” Shravis answered, but he looked conflicted. “There are many ships nearby, unfortunately, which means that there should be a plethora of anchors nearby…”

Jess gave a timely helping hand from the sidelines by smoothly supplementing, “The clue should be something ancient from Lady Vatis’s era or even before that. It’s under magical protection, so it should resist the effects of the Abyssus as well. Furthermore, the anchor is likely connected to a rusty chain.” She then beamed at Shravis encouragingly.

Shravis nodded in gratitude.

Meanwhile, Yoshu looked convinced by Jess’s description. “Gotcha. That means I just gotta glue my eyes to the riverbank, huh?”

Clearing his throat, Shravis regained the initiative of the meeting. “I’m considering heading downstream, which seems more likely to be the place we’re looking for. How should we divide our members?”

A thought occurred to me. “Hey, we haven’t finished examining and dealing with the crime scene’s aftermath here. Are you sure we can just leave it like that?”

“Don’t worry,” Shravis reassured me. “I have already summoned an intelligence officer and soldiers in the royal court’s army.”

At that precise time, a shadowy silhouette wrapped from head to toe in a black robe swept down from above. The man who landed without a sound was tall, and I caught glimpses of long, golden hair through his hood. His eyes were arctic blue like ice. I

recognized him as Meminis, the elder of the intelligence officers who'd attended the coronation ceremony.

With his hood still lowered, Meminis bowed in greeting at Shravis. He was fixed in that position for a while, and I deduced that he must be communicating something through telepathy. After receiving a nod from Shravis, Meminis ran in the direction of the old castle.

Shravis turned back to us. "Looks like reinforcements have arrived. Similar to Broperver, I will leave information gathering and crime scene analysis to my subordinates. Time is of the essence. We should focus on advancing forward."

Itsune was the first to speak up. "I'll tag along with you. That fire started as if someone had timed it to match our arrival. That Cross Executioner pal is targeting us for sure. The one who's got the biggest target on his back among us is our noble king, of course. If we team up, no one can take us down. In fact, we can turn the tables on anyone who dares to try."

The corners of Shravis's eyes softened with joy. "That's heartening to hear. Well then, come with me, Itsune."

I looked over our lineup and began thinking. "If Shravis's going downstream, that means Jess and I are in charge of upstream. Would be nice if we had a bodyguard with us."

"I'll go with you then," said Yoshu, who raised his hand to volunteer himself.

Last but not least was Nourris, who smiled sweetly. "If so, Mister Kento and I will follow Miss Itsune." Her hand reached out to stroke the boar clad in a frilly dress.

Kento nodded as well. "A prudent decision. I will find our compass [anchor] and protect the monarch [Shravis] as well."

"You're such a gooood boy!" Nourris merrily chirped as she continued to stroke him. Kento harrumphed pridefully.

Now that we'd reached an agreement, Shravis declared without hesitation, "It's time to move. Jess, if anything happens, call for me immediately with that seashell. I will rush over at top speed."

Jess nodded. "Thank you very much."

We went our separate ways and respectively climbed into the small boats the royal court's army had prepared. We would have to search for a clue along the river as we traveled. A dragon flying at low altitudes would practically be begging for attention,

so we decided against that means of transport.

The boat with Shravis and his crew departed immediately and disappeared downstream. As for us, we didn't set off right away. Since we might encounter danger, Jess insisted on equipping me with my dedicated magical anklet. During the wait, Yoshu stood by at the pier and kept watch for our safety.

While she fished out the anklet and ristae of three colors, Jess peered to confirm that Yoshu was turning his back to us. Then, she lowered her voice somewhat. "Um... Do you think I should say yes?"

The question came out of nowhere, and I tilted my head quizzically.

She was kind enough to add, "To his proposal to become his sister, I mean."

I finally grasped the subject. She was discussing Shravis's astounding statement. After a moment of hesitation, I muttered, "I'm not the one who should decide that. The question is, what do you want to do, Jess?" Though I was giving advice, it was no different from avoiding the question.

Jess puffed out her cheeks, clearly displeased. "I'm asking you what *you* think, Mister Pig."

"It's not like I... I mean, I don't really have an opinion."

She narrowed her eyes and huffed. Jess was evidently miffed.

With my pig field of vision, I took a sidelong glance at Yoshu. It wasn't a good idea to keep him waiting for too long. "Personally, I don't really like the idea of you becoming the king's little sister."

As she held up my front right leg, Jess peered into my eyes at point-blank range.

I paused. "But it's probably for a different reason than what you're thinking. It's not like I'd get jealous if you gained an older brother or anything. You can rest assured about that."

"You won't get jealous? I might end up calling Mister Shravis 'my dear brother.'"

What's wrong with that? She'll be just like a certain brocon magician heroine. "That doesn't really matter. You can simply call me big brother too."

"Whaaat...?" Her tone was both exasperated and baffled, but it also sounded somewhat like she'd expected that answer.

"The problem is if the nightmare scenario happens—in the unlikely event that Shravis passes away prematurely, you'll have

to succeed the throne. That's my only problem with it."

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. "Yeah... I don't have any confidence that I'm cut out for the position of a queen."

"Right? The same could be said for me—being the groom who marries into a queen's family sounds a bit daunting. Ah, hey, your hands have stopped moving."

Realizing she'd forgotten her task, with a gasp, Jess began fitting the ristae into the anklet.

"Thanks for your help." I paused. "Now, this is completely my private opinion, but if by some chance Shravis ends up passing away without leaving behind children... I'm only talking about possibilities here, but I think it's fine for the monarchy to end there."

"Huh...?" Jess's eyes were as wide as saucers, as if she'd never even thought of the possibility before.

"It's not that far-fetched. If the Yethma are liberated, the sovereign will lose the superiority that gives them their authority. There won't be any reason for you to rule over the country alone, Jess. In any case, a system where the dictatorship of the few compels the great majority to obey isn't healthy for a country. One portion of the mages and the interested representatives of the Liberators can work together to rebuild the country from scratch with a cooperative ruling system."

She blinked slowly. "You're...right."

"Therefore, choosing to become his sister in preparation for the nightmare scenario is downright nonsense. If I have to point out one thing that's worthwhile about becoming his sister, it's probably the fact that Shravis needs someone who will be willing to help him unconditionally no matter where or when."

Having finished fitting me with the anklet, Jess released my trotter. "But even if I'm not his sister, I will still help Mister Shravis."

"Yeah, I figured. In that case, I don't see why you need to become his little sister."

"...Right." Jess nodded, looking convinced.

"You're going to become an ace detective, aren't you?" I looked up into her eyes. "Let's focus on solving the ongoing case before anything else. We'll get our hands on the First Collar and drag out that Cross Executioner. That'll be the first step forward to help our client, Shravis."

"Yes, I agree!" Jess clapped her hands together

enthusiastically. “I will definitely solve this case… I swear it in the name of my grandfather, Eavis!”

With prep out of the way, I set sail with Jess and Yoshu. Within the veil of falling snow, we traveled upstream toward the west.

When I looked over my shoulder, I saw the diminishing brick cityscape. The pair of northern and southern stone bridges cast a reflection on the water and almost looked like glasses. If you ignored the fact that there was a grand carving of the city’s name on the southern bridge alone, this part of the city formed an impeccable bilateral symmetry.

The small boat carried its three passengers, cutting across the water speedily as Jess’s magic propelled it. So that we wouldn’t overlook even the smallest of clues, the three of us stared unblinkingly at both riverbanks.

His black hair fluttering in the wind, Yoshu declared, “I’ve got full confidence in my eyesight. If you two spot anything of interest, tell me right away.”

“Thank you!” Jess exclaimed before she promptly pointed at one distant part of the bank. “Can you see the statue at that pier?”

I looked in the same direction, but the white statue only looked like a small pebble to me.

Yoshu nodded. “Of course. It’s a statue of a merfolk holding an anchor.”

At that, Jess instantly turned the boat. Yoshu and I almost lost our balance and flattened ourselves against the gunwale.

“Don’t be so hasty,” Yoshu admonished gently. “There’s an engraving that says Royal Year 112. It’s not old, so I don’t think it’s the lead we’re looking for.”

“Oh!” Jess gasped. “Sorry. But, um, may I ask where that engraving is?” As she steadily turned the bow to face upstream again, she strained her eyes to scrutinize the statue.

“It’s on the merfolk’s bum—where there’s a rectangular blank in one part of the scales.”

Yoshu said that, but I’d only just managed to perceive the merfolk-like silhouette after we’d progressed this far. I had absolutely no clue where the statue’s bum was, much less whether it had scales or even where the scales weren’t carved. *Though I can see Jess’s bum as she’s leaning forward to look at the statue.*

“Whoa…” Jess said, shocked. “I believe I have relatively good eyesight, but I can’t see that at all.”

“A normal person wouldn’t be able to see it.” Yoshu shrugged.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *He talks as if he isn’t a normal person.* “You’re the best helper we could ask for. It’d be great if you could assist us with our hunt.”

“All right.”

The archer appeared to be an impassive man of few words. It was my first time being grouped up with Yoshu in a situation where we took action in small numbers. I’d also barely ever exchanged idle chitchat with him. Though I could say the same about his older sister, Itsune, she was a daring woman who was easy to understand, so I’d never had any issues communicating with her. In contrast, my impression of Yoshu was that he was a slightly gloomy introvert with whom I felt a sense of kinship, which meant that I still hadn’t quite grasped his character yet.

Beneath the overcast sky that was gradually growing darker, our small boat glided across the water with nimble maneuvers. For a while, there was only silence.

Yoshu must’ve sensed the same kind of awkwardness in the air as I did because he addressed Jess in a subdued voice. “Speaking of which, I don’t think we’ve teamed up together much.”

Jess, who’d been furrowing her eyebrows in concentration as she fixed her stare on the riverbank, whipped her head around with a start. “Oh, yes! I’ll be in your care, Mister Yoshu.” Being the responsible girl she was, she immediately returned her gaze to the riverside.

Directing his gaze left and right from behind his long bangs, Yoshu muttered, “You know, in terms of having a good balance of fighting prowess, I think it would be better if sis joined this team instead.” He sounded like he was grumbling a little.

“You think so?” I asked.

Yoshu gazed down at me. “Both sis and Shravis are the brute-force type who are unreasonably strong against enemies nearby. Sis has her greataxe, and Shravis uses magic, yeah, but he often uses his spells to summon lightning, water, or fire at a range near his body. You’ve got two people specializing in identical fields on the same team.”

True. I’ve seldom ever seen Shravis make long-range attacks such as bombarding.

He continued, “Meanwhile, I’m not all that strong against enemies that get up close. Jess is likely not great with opponents who approach too much either, right? If a strong mage ambushes us by some chance, I think it’s gonna be pretty difficult for just the two of us to deal with them.”

Now that he mentions it… Realization dawned on me. *In the event that the Cross Executioner attacks, Shravis’s team should be able to handle them with no issue, but we lack quite a lot of firepower over on our side. That means my anklet is a relatively great responsibility.*

Jess placed a hand on her chest worriedly. “I’m… Yes, if we are attacked, we will be in trouble. Let’s try to stay as out of sight as possible.”

Letting out a blatant sigh, Yoshu said unhappily, “The thing is, sis has a thing for Shravis.” At his abrupt revelation, both Jess and I stared at Yoshu with wide eyes. “You didn’t notice? Well, I guess that makes sense. She isn’t the type who tends to flirt too much with someone to get their attention.”

“By having a thing, do you mean…” Jess hesitated. “Do you mean that she likes Mister Shravis in that way?”

“Probably.” Yoshu shrugged. “She hasn’t admitted it, but that’s what it looks like to me.”

“That’s kind of surprising,” I commented.

Yoshu smirked with a hint of self-derision. “It’s not that unexpected. With my sister, there’re three requirements for the men she falls for. She even declares them often herself. The first is good looks. The second is high status. The third is…being stronger than her.”

I blinked. “She has some rather worldly standards…” Now that I considered it, I didn’t qualify for any of those categories.

The archer raised an eyebrow. “What, did you want sis to have a crush on you?”

“No way.” Even while I sensed Jess’s skeptical gaze from my side, I continued training my eyes on the riverbank. I hoped she could trust me on this and have no doubts about me. After all, Itsune’s breasts were a little too big for me.

Though I’d denied his accusations completely, Yoshu shook his head and said, “I don’t recommend going for her. Due to those three requirements, men rarely measure up to sis’s standards. Despite that, she refuses to acknowledge men who don’t meet those requirements as men—she sincerely thinks

that she'd rather get cute girls to wait upon her than end up with a half-baked guy."

Is it just me, or does Yoshu sound like he's a bit dissatisfied about that? "You sure are a walking encyclopedia on your sister's love life."

Yoshu grimaced. "I'm not. I only happen to know a thing or two because I've been with her since forever." He continued to chatter on. "Only two people have met her requirements so far. She carried a torch for the first one when she just joined the Liberators. Well, I'm sure you can read between the lines, but that certain someone naturally didn't even show a sliver of interest in her. And then the second one is that ruggedly honest king."

The "certain someone" was likely referring to Naut. He was handsome, had a high status as the hero of the Liberators, and was a powerful fighter. The guy was such a fine specimen that even I would be charmed by him.

"Don't be." Jess whipped her head around and glared steadily in my direction.

Uh... For a moment, I didn't know how to react. I hoped she could trust me on this and have no doubts about me.

Yoshu tilted his head slightly at our cryptic interaction before shaking his head, as if he'd suddenly come to his senses. "Don't tell sis that I told you guys all this. She'll murder me."

Our voyage spent observing the riverbank meant our eyes were occupied, but our mouths were free. In this situation, I learned that Yoshu was an unexpectedly chatty guy. Furthermore, he was also immensely knowledgeable about his sister. I also unearthed the fact that when he talked about his sister, his voice would become high-pitched, and his speech would become rapid for some unknown reason.

He was almost like an otaku ranting about his idol.

Right now, he was on one such rant. "Sis might not seem like it, but she's actually the cautious type when it comes to battles. Her greataxe has unrivaled destructive powers, but the motion of a single swing is long and doesn't leave much room for flexibility. So, if she doesn't deal a precise strike at the most appropriate time, she'll be the one who receives a blow instead. When she pairs up with Naut, since he can change his posture at will with his twin shortswords, he becomes the main offense. That said, when those weird ogur monsters were on the

battlefield, sis often became the vanguard because they're slow. What sits well with sis is, as a matter of fact, being the assistant of someone who can fight freely. She basically deals a heavy strike when her partner can't fully handle the opponent. In that sense, she seems to think that she's got a good affinity with that king too."

Noting that Yoshu had barely paused to breathe during his passionate speech, I asked him this question once again. "I know I said this earlier, but you sure are a walking encyclopedia on your sister, aren't you?"

He looked at me with a mystified expression. "Not at all. I only happen to know a thing or two."

Huh... I pondered for a moment before tossing a question at him. "By the way, what's Itsune's favorite food?"

His reply rolled off his tongue at once. "Thoroughly grilled meat, salty soup, relatively dense dark bread, white wine with plenty of spices, fruits preserved in sugar... Those are the ones I can think of, but why're you asking that?"



Wow. He answered instantly and came up with that list without pausing at all…

Jess seemed intrigued by our exchange and joined in, asking, “Is there any kind of food that Miss Itsune doesn’t like?”

“She barely eats any beans or root vegetables and always leaves behind that fatty part of meat. Oh, she’s also not fond of things like organ meats that have an acrid taste and odor, but besides that, she eats everything.”

Silence.

My imaginary eyebrow practically raised to my nonexistent hairline. “You’ve got to be a walking encyclopedia on her at this point.”

“I said I’m not. I just happen to know a thing or two,” he insisted.

It appeared that he planned on denying it to the very end. *Welp, siblings worldwide probably have all sorts of varying circumstances, so I won’t hound him any further about this topic,* I decided.

That was when Jess suddenly remembered something and asked, “I noticed that Miss Itsune has quite impressive muscle strength. Is there any secret behind how she became so strong?”

Yoshu gazed at Jess with surprise before immediately shifting his eyes onto the bank. “Wait, you don’t know? Sis and I are Lacerte.”

I blinked. *Lacerte?* He declared it casually, but I didn’t recognize that word at all. *I feel like I’ve read it somewhere, but it’s not coming to me…*

Jess gasped. “Oh, I didn’t know!”

I turned to her. “What are Lacerte again?”

“Otherwise known as dragonkin, they’re a race that can morph parts of their bodies into dragons,” she explained. “I’ve only read about them in books before, so I can’t say anything for sure, but they apparently have exceptional physical abilities and were active as mage hunters during the Dark Ages, achieving many great feats. They can take down mages with surprise attacks by moving faster than spells.”

“Yep.” Yoshu nodded. “I hear that we’re quite scarce nowadays. It’s a bother if people fuss over us for being rare, so both sis and I don’t mention it often.”

As I listened to him, I recalled something. When Itsune had kicked open the church’s door, her bare legs had transformed

into a blackish color for an instant, if I wasn't mistaken.

Before I knew it, the boat had slowed until we were stationary on the water, maintaining a momentum that balanced delicately with the motion of the river's current. Jess was leaning forward toward Yoshu, curiosity burning in her eyes. "Does that mean you can also transform your body, Mister Yoshu?" The maiden looked like she might start dissecting him at any moment.

"N-No, I can't do something as grand as transform…" Yoshu stammered. "I'll show you, so don't stop the boat."

The archer turned toward us. In no time at all, his black eyes changed into glinting, golden serpent eyes. His irises enlarged, and his pupils lengthened into vertical slits.

"There you go," he said. Next, he pushed up his hair with his fingers, revealing ears covered with fine, black scales. Their very tips were sharp and pointed. A while later, they returned to human ears, and Yoshu let down his hair. "I can only change my eyes and ears, while sis can only transform her skeletal muscles. When she musters up her strength, black scales appear on her skin."

"Interesting…" Jess muttered as she commanded the motionless boat to sail upstream again.

I nodded with intrigue. "So you have such extraordinary eyes because of your abilities as a Lacerte."

"You could say that. It's draining to keep it activated, but coupled with my ears, it's a very useful power for scouting out enemies."

That sounds very reassuring.

Jess began observing the riverside again as she addressed Yoshu. "If the two of you are Lacerte… Does that mean that your parents are too?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Only our accursed old man is." After saying that, he abruptly stilled, as if he recalled something. "Ah, wait, I think Sanon said not to tell anyone else… Oh well, you guys should be fine."

I narrowed my eyes. *Sanon? Why did he say that?*

Completely oblivious to my moment of doubt, Yoshu continued, "In my dad's case, both of his parents were Lacerte, and he was seriously, outrageously strong. He's one of the rare cases, even among Lacerte, where he has heightened senses like me and enhanced strength like sis. Thanks to that, he apparently climbed the ladder of success at a crazy pace. Must've been fun."

There was something thorny about his tone.

Speaking of which, Itsune mentioned that her father is a foolish man who only has a successful career on his mind. These siblings think they lost their beloved Lithis because of their father's attitude, which prioritized success in life.

That actually makes me curious—what in the world spurred on their father's extreme obsession with eminence?

As we ascended the Bellell River, the city eventually faded into the distance, and the riverside became a marsh blanketed by withered reeds. Chilly snow incessantly sprinkled down from the lead-colored sky. At places with high traffic, we'd followed the rule of sailing on the right-hand side, but now that other ships were few and far between us, we began cruising down the middle of the river.

Early evening settled in, darkening the skies and greedily snatching the warmth from our bodies.

Trouble liked choosing such moments to strike.

Yoshu barked fiercely, "Wait, something's coming our way."

The moment he held his bow at the ready, something snuck up on us.

In the blink of an eye, black smoke flooded our environment. Pitch darkness swallowed us instantly.

I couldn't see anything. I held my breath. I sensed Jess placing her hand on my back. There was a clipped string twang—Yoshu had fired a bolt.

Within the darkness, we communicated through Jess's telepathy.

<Mister Pig, are you hurt anywhere?> Jess asked.

<<Don't worry, I'm safe. What about you, Jess?>>

<I'm safe as well.>

There was a sigh. <Being affectionate to each other is nice and all, but could you be at least a bit worried about me too?>

We'd lost control of our small boat, which rocked unsteadily. I wanted to be on alert, but having been robbed of my vision, I could only shrink into myself with my mind in complete shambles.

Yoshu's voice rang out in my mind. <I heard the sound of my bolt hitting its mark. But because I aimed while relying on sound, I don't know where it struck. It was enchanted with lightning magic, so a normal human should be paralyzed right now, but

the problem is…>

<<The problem is that you don't know what or who exactly attacked us, right? Do you think you managed to shoot it down? >>

<Gimme a moment…>

The boat's planks creaked.

I wasn't Yoshu, but I was at least able to discern the direction of sounds. This one had come from somewhere separate from where we were—it was the sound of someone infiltrating our small boat. *The lightning enchantment didn't work?* I thought, alarmed.

<Get down,> Yoshu commanded.

Jess swiftly threw her body on top of mine. I sensed Jess whispering something next to my ear, but I couldn't decipher it. Hurriedly, I bent my four limbs and crouched as low as I could.

There was a quiet "Ah." It was Jess's voice. Shortly after, something rolled across the floor away from us.

Within the black smoke that offered no visibility at all, a tense back-and-forth battle unfolded.

The snap of a crossbow string. I could tell that a bolt had flown by right above our heads.

The click of a tongue. It sounded like Yoshu had missed. Our vision was still completely sabotaged. It would have been strange if he'd actually managed to land a hit.

My mind almost gave in to panic, but I forced it to analyze. Someone was attacking us. As if that weren't enough, that someone was on this boat. *Did they come from the sky above? Or from the water below?*

I heard Yoshu firing the crossbow again, but it appeared that he'd missed a second time.

There was no sign that the black smoke smothering our vision would be fading anytime soon.

This is bad. This is real bad. Every single second counts. If I don't make a decision fast, we might be killed. Jess *might be killed, and the murderer will carve a glowing red cross onto her chest— No. That can't happen. That can never happen. I won't allow it.*

I've got to decide.

What should we do in a situation like this? Think!

I inhaled. <<Yoshu, come over here. Jess will detonate the boat.>>

There was the creaking of boards from Yoshu's direction, and I

sensed someone approaching us. Jess's hand, which was still on my back, tensed up. A hand was placed on my head.

A hand? Whose hand?

The next moment, an excruciating headache assaulted me, the likes of which I'd never experienced in my entire life.

My vision—my world went pure white.

My body drifted with a sense of weightlessness, as if gravity had vanished. There was no wind. No sound. No temperature. Not even the weight of Jess's hand.

I'd lost sensation in my entire body.

It was as if someone had pulled out only my soul and had chucked me into a pristine white space.

Am I…dead? I thought numbly.

Against my will, my imagination went wild. My mind vividly constructed the image of a pig with a hand on his head. He exploded from a spell and transformed into mince in a split second. Physical bodies were fragile things. For powerful mages, the mortal vessel was nothing more than a house built with cards they could crumble with a single fingertip.

Within the overexposed space, I occupied my mind with unnecessary thoughts. That was when I heard a distant voice.

"Please…"

It was the voice of a girl. Her prayers echoed countless times.

"Please, you must come back…this…soon…"

Little by little, the voice grew louder as it continued calling out to me. *What happened? What should I do?*

"Your body is already…you must make haste…"

It was an excessively echoey voice. Overlapping countless times, it became a muffled clamor, and I could only make out parts of her words.

I think I know this voice. Realization dawned on me. *But where did I—*

A deafening explosion forcefully pulled my consciousness back to reality.

My five senses returned to me all at once. My vision was blurry. There was the sound of bubbles traveling through liquid. I detected the scent of muddy water. A cold, murky current had swallowed me whole. Someone's arms were holding me. Judging by the softness and the size of the items pressed against me, the arms must belong to Jess.

For a single second, my head went above the water. I spotted

something blazing with scarlet flames nearby. It appeared that the black fumes had dispersed somewhat.

But almost immediately, my head sank underneath the water again. Unwittingly, I breathed in a copious amount of water through my snout. I choked violently.

As I was tossed about by the water while being utterly bamboozled about what was going on, I felt something solid hit my leg. It seemed to be a waterside plant. Moving my limbs frantically, I directed my body toward the plant. After writhing about for a while, I managed to escape from the water's clutches with Jess.

I heard Jess having a coughing fit next to me. Similarly, I was hacking up water as I cracked open my eyes. We were inside a reedbed along the riverbank, tangled within a cluster over a meter long of withered reeds. Snapped reed fragments pricked my entire body painfully.

The ground was mushy, but at the very least, we were no longer underwater. Confirming that both Jess and Yoshu were nearby, I breathed a sigh of relief. Both of them were muddy all over, but they were alive and moving.

<<Jess, Yoshu, you okay?>>

Jess replied, <Yes.>

Yoshu shook his head. <I'm not okay, but I made it out somehow.>

My head was still spinning, but I struggled to climb onto my feet. However, the mud tripped me, and I had trouble getting into a stable stance. Rolling to my side with a heavy thump, my frame had withered reeds stuck to it like I was a pork sushi roll. Ultimately, I succeeded at wedging myself between Jess's thighs.

I allowed my momentum to take over until I faced upward, and Jess's upside-down face entered my vision. Despite being covered with muddy water and dead plants, she was still the same beautiful maiden she always was.

<I'm not beautiful though...> she protested.

I looked around me. We'd managed to leave the black smoke's range. I turned around to face the river and inspected it. Dark fumes hung stagnantly over one area. Smashed wood fragments and splinters, which were on fire, flowed downstream.

Yoshu sat up, resting his back against the thicket while spreading his legs apart. Holding up his crossbow, he watched our surroundings vigilantly. His eyes were the color of liquid

gold. From between his hair drenched with muddy water, the black pointed tips of his ears poked out.

"Our enemy's presence has disappeared," he reported. "What even was that hand earlier?"

I blinked. "Hand?"

Regaining his dark eyes, Yoshu replied, "Yeah. I managed to see just a little bit. A hand with a golden ring reached out and landed on our resident low-life swine's head. Someone unmistakably came into our immediate vicinity. Judging by the sound, I think they were alone."

I pulled up my memory of the earlier events. Someone had placed a hand on my head. I'd sensed five fingers pushing down and digging into my skin, so it must've indeed been a hand. *Still, I really don't think I deserve that regrettable nickname...*

"Whaaat?!" Jess leaned toward me. "Mister Pig... Do you have brain damage?" Her wording was also slightly regrettable, but I could tell she was worried sick, so I decided to leave minor details for later.

"There aren't any major issues." I hesitated. "But for a moment, I was completely out of it. My vision went pure white."

Still on the lookout, Yoshu pointed his crossbow in all kinds of directions. "Makes me wonder what our enemy wanted to achieve. If they were a mage, I'm pretty sure they had plenty of time and resources to kill us all. But instead, they went out of their way to touch the pig's head..." He sighed with frustration. "Sorry I couldn't shoot the hand. I wasn't confident that I wouldn't accidentally hit Jess."

I shook my head. "There wasn't much you could have done in that low visibility. That aside, who in the world were they?" After I wondered out loud, I began my analysis. My eyes widened as a thought occurred to me. "Hang on. Yoshu, did you just say you saw a *golden ring*?"

"Yeah. There was a big, flashy one on the middle finger. I think it was a right hand."

Suspicion flared up within me at once.

I couldn't confidently declare it was the same item, but the description rang a bell. During the coronation ceremony yesterday, I'd met the five elders of the privileged classes, and they had one thing in common: the golden rings on their right middle fingers.

Jess, who was muddy all over, looked at me anxiously.

My thoughts went wild. Despite their status as capital citizens, the five elders were given special privileges—the blood rings that restricted their magic had been removed. They were basically on the same level as mages with full freedom.

The Cross Executioner was, at the end of the day, a mysterious mage. If one of the five elders had indeed betrayed their king, Shravis, by committing mass murders around Mesteria and carving *Sanguyn Cros* on their victims, everything would click into place.

The fact that the murders had begun on the night of the coronation would also make sense if one of the five were the culprit. Since they'd attended the ceremony, they'd be fully aware of the enthronement, the existence of the First Collar, and even the fact that "The Chain Song" was our lead.

That said, if the murderer had learned of "The Chain Song" for the first time during the coronation, timewise, it was almost impossible for them to search for the leads within the same day and prepare the corpses at night. The suspicious ones were those who'd been privy to the information about the First Collar before the ceremony.

With all these conditions listed, we should be able to narrow down the contenders for the Cross Executioner quite a lot.

I narrowed my eyes. "Jess, can you contact Shravis?" I asked from between her thighs.

Jess furrowed her muddy brows apologetically. "Um, I'm really sorry... I dropped the seashell on the boat before it exploded, and the river current likely carried it away. However, it left my hand while the voice channel was still open, so I believe Mister Shravis knows that something has happened on our end."

I recalled how Jess had been whispering when we'd been engulfed in black smoke on the boat. She'd likely taken out the seashell and called Shravis's name. Unfortunately, she'd dropped the item after that.

"Don't apologize." I shook my head. "You lost your grip on it because I moved suddenly. You used your quick wits well during the chaotic situation—you were a great help."

She hesitated before sporting a small smile. "Thank you."

Yoshu glanced in our direction. "Then it's probably better for us to stay put as much as we can until reinforcements arrive. Let's keep our guards up while we wait for Shravis around here."

He made a good point, but I had qualms about waiting inside

the mud. Leeches might be lurking about.

Using the anklet that Jess had kindly equipped on me, I froze the surrounding mud, creating a path we could walk on. Pushing through the jungle of reeds, we steadily moved away from the river.

The reedbed was substantially vast, and no settlements seemed to be nearby. Withered stalks blocked our path and pricked me spitefully as I passed through them. Piled-up snow fell whenever our movements rocked the reeds, chilling my skin. For my body, which was already cold from the river, it felt like a grueling march with no end in sight.

I want to hurry up and move to a comfortable place. Around the time that thought began to take over most of my consciousness, Yoshu, who was walking in the lead, abruptly halted his gait. He extended one arm to his side, signaling for us to stop.

<Something's coming our way again,> he warned.

Holding his crossbow at the ready in no time at all, Yoshu fired a bolt diagonally forward without hesitation. The bolt sliced through the dead reeds—it soon disappeared soundlessly.

Bushes the color of withered grass blocked our vision, and I couldn't get an unobstructed view of whatever had alarmed Yoshu. Thankfully, the unknown entity was upwind. My ears also informed me that something big—something *gigantic*—was pushing through the thicket toward us.

A pungent, rotten odor drifted over. It was acrid, reminding me of sludge. I reported, "It doesn't seem like a human. Jess, can you burn the entire stretch over there to the ground?"

Nodding promptly, Jess thrust out her hands in front of her. "*Flamma: Incendo,*" she chanted.

I realized my mistake almost immediately, but before I could rectify the situation, a violent blaze soared up in the direction of the sound we'd heard. Dense, dry reeds, dressed in Jess's specialty blend of fuel, boisterously combusted as if they were bouncing up and down.

The maiden's magical technique was polished—she'd maintained the maximum firepower output while adjusting the volatility of the fuel so that it wouldn't lead to an explosion. We'd worked out several combinations beforehand and named them like move sets. Through this, she could significantly reduce the time necessary for her magic to take effect.

The problem? Her target was upwind.

Reeds had hollow and sturdy stems like bamboo. They stood tall and proud even after withering in autumn. On top of that, they even had air inside, making them highly flammable. The air blowing in our direction literally fanned the flames that threatened to transform the marsh into scorched land.

If we didn't do something, this entire area would be swallowed up in a sea of flames within several minutes. With the mud and thicket trapping our feet, we wouldn't make it in time, even if we tried to run away. A whole straw-grilled pig would then be ready for consumption.

I frowned. "I'm sorry, I forgot about the direction of the wind."

Yoshu briefly sighed before holding up his crossbow. "Step back for a bit." He put himself in front of us like a shield, aimed his empty crossbow without a bolt toward the ground, and dry-fired.

A whistling of wind reached my ears. A patch of roughly five meters of reeds ahead of him fell from its roots in one go.

During a one-eighty turn, Yoshu repeated the same movement. With this, he completed a circle of neatly reaped reeds within a five-meter radius with us at the center.

"With the power of a rista, it's simple to cut weeds with blades of air," he explained as he lifted his weapon.

I see. He created a firebreak so we wouldn't get caught in the fire.

Deciding to reinforce the firebreak, I used my anklet to control the muddy water and buried the chopped, withered plants under the mud.

It all went according to plan—the fire stopped ahead of us, giving us a berth of five meters. A while later, the flames subsided, allowing us a panoramic view of the wasteland covered with mud, ashes, and smoke on the other side of the firebreak.

But none of the environment could hope to hide a monster the likes of which I'd never seen before.

At first, I'd thought it was something along the lines of a dinosaur. It was taller than a human, and its entire length was seven or eight times its height. The creature's overall silhouette, however, was flat. Its four legs, jutting out sideways from its body, shared more similarities with amphibians than reptiles. *That's right, it's an amphibian,* I thought as realization dawned on me. It reminded me of an enormous salamander.

Sludge was slathered onto its frame from head to toe, and it

almost looked like an object sculpted with clay. It stood within the fumes, undaunted by the inferno.

"*Gurgle gurble gurble…*"

Making a disturbing noise that sounded as if it were gargling with mud, the monster languidly turned its face in our direction.

"Gross!" Yoshu exclaimed, notching a bolt immediately before promptly firing it into the monster's face.

The moment the bolt pierced the spot that should be the area between the muddy abomination's brows, it detonated, blooming a grand flower of mud.

The monster was unfazed—it was still facing us. A large chunk of its head had been gouged out, but I suspected it was made of mud all the way to the center because fresh mud flowed out and covered it with an eerie squelching sound. The next thing I knew, its head had regenerated.

"*Gurgle gurble gurble…*"

The mud monster, after letting out that creepy noise, took a step toward us. Its movement was identical to a Japanese giant salamander.

In that case, it should be pretty sluggish, I thought. But that optimistic outlook was utterly crushed in the following few seconds.

Twisting its body left and right, the monster moved its forelimbs deftly and charged in our direction. It only took one step every second, but it progressed several meters with every step, rivaling the speed of a bicycle.

"Let's get out of here!" I yelled.

Together, the three of us fled from the sludge monster. Beneath our feet was a carpet of soft mud and roasted reeds. Patches of fire were still littered here and there. I selected our route, freezing the mud to solidify it as I led the way. During occasions like these, being a quadruped was useful.

"It's going to catch up to us at this rate." While turning around, Yoshu landed a bolt on the monster's leg. "What's the plan?" The bolt exploded at the limb's base, tearing it off completely and stopping the creature's walk. However, the overflowing mud from its body regenerated the limb. In less than ten seconds, it resumed its strides.

I narrowed my eyes. "Jess, can you freeze its legs? If it's made of mud, freezing it to the ground might stall it for a while."

"I'll try!" she exclaimed. She paused her run for a split second

and placed her hands on the ground in the direction of the monster.

Roughly only fifty meters, approximately two tennis courts in length, separated us from the mud abomination. White frost darted across the ground and struck the monster's front right limb head-on.

Did she do it?! My heart leaped into my throat.

Unfortunately, the monster didn't stop its walk. It left behind its frozen foot on the ground and maintained its movement forward while regenerating that leg. Its momentum was hampered for a moment, but it was only a matter of time before it closed the gap.

Taking thermal conductivity and cross section area into account, I analyzed our situation. "It's not going to work. Its limbs are too slender compared to its main body. If you want to freeze the entire creature, you'll need to touch its trunk directly."

Therefore, we decided that fleeing was our best course of action again. Our pursuer was faster, but Yoshu accurately aimed at the base of its limbs with explosive and freezing bolts, and the monster would lose momentum every time the targeted limb was torn off. Thanks to him, we were able to widen our lead.

I scanned the path ahead. Our escape route led to a small stream with trees lined up along both banks of it. The mud monster likely couldn't progress any further than that point. *If we manage to cross that stream, we'll be able to shake it off for good.*

The problem was that there was still a sizable distance before we could reach the stream in question. We had to evade the clutches of the enormous mud salamander on this extensive reedbed. A touch of despair made my heart sink.

As if that weren't bad enough already, Yoshu reported, "Bad news." His hands were fixed in place—he looked like he'd been rifling through his quiver. "I'm almost out of all the bolts that are effective on that thing. There's only one freezing bolt left."

Because Yoshu had ceased his attacks, the lead we'd fought to gain was snatched away in leaps and bounds. Despite his incessant barrage of bolts earlier, the mud monster regenerated instantly. It appeared that we hadn't dealt any proper damage to it.

"Hey, Jess," Yoshu asked, "can you enchant bolts like Shravis?"

Jess cast down her eyes remorsefully. "I'm sorry, I... Um, I think I might succeed at making something like fire arrows—"

“Got it. Forget what I said. Let’s run.” Yoshu’s composed voice also sounded a little cold.

As the beautiful maiden sprinted, she thrust out her hand backward. “*Flamma: Plodo.*” A grand explosion boomed behind us.

However, the monster advanced on, as if the blazing inferno were nothing but a breeze.

Jess’s explosion spell involved manifesting volatile fuel in midair and igniting it. Though it could produce a fairly impressive wind pressure, it was inherently different from a bomb, so it likely lacked destructive force when up against an opponent resistant to shock, like mud.

“Ugh…!” Jess chewed on her bottom lip. Tears of frustration glistened in her eyes.

“You’ve done everything you can,” I encouraged her. “If we can’t deal with our enemy, then let’s focus on getting away. As long as we reach that stream, we can shake that monster off our trail.”

I didn’t know whether my words reached Jess properly because she muttered, “If I get close to it, I can freeze it.” All of a sudden, she stopped running.

“What did you just say?!” Looking shocked, Yoshu grabbed her arm. “That’s way too reckless. We’ve gotta run.”

“I…”

Even during this interaction, the monster steadily closed in. With every second, the chances of us escaping to safety diminished.

Jess’s slender arm swung fiercely, shaking away Yoshu’s hand.

My eyes widened. “Stop it, Jess! What are you going to do if that thing swallows you up—”

However, my voice fell on deaf ears. Jess ran clumsily toward the creature. The maiden looked small, like a delicate fairy, in front of the colossal salamander made of mud.

What should I do?! How can I save Jess?!

I heard Yoshu sighing next to me. “Jess’s a sore loser and foolhardy. She’s just like sis in that way.” He was holding his crossbow at the ready with the last arrow in place. The archer fired it in Jess’s direction.

Comprehending his aim, I began rushing at the monster. *You want a piece of me?! Well, I’ll show you how dangerous a charging boar can be!*

My pig trotters nearly sank into the mud. As I hardened the ground with my anklet's freezing magic, I commanded my four legs to move with all my strength. In a place like this, a pig could run faster than a human. I overtook Jess in the blink of an eye.

Yoshu's final bolt narrowly passed by the top of Jess's head before striking the salamander's front right leg—specifically, near the base of that leg. It was the slenderest and seemingly most fragile point. Meanwhile, I charged to the opposite side toward the front left leg.

The patch of sludge the bolt had pierced froze over in a flash. Admittedly, it was a small area relative to the monster's gigantic build, but the calculated snipe had stiffened the brittle part of the front right limb. The leg, having lost its flexibility, fell off the body. It was left behind on the ground like a towering, snapped tree.

Like a germinating plant, the leg began regenerating immediately, but the salamander who'd lost one of its forelegs was thrown off-balance by a margin.

Now!

I practically threw myself at the monster's front left leg. As I rammed into it, I activated my anklet's freezing magic. With undivided concentration, I iced up the leg that was bulky like a muddy pillar.

I couldn't afford to be squashed under the creature. Twisting my rotund pig body, I rolled across the muddy ground and broke away from the battlefield. At a slight distance, I turned back to face the salamander and Jess. I was just in time to see the monster's front left leg snap off after being frozen.

Having lost both its forelegs, nothing was supporting the creature's heavy head. Its upper body, enormous like a small hill, crashed into the ground with a thunderous sound that reminded me of a landslide.

Akin to an offering, the abomination's featureless face was placed right in front of Jess's eyes. Not letting the chance slip by, the maiden drove a punch into it.



It was the inexperienced, feeble punch of a delicate arm. But it didn't change the fact that her magic perfectly fulfilled its duty. The salamander's mud froze over instantly.

Frost spread down from its head, cloaking every inch of its "skin." The spell was powered by an awe-inspiring amount of mana that Yoshu's bolts and my anklet couldn't even hope to compare with.

The monster stopped moving altogether. White frost covered it from the very tip of its head to the end of its tail.

My eyes lit up with elation. "Jess, you did it!"

My voice should have reached her, but there was no response.

That was when I realized that something wasn't right about her posture. Her body was slumping forward, looking like she was leaning on her right arm. Her punch had caused her arm to get lodged all the way up to her elbow inside the mud.

To make matters worse, Jess had fainted.

"*Gurgle...*"

An ominous sound reached my ears.

The salamander's body surface, enveloped in frost, began cracking. Black mud slithered out from within. *That's not good!*

I ran at top speed toward Jess. I didn't know what I could do in a pig's body, but I had to save her somehow, no matter what it took. She'd likely passed out due to an ecdysia—she'd used too much magic in one go during the battle.

Even while I sprinted, the monster's cracks spread rapidly, allowing copious amounts of mud to gush out. Black sludge took over the "skin" that was white with frost. Concurrently, it began coiling around Jess's body like glue.

"*Gurgle... Gurble...*"

An uncanny noise rang out again. The salamander's titanic build began stirring languidly.

"Jess!" I cried in desperation.

Alarm bells were ringing in my mind. Jess's right arm, buried inside the monster, was about to bend in an unthinkable direction. By now, her body was bending backward, as if she were practicing a gymnastic bridge. Thick, slimy mud streamed down. It flowed from Jess's arm to her chest and neck, then gradually covered her face. *She's going to suffocate at this rate!*

By the time I reached her side, her face was entirely covered by mud—she looked like she was wearing a blank mask. *Fudge. She can't breathe like this.*

What do I do? Think!

Looming over me was a towering abomination. My mind went completely blank. I didn't know how I could make a difference, but I decided to do everything within my power. It was extremely primitive but likely the only method available to me right now.

Jess had bent backward at an angle where her face was now turned to me. I leaned forward and licked away the stinky, pungent mud.

It tasted so revolting that I wanted to die on the spot. A pig's palate was naturally designed to be indifferent toward small amounts of mud on vegetables, but even so, it tasted excruciatingly bitter and foul.

However, thankfully, Jess's nose and mouth were freed from the mud. Her body convulsed minutely, and I heard her having a coughing fit. She could breathe now.

I crawled under the back of Jess's head, elevating her head with my back so that mud wouldn't flow onto her face.

The price I paid was that the sludge ran down in my direction this time. Its movement was dull, but the muddy salamander was unmistakably moving forward, intent on crushing us with its weight.

I'm going to die, I thought numbly.

Not a moment later, a red shooting star rained down from above.

It was the only way I could describe it. A star, which had soared toward us while cutting across the cloudy leaden sky, transformed into a blinding trail of flames and sliced the monster from head to tail in one clean stroke.

The towering salamander was split into neat, vertical halves. It began collapsing left and right like a butterflied horse mackerel. So that we wouldn't be crushed under it, I planned on somehow scrambling away with Jess on my back, but the next thing I knew, she was gone.

As I evaded the collapsing monster, I realized the sky was unnaturally dark. Above my head was the enormous outline of something with wings. The creature in question was using counter-illumination on its stomach to blend in with the cloudy sky, but up close, I could recognize its true identity: It was the royal court's dragon.

Our friend had come to save us.

The bisected salamander behemoth remained still on the

ground. It didn't even move in the slightest. Like a soft-boiled egg, gooey mud oozed out from its solid, frozen "skin."

A familiar voice called out. "You did me a favor by freezing it. Thanks to you guys, I could slice it cleanly."

I slowly turned around.

Behind me stood Naut, who carried the muddy Jess in his arms.

We'd made it out alive. We were safe now.

The tension in my heart, which had lurked there continuously ever since the attack on our boat, finally began ebbing away.

We discovered something hiding in the place where the monster's brain should be—a decomposing human head covered with grave wax. It had been sliced perfectly into halves together with the mud by Naut's decisive strike.

Soon, we concluded that the head of an unknown murder victim had been disposed of in the marsh of the riverbed. It seemed that the influence of the Abyssus had given birth to the mud monster. Naut had jumped off the dragon's back and killed that monster with a single, fatal blow.

I'd heard that the emergence of such monsters was gradually increasing everywhere around Mesteria. Though its connection with the person who'd attacked our boat was unknown, Naut speculated that we'd probably just been unlucky and had coincidentally run into a monster prowling around the reedbed.

The passengers who'd been riding on the dragon alongside Naut were Ceres, Sanon—the pig she took care of—and Batt, who'd been tagging along wherever the handsome swordsman went. They'd answered Shravis's summons and had gone to his side, but after the young king had sensed that all was not well on our end, he'd immediately dispatched them here. With a new seashell that Shravis had entrusted him with, Naut reported our situation.

When we reached a safe meadow, Jess came to. Using magic, she manifested warm water from her hands and proceeded to rinse off the mud from me, Yoshu, and herself.

"You saved me again, Mister Pig," she gently said as she washed my face.

I shook my head. "You're the one who saved us, Jess. And Naut was the one who saved you." *All I did was lick her face.*

Jess blinked. "You…licked my face? But why?"

Do you really need a reason for licking the face of a beautiful maiden? Averting my gaze from the scenery before me, I went over the present state of affairs with Naut. “Back to the topic, where did you say Shravis was at again?”

Naut, Yoshu, and Batt had turned their back to us because Jess was in a very inopportune state of dress after she’d showered herself with warm water while clothed. The black pig was making a strenuous effort to peer at us, but Ceres was covering his eyes with her petite hands.

Still turned away, Naut replied, “He’s at a rural village called Tendar. I don’t know the details, but he mentioned that he found something called an anchor clue there, as well as dead bodies.” His voice turned grim. “Seems like there were a considerable number of corpses. I didn’t see it with my own eyes, but large flocks of crows were flying about in the forest like a mosquito swarm.”

I exhaled slowly. “So, Shravis’s theory was on the mark. The next clue to the First Collar was downstream. That also means the Cross Executioner beat us to the punch yet again.”

Jess leaned down until her face was in front of my eyes. Behind it was her translucent clothes that clung to her skin, then two fruits weighed down by gravi—

The maiden’s voice cut into my thoughts. “Once we are ready, should we meet up with Mister Shravis right away?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It will probably be cramped, but let’s all head over there on the dragon’s back.”

Five humans and two pigs crammed ourselves into seats meant for four people—we were practically packed like sardines during our air trip. By the time we arrived at a grassland on the outskirts of Tendar, the sky had already turned rather dark.

Tendar was a small village sitting on the bank of the Bellell River. An earthy, rustic community along the water’s edge, it was walled in by a mountain. Considering how a groomed coniferous forest stretched out around it and how many piles of logs were in the harbor, Jess deduced that many of the villagers must make a living off forestry.

Below the dark night sky, where the moon and stars were hidden behind clouds, we used the cries of crows as our guide to the crime scene. We walked down the forest path, which was likely purposed as a logging road, and proceeded deep into the mountain.

According to Naut, our destination was on high ground. We had to hike up quite a steep slope.

By the time I could hear the shrieks of the crows from above my head, I began catching sight of enchanted lighting. Countless orbs of light were floating within the pitch-dark forest.

Half-running, we rushed to the focal point. Surrounded by the lights were all the remaining members we'd parted from at Harbir.

"Thank goodness… I heard that you were attacked, but I see that all of you made it out safely." Though he maintained a high-strung expression, the corners of Shravis's lips lifted into a faint smile the moment he saw us. "Regrettably…I can't say that things are much better on our end."

I'd already braced myself for the worst. Just like I'd anticipated, what awaited us was a gruesome spectacle once again.

What entered my vision first was a stone lodge with a triangular roof. Long logs lined up in a circle around it and had been driven into the ground. Naked corpses were restrained on each and every one of these stakes. The bodies were marred with wounds everywhere—no one had been spared from becoming food for the crows.

Without exception, a *Sanguyn Cros* glowed on the chest of every corpse. The crosses cast a faint, scarlet tint on the building they encircled, creating an unearthly atmosphere.

I couldn't fully fight off the despair that gradually ate into my mind. *We're…too late.*

Shravis clapped his hand fiercely, chasing the crows away. "We've barely touched anything since we discovered the scene. Judging by their adornments and tattoos, the victims are likely survivors of the Nothen Faction once again. All of them were murdered by a powerful electric current." He explained the situation in a concise, methodical manner, similar to a crime scene investigator.

I was intrigued. "Thanks to the work of the crows, I can't clearly identify their fatal injury… How could you tell that they died by electrocution?"

Shravis looked away from us. "It's because I have killed enemy soldiers with electricity myself."

"I see…" I mulled over his statement.

The third ring breaks, allowing the brown bear to flee,

Onto the tree it climbs, until the sky strikes it down in time*, the brown bear is* dead*, so mote it be.*

One part of the nursery rhyme hinted at death by lightning. Even at this crime scene, the method of murder highly resembled “The Chain Song.”

I didn’t choose to ask Shravis for any more clarifications; instead, I coolly verbalized my own deduction. “The crows have eaten quite a great chunk of all the bodies present. They’re in hideous condition. It seems like a day, at the minimum, has passed since they were murdered. At the very least, they should have been killed way before the fire we saw started at the Harbir Whole Roast Case.”

It was around noon today when we’d noticed that the fourth floor of an old castle in Harbir, the city with stone bridges, was ablaze. Only half a day had passed since then. If the victims here had been murdered after the arson, in terms of time, it was very unlikely that the crows would have done this much damage to the bodies.

That is to say, there was a possibility that the second and third murder sprees had been committed out of order.

Jess fixed her gaze on me. “The time of the crime here might be close to the mass murder in Broperver…”

“Right.” I nodded. “The Whole Boiled Murder Case—or at least, the whole boiled bodies arrangement, likely happened between last night and early dawn today. Though the criminal would need some sort of high-speed means of transportation for it to be possible, there *is* a chance that these two murders happened around the same time. That said, you also can’t rule out the possibility that the third murder case here took place further back than that.”

Behind Shravis, Itsune looked at us, mystified. “What’s the point in thinking all that? What we want to know is who created all this mess. Who cares about when these people died?”

I shook my head. “Until now, we’ve come across these three murder scenes following the order indicated in ‘The Chain Song,’ remember? We were naively optimistic, assuming that the murders also happened in that order. In fact, we even thought that if we hurried along, we might be able to get ahead of the culprit.”

With a grave expression, Shravis listened while nodding in

acknowledgment.

I continued, “But now, a new possibility has surfaced—the actual murders might have happened in a different order. The arson happened at noon today, but there’s a chance that even the corpses at the old castle in Harbir were prepared a long time ago. However, they were all burned to a crisp, so we couldn’t estimate the time of death.”

Itsune inclined her head quizzically. “Are there any bonuses about knowing the order?”

“We can get some insight into the Cross Executioner’s behavioral patterns. And…” I trailed off, unable to finish my sentence as my heart sank with hopelessness.

From beside me, Jess finished my statement for me. “It means that there is a high chance that even if we pursue the leads in haste, the criminal has already carried out the fourth murder at this point.”

It appeared that the implications of our sentence had finally sunk in because shock wormed onto Itsune’s face.

If, like the previous murders, the fourth murder had been arranged in accordance with “The Chain Song,” the Cross Executioner, who was responsible for them, had most likely already found the final destination—the hiding place of the First Collar.

Here, at the site of the third murder scene, we’d made a discovery. A horrifying scenario was growing exponentially probable—the Cross Executioner had already snatched away the First Collar.

Shravis clutched his head, looking totally thrown off. “What in the world is the Cross Executioner trying to achieve?”

“The most plausible interpretation is that they are taking the First Collar hostage and toying with us.” As I analyzed the situation in my mind, I voiced my thoughts. “Our only choice is to follow the leads indicated in the nursery rhyme, forcing us to chase after the criminal constantly. To put it another way, we’re always on the defensive. In contrast, our enemy was even bold enough to roast the dead bodies right in front of our eyes during the day. They evidently have a clear understanding of our movements and know of our existence.”

While I spoke, an unpleasant feeling filled my chest. It was as if we were fighting a doomed battle. “When we reach the First Collar’s location, we should take utmost caution. The Cross

Executioner is definitely cooking up something unscrupulous over there."

Was the perpetrator's ultimate goal to satisfy their craving for the limelight, to play a malicious "game" out of spite, or to assassinate the king? I had no way of knowing.

That said, we had more than sufficient military strength on our side. We also had a new lead— *Oh, right. I was completely distracted because of the battle with the monster, but we came across an important clue!*

The moment I recalled that fact, I reported to Shravis that the person who'd assaulted us on the boat had been wearing a golden ring on their right hand.

Since this morning, Shravis had practically worn a composed expression like a robust mask. But at long last, his inner turmoil and shock showed on his face. "Come again…?" He frowned so deeply that his thick brows were almost connected.

Jess's memories of the incident must have been cloudy due to the ecdysia, as she gasped in realization as well. Zeal worked into her hushed voice. "The assailant threw up a thick smoke screen around us and marched onto our boat as we sailed down along the centerline of the Bellell River. Even after a bolt struck their body, they seized Mister Pig's head and did something. I highly doubt that it was the work of an ordinary human. They must've been a mage."

Shravis looked like he couldn't believe what Jess was saying. "Those gold rings were tokens of faith that I personally gave the five elders. Are you implying that one of those five betrayed us? It can't be… Mother and I— No, I see, that's possible… In that case…" After muttering incoherently under his breath, the young king fell silent.

He'd certainly hooked Jess's curiosity. She peered at his face. "May I ask how you and Madame Wyss relate to this topic?"

After a moment of hesitation, he replied, "No, ignore me. Though we've removed the blood rings from the five elders, they all stopped at three ecdysias. The question remains whether they had the mana pool necessary to commit such large-scale murders. Furthermore, I trust those five from the bottom of my —"

Cutting himself off, he shook his head and continued. "Pardon me. There's no point in debating about assumptions. I'll contact mother and ask her to urgently check whether any of those five

have acted dubiously. Give me a moment."

Walking away from us slightly, Shravis took something that looked like a crystal ball out of his pocket. Jess explained it was a magical instrument that could be used to communicate with the royal capital.

Within the darkness, Jess and I were left behind with the Lacerte siblings in front of the lodge with the triangular roof.

A thought appeared to occur to Itsune because she casually asked, "Hey, where did Naut go? He should've come here with you guys, right?"

Yoshu pointed at the other side of the lodge. "I can hear voices from over there. Sounds like they're searching for something."

I pricked up my ears but could only hear the caws of crows. I decided to head over to check on them.

Naut was driving away crows while examining the corpses with Batt. Ceres seemed to be stuck in the conundrum of wanting to look at Naut but not at the dead bodies—she was hanging her head while stealing glances in the swordsman's direction.

A voice suddenly rang out near my ears. "I must say that I have a bad feeling in my gut."

My liver nearly went cold with fright before I recognized the black pig who had blended into the darkness. *Sounds rich coming from me, but talking pigs are seriously disturbing.* "Did something happen, Mister Sanon?" I looked at him warily. "Please don't sniff Jess's legs."

"Oh, pardon my rudeness..." He paused. "Mister Lolip, are you aware that we Liberators are carrying out undercover investigations?"

"Yes. If I remember correctly, you started it to sweep clean all the survivors of the Nothen Faction in one go, right?"

"Indeed. Nattie and I are overseeing the operation together, you see, and we just so happened to be undertaking this mission near Bellell River recently." His voice turned solemn. "I'm sure you can imagine my shock when one of the men we were monitoring appeared as one of the corpses among this lot."

The black pig indicated one of the bodies with his snout. A distinctive tattoo of roses and a skull was on the man's forearm.

Guarding her skirt vigilantly, Jess asked Sanon, "Does that mean you are investigating whether the other targets you were

observing are present?”

Sanon shook his head. “The murder of our surveillance targets isn’t a matter of concern at all. We left them at large to gain intel, but we planned on killing them in the end anyway. What we are concerned about are our comrades, whom we have requested to infiltrate undercover.”

An ominous tone crept into Sanon’s voice. “To tell you the truth, one of the brave souls among the Liberators who have snuck into their ranks ceased all communications a few days ago. We’ve been searching for him tirelessly since last night.”

At that precise time, a young boy’s voice echoed out from the other side of the darkness. “Oy, Master! Over here!” The cheeky little guy with short hair called for his teacher, Naut, in an informal manner.

Batt was his name, and he’d escaped from the arena under the Nothen Faction’s management alongside Naut. He’d been glued to Naut’s side as a self-proclaimed disciple ever since. He struck me as a somewhat puppy-like boy, and I secretly theorized that Naut kept him around in Rossi’s stead because the swordsman felt a sense of loss over his beloved dog.

When I approached him, Batt was reflecting the environmental light with the mineral on the grip of his shortsword, illuminating one of the corpses. The pitiful body had been mercilessly stripped of his clothes and was missing chunks of flesh everywhere—the work of the crows in the vicinity. From what I could see, it was a middle-aged man. He didn’t possess any characteristics that stood out, but the moment Naut saw the body, he gritted his teeth.

Blinding flames flashed across the darkness. The next thing I knew, Naut had gently rested the remains on the ground.

“Yoshu, send out letters to the whole country at once,” he said in a dangerously low voice.

“Why’s that?”

“We’ll tell our comrades that a murderer with a few screws loose is running around and order them to invest all their efforts into hunting the fool down.” A hot anger was blazing in his voice, as well as a stinging bloodlust that I could practically feel against my skin. “This man, Evan, was our brave kindred spirit who risked his own safety to decimate the Nothen Faction. Before he went undercover, I swore to him that I’d monitor the survivors carefully so that he wouldn’t have to risk his life. But look at what

happened.”

Naut slowly lifted his head. Next to me, Jess sucked in a sharp breath. The swordsman was wearing a hair-raising expression of unadulterated indignation.

Dragging out every syllable with fury, he declared, “Cross Executioner, was it? I don’t care who you are, but the moment I drag you out…I’ll cut you down with my own hands.”

After finishing his transmission, Shravis called Jess and me amid the clamorous Liberators. “Can you come with me for a moment?”

The three of us walked all the way to the lodge’s front entrance. If I wasn’t imagining things, I sensed inner conflict in Shravis’s gait. He explained, “I have reported everything to mother. She hasn’t found any new information but has graciously said she will join us immediately. We will head to the last location, the collar’s hiding place, in full assembly while being perfectly prepared. I will be with you every step of the way. I’ll see to it that both of you will never be attacked again. I’m sorry that you had to go through such a horrifying incident.”

Jess worriedly placed a hand against her chest. “But you must be the one who is suffering the most dreadful experience, Mister Shravis.”

Shravis’s feet ground to a halt. He looked over his shoulder at us. “What makes you think that?”

“I mean… If the Cross Executioner has a target, then it wouldn’t be me or Mister Pig. It would have to be you, Mister Shravis, since you are the king.”

As if soothing a little sister, Shravis fondly ruffled Jess’s hair. “You can relax. I’m not scared. I’m calm. I’m the king of Mesteria with divine blood running in my veins, after all.”

I frowned. *The problem is, a truly calm person wouldn’t proclaim that they’re calm…* “You can always come to us if there’s ever anything troubling you, okay?”

Shravis nodded. “Got it. Actually, I’ll take you up on that right away.” His muscular arm indicated the entrance of the lodge. “I haven’t had much time to explore, so I’ve barely investigated anything. Could you search for more clues with me?”

The lodge was cramped. Judging by the interior, it had been purposed as a chapel. Shravis used his enchanted lights to illuminate the entire space, and startled spiders scuttled across the walls and floor.

On the other side of the front entrance was a Vatis statue covered with dust. Her raised right arm held a rusty chain.

"Looks like we've got our third lead," I commented as I approached and observed the item. The chain reached the ground before running parallel to the wall and heading deeper inside the lodge.

I turned around and took in the entire chapel. A thought occurred to me. "Is it just me, or is this place a bit shabby overall?"

Jess and Shravis both looked at me at the same time. The young king asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, and I don't think it's too important," it was ultimately my personal opinion, so just in case, I prefaced it with that statement, "but until now, our leads were either in a scorching hot jail underneath a cathedral or a chamber meant for burning at the stake in an old castle that was practically a torture museum—both places that were impressive in some way. Compared to them, this chapel is a bit, how do I put it... It feels like it's too lackluster."

Jess inclined her head quizzically. "But this chapel seems like it has seen its fair share of time as well. It wouldn't be unnatural for it to be a building constructed by Lady Vatis."

"You have a good point in terms of how timeworn it looks, but y'know..." I struggled to find the right word. "It doesn't have that kind of sexy feel to it."

Two identical expressions lined up next to each other, looking as if they had imaginary question marks floating above their heads.

The maiden was struggling to understand my abstract description. "Um... From what I can remember, the underground jail in Broperver and the old castle in Harbir weren't particularly sexy in any way..."

I shrugged. "I thought they were sexy in a sense, though. How to explain this... You could tell that whoever designed them refused to compromise on quality right down to the fine details, and functional beauty coexisted in perfect harmony with functional grotesqueness. Even now, you could almost feel the fleshly atmosphere from back when those places were constructed."

Shravis blinked before hesitantly saying, "I must say that you have rather peculiar fetishes, pig." He sent a concerned gaze in

Jess's direction.

Hey, why are you getting worried about Jess after saying that? "No, sorry, ignore me. It's not that I want you to understand my way of thinking or anything. I was only stating my impressions out loud…"

Unpleasant silence stretched on for a while.

Jess finally said, "Maybe Lady Vatis had her reasons. If the two previous places were significant to her in some way, then I believe she chose this place with some kind of intent as well."

Shravis didn't look like he quite agreed, placing a finger on his jaw. "Do you truly think so? I find it hard to imagine that there's anything too meaningful about the specific places she chose as our stops on the way…"

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. "Do you really think she'd make us go on a riddle-solving game like this *without* any motives?"

My statement appeared to only add to Shravis's confusion. "Do you need a reason to give someone a riddle?"

As I looked at his bewildered face, I realized something. *That reminds me, Shravis never experienced Hortis's boob sightseeing tour in the royal capital or Vatis's unreasonable Labyrina tour. No wonder his reaction is different from ours.*

People always solve mysteries with a motive. Likewise, people would only make others solve mysteries for a motive. The mystery-bearer might have an innocuous reason, like wanting to give someone a good time or tease them. Maybe they simply wanted the challengers to take a detour to avoid a place with a certain secret. Or perhaps they wanted to lead the contenders astray so that no one could touch or defile their memories with their beloved.

From experience, I knew one fact: Riddle crafters always deliberately put together mysteries because they wanted to achieve something.

"If Vatis only wanted to hide the First Collar somewhere, the obvious choice would be to stash it in a place only royalty could access in the royal capital," I pointed out. "That way, there's less risk of someone stealing it. Instead, she chose to scatter secret hints across various places in Mesteria and make us follow her predetermined course. Because of that, the collar is in danger of being snatched by a third party, and that's the exact problem stumping us right now. Don't you think this is going too far for a

simple game?"

Jess hummed thoughtfully, placing a hand on her chin. "You're right. I doubt that Lady Vatis would have overlooked the risk of her arrangements leading to an undesirable situation like ours. Now that's strange... Why exactly did she plan a mystery tour involving a nursery rhyme?"

By this point, we'd left Shravis completely in the dust. "Are there any bonuses for knowing the answer?"

Is it just me, or did someone ask me almost the exact same question earlier?

In a confident tone, Jess replied, "We will be able to take a few steps closer to the one truth. At times, small pieces that don't seem to fit properly, like loose threads, can be guiding trails leading to significant truths that others are trying to bury."

Jess spoke as if she were a genuine ace detective. She then looked at me with a face that practically said *Right, Mister Pig?*

I nodded in agreement. "Jess's right. It would feel disconcerting to leave mysteries as they are. No matter what kind of mystery it may be, somehow or other, they are connected to the roots called truth. To put it another way, the questions that appear in front of your eyes are hints that the truth has been generously presented before us. Disregarding them would be a loss."

Shravis frowned. "I see... Well, I suppose I can understand your case. But it should be acceptable to postpone that problem, right?" His gaze was fixed on the chain trail.

"Of course," I replied. "For now, let's do the straightforward thing and follow the clue the chain is giving us."

We proceeded in the direction of the chain. After twirling to the back of the altar, the chain crawled out from a small hole in the wall. Shravis touched the chain, and it began glowing faintly.

"Let's head outside," he announced.

We left the lodge and saw that the chain was halfway buried in the soil. But we were able to follow it to the end thanks to Shravis strengthening his enchantment and making it shine intensely. It led us to a cliff with exposed rock.

"Where's our next destination?" Naut cut in from the sidelines in a heated tone that was rare for him.

The young king turned around and pointed at the ground. "We'll know soon. It's wherever this chain leads to."

Everyone assembled, and our collective gazes traced the path

of the glowing chain. One part of the chain had been hammered into a boulder with a rusty iron rivet. The boulder had an unnatural shape—it looked like a cheesecake that had been divided into eight equal parts. Someone had likely altered it.

A certain item that spurred on an ominous premonition was hanging down from the end of the chain: a metal sculpture depicting a skull.

Yoshu focused his eyes on the area beyond the cliff. “If we’re supposed to follow the pointed end of the chain, then…” He paused. “Maybe it’s that thing. I see a shining tower.”

Itsune placed a hand on her brother’s shoulder and looked in the same direction. “A shining tower? Is it a lighthouse? Which direction on the compass is it?”

Shravis quickly scanned the scenery below, checking the direction of the Bellell River. “The tower is further downstream the river. It’s probably roughly southeast. You shouldn’t be able to see the ocean from there, though…”

Yoshu shook his head. “No, it doesn’t look like a lighthouse to me. It’s a tall tower. Ugh, it’s beyond that mountain… If only I could see a settlement nearby.” He sounded stuck.

That was when Batt interjected, “Oh, it’s got to be the fire in the memorial tower of Lyubori then.”

Lyubori. My internal radars rang alarm bells immediately in reaction to that name. It was where we’d strayed into a graveyard in the Abyssus and had almost died in the opium fog. *It’s also where a maiden with an ample chest rescued us…*

Jess, who’d been inspecting the skull sculpture, echoed Batt’s statement subconsciously. “Memorial tower…?”

Batt rubbed the bottom of his nose proudly. “Yeah. Lyubori’s my hometown. There’s this huge graveyard, and we’ve got a giant tower built there where you can get a sweeping look at the place. The oil in the fire refills little by little, and it stays burning even throughout the nights.”

Jess and I looked at each other with a start.

Walk out of the jail, there you will see the chain trail, to the graveyard *it paves the way.*

The direction the chain clue pointed us in and the verse in the nursery rhyme matched perfectly.

Lyubori—that was our final destination and the hiding place

of the First Collar.

Chapter 4: When It’s a Serial Murder Case with a Motif, the Detective Must Deduce the Murderer’s Motive

With the addition of Itsune, the ones on the royal family side—Shravis, Jess, and I—traveled on the dragon while the rest of our fellows sailed to Lyubori by boat.

The Cross Executioner or some kind of trap might be eagerly awaiting our arrival—we met up at the harbor with utmost vigilance. The last to join us was Wyss, who wore a solemn expression. She wasn’t adorned in one of her usual elegant dresses but in a modest robe that was likely for outings. Possibly because it had been left forgotten in a wardrobe somewhere, I picked up the pungent scent of insect repellent.

That reminds me. This might be my first time seeing Wyss outside the capital, I noted.

I was sniffing noisily, and of course, Jess didn’t approve of my actions. Hurriedly, I put some distance between the woman and myself.

Wyss’s voice was several degrees more composed than usual. I could tell she was suppressing her emotions with a blanket of rationality. “I have heard the summary of our current situation from Shravis. We must advance knowing that our path might lead us to a ferocious battle.”

The night was no longer young, and the winds seemed to have made incisions in the clouds. The blinding starry sky that peered at us from the openings was as highly dense as ever, as if someone accidentally sprinkled salt all over it.

Without a shred of hesitation in her gait, Wyss marched in the lead. Walking shoulder to shoulder with Shravis, Jess and I followed her.

The heart of the town was deathly silent. It was a magnificent settlement with a main street of cobblestone paving running through it.

The Liberators placed their hands on their weapons, ready to spring into action at any time. Meanwhile, the inconspicuous black pig and boar—in our tense situation, Kento naturally had

to take off his frilly dress—blended into the darkness while sniffing our surroundings. Ceres and Nourris held hands and pressed on under the protection of our warriors.

Wyss turned around to face Jess. “We are walking into a possible battlefield. There is no need for the two of you to risk yourselves and come with us.”

Jess shook her head. “No. I’ll also accompany Mister Shravis to the end.”

There was a pause. “Is that so? I repeat myself, but you must be careful.”

As their impassive conversation unfolded, my mind played back the memory of last night. *Oh, it was only last night, huh?* The ninth day of the second month had been such a long, long day that it almost felt like more time had passed.

But if everything went as expected, it would all end in this town, along with the night.

Our destination was the memorial tower. During my previous visit to Lyubori in the Abyssus, I hadn’t seen it because my vision had been obscured by fog, but there was a lofty stone tower rising up deep inside the graveyard on the outskirts of town.

According to Shravis, this was a piece of architecture that had existed even before the founding of the royal court. Therefore, it certainly matched the description of a place that Vatis could have chosen as the hiding spot for the First Collar. The tower was also a landmark that served as the ideal sign to refer to if you were looking for something.

That said, from what I could perceive from afar, the structure seemed almost too striking to call it a simple memorial tower. It was practically an austere, rectangular pillar made by stacking up ashen stone slabs. The walls of the rooftop area were bumpy, like the edge of a saw. The walls beneath it were even designed with holes that reminded me of arrowslits. One level down from the tower’s top floor was an ample, hollowed out space that you could peer into without obstruction from all directions. Here, an enormous flame blazed dazzlingly.

The flame was dark scarlet. I grimly noted that it was the color of blood.

When we left the bounds of the city, we were welcomed by a dark grassland that stretched to the horizon—a vast graveyard. Red opium poppy flowers in full bloom were dotted here and

there, producing a sweet fragrance that they shouldn't actually have as the wind spread it generously.

Naut scowled and warned his comrades. "This wind isn't good. Don't breathe in too much of it. It's the same as anesthetics that'll mess with your head."

In the Abyssus, we'd come close to kicking the bucket due to mist with this opium component. It seemed that a similar phenomenon had manifested on this side of Mesteria.

We cut across the graveyard and arrived at the memorial tower.

Realization struck me immediately. There were relief carvings modeled after skulls nestled here and there along the tower's walls. The skull sculpture hanging from the end of the chain in Tendar was connected to this memorial tower through the "chain trail."

The tower's entrance was left wide open. A narrow spiral staircase traced the rectangular tower's inner walls. It led up and further up—all the way to the level where the dark vermilion flames flickered.

Here, Wyss temporarily stopped before turning to face us. "I shall be our vanguard. If I ever come under attack, Shravis, don't waste any time on me and strike back without hesitation." Her no-nonsense tone didn't allow for any objections.

The king's mother began marching up the stairs without waiting for anyone to respond. Partly because it was cramped inside the tower, we decided to split into two groups. One group would climb the tower while the other would stay behind at the base as lookouts.

The ascension group consisted of Shravis, Wyss, Naut, and Yoshu, who had exceptional scouting abilities. Jess had insisted obstinately about going as well, so she and I were tagging along. The rest of our members huddled together and watched over the tower base's environment cautiously.

A rough estimate with my eyes told me that the tower was probably around thirty meters tall, approximately three times that of a residential utility pole. We walked up the dark, cramped, and steep stone steps in one line. Parts of the staircase were broken up with landings. However, the only noteworthy things at these spots were arrowslits or stone pedestals left in place that had been used for positioning weapons. We didn't come across any particular structure that looked like it could secretly harbor

an artifact.

You could cut the tension with a knife as we held our breaths and scaled the stairs, but nothing happened. We reached the flames without any interruptions.

Only the thick pillars in the tower's four corners were left behind on this level. The walls on all four sides had been cleared away. At an elevation of thirty meters above the ground, the cold gusts of night swept across the area from right to left. A low stone fence, which couldn't even deter anyone from tumbling down, surrounded the rectangular floor, which was constructed with flat blocks of stone.

At the very center of the floor was a blazing flame in a color I'd never seen before. Its crimson silhouette flickered, licking the ceiling voraciously. In contrast, the innermost part of the flame, the dark zone, was black, as if it were sucking in light. It reminded me of the red opium poppy flowers that bloomed in the graveyard.

"Is this as far as we can go?" Naut asked, his hands still poised to draw his twin shortswords at any moment.

We dispersed cautiously and explored this floor. No one else was around. There was no hide nor hair of the First Collar either.

Soon, we gathered again around the dark red flame.

"The only places we haven't seen are the floors above, right?" Jess asked, craning her neck to look at the ceiling.

Based on what I'd seen outside, this tower had a rooftop area, and there had seemed to be enough space to squeeze one more floor beneath it. The problem was that there were no stairs within sight that led upward from this blaze chamber. The walls that should be blocking the outside world were missing; the only things we could see were the four bulky pillars propping up the upper levels.

Naut placed a foot on the unreliable stone fence and peered up from outside the walls. "By the looks of how bumpy the walls are, there must be at least a rooftop. Yoshu, can you scout out what's going on there?"

"I'll try." Yoshu nodded. "Guys, stay as still as you can." He looked over everyone present as he placed his ear against one pillar. It appeared that he was investigating the upper floors through sound.

For a while, I remained stationary like an ornament so I wouldn't make any noise.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything alive,” Yoshu reported.

“I see.” Naut placed all his weight on his foot resting on the stone fence before leaping *outside* the tower.

Jess, who’d been watching over the events near me, exclaimed reflexively. “Mister Naut!”

She turned out to be worried for nothing. Naut swung his shortswords in midair and unleashed magnificent crescent arcs of flames downward. The recoil propelled his body upward, and he swiftly disappeared from our vision.

There was a tap. Our hero had landed somewhere. “Nothing’s on the rooftop.” The night wind carried down his voice from above. “Ah, scratch that, there’s a door leading down.”

“Wait!” Shravis leaned out from the fence and raised his voice. “There might be a trap. We’ll head up with you.”

“Head up?” I blinked. “Mind giving me a few more details?”

My question was utterly ignored. Shravis and Wyss floated everyone into the air with magic and carried us onto the rooftop. The moment my body left the bounds of the fence, my vision was filled with the precipitous walls and the ground that was horrendously far below. I felt as if my pork stomach were being squeezed in a sandwich press with fear. No matter how many times I experienced it, being floated by magic wasn’t my cup of tea.

Naut hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said there was nothing on the rooftop. There were some neglected stone pedestals and a handful of items reminiscent of cannonballs, but the elements had wrecked them. They certainly didn’t classify as clues.

In one corner was a trapdoor that led downstairs. It was a solemn, hefty metal door. I thought about heading over to sniff it, but Naut, Shravis, and Wyss stood around the door a step ahead of me to inspect it. Still, I tried smelling the ground nearby.

Hmm…? I picked up a scent that didn’t belong to any of the members here. It likely belonged to only one person and grew stronger near the door. *Which means…*

When I lifted my face, Wyss’s bottom happened to be in front of me by pure coincidence. “May I help you with something?” she asked.

“Ah, my apologies, I just smelled something…” I stammered.

Next to me, Jess communicated a message with her eyes: *You*

are a piggy with no self-restraint, I see.

Naut looked down at me. “What smell is it?”

“It’s a body odor that doesn’t belong to any of the people present,” I reported. “It’s quite strong, so the person was probably here recently.”

Shravis’s eyes widened. “Impossible! If this tower is the collar’s hiding place, then…”

He fell silent before finishing his sentence, but I could tell what he was getting at. An unknown person had used the door. Supposing that the First Collar was hidden in this place, there was likely an extremely low chance of it being left untouched here.

Shravis glared daggers at the hefty trapdoor. The next moment, it sprung up vigorously.

There was a heavy clang as the door slammed onto the ground at an angle of a hundred and eighty degrees. The dense starry sky shed cold light onto the stairs that led downward into the unknown darkness. We couldn’t see what was inside from above.

That was when something reached my nose. *Wait a minute… This smell is…* The human body odor I’d detected earlier wafted even more intensely from the bottom of the stairs. This couldn’t be a lingering scent.

<<Be careful,>> I communicated through Jess. <<Someone’s still downstairs.>>

Everyone stilled at once. Yoshu crept over on his tiptoes, leaning against me as he pointed his ear at the entrance. <No, I can’t hear any breathing or heartbeats. There’s no one there,> he declared.

There was a human who didn’t exist through auditory perception but was undeniably present through olfactory perception. The only situation that could match these requirements would be—

“It’s a corpse,” I whispered with trepidation.

Shravis immediately illuminated the entire stairway and ran down the steps, ready for battle at any time.

What we found at the other end of the stairs was exactly what we expected: a hidden level and a corpse.

The confined chamber was blocked off everywhere; the ceiling, the floor, and all the walls were made of stone. In the middle of the chamber was a single naked man stretched out

spread-eagled on the ground. Someone had carved a grand cross onto his fair chest, and blood was gushing out.

However, the man's identity shocked me more than anything else. I recognized him—he was Meminis, the intelligence officer elder of the five elders.

Shravis looked stunned. In a daze, he fell onto his knees next to Meminis. Possibly because he wanted to shake the man, the young king's hand touched Meminis's bare shoulder. But not a second later, he withdrew his hand as if burned. The elder's skin must've been chilly to the touch.

I confirmed that the smell above the stairs earlier belonged to Meminis. Looking over his body, I observed a golden ring on his middle right finger. His left hand was gripping a bloody knife.

Meanwhile, Naut and Yoshu were staring in a different direction. I followed their line of sight—they were looking at a wall. A rusty chain dangled from it, clearly severed in the middle. Something must have been suspended from it before the damage.

Words had been carved into the wall across that wall. The strings of characters indicated our defeat in a despairingly concise manner.

The First Collar is already lost.

The writing on the stone wall had been carved with magic, and the only footprints in the dust produced during the process belonged to Meminis. I sniffed his knife, but the only scent was his own.

The circumstances indicated that the perpetrator responsible for the crimes was Meminis, the elder intelligence officer.

Furthermore, after Wyss analyzed the traces of magic left on the corpse, she reported that she'd discovered two things. The first was that Meminis had committed several mass murders with magic. The second was that, apparently, the same spell had robbed him of his own life.

After we descended the tower, we were all in shock for a good while.

Jess turned to me, looking frustrated at herself. "Mister Meminis was an intelligence officer whose duties involved erasing memories and assassination. On top of that, there were no restrictions on his mana pool by a blood ring. We definitely

can’t deny the possibility that his magic was enhanced by the current state of Mesteria, where the Abyssus’s pollution is rampant. It wouldn’t be unusual at all for him to have the ability to take the lives of many people in one go mercilessly.”

I recalled feeling a hand press down on my head while on the boat. “When our boat was under attack within that smoke screen, my head went completely blank. It might have been because Meminis erased some kind of memory from my mind. Does that mean I ended up witnessing something extremely inconvenient for him?”

They say that hindsight was twenty-twenty, but I still couldn’t stop myself from thinking, *If only I came up with some kind of countermeasure immediately after the attack.* Back then, Meminis had still been alive. There was even the chance that if I’d maneuvered properly, we could have even pried the location of the First Collar out of him.

Jess chewed on her bottom lip. “I can’t believe myself… I was too slow to find the truth through all the hints.” Tears flowed down her cheeks.

The only way I could offer comfort was to gently lean against her and tell her through my actions that I was here with her.

The rusty chain leads on to far, far away,
Walk out of the jail, there you will see the chain trail, to the graveyard it paves the way.

The “chain trail” that had begun at the underground jail of Broperver had ended at this memorial tower surrounded by a graveyard. This was the First Collar’s hiding place. But we’d come too late—the First Collar was already lost.

Everyone else must be just as bitter as we were. Kento paced around restlessly. Naut sat down on the ground, looking defeated and chagrined.

Shravis looked shaken. His inner turmoil slipped out from his mouth in bits and pieces. “Meminis was my most loyal subordinate… When the Clandestine Arcanist possessed father, he secretly gave directions to the capital citizens and helped suppress the damage in the royal capital to a minimum… Why did he do this? How did things come to this…?”

Hearing her son’s feeble, vulnerable moment, Wyss voiced her deduction in a detached voice. “He must have protested with

his very life. Meminis was a conservative man. Your policy of liberating the Yethma was likely intolerable to him."

Naut punched the ground and lost his temper. "So, it's all the dirty work of people in your royal court, huh? Why can't you even keep a leash on your own subordinates? That man went on a crazed mass murder spree. Don't tell me you didn't have a clue at all."

Not only had the Liberators lost their only hope, the First Collar, but one of their kindred souls investigating undercover had also been killed in the process. On top of that, the target of their wrath was already dead. No one could blame Naut for his indignation.

Shravis shook his head, looking disconcerted. "Meminis excelled in erasing memories, but he wasn't a mage at a level capable of such devastating murders. The royal family limited him to three ecdysias... I'm struggling to believe that he managed all this..."

"It must have been the effect of the Abyssus." Wyss's analysis matched Jess's almost perfectly. "The world of reality and the world of desires are melting into each other, causing magic itself to become unstable. I've heard that there was an incident where over ten times the normal amount of mana was drawn out from a rista. Provided that someone has the fervent wish of homicide, it's completely possible for them to grasp techniques that can achieve harrowing massacres."

A heavy silence weighed on all of us.

Sanon, the black pig, was the one who shattered it. "Now, I am purely entertaining possibilities here, but in the scenario that we obtained the First Collar and liberated the Yethma girls with it... Could something similar have happened?"

"Similar?" Wyss echoed.

The black pig continued almost heedlessly. "I am speaking of the possibility that a hazardous mage might arise just like the corpse we saw earlier. If the disorder in this world doesn't settle down... Wouldn't the girls without their collars—wouldn't the unleashed mages be liable of becoming terribly dangerous beings?"

Shravis interjected from the sidelines. "Yes. That risk was always present. The Yethma are kind by 'nature,' so such a scenario likely wouldn't happen immediately. That said, a seemingly innocuous spark of anger or terror might always lead

to a catastrophe. It's especially true in the current state of this world."

Hearing that, Ceres shrank into herself, as if put on the spot.

Itsune glared at the black pig with displeasure. "Hey, Sanon, the hell are you trying to say? Are you implying that we shouldn't liberate the Yethma just because of that?"

"No, no, not at all." He shook his head. "What bothers me is the motive behind the killings."

Trotting forward, Sanon walked into the center of our circle and eloquently made his speech. "If the culprit simply wished to hide the First Collar, it wasn't necessary for him to slay that many people, was it? In my eyes, that man looked almost as if he wanted to demonstrate his abilities, which even allowed him to commit mass murders. And that was when I had a thought—these incidents are a little *too* convenient for the royal court, don't you think?"

"What do you mean by that?" Shravis's tone turned all the more rigid.

"Now, I have no plans of reproaching you as an individual, so please don't be so tense. I am simply saying that from an objective lens, the fact is that these serial mass murders will bring about a very convenient outcome for the royal court."

The black pig spoke his thoughts as he walked back and forth. His intimidating pressure almost reminded me of a highly competent police detective. He continued to explain, "A mage that we once assumed was insignificant took advantage of the abnormal state of this world, and he was secretly powerful enough to even commit massacres on the side. If this fact is established, we would naturally conclude that using the First Collar to release Yethma would be a perilous gamble, no? From the side of the Liberators, it would become difficult to advocate our opinion that Yethma deserve their freedom."

His trotters abruptly stopped. Sanon steadily looked up at Shravis. "Surely the royal court hasn't ordered that man to put on a charade, have you?"

"That's preposterous!" Shravis spat furiously. "I ordered Meminis to murder and sacrifice his life for our cause. Is that what you're insinuating?!"

"Goodness me, don't be so mad. I am simply confirming this just in case."

I could feel the tension in the air skyrocketing. Alarmed, I

wedged myself between the two. “Mister Sanon, I understand your concerns, but let’s stop the unnecessary accusations. Think about it. If it becomes public that the royal court’s subordinate was the culprit, as you can see, the royal court would also be put in a disadvantageous position. Generally speaking, the best choice is to leave the culprit’s identity up in the air.”

I turned my snout in the direction of the blazing flames at the top of the memorial tower as I continued, “Supposing the royal court is truly trying to demonstrate the dangers of releasing the Yethma to the Liberators, there is no merit in ordering Meminis to die in the place where the First Collar was hidden. They’d be shooting themselves in the foot.”

It was a point I’d whipped up on the spur of the moment, but possibly because it was convincing, Sanon slowly nodded. “I see, I see. Indeed, it is rather odd. Logically speaking, it makes the most sense for that Meminis man to have drifted away from the king’s control, gone on a rampage, slaughtered numerous Nothen Faction survivors, concealed the First Collar somewhere, then literally took its new hiding place to his grave. That does sound like the more natural deduction.”

Shravis walked over before kneeling and meeting the black pig’s gaze. He then bowed deeply at the executive officers of the Liberators. “I truly cannot apologize enough. This all happened because I was inadequate. I suggest we investigate Meminis’s corpse and search for the First Collar’s new location.”

He inhaled slowly before continuing. “I can’t deny that liberating the Yethma right away comes with risks, but I—no, the royal court doesn’t approve of these innocent girls remaining as slaves forever. I swear to you that I will continue to seek out the First Collar as long as I breathe.”

At last, the king lifted his face. His eyes didn’t shed tears, but they were puffy and red. “And…I want to apologize for the fact that your comrade, Evan, was dragged into this incident deep in the wilderness of Tendar. I am sorry for your regrettable loss from the bottom of my heart. The responsibility of my subordinate’s rampage falls on me as the king. I beseech you, please forgive me.”

The Liberators didn’t respond right away. A curtain of stillness fell on us.

The first to speak up was Itsune. “I know that you’ve done nothing wrong. Since the murderer’s cold and dead, we’ve got no

way of taking revenge either. If you're willing to search for a way to liberate the Yethma with us to the very end, personally, I've got no complaints."

Hearing that, Naut slowly rose to his feet. "There's no point arguing back and forth. The criminal died, and the murders ended. The case is closed. All that's left is to focus solely on getting those collars off the Yethma."

The black pig snorted noisily. "Hang on a moment, will you, please? I'm afraid that's unacceptable."

Everyone present had intended to end the conversation at that, but now, all their gazes convened on the black pig.

Sanon continued, "Yes, I agree that we should end the argument here. But if we end it here without hard feelings, it would be a great injustice to Mister Evan. The king might not have evil intentions. That much could be true. However, it's an indisputable fact that his mismanagement of his subjects led to the death of one of our comrades. We ought to demand some sort of compensation."

Shravis froze momentarily, as if taken by complete surprise, but he nodded animatedly. "Indeed. You have every right to demand that. I must take responsibility for your loss."

Lightly wagging his curly tail, Sanon looked up at Shravis. "How does a thousand ristae sound? I have heard that you stopped distributing them due to the pollution of the Abyssus. You should have plenty in excess. I ask that you transfer them to us."

Itsune looked stunned. "Sanon!" she exclaimed disapprovingly.

Ristae, which served as mana sources, were extraordinarily luxury wares that the royal court had a monopoly over from production to distribution. Apparently, a normal citizen could finally squeeze out enough money to buy a single one after a month's work. When the Clandestine Arcanist had taken over the royal court, they'd stopped putting ristae on the market. Even now, there were harsh restrictions on the circulation of ristae due to the risk of spontaneous activation, leading to even more exaggerated prices.

Asking for an entire thousand was too greedy—no, calling it greedy didn't even cut it. I looked at Sanon. "Mister Sanon, the royal court should have supplied us with ristae for free whenever the need arose. Surely you wouldn't have to ask for that many in

one go, right?”

Sanon’s black eyes glinted. “No, Mister Lolip. This condition will allow both sides to put this incident behind us once and for all. For the price of a thousand ristae, we will leave this place without any hard feelings between us whatsoever. We will accept Evan’s death as a stroke of misfortune. Furthermore, there’s indeed an excess of ristae in the royal capital. In fact, I actually believe it’s a rather pleasant solution for both us and the king.”

Wyss cast a frigid gaze I’d never seen on her before in Sanon’s direction.

Due to his disadvantaged position, Shravis could only swallow this term as he was told. “Understood. I should be able to prepare a thousand right away. I’ll arrange for them to assemble a selection of every type, from normal to special colors, before delivering them.” He paused. “That said, I’m sure you are already aware, but—”

The black pig shrugged. “Yes, of course. I will never sell them. We aren’t particularly short on money, after all.”

At that, Shravis looked relieved. “That’s good to hear. I will say it aloud just in case, but please don’t pass them on to ordinary citizens. We didn’t stop distribution because we wanted to trouble everyone. It’s undeniable that the power of ristae has been rising. I wanted to avoid them ending up in the hands of an unsavory faction.”

“I will give you my word. Well then, please deliver them to our place tomorrow morning.”

“Very well. I will arrange for the royal capital to prepare them at once.”

At this moment in time, I’d been none the wiser about the true meaning behind Sanon’s request.

Little did I know that the Cross Executioner Serial Murder Case was far from finished.

For now, my hectic day had finally ended, and I had a moment to catch my breath. I cherished this time when nothing was rushing me to take action.

Shravis and Wyss decided to climb the memorial tower to investigate Meminis’s corpse again. The Liberators, including Kento and Sanon, accompanied them.

Naut, however, had seemed like he wasn’t that interested in

this endeavor because he remained on the ground level with Jess and me.

As we wandered aimlessly toward the graveyard, Naut muttered to us, “Say, if I didn’t kill Marquis back then… Do you think we could have set the Yethma free without having to rely on something like the First Collar?”

Though it wasn’t to the extent of the Abyssus, opium content was infused in the night air. In my eyes, Naut seemed like he was actually actively heading over to inhale some of it.

Jess sprinted to Naut’s side and shook her head fervently. “If you didn’t wield your sword back then, Mister Naut, Mister Shravis and the others would have perished at the hands of the Clandestine Arcanist. We had no means to rescue King Marquis. It was the only way.”

“Right.” I nodded. “We didn’t have the courage to kill Marquis. Without you, Naut, this world surely would have ended up in a much worse state.”

Naut didn’t turn around to look at us, instead single-mindedly weaving between the gravestones. “If we didn’t try to assassinate Marquis with the Destruction Spear, Hortis wouldn’t have lost his life. In that case, he probably could have removed the Yethma collars like he did with Ceres, yeah?”

There was something listless about Naut’s strides—it came from a sense of helplessness. I followed Jess’s example and encouraged him. “But if you didn’t strike back in that moment, it’s clear that Marquis would have executed you and the other Liberators. It’s only because Hortis appealed to his brother while staking his life that he actually got through to an obstinate tyrant like Marquis.”

However, it appeared that my voice fell on deaf ears. “You know, I’ve been shouting that I’ll release the Yethma everywhere I go, but in reality… What kind of difference have I made up to now, huh?”

Jess gazed at Naut worriedly. “Um! I…I had the chance to be freed from my collar all thanks to you, Mister Naut.”

At long last, Naut turned around to face us. If I wasn’t imagining things, his eyes were even glistening slightly with moisture. They were the eyes of a hero who’d lost the First Collar—of a hero who’d lost sight of his purpose.

“Right, I almost forgot.” Naut reached out quietly toward Jess’s neck. But his fingertips never touched her skin. “Hey, are you

happy right now?”

It was an abrupt question, but Jess nodded earnestly. “Of course.”

Without a ripple in his noncommittal expression, Naut continued, “You know, Ceres says the same thing. She says she’s happy. I’m happy whenever I hear that. But at the same time, it’s so incredibly frustrating when I think that the world I can reach and change is this tiny.”

Naut spread out both hands, but they didn’t reach anything. “Even at this very moment, there are more than plenty of Yethma being treated like slaves. There’re over a thousand of them. Even though they’ve got more power than a fully grown man, they don’t know that they can use magic and are constantly living in fear of someone being out for their lives and bodies.”

“One day, no matter how long it takes, let’s remove all of their collars,” Jess declared fervently.

Naut scoffed, but it was gentle. “The thing is, I’ve got the feeling that I let that ‘one day’ slip away from my grasp a long time ago.”

I understood where he was coming from. Hortis’s death, then Marquis’s death. In an ironic twist of fate, we’d personally destroyed the methods to liberate Yethma during our battles. And tonight, we’d even failed to procure the First Collar, which had been our final hope. No one knew where the artifact had gone—no one knew whether it had been destroyed or stashed away. Unless Meminis had made some kind of fatal blunder, the First Collar was likely lost to us forever.

I exhaled slowly. “But Naut, don’t lose focus. The hunt for the First Collar is far from over.”

A wry smile played at the corners of his lips. “Treasure hunting isn’t my thing. I’ll leave the rest in your guys’ hands.”

The next thing I knew, we’d gotten relatively far away from the memorial tower and had ended up on a small knoll carpeted with grass. The dazzling starry sky peered at me from the crevices between the clouds. A cluster of crimson stars shining on the other side caught my eye—perhaps it was the northern sky.

The opium poppies didn’t bloom on this hilltop. Fresh air blew down on us from the heavens above. Naut plopped onto the meadow and stretched out his legs haphazardly.

Jess sat down demurely at a small distance from his side. I

squeezed myself between the two and settled down there.

Just as I was about to nod off with fatigue, a sentence I simply couldn't overlook rang out from our rear. "Ah, Master! Are you on a date?"

My eyes snapped open. *Excuse me, a pig is here too, for your information?!*

I turned to see Batt, who always followed Naut around like a tail, racing over to us. His smooth brown hair, which was close to a shade of crimson, fluttered boisterously in the wind as he sprinted with the nimbleness of a puppy.

He chirped, "From the top of the tower, we could see you hanging out with Jess, and well, Ceres looked like she was about to cry."

"Wait, really?!" Jess gasped. "Um, I don't have such intentions at all, though…"

A pig is here too, good madam and sirs… I protested feebly in my mind.

Naut huffed. "These two tagged along without asking, that's all. It's not like I invited them."

Unlike the others, Naut was willing to count me in. *Handsome hunks sure are built different,* I thought with a hint of gratefulness.

"Oh, that's it?" Batt blinked. "But Master, why're you in a place like this?"

"No particular reason. I just ended up here when I was wandering around."

Batt sat across Naut, looked up at the night sky, and did a stretch. "I gotta say, this small hill brings back memories. When I lived in Lyubori, I came here with an older Yethma all the time. It has a good view of the wishing star."

His petite hand pointed up at a patch of the sky in front of us —it was where the crimson star cluster twinkled. Apparently, it was the result of the wishing star multiplying by itself. This confirmed that, indeed, we were looking at the northern sky. Due to spercritica, which led to the pollution of the real world, even the formerly one and only Salvia had been transformed into a tacky star cluster.

Batt gazed at Naut's profile and seemed to have perceived something. He shuffled his bottom closer to the hero, earning a sharp and clipped "You're too close." from the man.

"Hey, Master," Batt began, "when that older Yethma turned sixteen and had to leave Lyubori, she taught me something." He

cleared his throat before continuing in a serene voice, “‘When you’re lost and don’t know what to do, search for a star that can be your guide.’”

Naut listened in silence. His sapphire eyes were fixed to the northern sky.

The younger boy continued, “Y’know, when I was kidnapped by those Nothen folks and forced to work at the arena, I lost sight of what I was even living for. That was when I met you, my teacher. You were muddy and bloody all over, but you still stood up and fought. In my eyes, you were shining like a star.”

“Shining like a star? Me?” Naut turned to look at the boy by his side. His tone wasn’t quite skeptical but more astonished.

“Yeah. You were seriously bright in my eyes,” Batt replied earnestly. “And so I thought, the star she was talking about has *got* to be you. That’s why I decided to follow you forever, Master.”

“So that’s the reason you clung to me persistently all the way here.” Naut sighed. “I told you so many times to stop, but you never listened.”

Watching the boy nod happily, I felt everything clicking into place.

Batt was a run-of-the-mill boy in his early teens. He wasn’t one of the executive officers of the Liberators. This boy wasn’t blessed with exceptional talent as a warrior, nor was he capable of using healing magic. Therefore, I’d been slightly mystified by the fact that he’d stuck to Naut’s side like glue all this time.

The sole reason for escaping from the arena with Naut shouldn’t have been enough motivation for Batt to persevere this far. Staying near the swordsman, the leader of the Liberators, had likely brought him many ordeals, some more dangerous than others.

Now, I knew the reason. Batt had stubbornly run after Naut with a determined passion that had exceeded all his hardships, believing that this hero must be the guiding star he’d once heard about from the Yethma in his life.

“I’m thankful from the bottom of my heart that I could come all the way here with you. I’ve got no regrets at all. So you should find your star too, Master.” While saying that, the disciple patted his master’s shoulder casually.

Naut gazed up at the heavens absentmindedly. Until he’d bade farewell to her in the Abyssus, Naut’s “star” had been Eise, the girl who’d once had his heart. He’d approached the star and

reconciled with his lingering regrets before returning to the real world. What in the world should be his guiding light now?

Seeing that Naut was still all gloom and doom, Batt sniffled before continuing cheerily, “I’ve got to say, talking about her makes me all nostalgic. She was a really knowledgeable person. She loved listening to all kinds of rumors. Whenever she came here to pray, she’d tell me lots of things.”

As if he’d suddenly realized something, Naut looked at Batt. “Your family was wealthy enough to buy a Yethma?”

“Nope, not at all. My family was real poor. The big shots that run the graveyard here bought her. My family was only working under them.” Possibly because he’d remembered a fond memory, Batt looked at us with an impish grin. “That miss had huuuge boobs that anyone’d be amazed by. When we had to dig holes, I couldn’t stop my eyes from being distracted by them… I hope she’s doing all right.”

Naut’s expression stiffened. You might assume he was imagining astonishingly huge boobs and getting all randy, but I knew that wasn’t the case. The same could be said for me, and Jess was probably sharing identical thoughts as well.

A grave household. Stars. Prayers. Enormous breasts.

All the pieces of the puzzle had clicked into place perfectly. *No way… Could it really be…?*

Nervously, Jess asked, “By any chance…was her name perhaps Miss Blaise?”

Startled eyes looked back at us. “Huh? Why do you know her name, Jess?”

My pork heart pounded. *Surely, such coincidences can’t be possible.* But a moment later, I second-guessed myself. *No, maybe it isn’t a simple coincidence.*

Blaise was the girl we’d rescued amid our initial journey to the capital. She’d used her own body as a shield to protect us before breathing her last in the Needle Woods. After parting with us, Naut had retrieved her remains, cremated her, then carried the ashes back to the village where Ceres had lived.

At the beginning of my second teleportation to Mesteria, I’d discovered the cremation urn together with Ceres and Sanon. It had been adorned with a silver collar. When I’d touched the metal, the blackish tarnish had vanished as if it’d never existed in the first place, and the collar had regained its shine.

Until her very last moments, Blaise had prayed for the

happiness of Jess, Naut, and me. Even after her body had perished, her collar had still undoubtedly remembered us.

Perhaps similarly, the keen prayers of the maiden who'd sacrificed her life for us had also outlasted death itself. I wondered how long they'd endured. Maybe they'd valiantly persisted even when Naut had been a captive in the arena. *And maybe…they're still going strong, even now.*

Blaise had been the one who'd told Batt to find a guiding star. According to Batt, Naut had looked bright in his eyes—what if he hadn't been exaggerating? What if it had been Blaise's influence?

If Blaise's words and prayers had indeed brought the two together, it wouldn't be a mere coincidence.

Naut swallowed clumsily before suddenly throwing his arms around Batt firmly. "So you're… I see, that's why you came to where I was…"

Batt blinked in confusion. "Huh? Where did this come from, Master? This is kinda sudden…"

Watching him, I sensed something akin to fate.

I was never the type to believe in something like destiny from the very beginning, but I'd learned one lesson after coming to this world.

The prayers of humans aren't powerful enough to change the world. That much is true. However, when the world does indeed change, someone's prayers will always be propelling it. All kinds of prayers spur people into action, nudging the world little by little in the direction of these prayers.

And I thought that, perhaps, calling it fate wouldn't be inaccurate.

I spoke up. "Batt, Blaise is a friend of ours. As a matter of fact, it's all thanks to her advice that Jess and I were able to enter the capital."

"Wait, really?" His eyes lit up. He asked innocently, "Is she doing well?"

My heart ached at the thought of telling him the truth.

Batt was a sharp boy—he seemed to have guessed the answer from our silence. "I see… Oh, man, I shouldn't have kept looking at her boobs. If only I'd listened to what she had to say more properly…"

When you talk to someone, look at their eyes and not their chest, okay?

The atmosphere was excruciatingly solemn. Jess must have

wanted to change the mood because she talked to Batt in an unnaturally bright tone. “By the way, what kind of things did Miss Blaise tell you here?”

Batt gazed up at the sky, as if immersing himself in his memories. “Let’s see… She said that a woman would always notice gazes focusing on her boobs for sure. And stuff like no one’s ever seen the rotten corpses of heckripons.” He scratched his chin. “How do I put this? They were interesting tidbits, yeah, but they didn’t feel like they’d come in handy.”

I slowly turned to Jess. “It’s something you’d notice?”

Jess didn’t even hesitate. “Always.”

Today, I learned something new… I gulped. *Hey, it’s actually useful information.*

Jess leaned forward slightly and beamed at Batt, who was sitting on the other side of Naut from her. “I would love to know more. You see, we didn’t have many opportunities to talk that much with her.”

Under her encouragement, Batt stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Other than that, well… Oh, right! She said that my big bro was doing yada yada in a bush with a girl—what was her name again?—from the neighboring village. And the husband of so-and-so didn’t die from sickness but was killed with poison. Or that people say this place is a prestigious graveyard with a long history, but it’s all a big lie. Most of the things she said were basically rumors circling around the neighborhood.”

A piece of information had caught my attention. “Hmm? Hang on, this graveyard isn’t a venerable place with a long history?”

Batt shrugged. “Yeah. Or at least, that’s what she said, so I dunno how true that is. Blaise said that this spot was originally the boundary with the neighboring village that this town was at odds with in the past, and it was where you dumped trash.”

Jess seemed to have grasped my doubts as well because she added her own question. “Do you mean it wasn’t always a graveyard?”

“Pretty much. You know how, during one Royal Year, a weird illness was spreading like crazy around this area of the Bellell River? The one where people lost weight and died? Loads of people perished all at once, and there wasn’t enough space to bury all the bodies. If Blaise’s right, that’s the reason they changed this spot, which was basically a trash dump, into a graveyard.”

Frowning, Jess muttered, “An illness along the Bellell River during the age of the royal court… It must be the Emaciation Plague from ninety years ago.”

Naut cocked his head quizzically. “But the memorial tower we saw is way older than that, isn’t it?”

Batt explained, “Yeah, it’s pretty ancient, but it wasn’t a memorial tower at the start, Master. T’was a watchtower for keeping a lookout on the neighboring village. You saw the arrowslits and stuff, yeah? You wouldn’t need that in a plain old memorial tower.”

I nodded. *That’s true. It felt too unrefined to be a decorative monument and had a ton of unnecessary structures on top of that.*

The boy continued, “It didn’t stay that way, though, because no one likes the idea of burying dead bodies in a trash heap. That’s why the royal court apparently decided to say it’s a memorial tower and even erased all stories and records about this place being a garbage dump. I heard all this from Blaise, though, so I can’t be sure.”

The matter of the rumors’ authenticity aside, there *was* something I wanted to confirm. I narrowed my eyes. “Hey, Jess, you mentioned that the plague happened ninety years ago, right?”

She nodded, looking uneasy. “Yes.”

“When was the year of Vatis’s death again?”

“She should have passed away at the age of forty-three…” She paused to think. “The records say that she established the royal court when she had her child at twenty-five, so calculating from there… It should be Royal Year 19, 111 years ago.”

“It doesn’t add up, does it?”

“You’re right, it doesn’t.”

Naut turned to face us, looking like he couldn’t keep up with our thought process. “What doesn’t?”

Jess explained, “Because this place in Lyubori is a graveyard, we thought that it matched the verse that says, ‘Walk out of the jail, there you will see the chain trail, to the graveyard it paves the way,’ remember?”

He blinked blankly. “Yeah…?”

“The issue is that the First Collar was hidden when Lady Vatis, the key person to all of this, was alive. But back then, this place wasn’t yet a graveyard. The Emaciation Plague at the Bellell River became prevalent approximately twenty years after her death,

after all."

"And what does that mean?"

The answer to Naut's question was clear: Our job wasn't quite finished yet.

Leaving Naut with the declaration that we'd head back ahead of him, I asked Jess to follow me. Slipping into the cloak of the dark night, we headed toward a pier on the Bellell River just by ourselves.

As I rushed forward, Jess called out to me from behind. "Um, Mister Pig, what about the others?"

"I want it to be just the two of us," I replied. "We'll get a head start as a lone pair of a detective and her assistant."

"Get a head start?" she repeated in confusion.

"Will you join me on a mystery-solving date for the first time in a long time? Once we're done, we'll return to the royal capital right away."

We arrived at the pier. Floating lightly on the dark water's surface was a single small boat that belonged to the royal court's army.

I turned around—Jess placed a hand on her chest as she gazed unblinkingly at me. "You wish to go on a date?"

"That's right. We'll sail upstream on this river again, just like once upon a time. I'm sure you want to enjoy one with me, yeah?"

Jess nodded earnestly. "Of course."

We gratefully appropriated the boat of the royal court's army before rowing into the darkness.

The tranquil water's surface glimmered as it reflected the anomalous starry sky. It had so many stars, almost like a child's artistic interpretation, that it was glaring. I didn't see any other ships on the great river at night. Jess extensively used her magic, guiding the boat to glide swiftly upstream.

"You mentioned some mystery solving... What exactly are we looking for on our journey?" Jess asked.

Hearing that, I recalled Vivis's words from a while ago. *"Right now, the world has gone terribly awry, hasn't it? If something even worse happens on top of that... I keep having that bad feeling in my gut."*

Praying that the nightmare scenario that had crossed my mind wouldn't come to pass, I chose my words cautiously. "A

viper.”

Jess didn’t question me further. She must have sensed that I didn’t want to go into detail.

That worked out for me. It wouldn’t be a journey to solve a mystery if the traveler didn’t have a secret or two.

The evening breeze that swept across the river was chilly. On the seats designed like a sofa, I huddled up to Jess to stave off the cold. Our treasure hunt, full of twists and turns, had started early in the morning and had continued nonstop until the dead of night. Both my mind and my body were spent.

“How far should we go?” Jess asked, stroking my head. Concerned, she added, “You can get some rest until we arrive, Mister Pig.” But the person who said those words looked just as sleepy.

“For now, we’ll stop at Harbir,” I replied. “You’ve got to stay awake to steer the boat, don’t you? I’ll stay awake and keep you company, Jess.”

“Oh, you don’t have to fuss over me.” The maiden took out a small bottle from her inner pocket and showed it to me. It was filled with a blue liquid. She pulled out the stopper, squeezed her eyes shut, and drank all of it in one gulp.

I recognized it—it was a monster tonic. When mages consumed it, the tonic would provide a dramatic stimulant effect in exchange for using some mana. After the death of King Eavis, the king from two generations ago, I’d heard that Wyss had been practically chugging down monster tonics like water due to the strenuous workload involved in managing the royal court’s general affairs.

“I’m a mage, so I can stay awake without issue by using a monster tonic,” Jess declared with a hint of pride. “But unlike me, you can’t drink it, right?”

That’s true. According to Shravis, if a non-magical being drank a monster tonic, their teeth would melt, their throats would burn, and the liquid would even puncture holes in their stomachs. “I didn’t know you had that trick up your sleeve… Okay, I’ll take you up on your kind offer and nap a little until we arrive at Harbir. Thanks.”

Jess smiled sweetly and patted her thighs as she sat. “I’m very happy to offer my lap as your pillow.”

My eyes widened. “You sure?”

“Yes. I’m certain that you’ll feel more refreshed with it too.”

Yeah, I somehow have the feeling that she's right. "Are you *sure* sure?" I emphasized to be safe.

She puffed out her cheeks. "Haven't I already said yes?" Half forcefully, Jess tugged my head closer before guiding it onto her lap.

My vision turned sideways, interrupting my train of thought. The muscles and fat of Jess's thighs came together to weave just the right softness. Above this texture, a peculiar sensation of some sort was soothing my fatigue.

"I hear that using a mage's lap as a pillow comes with the effect of alleviating exhaustion," she explained. "Please get some good rest."

What in the world is that ability? It sounds like a trope you'd find in a porno manga...

Jess blinked. "*Poor-no manga*?"

"It's nothing important. It's an island's name." A thought occurred to me. "Speaking of which, Jess, weren't monster tonics kind of bad for your body?"

As she stroked my pickled and sliced mimiga ears, the maiden giggled. "It's not too different from alcohol in that sense—a little is fine. It's a rather handy drink."

"If my mind isn't playing tricks on me, you mentioned that your body gets a bit...*excited* when you drink it, though."

A moment of silence.

Underneath my head, her knees shuffled, as if rubbing against each other. "Um, yes... Frankly, I have gotten a little...worked up."

"Uh, is it the type of 'excitement' where it's okay for me to lie on your lap like this?"

"Yes, it's all right." She paused. "I think?"

Excuse me, is this some sort of porno visual novel in real life?

"*Poor-no bisual* novel?" Jess sounded out quizzically.

I cleared my throat. "It's nothing important. You could say it's like a sibling of the island earlier. That aside, I know I'm repeating myself, but are you sure this is okay? Wouldn't your legs go numb? If we stay like this, you can't deal with your 'excitement' either."

Her cheeks flushed bright red. With both hands, she pushed my head against her thighs. "I won't deal with it! If you don't hurry up and sleep, I'll *make* you with my magic!" She huffed.

With that, I was half-coerced into falling asleep.



“…this way…”

Within the darkness, I heard a voice calling to me. A woman’s hazy voice bounced around in my mind, echoing. It breathed life back into a part of my memories that had been fading away—and with these memories came a vivid realization.

This was Blaise’s voice.

Was she trying to tell me something? As I began walking toward her voice, a light appeared in my vision.

“Please come this way…come back… You must make haste…”

Under the ushering of Blaise’s voice, I quickened my steps toward the light. *Please tell me the way out,* I thought. *At this rate, I might wake up the viper.*

Without warning, I choked.

Something was constricting my throat. It was a cold, metal collar. I gripped it with my hand, trying to resist. I could feel someone pulling me from behind with a chain.

“No, stop.”

I heard this voice loud and clear. It was *Jess*. Jess was clutching the chain and detaining me. Why was she doing this?

“Jess… I can’t breathe,” I croaked.

“You only have to stop going forward.”

When I came to a halt, the chain slackened, and the pain in my neck subsided. Even during all this, the light gradually faded into the distance.

Blaise’s voice grew distant as well. *“Hurry, come this way…”*

My eyes widened. *Why…?*

Jess’s voice tugged at my heartstrings, pulling me the other way. “Don’t go, please.”

Who should I follow? What in the world is the right choice?

A shout tore into my consciousness. “Mister Pig!”

When I opened my eyes, my senses returned to me at once. I saw the dark sky. I sensed the rocking of the boat. I felt the softness of Jess’s thighs. “It’s already morning?”

“It’s not morning, but you were groaning terribly in your sleep.” Jess sounded concerned. “How are you feeling?”

I blinked blankly as the last of the drowsiness left my mind. My head was clear, as if I’d slept an entire night. Just like Jess had reported, it appeared using her lap as a pillow truly helped with exhaustion.

Shaking my head, I answered, “I’m feeling perfectly fine. In

fact, I'm feeling more energetic than ever before."

Her concerned face leaned down to peer at me. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"You could say that… It was a weird dream, at any rate."

Jess's eyes observed me, as if searching for something. "Weird? What kind of dream was it?"

Though she could read minds, her abilities didn't seem to extend to extracting information about my dreams. "It was an indecent dream, so I can't tell you."

"Huh?" Jess gasped, looking somewhat shaken. "But Mister Pig, you were calling out my name…"

Oh, I said it out loud. Uh…

While I hastily rummaged my mind for an excuse, Jess's brows furrowed with suspicion. "Did you possibly…have a dream of doing indecent things with me?"

"I didn't."

"Then that means you dreamed of doing indecent things with someone else." She puffed out her cheeks, looking miffed.

I decided to be upfront with the truth before things could go awry. "To tell you the truth, I heard Blaise's voice in my dream. I've been having this same dream over and over. I had it last night, and I even had it when I nearly blacked out on the boat earlier today."

She narrowed her eyes. "I see. You were dreaming of doing indecent things with Miss Blaise's ample chest."

No! You've got the wrong idea! "Hey, don't jump to conclusions. I was lying about it being a dirty dream. I wasn't thinking and ran my mouth on the spur of the moment." I looked up at her remorsefully. "Sorry about that."

After pacifying her, I gave Jess a quick…*summary* about the content of my dream. I explained that I'd heard Blaise calling out to me repeatedly. She seemed to be pressing me to do something as soon as possible. Though I'd tried to head in her direction, I hadn't managed to advance past a certain point.

"Miss Blaise was calling for you?" Jess placed a hand on her chest. "Was she trying to give us some kind of message?"

I shook my head. "No clue."

A certain possibility had already surfaced in my mind, but my gut was telling me that now wasn't the time to check it. After all, I would have to ask Kento and Sanon whether they'd heard the same calls as well. *Problem is, it's a recipe for disaster to come into*

contact with the members of the Liberators right now.

Sometime into my contemplation, Jess uttered an “Oh!” and pointed somewhere ahead of us. “We’re here!”

Bidding adieu to Jess’s thighs, I sat up. Above us was the gloomy, overcast sky where the stars spied on us from the cracks. Beneath it were magnificent stone bridges that were getting closer by the second. They were positioned to the left and right of the river island.

There was something I had to check. “Jess, let’s go to the bridge on the right.”

“Heading there.” Jess had been resting her hands on a large crystal ball, and her hands moved slightly to the right. This crystal ball was a mana inlet for the boat and a rudder. She steadily nudged the boat’s direction of motion to our right.

The stone bridge pressed nearer and nearer. An archaic, fancy inscription entered my eyes: *Harbir*.

I knew it, I thought as I inspected the engraving.

“Have you noticed something, Mister Pig?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I found a clue that we overlooked in this city.”

“Whaaat?! Really?” She eagerly leaned forward and scanned the scenery. “Is it something we can see from here?”

Considering she didn’t ask me what it is, she probably wants to try hunting for it alone. She’s the ace detective, after all. “Yep. When you look at the bridges, Jess, what do you observe?”

“Bridges…” She concentrated on them. “There are two of them.”

“Exactly. With the island in between, there is a southern and a northern bridge.”

“Is that the clue?”

“To be more precise, the difference between the two bridges is our clue.”

“The difference, the difference…” she muttered. “They seem identical in shape, though.” Her eyes widened. “Oh!”

Jess proceeded to point at the bridge on our right. Since we were sailing upstream toward the west, it was the northern bridge. “Someone has carved the city’s name, Harbir, onto this one, but it’s missing from the southern bridge!”

“Correct.” I nodded. “Do you know what that means?”

“Um… The city’s name is only on one of them…” She frowned, racking her brain for ideas. “No, I can’t figure it out yet.”

“Let’s get off the boat and look for ourselves.”

I purposefully didn’t spell out the answer for her, instead waiting for the boat to stop. Jess steered the vessel meticulously until it moored at the pier on the island’s side, where the chain clue had extended from. She practically hopped off the boat as if she couldn’t wait a second longer. I followed.

I decided to give her a prompt. “The one thing you should consider is this: Were there any errors on our course while we pursued the chain trail?”

Jess thoughtfully touched her chin as she walked across the cobblestone paving. “You think we made a mistake somewhere down the line, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. And that mistake happened right here.” I indicated the rusty chain that had been carefully concealed so that it was one with the environment in this corner of the pier. “The chain that the Vatis statue was holding sank into the river here. The sole thing we found at its very end is an anchor. That’s why we deduced that our next stop was either upstream or downstream.”

Jess’s eyes widened. “Huh? You mentioned this was a mistake. That means… Whaaat? What does that even mean? Are you saying that our destination wasn’t somewhere along the river?” She looked bewildered.

It probably wouldn’t take too long before she figured it out. I gave her a clue. “No, we were right about the river part. The problem was our direction.”

The maiden began analyzing the situation aloud to organize her thoughts. “We had two options, upstream or downstream. In the end, we found the key item downstream…”

“Let’s forget about the clues we found after this point for now. Okay, so we followed the chain from the old immolation castle and came all the way to this pier. Now, then, which way should we go? Upstream or downstream?”

Jess mulled over the question with complete focus. I could almost hear the gears turning inside her head underneath her fine, silky golden locks. “The chain…didn’t quite end in the river but on the *pier*.”

“Right.”

“The ships here sail either upstream or downstream. If this pier is dedicated to ships going in one single direction… We can assume that we should follow that course!”

“I had the same thought.” I nodded. “And a handful of facts we have come across clearly indicate one specific direction.”

Jess hummed thoughtfully as she combed through everything she’d heard and seen. She appeared to have finally arrived at the answer because astonishment overtook her face. “The answer is upstream,” she muttered in disbelief. Her finger raised to point in the opposite direction from Tendar, where we’d discovered the electrocuted bodies.

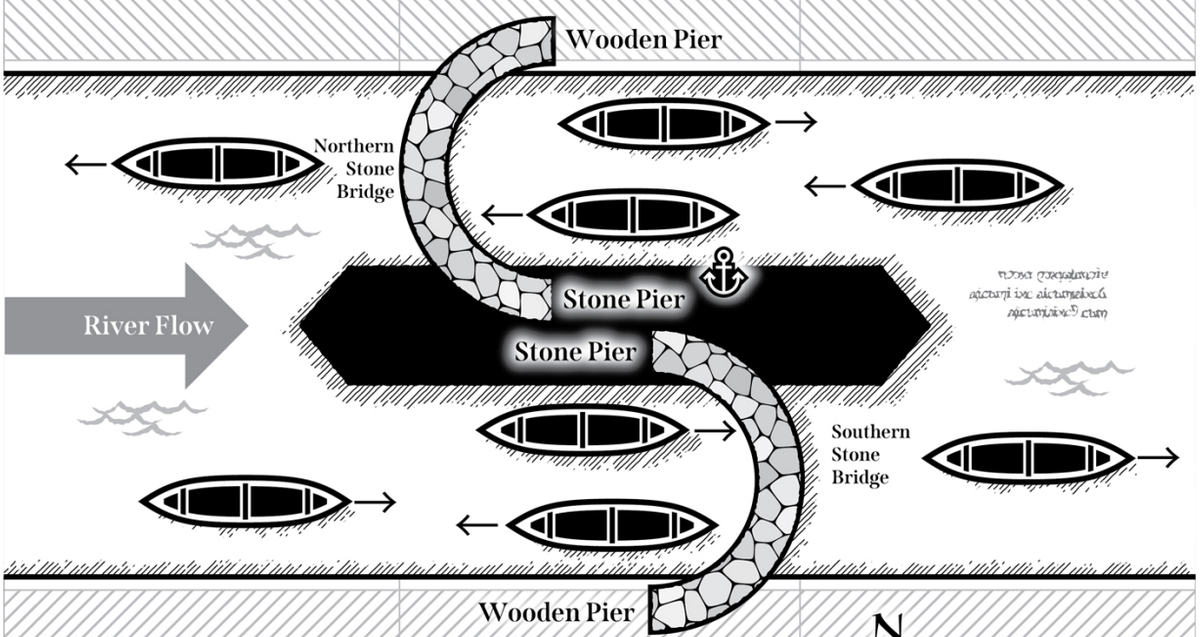
It was west, the course we’d initially picked when we’d split up.

I inclined my head. “What makes you think that?”

“The loading and unloading of cargo,” she replied. “Ships load and unload objects from the port side. For the ships’ port sides to connect to this pier without issue, they would naturally have to go upstream.”

Harbir's Harbor

Butareba / MAP



That was something I'd confirmed when I first arrived in Harbir. The river flowed from west to east. Underneath the southern bridge, the pier on the island's side had been dedicated to ships going downstream while ships going upstream moored at the opposite shore. The general rule was to sail on the right side of the river, but it was reversed underneath the bridges because cargo had to be moved from the port side.

"Got it in one. Here's more food for thought—wooden piers were added afterward, but the old piers that likely date back to Vatis's time are only on the island side, right?"

I lifted my face to look at the opposite shore where the newer wooden pier was visible. Meanwhile, we were standing on an ancient stone pier.

I continued, "In the past, ships abided by the rule of sailing on the right-hand side as they arrived at Harbir. Ships going upstream would head to the island's northern pier, to the right of their course. Meanwhile, ships going downstream would head to the island's southern pier to the right of their course. Each side of the island was dedicated to one direction. Assuming I'm correct, only ships going upstream would have come to this northern bridge."

Jess looked convinced. "I see... With that, all the cargo should have been assembled on the island back then. Perhaps it was a convenient design for tasks like charging customs."

I nodded. "Finally, the evidence that supports our current theory is the engraving of this city's name on the bridge."

The maiden blinked, seeming a little lost. "Um... Sorry, I still can't figure out why the city's name is only on the northern bridge where we are."

"Well, how about we go and find out?"

Together, we climbed onto the island and walked until we were halfway across the northern stone bridge, which we'd been gazing up at until earlier. When we cast our eyes down the bridge wall facing downstream, we could see the inscription "Harbir."

"That's the engraving we saw earlier, yeah? Now, let's see what it's like on the other side."

We cut across the width of the bridge and checked the side facing upstream this time.

Jess reported, "I don't see any writing here."

"Right? Okay, onward to the southern bridge."

We descended the bridge, traveled through the island, and crossed the southern bridge.

First, we looked down the wall facing downstream. But just like we'd seen earlier, there weren't any engravings. We moved to check the upstream side.

"Oh! I see letters!" Jess exclaimed. "It's the same as the northern bridge's downstream side!"

On the stone was "Harbir" in old-fashioned, fancy writing.

"I actually happened to see this when we headed upstream with Yoshu," I explained. "I remember thinking that it was a little odd that the city's name is only on one bridge. You haven't checked the city's appearance from upstream, so you probably struggled to deduce the reason."

"Yes! After seeing this, I finally understand what's going on!" Jess excitedly raised her fists before rapidly saying, "This writing is only on the northern bridge's downstream side and the southern bridge's upstream side. These inscriptions were meant for the people in the ships!"

Jess cheerfully pointed at the left and right parapets of the bridge as she analyzed, "If you're going to engrave the city's name somewhere, it only makes sense to put it in a place that's visible in the direction the ships are traveling. From this, we can infer that the ships going underneath the northern bridge headed upstream while the ships underneath the southern bridge were headed downstream!"

I nodded proudly. "Precisely. In the old days, the stretch of the river underneath the stone bridges was a one-way canal. The flow of the river never had anything to do with the chain riddle. If Vatis wanted to indicate downstream, she should have extended the chain to the southern bridge, where the ships travel downstream. The fact that she chose to stretch it to the island's northern side is none other than a message to go upstream."

The chain hadn't ended at the river but at the pier for traffic upstream. Therefore, we should definitely find something by following that course. We returned to our boat at once before initiating our westbound voyage upstream.

The next landmark to look out for probably wasn't a small sculpture but some sort of grand building.

"That said, if the real chain trail is this way..." With her eyes

fixed forward, Jess placed her hands on the rudder. She seemed somewhat puzzled. “What in the world is the meaning behind our findings in Tendar and Lyubori?”

“We can narrow it down to two possibilities.”

Astonished, Jess whipped her head around to face me. “Wait, really?! Please, tell me!”

I felt a little remorseful about my next words as I saw her innocent reaction. “The first scenario is that Vatis prepared a fake trail. The second scenario is that someone other than her prepared a fake trail.”

Taken aback, Jess gaped at me. “Oh, right…”

“Sorry, I was stating the obvious.” I winced sheepishly. “But this is important to think about. That memorial tower in Lyubori wasn’t the destination the chain trail was leading us to. The stop on our way there, Tendar, is also a red herring. If Vatis had set up that dead end, what was her reasoning? If someone other than Vatis created that dead end, why would they? And who exactly is it? These are pressing questions we have to consider.”

Jess frowned. “Assuming that the First Collar wasn’t hidden in that memorial tower… It’s also a little peculiar that Mister Meminis perished in Lyubori.”

“Yeah. It’s all questions and no answers.” I sighed.

I looked at the water ahead of us. The river was gradually curving right; in other words, north. We just so happened to be passing by a nostalgic place—we’d also dropped by here on our quest for the wishing star. On the night after we’d visited Fairy Creek, Jess had gotten drunk on brandy, and a pretentious, showy man had almost hit on her.

Forcefully tearing myself from that train of thought, I declared, “Time to press on. We will find all the answers at the end of the real chain trail.”

Within my mind were several theories my intuition had put together. But if I were to be honest, I didn’t really want to believe that any of these possibilities were the truth. I was even more reluctant about putting them into words.

Something was telling me that the truth was a hideous monster.

Jess looked at me with determination. “Let’s go. You have me, and I have you. Together, we will drag the one truth out into the light!”

I nodded. “Yeah. This is where the real show begins.”

Not much later, we discovered the authentic third clue.

After three hours of racing up the Bellell River from Harbir at a mind-boggling speed, we came across a town that served as the junction between the river and a canal extending north. In this town, there was a grand stone bridge with a familiar shape—it was almost identical in design to one of the twin stone bridges in Harbir.

While Jess helped me to get down from the boat, she said, “This is a town called Prannsbate. It is the canal entrance leading to the northernmost tip of Mesteria, Mousskir.”

Once we were back on land, we immediately made a beeline for the stone bridge. The sky was about to bid farewell to the night, gaining a tint of the morning glow.

After walking for a while, we observed the bridge from the side. Jess noted, “It’s almost covered entirely by ivy.”

The side of the stone bridge facing downstream was cloaked with a dense layer of verdant ivy leaves. I couldn’t pick out any vines that had been left withered—it certainly didn’t look like the plants had seen over a century. It must have flourished recently.

“The clue might be underneath these leaves.” I narrowed my eyes. “Can you clear them away?”

“Leave it to me!” Jess eagerly declared before surveying the environment. Calling it early in the morning didn’t cut it—even the sun hadn’t gotten out of bed yet. There wasn’t a soul in sight. “It should be fine to be a bit flashy during the process, I think… *Flamma: Incendo*.”

Jess fired five spheres of fuel ablaze with yellow flames from her hands. When these firebombs ruptured, the fire spread voraciously, covering a significant area of the ivy twining around the bridge. Gradually, the blaze flickered and burned…before it steadily diminished and went out completely.

“Wha…” Jess shakily muttered.

The flames had disappeared to reveal the utterly unharmed ivy as if nothing had happened, though it was coated with soot.

My eyes widened. “That’s weird… What’s going on?”

“This is just a guess, but it might be protected by some kind of enchantment that prevents it from damage.”

I recalled the fountain overtaken by plants in Harbir. “Is it the pollution of the Abyssus?”

Jess inclined her head thoughtfully. “You need a certain level

of mana and technique to transform a flammable substance into a nonflammable one. Hmm, it might be a different story if someone strongly wishes to protect this ivy no matter what it takes, but…"

"Would someone like that really exist?" I voiced her skepticism out loud. "Well, are we stuck then?"

Jess grinned with a hint of pride. "Maybe we can try using magical flames. If the damage-resistance enchantment is around the same level as my spells, I think I should be able to neutralize it." Clasping her hands together, she turned her wrists until she was posed in a unique stance as if she were about to unleash a Kamehameha at the ivy. "*Flamma: Apocalypsis*."

Spine-chilling white-hot flame spewed out from Jess's hands, almost as if they were a flamethrower. It was a most unusual fire with flashes of crimson mixed with the white. Twisting and turning like a snake with a mind of its own, it began engulfing the ivy.

The maiden frowned. "I'm against quite a formidable opponent." She invested even more mana into her spell, and the flames multiplied noticeably. There was faint sizzling—the fire was finally burning the plants. "Please stay away from the fire at all costs," she warned. "A single touch could lead to it roasting you to a crisp, all the way down to the medulla of your liver."

Livers don't have medullas, though… "I didn't know you could use such scary magic."

Hearing the surprise in my voice, Jess triumphantly puffed out her modest chest. "I certainly can. That's why it's a bad idea to make me angry, Mister Pig."

Under the stark illumination of the white flames, a dark, striking shadow was etched onto Jess's profile.

She must've read the narration because she muttered, "I was only joking…"

During our silly banter, Jess's flames burned down all the ivy. All the leaves that had shrouded the stone bridge were reduced to fine ash, revealing the surface it had tried to hide from us.

The first thing that entered my vision was the relief carving of an anchor right in the middle of the bridge's side. Its shape was identical to the anchor we'd dragged up from the river in Harbir.

"Well, well…" I scrutinized the sculpture. "Looks like we're in the right place."

There was a relief carving of a thick chain connected to the

top of the anchor. It led to the right.

Exhilarated, we followed the direction of the carving. The chain sculpture stretched to the footpath on one end of the bridge. Someone had hammered in a real rusty chain at the place where the relief sculpture ended. As if taking cover inside the gutter that ran across the cobblestone paving, the chain led all the way into the streets.

“Let’s see where it takes us.” Before Jess even finished her sentence, our feet were already on the move.

Prannsbate wasn’t what I’d call a flourishing town, but it still had countless one-story buildings reminiscent of factories lining up in rows along the streets. It appeared to be a town that had steadily and patiently developed over time as the entrance to the canal and an industrial area.

We walked along the riverside path, following the chain trail. After a while, we arrived at an enormous ruin site on the outskirts of the town.

The building here was a rather curious structure. Almost like an outstretched hand, five long and narrow one-story annexes were arranged in a radial spread. Every one of them was made with red bricks and no windows. A towering wall encircled these five structures.

The chain ended just short of the wall. Jess used magic to fly us over our obstacle, and we tumbled into the premises.

After we landed, I observed the area. The red brick building had blackened with age and was thoroughly sullied. However, possibly thanks to the systematic bilateral symmetry incorporated into its design, this place as a whole maintained an orderly atmosphere.

We started by entering the central part of the ruins where the five wings assembled. If it were a hand like I’d described earlier, this place would be the palm.

The rusty bronze door opened without a struggle, beckoning us into its mysterious depths. Jess lit up the area with magical lights, revealing it to be a circular hall.

When I turned my back to the entrance, I could see five evenly spaced apertures leading into the darkness. Likely, each aperture was connected to one annex, which would be the metaphorical fingers.

“What in the world did they do in this place?” Jess wondered

out loud, quietly thrusting out her right hand before her. Five more orbs of light manifested and flew into the five mouths of darkness respectively at the same speed.

White light illuminated five long hallways. Inside each hallway, golden cells were arranged regularly along the walls on both sides.

"Golden cages…" I paused. "If I remember correctly, they were used to imprison mages, yeah?"

"Yes. Let's see what's inside!"

Jess graced the rightmost hallway with her presence first. I trailed after her. The golden cells' interiors were modest—only golden collars and golden chains connecting these collars to the wall. Unlike the ones designed for Yethma, these collars had joints that could be opened and shut. These devices had been installed in every isolation cell.

"Collars and chains…" Jess hummed thoughtfully. "Would the First Collar be located here?"

I shrugged. "I've got no clue. We'll need to explore more before we can draw any conclusions."

We explored every nook and cranny of the hallway, but all we found was the monotonous scenery of identically designed cells—no collars stood out. Nor were there other items that seemed important in any of the cells. The only noteworthy things were the occasional shriveled animal carcasses and tiny bones that appeared to be from humans.

I wondered out loud, "Why did they imprison so many mages here? What were these collars meant to do?"

Jess hummed thoughtfully. "I'm curious too. In a normal jail, you wouldn't see *this* many collars… Even if it's meant to be a kind of restraint, a mage who can break out from these bars should also have the power to remove their collar. I don't think it's very efficient to put collars on mages who aren't powerful enough to break out because the cells are enough already."

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. "So the collars weren't meant to be bindings?"

"Perhaps. As for what else they could be used for…" Jess paused there, like she'd noticed something. She walked into one of the open cells and gingerly lifted the collar inside. Her eyes widened, and she dropped it with a start.

With shrill, disagreeable clanging, the metal device rolled onto the ground.

I rushed up to her. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yes. This collar is… How do I explain this…” She furrowed her brows slightly, as if recalling an unpleasant memory.

“Go on?”

“Um, it gave me the same feeling as a Yethma collar.”

Oh. No wonder she’s so repulsed by it. “By the same feeling, do you mean that you felt like it was suppressing your mana and sense of self-interest?”

She inclined her head. “Strictly speaking, it felt as if it were sucking up my mana. Yethma collars constantly suck up the wearer’s magic, using that mana to prevent the Yethma from using spells, suppress their sense of self-interest, transmit their location, and so on.”

“I see… In that case, do these collars work just like the Yethma collar, sealing a mage’s magic?”

To my surprise, Jess shook her head. “After I started learning spells, I gained the ability to sense the flow of mana to a certain extent. This collar sucks up mana, yes, but it doesn’t store the extracted mana within. Instead, the mana flows directly into the chain.”

The maiden’s eyes were fixed on the chain buried into the wall. It appeared that the chain hadn’t simply been driven into the wall but was extending even beyond it.

Jess frowned. “It makes me wonder what’s on the other side of this golden chain.”

I considered her question. One collar was prepared in each solitary cell. The cells were lined up along a lengthy hallway. These hallways were set up in a radial spread. “If I take it at face value, these chains probably converge as you go down the hallway and eventually meet at one place.”

Surprised, Jess’s eyes widened slightly. “Huh? How did you figure that out?”

“It’s a deduction I made based on the building’s shape. You’ve got hallways with many cells containing collars lined up, and the hallways are arranged to meet up at one place. If we compare it to a single tree, the collars in the cells are leaves, the hallways are branches, while the building as a whole is a tree—everything is designed to assemble at the trunk gradually. Don’t you think this is a practical shape to implement a system where you can amass the absorbed mana in one place?”

“You’re right. If so, the mana would flow to…” Jess’s gaze

shifted forward.

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s got to be the structure at the center earlier. We might find something there.”

We returned to the circular hall at the heart of the building and investigated our environment.

Jess was the first to notice something. “Look at the tiles on the ground. The square stone tile in the middle is much bigger than the others.” As she spoke, she raised her hands. The stone groaned from below.

The square stone tile wasn’t a tile but a trapdoor. The maiden had lifted it with her magic, and it creaked open wide, almost like a gaping jaw.

I peered in and saw a passage leading to the basement level.

Though it was a passage within a trapdoor, it was still spacious enough to serve as a small tunnel. In fact, the stairs were wide enough for Jess and I to easily walk next to each other with extra space to share. I tried sniffing the floor and Jess’s legs, but there weren’t any noteworthy scents other than the fragrance of a beautiful maiden’s skin.

We soon reached the end of the stairs to find a humid cellar around the size of a squash court. Musty brick covered the entirety of the floor, walls, and ceiling. When I looked up, I saw a single gaping wide hole in the ceiling. Beneath it were magnificent wooden chairs with backrests spaced at regular intervals. Each was connected to a golden chain that drooped down from the ceiling aperture.

There was one chain boasting an appearance that was unlike the others—a rusty chain. This rusty chain crept into the deepest part of the room until it rose up onto a Vatis statue’s right hand.

Despite nobody else being present, Jess whispered to me, “This is it. We must be in the right place.” Even her faint voice reverberated countless times within the cellar. “What are those chairs for?”

Together, we observed the chairs. On the top part of each chair’s backrest were metal hemispheres, as if someone had flipped over a bowl. Metal fetters were on the anterior legs of the chair. The golden chains that slithered down from the ceiling were connected to intricate metal fittings that linked the hemispheres and fetters together.

Jess reached out toward the metal, and I reacted immediately. “Don’t touch it,” I warned. “I’ve seen something similar before...

These are the tools to execute people with electricity."

"Execute..." she repeated in a daze.

I said grimly, "The way they work is that you pass powerful electric currents, similar to lightning, through the metal near the head and the fetters around the feet."

Almost as if someone had been waiting for my statement, a pallid flash of lightning darted across the damp wood surface. A thunderous crackle of electrical discharge bounced off the walls and ceiling. After the chair we were observing was done, the one beside it began crackling with electricity as well. Looking spooked, Jess took a step back.

I craned my neck. "Now, this raises the question: What's inside that opening?"

Hearing my words, Jess sent magical lights flying inside, illuminating the interior. A bulky chain, like one you'd use to anchor a large ship, glistened within. It was also gilded like the others.

As she watched that scene, the maiden began forming her theory. "Maybe...the collars in the cells are all connected to that big chain, where the absorbed mana is accumulated. In this room, the mana is extracted and converted into lightning."

"Makes sense. And seeing that the chain doesn't end here, the mana collected in the cells earlier are carried further away to somewhere else through that thick chain."

"I believe so too. From what I can see, the large chain is pointing in the direction of an area with many factories. Perhaps they used this mana to manufacture something in them in the past."

Her hypothesis convinced me. In summary, the five-fingered building used to be something like a power plant that squeezed mana out of mages. A part of that mana had been extracted in this cellar for executions.

I shifted my gaze onto Jess. "'Onto the tree it climbs, until the sky strikes it down in time, the brown bear is dead, so mote it be.' It matches the nursery rhyme verse too. The third stop of our journey has got to be here."

The maiden chewed on her bottom lip. "I think I'm starting to get what you were talking about in Tendar, Mister Pig." She looked shaken, her complexion paling as she stared at the chairs designed for execution. "Each place Lady Vatis chose was, how do I say this...brutal but functional..."

“And sexy, right?”

“Yes. They are extremely…sexy.”

I nodded with satisfaction in my mind. *As long as you get me, I’ve got no complaints.* “The underground jail of the cathedral. The torture chamber of the old castle. The execution site here. All these stops are monuments that are more than ideal for displaying the insignificance of life in the past and the cruel side of humans. When you consider why Vatis chose such locations, you’ll also start getting an inkling about why she went out of her way to send us on a journey like this, don’t you agree?”

Jess nodded profoundly with understanding. “Yes. We are solving this riddle because we want to find the First Collar. Lady Vatis knows that, and I suspect…she *doesn’t* want us to use it.”

“I got the same impression. Using the First Collar is no different from unleashing countless mages upon the world. If something goes wrong, mages might fight among themselves and initiate a bloodbath with no end in sight. Eventually, history might repeat itself, and we could end up in another dark age where even such sexy facilities are necessary. Most likely, this is a warning from Vatis telling us not to use the First Collar even if we obtain it.”

Frowning, Jess muttered, “Assuming that our last stop is a graveyard, then…”

“Yeah. It should be a fairly sexy place too.”

“I figured…” She sighed before suddenly looking at me as if a thought occurred to her. “That aside, if this riddle is a warning against using the First Collar, there’s no motivation for Lady Vatis to create a digression that leads to Tendar and Lyubori. A fake branching path isn’t going to deter us at all.”

Excellent point. “Agreed. Now, that prompts more questions: Who created that fake trail, and why?”

“Who was it? Why would they do that?” Jess wondered aloud. She looked deathly curious.

As I spoke, I continued my analysis in my mind. “If Vatis didn’t intend to create the branching path, it was likely meant to be a ruse that leads us astray. The criminal is someone who doesn’t want us to find the First Collar—likely the same person as the one who concealed the patterns on the bridge with ivy.”

“The ivy was under magical protection, so the culprit has to be a mage.” Jess’s frown deepened. “The plants seemed to be new, so it must be someone who’s still alive.”

“Yep.” I nodded. “After solving the entire nursery rhyme, that unknown party literally covered up the bridge leading to the third stop and subtly maneuvered us in the wrong direction.”

I turned to look at Jess and continued, “With this much info, I’m sure you can start painting a picture of the culprit.”

“Huh?” She blinked at me in surprise.

“Ah, you haven’t put two and two together yet.” I paused. “Hey, why were we so convinced that the other branching path was right?”

“Um… I mean, there were Vatis statues holding chains and all, so… Oh!” Jess smacked a fist against her palm with realization. “It was because the culprit prepared numerous corpses.”

“That’s right. We followed the trail of dead bodies with the *Sanguyn Cros* on their chests and ended up straying to Tendar. We were so preoccupied with the murders inspired by ‘The Chain Song’ that we never doubted the legitimacy of the crime scenes.”

Though it was vexing to admit, the orchestrator of all this had been brilliant and almost awe-inspiring in the manner they’d led us around by the nose.

Exhaling slowly, I continued, “Those peculiar serial murders were none other than a red herring to manipulate us into following the dead bodies and going to the wrong places.”

“Which means that the person who prepared the false leads and hid the bridge in this town was…” Jess nervously swallowed.

I nodded. “Yes. It was none other than the mage who prepared the corpse trail before our eyes—the Cross Executioner.”

The problem, however, was whether this culprit was truly Meminis.

We narrowed down our last stop and the collar’s hiding place almost effortlessly.

Like previous times, Jess used her magic to light up the rusty chain that extended from Vatis’s right hand, allowing us to track it. We eventually discovered it on the roof of the five-fingered building. From there, we continued following it to the second one-story building from the right—it crawled along the ceiling and stretched in a straight line to the edge of the structure.

When we climbed onto the roof, something became apparent. Overall, this building in question was shaped like a squashed anchor with four flukes. The hallway of the one-story building,

which the chain ran parallel to, just happened to extend from north to south, and the chain was pointing north. The morning sun was climbing up the eastern sky, and the canal was sparkling like stars as the water reflected its brilliance. It just so happened that the direction of the canal perfectly aligned with the building as well—it headed north.

It was the direction of the wishing star, which wasn't visible right now.

As if affirming that we were right, a small metal sheet was attached to the very tip of the rusty chain. Roughly the shape of a rhombus, each of its sides curved inward just a tad. It was the same shape as Jess's earrings—was this perhaps the major symbol representing stars in Mesteria?

According to Jess, there was only one notable settlement directly north from here: Mousskir, the northernmost tip of Mesteria where legends of the wishing star remained.

Apparently, small boats weren't allowed to sail on this canal, so we boarded the morning ferry and made our way to Mousskir. Though the journey there took quite some time, we arrived in the harbor before sunset.

The bayside town, which faced the northern waters, had been left atrociously destroyed beyond repair. Whether it be the brick warehouses or the residences with white walls, most had collapsed, been scorched, and melted. Possibly searching for a mouse or two in the ashes, a goshawk was circling persistently in the sky above us.

The Clandestine Arcanist had been responsible for this tragedy, transforming this town into a sea of fire to capture the escaped Prince Shravis. The now young king had only ended up here because he'd been looking for Jess, so we were partly to blame for this disaster. My heart sank at the wrecked townscape.

That said, there were still signs of its former glory—I saw a handful of white sails fluttering in the port. Some buildings had also been put into use after being repaired with wood and cloth, and the glimmers of life were seeping out into the dusk from within. It was a quiet port town where the northerly wind whispered into your ears, but you could occasionally sense the presence of people, which filled my heart with delight.

I couldn't explain it even if I tried, but I felt I knew where our destination would be. After all, I knew of a certain place that was ancient, had a connection with the wishing star, and seemed like

a structure that Vatis would be inclined to choose.

Jess and I walked up the incline in the white townscape, though it wasn't all that white now because it had been painted in coats of light purple by the evening glow. Once the residences were no longer in sight, we arrived at precipitous chalk cliffs—the Mouss Cliffs. On a rocky stretch a slight distance from the cliffs' edge was a small, solitary church painted in an astonishing shade of white that blended in with the cliffs.

Indeed, it was none other than the Maidens Church, which Vatis had constructed in honor of Aneera and Marta, girls from an old legend.

Even after that horrifying wartime fire, the church remained standing without a scratch, as if nothing had happened since our previous visit. When we advanced in, the distant song of waves echoed faintly in the stillness of the hall. Vivid and colorful wall paintings surrounded the benches for worship, depicting the tragedy of Aneera and Marta concerning the wishing star.

"I don't see anyone around," Jess commented.

The maiden admired the wall paintings as she made her way toward the altar directly in front of the entrance. On it was a statue of Vatis placing her left hand on her chest and raising her right hand high into the air.

We came to a stop in front of the altar. "Yep," I muttered. "The Vatis statue here doesn't hold any chains."

The statue's stark white right hand reached out her fingers, as if she were trying to grasp the heavens—she wasn't holding a rusty chain like the previous statues we'd come across. It was exactly as I'd remembered it.

"Maybe there is some kind of clue in the wall paintings," Jess suggested.

"Right. It should be either about a graveyard or a chain... Let's see what we can find."

The wall paintings in pastel colors were arranged chronologically as they followed the two girls' sorrowful fate. Their childhood as close friends. Marta collapsing from the illness that bloomed flowers of blood. Aneera praying to the stars for her dear friend's swift recovery.

But it appeared that her prayers had gone unheard because Marta's illness had only grown more severe, and Aneera went to visit her friend, who was on her deathbed. That night, Aneera picked up a shining star—a magical star. But that little bit of

magic she'd needed for a happy ending didn't make it in time to save Marta, who perished.

Aneera concealed the star with a red cloth. A mage looked at the star Aneera brought with wide eyes—the star had been enchanted with magic that could grant eternal life. Aneera, however, tossed that star, cloth and all, into the sky. She then threw herself off a cliff.

What stood out to me in particular had to be the last wall painting, which was closest to the altar. It depicted two girls sitting side by side on a meadow above a cliff. They weren't smiling or crying; instead, they were gazing up at a star in the night sky with admiration, as if looking at a beautiful painting. It was the star that glowed crimson in the northern sky: Salvia, the wishing star.

Even here, the star was drawn in the same shape as Jess's earrings. According to the legend, the stars were the ones to whom you entrusted your wishes. Therefore, this symbol must represent wishes and prayers. It was something I'd seen since my very first encounter with Jess, and now, I finally had a chance to learn its meaning. It was quite a moving thought.

Noticing my gaze, Jess also stopped in front of this painting. "So, in the end, the two of them managed to reunite with each other, I see."

I nodded. "The star's red, which means that timeline-wise, it's after Aneera tossed the star away. They must have found each other again in the afterlife."

"Right…"

Aneera and Marta were at a distance, close enough to see each other but a little far to be leaning into each other. Their hands, placed on the ground to support themselves, were just as ambiguous. Were they touching or on the cusp of reaching each other?

My mind ground to a halt. *Hmm?*

I saw something. For a moment, I doubted my own eyes.

A pig's point of view didn't just allow me to see my owner's underwear. I could also see things low on the wall—things that a human would overlook unless they went down on their hands and knees.

"Did you find something?" Pushing down on her skirt defensively, Jess crouched by my side.

"Over here." I gestured with my snout. "Between their hands."

There was a small patch of color—the color of dull rust—left nonchalantly in the grass depicted with green. If you took a good look, you could see the same color on Aneera's and Marta's pinkies. The reddish-brown coloring had a pattern—it didn't seem like mere dirt.

It had dawned on me earlier that it was a thin chain. A *rusty chain* was connecting the two's pinkies.

"Is that…?!" Jess got down on her hands, matching my eye level. Her honey-brown eyes were absorbed in observing the area between the two hands. "There's no mistaking it, Mister Pig! This is a chain!" Her face, practically shining with excitement, turned to me. Gravity pulled on the fabric concealing her chest, creating a slight gap—

"Excuse me, you can look at my chest all you want later, so please focus on the painting right now." She sounded unimpressed.

I raised an imaginary eyebrow. *I can look at it all I want later?* "Sorry about that. What does this mean? A chain is connecting them…"

Jess inclined her head quizzically. "Is it trying to say that they had an inseparable bond?"

Her wording reminded me of something. There was a Japanese term for people who were unfortunately intimate whether they liked it or not, *kusare en*, which literally means a "rotten connection." I'd heard somewhere that it had been derived from *kusari en*, "a chained connection," meaning an inseparable bond, like a chain.

Had Aneera thrown away the miraculous star and chased Marta into the afterlife for this proverbial and literal chain?

Jess traced the chain in the painting, but nothing seemed to happen. "I have the feeling that it's some sort of clue… What do you think?"

I took in the painting before me and began contemplating. "If Vatis thought there was a chain between Aneera and Marta…" I paused. "It wouldn't be strange if she requested chains to be depicted in other paintings too."

I stood up and promptly got to work. However, after doing a round in the church, it turned out that my theory was off the mark. We couldn't find anything that resembled chains in other paintings.

Jess hummed thoughtfully. "Perhaps Lady Vatis only

requested a chain in the painting to depict the afterlife.” She did a small twirl and surveyed the interior of the petite church. Her eyes drifted until they were drawn to the altar.

I turned to her. “Something wrong?”

“No, the statute just reminded me.” She marched up to the altar and summoned magical light to illuminate the area behind it. “Lady Vatis’s statue attracts all the attention, but there are actually statues of Miss Aneera and Miss Marta in the back.”

The white light revealed wooden statues blanketed with dust. Statues of two young girls were against the wall in the back, placed beside each other as if snuggling. Together, they were staring up at the star drawn near the ceiling. Naturally, they were Aneera and Marta.

It would be more accurate to say that they were *in* the wall—half of their bodies were embedded inside. On the part of the wall between them was the art of a slender chain, drawing a U-shape as it dangled. Each end of the chain was connected to one girl’s pinky.

“I knew it! There’s a chain here too!” Jess exclaimed before gingerly touching the wall painting. Her fingertips traced the chain that connected the two.

I hadn’t realized what had happened at first. The change only became apparent as the straight vertical line in the middle of the wall, which had appeared abruptly, began stretching out and transforming into darkness.

The wall had split into two, soundlessly opening a path leading deeper inside.

My eyes lit up. “A secret door, huh?”

Chilly air blew into our faces. It appeared to be a passageway leading downward.

The wind flying out from the dark had a sinister coldness to it that was more than just temperature.

The end of the tunnel opened up into an underground chamber reminiscent of a cavern. The sole light sources were the magical lights drifting around us, and they certainly weren’t enough to fully shed light on an enormous cavern of this extent.

Even the ceiling was lofty despite it being a subterranean space, and countless thick pillars supported it. The walls and these pillars had been constructed by neatly stacking roundish white stone blocks. Though the workmanship was of a primitive

make, it was overall a systematic design. I felt like it had a sense of architectural beauty.

What was more striking than anything else was what sounded like the whispering of people coming from all around us. Their voices, which didn't form coherent words, sounded almost like waves crashing against the cliffs. But they were undeniably human voices.

Jess gasped. "I can't believe such an underground area exists…"

As I felt reassured by her voice, I sensed someone's gaze on us from somewhere and turned around.

No one was there. *Was my mind playing tricks on me? But…* I could have sworn that my pig's wide field of vision had captured something akin to a gaze. I surveyed my surroundings again.

When I realized the source of the "gaze," however, I was thunderstruck.

I finally found my voice. "Jess, look… Look at what this wall and pillar are made of."

I approached the nearest pillar. Staring back at us from there were *human skulls*.

The pillar didn't only consist of skulls—bones of various sizes had been piled up as decorations. What had seemed to be roundish, chalky white stone blocks had all been *human bones*. I scanned my environment to see that every single wall and pillar was adorned in the same manner.

If you add them all together… How many thousands, no, tens of thousands of human skeletons made this place? A chill went down my spine.

Upon closer inspection, the whispering had come from the gaps between the bones.

Jess was surprisingly composed as she intently scrutinized the pillars of stacked-up human bones. "This place is an underground graveyard, I see. I've read somewhere that before the Dark Ages, during periods when there was still a big population, they prioritized efficiency and often chose to bury the remains of the dead in this manner. Apparently, the remains were often arranged beautifully, just like this. It's my first time seeing it in person."

"'Walk out of jail, to the graveyard it paves the way.'" I savored those words. "We've finally come to the graveyard, huh?"

She nodded. "If the pinky chain drawn on the wall embodies

the afterlife—”

I finished her sentence for her. “—then this just might be the world of the afterlife it’s talking about.”

Provided that we were literally on the right track this time, this graveyard should be the true hiding place of the First Collar.

As we trod into its inner recesses, I realized that the bones here weren’t any ordinary human bones. I spotted skulls being split cleanly—spectacularly cleanly—in halves from the top of the head. Femurs that had been enlarged and bent grotesquely. Spines that had been contorted and riddled with thorns all over. There were even whole human skeletons that had been rolled into a ball like a pill bug before being melted and fused together just like that.

These bones all belonged to humans who’d been murdered with magic. The designer had clearly considered a sense of unity as they’d tightly stacked up the bones, allowing the simple building material to become a part of the enchanting ornaments.

The scene was graphic. Grotesque. Functional. Beautiful.

“It’s pretty sexy,” I commented.

“It’s…pretty sexy, yes.”

We marched on quietly, barely exchanging any words before we ran into a dead end—the deepest recesses of this burial site.

Here, at long last, we discovered our treasure.

Along the wall was a great chair made of human bones. Its backrest was lavishly adorned, almost like a throne, and right about where the human neck should be was a single collar fixed in place. It was a silver collar. Split into two as if it were a monster opening its jaw wide, the silver collar almost looked like it was waiting eagerly to snap around an unsuspecting neck.

Behind the throne was a stone tablet inscribed with a warning poem.

You who possess my blood,
do you have the resolve to offer up your life and cast it away like mud?
When the First Collar closes and snaps around its token,
all the collars will crack and open.
The closed collar opens not for even an endless time’s call,
the broken collars restore not for even an endless time’s crawl.
Your body will be left here henceforth to rot, to be forgotten,

my country will go from here henceforth to ruin, to be downtrodden.

After we finished reading it, Jess slowly muttered, “It says…‘to offer up your life and cast it away like mud’… Does it mean…?”

While she was trying to choose the right words, I chose them for her. “If someone with Vatis’s blood wears this collar and sacrifices themselves, the Yethma will be liberated. That’s one way you can interpret it.”

“That can’t be… How could this… Why…?” Jess was stunned. She looked like she was still scrambling for words in her mind.

I shook my head. “Vatis must’ve been extremely against the idea of someone using the First Collar. Makes sense—she went out of her way to even create that riddle rally as if to force us to see how ghastly the Dark Ages were.”

“But the people with Vatis’s blood would be…” She swallowed audibly.

I couldn’t bear to watch how shaken she was and cast my eyes to the ground.

There were only two people with Vatis’s blood in their veins: Shravis, who was the king, and Jess, who was from a subsidiary line.

In other words, to liberate the Yethma, one person had to die between Shravis and Jess.

I shook my head profusely. “No, that’s ridiculous. Absurd. It’s not even an option. We’ll never consider it.”

Within the chamber filled with human bones, we could only stand there, rooted to the ground. The good news was that we’d tracked down the First Collar we were seeking. The bad news was that the price we had to pay to use it was unthinkably steep.

It was too cruel of a conclusion to our treasure hunt. We were speechless.

The silence stretched on for a while.

Jess was the first one to break it. “It’s completely out of our hands now. We should return to the capital and tell everyone else about our findings.”

I frowned. “Not yet… Let me think about it for a bit first.”

“Huh?” Jess whipped her head around, blinking at me blankly.

There was a certain concern I’d avoided bringing up on purpose until now. I took a deep breath. “Jess, there’s something I want to consider quickly.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“The identity of the Cross Executioner we’ve been chasing all this time.”

“Um… Isn’t it Mister Meminis?”

Meminis is the biggest problem in all of this. I exhaled slowly. “I just wanted to organize the conditions the Cross Executioner should match. Let’s start from the fundamentals. The Cross Executioner is the murderer who went around killing Nothen Faction survivors in a manner inspired by ‘The Chain Song.’ They carved a *Sanguyn Cros*, a spell dating back to before the Dark Ages, onto the chests of their victims’ corpses. Based on the above, we know that the culprit is a mage who is aware of the nursery rhyme and its connection to the First Collar. They also have a wealth of knowledge about history.”

Jess nodded. “Mister Meminis knew of the nursery rhyme. Because his blood ring was removed, he should have also been able to use magic freely. Even in the case of history during and before the Dark Ages, he’s a capital citizen from a privileged class, so I believe he had access to the information.”

She was right. However, the conditions she listed were only the absolutely necessary ones—the bare minimum.

“Agreed. But now, we’ve got to add the truths we’ve uncovered by ourselves.” I began organizing the rest. “The settlements that the Cross Executioner chose as their third and fourth stops were a false lead. The criminal used magical ivy to hide the real clue and tried to misdirect us down a fake trail using serial murders. Why?”

She immediately replied, “The culprit didn’t want us to find the First Collar.”

“Yep, that’s for sure. Okay, let’s take it a small step further from here. Why did the culprit go out of their way to do that?”

Jess tilted her head quizzically.

I explained, “When we found Meminis’s corpse, this is what we thought: Meminis secretly stashed the First Collar away somewhere so that Shravis wouldn’t use the First Collar. By ending his own life, the elder literally took his secret hiding place to the grave. In summary, we concluded that the series of murders was Meminis’s message directed at Shravis.”

“Yes, I remember.” She nodded.

“But after reading the text here, that scenario’s growing incredibly dubious.” I looked up at the epigram displayed above

the chair. “The First Collar isn’t actually something you can activate on a whim. A member of the royal family has to be sacrificed, so even if someone finds it, we wouldn’t immediately go, ‘Yeah, let’s go free all the Yethma!’ Furthermore, the Liberators or any other human can’t activate it on their own either.”

Within a stone’s throw from me, the First Collar gleamed apathetically.

I continued, “Put yourself in his shoes. Would you commit a series of mass murders, prepare an elaborate cover-up, and even sacrifice your life just to hide the location of such a thing from your lord? It should have been as simple as advising Shravis to cherish his life before receiving the reply of, ‘You’re right.’”

The maiden placed a hand on her chin. “That’s a good point. Then… What were the murders and distractions for?”

“You wouldn’t need to cook up such a grand scheme if you wanted to persuade someone you can reason with—the Cross Executioner’s series of tactics were to deceive someone they *can’t* reason with. Therefore, the message wasn’t directed at Shravis.”

She anxiously chewed on her bottom lip. “Which means that it’s directed at…the Liberators? Do I have that right?”

“That’s what I think.” I sighed. “The Liberators are an assembly of people who have been publicly announcing that the royal court comes second or lower to them while the Yethma’s freedom is their top priority. You’d want to avoid them finding out where the First Collar is, wouldn’t you?”

“You mean that Mister Meminis did all this to trick the Liberators?”

“That’s where the problem lies. Something doesn’t add up, don’t you think?”

I pulled up my memory of the coronation ceremony and Meminis’s words back then.

“Our greatest enemy is no more. The royal court’s army should be sufficient in terms of military strength. I fear that…I cannot see the purpose of maintaining an alliance of equal status with a gathering of mere commoners who foist an unreasonable demand on us.”

“From Meminis’s perspective, he couldn’t care less about the

Liberators," I concluded. "Even if he did know about this place, would he really think that he must hide it so thoroughly, to the extent of adding in some elements of manipulation? Shouldn't he have thought that the royal court would simply ignore the Liberators' demands? If the murders were Meminis's message for the Liberators, his motivations still don't quite add up."

With the information we had right now, assuming that Meminis was truly the Cross Executioner, the sequence of events likely went something like this:

Stage one: After discovering the First Collar on his own, Meminis decided to cover up its location.

Stage two: He concealed the true clue with ivy, performed the murders that alluded to the nursery rhyme, and subtly guided us toward the fake destination.

Stage three: He attacked us as we headed upstream on the river to prevent us from discovering the true clue.

Stage four: He took his own life, escaping from further questioning and investigation.

But is this really the correct sequence of events? I frowned. *Why did he have to invest all this time and effort into doing this?*

Meminis could have easily persuaded Shravis that using the collar wasn't worth it—not to the extent of sacrificing the life of royalty. The elder had never regarded the Liberators' demands as anything important to begin with. Would he really go out of his way to commit such ostentatious murders and even take his own life?

The Cross Executioner's actions and my profile of Meminis didn't match up properly.

After taking a moment to think, Jess opened her mouth cautiously. "In that case, the Cross Executioner isn't Mister Meminis but someone who doesn't think little of the Liberators..."

I added, "That said, Meminis was undeniably the one who died in Lyubori. Likely, he was also the one who attacked our boat. Which means that the real Cross Executioner is someone who can make Meminis do their bidding and even arrange his death on top of that."

The name of the possible culprit had already reached my windpipe, but I had a sinking feeling that it might come true if I

said it out loud. Dread glued my grilled pork tongue in place.

I wasn't the only one—even Jess, who'd set out to become an ace detective, was wavering about pointing out the possibility aloud this time.

But as fate would have it, I didn't need to say it. *Click, click.* I heard someone's shoes striking the ground as they approached us from behind.

Jess and I whipped our heads around at the same time.

"So you found this place after all." A single man emerged from the darkness, carpeted with human bones.

In a daze, the maiden beside me let out a "Huh?"

After a pause, the man slowly said, "At times, there are mysteries in the world that are better off unsolved."

His silhouette was well-built and sturdy. Eavis's robe draped from his shoulders.

From beneath his exaggerated blond curls, emerald eyes gazed at us steadily.

Chapter 5: The Truth Doesn’t Always Bring About Salvation

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you two. You vanished into thin air without telling us anything. Mother was worried sick.” Shravis strutted forward until he was right in front of us. His expression softened with a relieved smile. “Let’s go back. I can’t say this is a very comfortable place to stay in.”

Jess looked speechless. Her eyes were moist with unshed tears as she stared at Shravis.

I took a deep breath. “Yeah, I agree with the uncomfortable part. But could we postpone the going home part until we clarify all the facts of the case on our hands?”

Shravis nodded. “Very well.”

Spreading his hands, the young king summoned dozens of crimson fireballs before dispersing them throughout the cavern. The flames squeezed themselves into hollows, like the eye sockets of skulls or the gaps between bones, illuminating the crypt-like room with indirect lighting. All the uncanny details of the underground graveyard constructed with human bones emerged from the darkness.



“Go on,” he prompted. “If there’s anything you’d like to ask, I’m all ears.”

Those words were like a hammer strike to my head. My mind went blank. *Anything I’d like to ask? The only thing I have in my mind right now are questions!*

Trying to stay as composed as possible, I selected my first question. “How did you find this place?”

“I received your message from Naut that you would be leaving before us, but I couldn’t find you anywhere in the royal capital. I hoped it wasn’t the case, but when I checked the stone bridge in Prannsbate, I saw that all the ivy had been burned away without a trace. There’s only one potential candidate left in Mesteria who possesses a mana pool that can overwhelm my magic-resistance enchantment: Jess. That’s why I deduced that the two of you had found this place in the end.”

Jess placed a hand over her mouth in shock. *Shravis* had been the one who’d created that ivy.

There was no room for misinterpretation—it was an unmistakable confession of guilt.

“So you did it.” That sentence practically sprung out of my mouth by itself.

Shravis blinked slowly. “You mean that ivy? Yes.”

I shook my head. “Not just the ivy. The serial murderers, the *Sanguyn Cros* spells, the camouflage that concealed the real chain trail… Were you responsible for it all? Are you…the Cross Executioner?”

A moment of silence.

When it ended, my tiny, fragile wish that he’d refute my statement was shattered beyond repair. Shravis calmly said, “I must say, I’m interested in the thought process that led you to such a conclusion. Would you indulge me?”

Jess looked deflated, as if all the motivation had drained out of her body.

As her assistant, I’d forgotten to tell her something extremely important to keep in mind as a detective: Clients can lie.

I had to be the one to settle things once and for all here.

My mind was still blank and struggling, but my mouth spoke eloquently. “The first step was figuring out the criminal’s motive—what kind of result did the Cross Executioner’s actions lead to? Rationally analyzing the answer helps narrow down the culprit.”

“The motive, I see. Interesting. What is your answer?”

I cast my eyes down briefly. “If everything went according to the Cross Executioner’s plan, this is what we should’ve thought: If an unidentified mage was able to commit mass murder, then it might be dangerous to release the Yethma thoughtlessly. On top of that, we even lost the First Collar. We can only give up on this cause.”

Shravis attentively crossed his arms. “Agreed.”

“Well then, who does this result benefit? It’s clearly none other than the members of the royal court. The culprit in question must also be willing to exert this much time and effort to convince the Liberators that this is the right choice—someone who doesn’t think they can simply disregard the demands of mere commoners. If there’s a candidate who fits this description other than you, Shravis, I’d love to know.”

The young king paused. “Still, it’s a little strange. I was the one who personally ordered the search for the First Collar. Wouldn’t it be unnatural for me to wish for such an outcome?”

The fact that he seemed to be acting no different from usual made him all the more petrifying.

“Finding the collar was probably what you truly wanted at first. Initially, you thought that the Liberators’ demand had some merit. However, you also had your doubts even before you made your command. Is it really the right choice to unleash the mages that Vatis sealed and put under her control? Could it possibly lead to a relapse to the Dark Ages? Furthermore, Mesteria is progressively merging with the Abyssus, leading to the instability of magic itself.”

Shravis was nodding as he listened to my analysis.

I continued, “But you concluded that in either case, the safest and best choice was to look for the artifact for the time being. And so, you encouraged the Liberators to join in on the hunt for the collar as well. Sometime during that process, you solved the riddle and discovered this place on your own merits. There was a period when you didn’t even meet with us in the royal capital at all, did you? You’re a responsible guy—you must have taken the matter into your own hands and rushed all over Mesteria to search for the collar yourself.”

There had been a gap of over a month between the vanquishing of the Clandestine Arcanist and Shravis’s enthronement. He’d had more than enough time.

In fact, even his aura had changed during the period we’d

been apart. His explanation had convinced us that it was due to his training, but it appeared that wasn't the only reason.

Dragging out a long exhale, I proceeded to my next point. "Eventually, *this* is what you discovered." I indicated the collar and the throne. "You saw that the writing says a living sacrifice from the royal family is necessary to release the Yethma. Of course, you can't activate it if that's the price. So, you had a change of heart."

Shravis raised a hand, indicating that I should pause. "Generally, that's how things proceeded, yes. But adding to that, the warning here isn't the only reason I changed my mind. I realized Lady Vatis's message during my journey as I solved her mystery."

His eyes shifted to gaze at the chamber filled with bones. "The underground jail of Broperver where humans were boiled alive. The old castle of Harbir where humans were tortured and burned at the stake. The prison of Prannsbate where mana was bled dry from confined mages and was used extensively, from powering the factories to executions. Finally, this underground graveyard of Mousskir where countless casualties rest. My journey showed me a display of the bloodstained legacy we have inherited from the Dark Ages, and I have experienced firsthand how inhumane the beings labeled as mages can become."

It sounded like Shravis had keenly understood Vatis's warning to never use the First Collar during his quest for the artifact, just like we had.

I nodded. "That makes sense. No wonder you decided to conceal the First Collar to snuff out any and all possibilities of someone demanding that you use it. But there was one problem. This collar is fixed in place here, and it's even under the protection of Vatis's potent magic. You couldn't move it."

The collar was secured firmly to the chair. If Vatis—who'd possessed peerless magical powers—had indeed crafted it herself, it should be impossible to remove the collar and hide it elsewhere. Based on what I knew about her, she'd likely left enchantments that prevented the destruction of the surrounding area as well.

"Precisely. Though it's regrettable, I can't demolish that device." Shravis raised his right hand slightly, manifesting a sphere with an explosive energy that was as blinding as a miniature sun. He fired it ferociously, commanding it to slam

directly into the chair.

A thunderous roar and a shock wave burst out aggressively. But after the smoke cleared, it revealed the completely unscathed chair of human bones.

I wasn't daunted by this display, instead continuing my deduction. "Unfortunately, by then, you had told the Liberators about the significance of 'The Chain Song.' Everyone had already started the search, and the other side had also gotten their hands on all the info necessary to reach the First Collar's hiding place. It was only a matter of time before they discovered it too. If so, what could you do to bury it away impeccably? You considered one evident method: forging fake leads and guiding them to the wrong places. Then, you could just weave the narrative that the collar has already been lost."

"True," he said in a clipped voice.

"That's why you came up with the idea of guiding us in the wrong direction downstream instead of upstream at the Harbir stone bridges. You left counterfeit leads in Tendar and Lyubori before using those places for your serial murders. With these preparations, you convinced all of us that the chain trail's last stop is Lyubori."

The web of deception he'd weaved had been brilliant. If Batt hadn't shared the rumors he'd heard from Blaise, perhaps every single one of us would have been trapped within that web for all of eternity.

I looked up at him. "Furthermore, these murders also served as a message for the Liberators. There's a mysterious mage out there committing mass murder. Sanon pointed this out as well, but it was useful as a tool to convince the Liberators that releasing the Yethma comes with a tremendous amount of danger. You could kill two birds with one stone."

"But…" This was when Jess found her voice at long last. "But Mister Shravis… Surely you didn't… Surely you weren't responsible for the mass murder as well, were you?" I could tell from her tone that she didn't want to think it was true.

However, reality was cruel. Shravis readily nodded. "I was."

Jess edged backward in my direction and placed a hand on my back.

For a split second, the young king's gaze shifted to that hand. "I have to ask, though, is it truly *that* surprising? Even uncle, a man with overflowing compassion, killed numerous humans in

battle, didn't he?"

His deadpan reply was sound. Unable to find any rebuttals, I held my tongue.

Shravis continued, "After killing the Clandestine Arcanist, the royal court's army and I joined forces with the Liberators, striving to eradicate the survivors of the Nothen Faction. These scoundrels are felons who have killed Yethma and done as they please with the citizens in the North. Almost everyone whom I carved the bloody crosses into and made a public display of were people who should have perished during our extermination operation."

I recalled the whole boiled corpses in Broperver. They hadn't been boiled to death but killed before their bodies had been boiled. If Shravis had imprisoned captives he'd gained during the operation in the underground jail, killed them with magic to give them a painless death, and boiled them, then it certainly *did* sound in character for him. It was a convincing scenario indeed.

"But..." Jess shrank into herself. "I don't want that to be true..."

I addressed her with the gentlest voice I could muster. "I feel the same way, Jess. I didn't want to believe that Shravis would do something like this—I wanted to think I made a mistake. But other than the culprit's motive, another clue indicated that Shravis is the Cross Executioner."

Raising an eyebrow with intrigue, Shravis looked at me. "Oh? There was? Do tell."

"The scents," I declared.

He inclined his head a little, looking confused. "Scents... Strange, I believe I was fairly attentive to this matter because I assumed that you, Sanon, and Kento would be involved."

"That's what tipped me off. A smell that should have been present wasn't anywhere to be found. I sniffed the places thoroughly at every stop but didn't detect the culprit's lingering scent even once. It's impossible...unless the culprit took the utmost care to prevent it from happening, like elevating themselves with magic to avoid their feet touching the ground, for example. It's the very evidence that indicates the culprit—the Cross Executioner—is someone who has extensive knowledge about our pig noses."

Shravis nodded and abruptly began walking. His footsteps made no sound. He was floating slightly above the ground, almost like a Robot Cat. "The fact that I was careful came back to

bite me instead, huh?"

"That's not all," I added. "There's also your cologne."

"Cologne..." He blinked. "I see. That's interesting. So it was a bad move as well."

For Jess's sake, I explained things step-by-step from the beginning. "Remember how Shravis put on some cologne for the dinner party on the night of the coronation ceremony?"

She sluggishly placed a hand on her chin. "Yes, now that you mention it."

I remembered it as a slightly off-putting fragrance that had reminded me of a corporate executive. I continued, "Not leaving behind scent trails in the crime scenes was crucial, yes, but it's also important to not take scents away from the crime scene with him. The stench of volcanic gas and the metallic odor was pungent in Broperver. He likely went to Broperver after the coronation and made preparations as the Cross Executioner, but because of it, the local odors were clinging stubbornly to his body. The cologne probably served the purpose of drowning them out."

Shravis shrugged. "Since you've seen through the situation to this extent, I guess I don't have any way to talk myself out of it anymore."

Jess shook her head profusely, looking like she refused to accept this truth to the very end. "But, but... One thing doesn't add up!"

The young king and I turned to look at her at the same time.

She chewed on her bottom lip. "During the arson at Harbir, we split up and went separate ways, right? Mister Shravis only arrived after we left the church, witnessed the fire in the old castle, and summoned him over. He parted with Miss Nourris and the others to come to our rescue. He couldn't have possibly known when we left the church and adjusted the time of the fire to match."

"You make a very good point." The youth gazed at me. "How do you explain that, pig?"

The answer was already in my mind. "It's a simple trick. You knew our location with the *Trac* enchantment you cast on the seashell meant for communication, Shravis. You also predicted that we would call for you immediately after seeing the flames. With these conditions met, you could devise the following trick."

I looked right back into his eyes. "First, pretending that we

called for you, you left Nourris and the others before making your way to the rooftop of the old castle. Matching the exact time we left the church, you set fire to the building's interior through the chimney. Seeing that, we contacted you. Even though you were already at the old castle, you put on the act of having hurried there when you appeared before us. This way, you were able to fabricate an alibi easily."

He smiled wryly. "Sounds like you can see through everything, huh?"

I shook my head. "I can't see through everything, only things that can be seen through."

It appeared that neither Shravis nor Jess understood the meaning of my statement, for they were staring at me blankly. *Oh well. It's just a reference to a certain class representative who seems to know everything, no biggie.*

What mattered was that we'd confirmed one cruel truth here: The Cross Executioner was Shravis.

I closed my eyes briefly before looking at the youth with determination. "But if we go with the line of reasoning I have so far, there's one baffling piece of the puzzle that doesn't fit properly."

Jess gingerly spoke up. "Meminis, right?"

"Indeed, detective." I nodded. "If Meminis wasn't the Cross Executioner, why did he attack us? Why did we find him dead in the memorial tower in Lyubori? We can't find any logical explanations for these two events."

Shravis inclined his head. "Meminis was a loyal subordinate. To prevent your group from discovering Prannsbate, I ordered him to attack you before killing him and leaving his corpse in the memorial tower to frame him for the crime. Is that explanation not good enough?"

"It isn't. Far from it. As for why I can't accept it, it's because both were unnecessary for you. If you wanted to prevent us from coming across Prannsbate, you could have simply told us that you found the third clue in Tendar before we arrived. Plus, if everything went according to your original plan, you wouldn't need to frame anyone else. You could have just gone with the narrative that the criminal was an unidentified mage to the bitter end."

In fact, establishing that the criminal was a citizen of the royal capital had impaired the royal court's standing, especially in front

of the Liberators.

I concluded, “That’s why it’s more appropriate to deduce that Meminis’s series of actions were for some other kind of goal.”

Jess must have caught on because she supplemented, “Not to mention that between the attack on us at the river and our discovery of Mister Meminis’s remains in the memorial tower, Mister Shravis was with us or the Liberators the entire time. It’s physically impossible for him to be responsible for Mister Meminis’s murder.”

Shravis attempted to sidestep the accusation. “I could have easily ordered him in private to commit suicide at the memorial tower.”

Seeing his reaction made my ire rise. “Do you really think that man would go, ‘Yes, sir, at once, sir,’ to such an outrageous demand and offer his life to you? Are *you* truly a person who thinks so little of your subordinates’ lives that you can make such an outrageous demand?”

There was no reply. He was trying to hide something.

I narrowed my eyes. “Nothing about it adds up. There’s only one explanation. That man’s death wasn’t included in your original plan—the Cross Executioner’s plan. When inconsistent events happen, an abnormal or foreign element must always be at play. It either happened unexpectedly, was the machinations of someone else, or both.”

“What is your opinion on the matter?” he slowly asked.

“It was both.”

Jess’s hand, which she’d placed on my back, tensed. “You mean… There’s someone other than Mister Shravis who arranged for Mister Meminis’s demise?” Judging by her expression, she should have a good idea about the exact suspect.

I nodded. “That’s right. This mysterious person discovered the identity and intentions of the Cross Executioner in the middle of our chase down the trail of corpses. Then, they made Meminis attack us at a time when Shravis was a hundred percent occupied elsewhere. That way, they could eliminate the possibility of Shravis coming under suspicion. Perhaps they even intended to frame Meminis for the crime when push came to shove with this move. As it turned out, they were astute and insightful to have come prepared.”

I paused to take a breath. “Shravis thought he was killing a

survivor of the Nothen Faction but mistakenly murdered a Liberator who was investigating undercover. This was an unexpected discovery. The Liberators were livid, intent on finding the Cross Executioner and slaughtering him—an atrocious turn of events. If they zealously continued their investigation, then Shravis might slip up somewhere and give them a clue. What if they unearthed the fact that Shravis was the culprit by some chance? It would be a nightmare."

Jess exhaled slowly. "That was why there was no choice but to arrange for Mister Meminis's passing and to frame him as the true culprit..."

"Exactly. Well then, who would be capable of this? Who has the keen perception to see through Shravis's elaborate plan? Who has the authority to order around Meminis and make him act as they wish?"

Shravis hung his head. He hoarsely whispered, "It was my mother."

Lifting his face, he looked at me. "All because I was inadequate, I caused mother to act recklessly. Despite being in the capital, she apparently realized my plan as early as the arson in Harbir. I should have expected it. She watches over me more closely and knows me better than anyone else. When I heard that your group was under attack, I contacted mother. She told me about her deduction during the transmission."

He creased the area between his thick brows. Regret must be torturing him on the inside. It wasn't about his crime, however, but the fact that his crime had been inadequate.

Ruffling his own hair slightly in frustration, he continued, "Mother told me that she ordered Meminis to wipe your memories, pig. But even if someone were to destroy your brain cells, they would regenerate almost immediately with Jess's healing powers. It was a meaningless instruction, but it did lower the chances of me becoming a suspect."

That clarified why my mind had gone completely blank inside the smoke screen.

Shravis pressed his lips into a tight line. "But as it turned out, I made the fatal mistake of killing a Liberator. If they were to investigate too closely, I would have been in a precarious situation. I consulted mother about the matter. She said to entrust everything to her. Then, she summoned Meminis, killed him, placed his remains in the memorial tower, and fabricated

evidence. She also took on the job of analyzing the crime scene and crafted lies for our convenience. With this, we managed to make Meminis shoulder all the blame. The one who drove Meminis to death…was *me*."

He smiled—it was a smile of resignation. "I'm deplorable. I caused the death of my most devoted subordinate due to my blunder. If I were more shrewd, more dependable, it wouldn't have come to this."

I couldn't believe my ears. I desperately wanted him to say that he was joking. "Shravis, you… Did you actually hope that everything would go as planned? That there was nothing wrong at all with your scenario if you succeeded?"

There wasn't even a sliver of hesitation before he nodded. "I do. In my opinion, my plan itself was flawless. I could make a statement about the danger of mages without meaninglessly taking lives. I could also conceal the location of the First Collar for all eternity. The Liberators and you two would have been convinced by my narrative if there hadn't been any unexpected elements."

My heart was heavy—I wanted to believe that the man before me wasn't Shravis. "You obtained peace by deceiving your friends and comrades in arms. Do you really think that it will last?"

"Yes, I do. Thanks to mother's quick wits, the situation was resolved without incident. I handed over a thousand ristae to the Liberators in exchange for their understanding. As long as the two of you go along with my story, the case will be closed."

His statements were so appalling that I couldn't even work up the energy to be furious. "Are you telling us…to become your *accomplices*?"

"You're my friend, aren't you?" His gaze shifted to Jess. "You're my cousin, aren't you? If the existence of this collar becomes public knowledge, I'm not the only one who would be in trouble. Divine blood flows in Jess's veins as well. Naut and the others likely won't ask Jess and me to die for their cause. However, as long as it exists, it's only a matter of time before the revolutionaries who wish for the Yethma's liberation target me, Jess, or any of our offspring. That's the one future I want to avoid at all costs."

If I only considered this part, his argument was sound. Jess and I were both rooted to the spot, stunned.

Shravis gazed at us. “If you aren’t confident that you can guard the secret…we can selectively erase your memories about this matter alone. Mother has the necessary skills to remove memories with magic.”

A single drop of liquid splashed onto the limestone ground, then another. Jess was crying while stifling her own voice.

I looked up at her and tried to offer some comfort. “Jess, it’s okay. Let’s consider everything thoroughly and make the right decision.”

But it was a difficult decision indeed. Even if I tried, I couldn’t agree with Shravis’s past actions. At the same time, it was undeniable that Jess would be in a bind if we chose to bring the truth to light.

The First Collar was the key to releasing the Yethma. Was it right to turn a blind eye to it?

“Mister Pig…” Jess sniffled. “What in the world should we do…?”

I nodded to her, as if to say that everything was all right. *Everything is all right,* I told myself. *As long as we think about this thoroughly, I’m sure that we’ll find a solution.*

I was never given the chance to make the right decision, however.

A voice cut me short. “I knew it. I *did* think there was something fishy about all this.” It was a familiar voice. A voice I shouldn’t be hearing here.

Abruptly, a black pig slipped out of the other side of the darkness.

The three of us present were petrified with shock.

One after another, the members of the Liberators emerged from the shadows behind the black pig.

Sanon trotted forward until he was in front of the chair of human bones fitted with the First Collar. He steadily inspected the warning poem on display. “I see, I see. So that’s how it is. If a member of the royal family has to be sacrificed, it makes sense that you would want to cover up its existence. I admit to sympathizing with you on this front.”

The fireballs Shravis had dispersed earlier were the sole illuminations in the underground graveyard. The black pig’s eye glinted sharply inside the dim cavern.

The young king wore an impassive expression, but his eyes couldn’t fully conceal his inner turmoil. “Sanon… Why are you

here?”

“Oh, that doesn’t actually matter right now, does it? We don’t owe you any explanations. You are the one who ought to explain yourself, King Shravis.”

Naut squared his shoulders with indignation as he approached us. He glared right at Shravis. “Is it true? Did you really trick us and try to hide this collar?”

Shravis didn’t reply.

“Answer me,” Naut practically growled. “Are you also the one who murdered Evan while he was undercover?”

Silence.

Itsune yelled from behind Naut, “Say something! Is it true?!”

Naut backed off slightly, maintaining a set distance between himself and Shravis as he placed his hands on his twin shortswords. “If…If that’s the truth, then…I have to cut you down right here.”

Alarmed, I hurriedly yelled, “Naut, wait! Cool your head a little!”

The swordsman didn’t as much spare a glance in my direction. “If you’re going to stand up for him even while knowing the truth, pig, then you’re guilty of the same crime.” His eyes were lit up with fiery rage as he fixed his glare on Shravis.

Tension was high in the air.

My mind refused to work as anxiety dismantled it. Jess and I remained frozen in place while huddling up to each other, unable to move even a little.

Possibly because his pride wouldn’t allow any retreat, Shravis maintained his position within Naut’s reach as he said, “The pig and Jess have nothing to do with this. I will explain everything. Take your hands off your swords. Even if you fight me head-on, I’m sure you know well enough that you are no match for me.”

“Shut up,” Naut snapped. “I won’t know until I try.”

Upon hearing that, Shravis’s gaze focused on Ceres, who was standing in the back. I realized his intent and felt pig bumps rising all over my skin. Ceres had the ability to instantaneously heal Naut. To defeat the hero of the Liberators, you had to start by eliminating Ceres first.

No, I can’t let that happen. I’ve got to do something and settle this conflict peacefully somehow. “Stop!” I cried. “We should put our swords and magic to one side. Let’s solve it with words, not violence.” I turned to the black pig pleadingly. “Mister Sanon,

please back me up here."

Sanon replied with a coldhearted shake of his head. "Mister Lolip, Miss Jess, you have truly done well to lead us this far. I shall take over the rest, so could you please back off a little? This will be our last step in our quest to liberate the Yethma girls who are being forced to suffer injustices—the grand finale."

His tone was polite and even respectful to an extent I'd never heard before, but there was also something firm that didn't allow any objections.

I knew very well that Sanon was a man who wholeheartedly believed that the ends justified the means. To receive permission for Ceres's departure, he'd set fire to Martha's inn in Baptsaze. To assassinate Marquis, who'd flown into a rage over the *coup d'état*, he'd used Ceres as a tool to snatch the Destruction Spear from us.

As if that weren't enough, he'd practically plundered an entire thousand ristae through negotiations and should have added it to the Liberators' arsenal this morning. *Did he do that because he already predicted this situation? Was he preparing for the collapse of the relationship between the Liberators and the royal court?*

Our second teleportation to Mesteria was a project that Sanon had driven forward to begin with. I was only standing here because Sanon had tracked down me, Kento, and PhiloponMeth through cyberstalking before assembling us in one place with free parfait as bait.

Sanon was a shrewd man with a kind heart at his core. But that kindness didn't stop him from being more relentless than anyone else in the face of injustice. He was someone who knew that if he wanted to eliminate such injustices, he had to throw all compassion out the window at times.

He was more serious, more dedicated than anyone else—when he'd said he would change the world, he'd meant it. Sanon must've determinedly marched to this day with a dedication that was levels above a wimp like me.

This man wouldn't hesitate to kill Shravis if it were necessary to free the Yethma. Considering his capabilities until now, there was no way he'd come empty-handed. He should have prepared some kind of ace up his sleeve that could help the Liberators fight on equal footing with Shravis.

It's true that Shravis's actions might have been wrong. However, these are two completely different things. I don't think he's so far

gone that he has to die no matter what. I have to save him.

But…how? I hung my head.

Are there any escape routes? The Liberators are on the side of the exit, but with Shravis's abilities, it might be possible for him to forcefully break through them and flee to safety. The problem is, will running forever solve anything?

In the worst-case scenario, Jess might even be taken hostage. If he chooses to flee, Jess has to run away with him. But how?

What kind of secret weapon did Sanon prepare? What if there are traps at the exit?

I gritted my teeth with frustration at myself. *I have no clue. We're stuck. In any case, I've got to diffuse the current situation as peacefully as I can.*

Just as I was about to interrupt from the sidelines, I was cut short once again.

The footsteps of a single person were unhurriedly approaching us from the darkness of the crypt. Judging by Sanon's surprised expression, they didn't belong to a Liberator.

Before long, a woman adorned in a white dress revealed herself. It was Wyss.

I squinted. Something didn't seem right about her.

"I was the culprit behind it all. The responsibility is mine. Shravis, stop trying to shoulder the blame in my stead."

As she approached, I got a better look at her and questioned my own eyes.

Her right arm was missing. The sleeve of her dress, which should have been decorating her right shoulder, was dangling straight down beside her chest. Possibly because she had difficulty maintaining her balance, her gait was stiff.

Sanon turned around to face her. "You're saying that…you were the culprit behind it all, I see. So you confess to our accusations of murder and concealment of the collar?"

"Correct. I am the 'Cross Executioner.'"

There was pin-drop silence.

No, that's not possible. She's only trying to cover for her son… I gazed over at Shravis. He was staring at his mother's missing arm, frozen in place from confusion.

I was just as confused. *Why* is *her arm missing?*

The gazes of everyone present were stabbing into Wyss, but she addressed the Liberators in a composed voice to the very end. "I have delightful news for you and your comrades. Could

you at least give me the time to finish reporting it?”

Sanon belligerently said, “I’m afraid that the compensation of a single arm won’t be enough to placate us.”

Wyss shook her head. “No, I didn’t lose this arm for the sake of you all. My compensation…” She trailed off.

After a brief pause that almost seemed like an eternity, she finished, “…will be my very life.”

Shravis’s eyes widened. “Mother…?” he asked in a dazed voice. “What are you—”

Disregarding her son’s interruption, Wyss raised her voice. “Read that warning poem carefully. It says, ‘You who possess my blood,’ not ‘you who have my blood flowing in your veins.’ I have perused several books that Lady Vatis has left behind until now, and from experience, I know that such a description isn’t strictly limited to those with royal blood in their veins. Shravis is a child I gave birth to, and he is Lady Vatis’s flesh and blood. The requirement of ‘possessing’ Lady Vatis’s blood applies to me as well.”

I had no way of knowing whether it was truth or sophistry. What I could tell for sure, however, was that her statement had changed the mood here altogether.

Naut looked mystified as he asked Wyss, “Do you mean…*you’re* going to put on the First Collar?”

“Indeed,” she replied detachedly. “I will sacrifice my life to atone for my crimes and release the Yethma. No one will have any complaints with this, yes?”

“Mother, you mustn’t!” Shravis exclaimed, having lost his composure altogether.

Wyss, however, turned a deaf ear to her son as she gazed at him. “You know the price we pay for childbirth. I already don’t have that much time left. I’m certain you’re aware of that as well. Let’s put an end to everything with this.”

The price of childbirth? What is she talking about? I glanced over at Jess to see that she was chewing on her bottom lip and hanging her head. She also appeared to be aware that Wyss didn’t have long to live.

Naut turned to the black pig. Sanon looked at Wyss with scrutiny, as if trying to see through her thoughts. “If that is the case, we have no reason to refuse. No matter who the Cross Executioner may be, as long as the girls who were labeled Yethma, discriminated against and exploited all their lives, are

freed from their shackles, we will welcome that future with open arms."

That, however, meant that Wyss had to die right here. "Please wait. Let's be rational about this," I protested politely. "There is no need for you to put on the collar right away. We can—"

Wyss narrowed her eyes and said flatly, "Silence, pig." She strutted past Jess and me. Then, she wedged herself between Naut and Shravis, who were still keeping each other at a distance, ready to strike. She almost looked like a mother mediating a sibling quarrel between little children.

After glancing in Naut's direction, Wyss turned to face Shravis and looked him in the eye. "This is my gift in return for your ring from the day before yesterday. Think of it as me—as your mother—and cherish it."

Saying that, she held out her left hand. On her middle finger was the ring Shravis had given her. Meanwhile, her fingertips held yet another ring. It was a simple silver band decorated with a small, clear jewel that shined brilliantly. Wyss clumsily lifted her son's right hand and slid the ring onto his middle finger.

Shravis looked like he couldn't comprehend what was going on. He tried to grasp his mother's sole hand. However, she shook his hand away.

Swiftly turning on her heel, Wyss marched straight toward the chair furnished with the collar. The dignity of the king's mother, who walked on without even sparing a glance in another direction, overwhelmed everyone present. No one moved. Even Shravis, her own son, only chased her for a few steps before unwittingly coming to a stop. His knees were trembling uncontrollably.

I knew it was better to stop her, but my mouth refused to obey me as well.

"Mother, no!" Shravis pleaded. "Please, *no!*"

At last, Wyss turned around just a step in front of the chair. The collar was right behind her back. The distance was so short that simply taking a seat would close it. It looked as if the masses of human bones were stretching out their chalk-white fingers, beckoning Wyss to join their ranks.

"Shravis," she called softly. Identical forest green eyes locked with each other for a heartbreakingly brief moment.

Resolutely, she left these words for him. "Become a great king, my son."

That was all Wyss said before she sat down on the chair of human bones without a hint of hesitation. With a cold, resounding metallic clang, the collar captured the queen’s neck without delay.

The First Collar had closed around its token.

“Mother!” Shravis screamed.



The response he received was a silence that offered no salvation. Even the incessant murmuring that had leaked out from the crevices of the bones had stilled now.

Wyss was shutting her eyes quietly. Was she merely closing her eyes? Or had she fainted? *Or...* My heart sank. I was powerless. I didn't have any means of knowing what was going on.

Suddenly, I noticed that the collar was glowing faintly. White light rose from Wyss's body like steam and was gradually sucked into the collar. The more light it absorbed, the brighter it shined.

When it had grown so brilliant that I suspected the collar might burn off if it absorbed any more light, the artifact released an instantaneous but intense flash.

The light faded from the collar altogether. Wyss, who was bound to the chair, remained motionless with her eyes shut.

Is it over now? I thought. It felt as if time itself had slowed to a stop.

I didn't know whether it had happened after a split second or several minutes, but there was a sudden click of metal.

The First Collar had snapped *open*.

Wyss's body lost balance and limply tumbled forward from the chair. The slightest of hope lit up in my heart and ballooned. *Didn't the poem say that the closed collar won't open even for an endless time's call? So, that was a lie? Then isn't there a chance that Wyss made it out alive?*

Now that I had time to think properly, it was an absurd notion for Vatis to cruelly take the life of her descendants or their family. The "offer up your life" part was nothing but a threat to prevent people from using the collar thoughtlessly. *That's got to be it,* I told myself.

Shravis seemed like the lone thing he could see in the world was his mother, and he rushed over to her side. Jess and I were hot on his heels.

"Mother!" he called, flustered, lifting Wyss gently into his arms. His mother's head and arm were dangling loosely, powerlessly.

I heard the sharp sound of something falling behind us, and I turned over my shoulder. It was the sound of Nourris's collar splitting apart and crashing onto the ground—the sound of the Yethma's liberation.

The innocent, simple smile had been wiped from Nourris's

face. She only stared at the king, who was embracing his mother, with melancholic eyes.

Wyss was in the young king's arms, but she'd already left his side, never to return again.

Belated realization dawned on me.

The fourth ring breaks, allowing the Yethma to flee,
Among the people it weaves, brushing by your sleeves, right next to you the Yethma lives, so mote it be.

If you inserted the word "Yethma" into the blank part, it would mean that "The Chain Song" had come true. As I stared at Jess, who was sobbing as she clung to Wyss, that was the only thing my scrambled mind could think about.

The Yethma had been liberated at long last in a manner that I couldn't have imagined even in my wildest dreams.

Fate had been cruel. It had been inevitable that either Shravis, Jess, or Wyss would be coerced into sacrificing themselves one day. Knowing that, Wyss must have decided that she would be the one to die among the three of them.

Neither my thoughts nor my emotions could catch up to reality.

And that was precisely why the series of tragedies that followed was the last straw on the camel's back—it completely exceeded my brain's processing power and crashed it.

Sanon's voice rang out without warning. "This is our chance," he slowly said. There was something sorrowful in his tone, but a steely will eclipsed it.

Before I could turn around and figure out what was going on, my vision was stained with bright crimson blood.

Jess had been smeared with blood from head to toe in the blink of an eye. Next, I forgot how to breathe. A beat later, I realized that she was utterly unscathed.

The source of the blood was Shravis.

Before my very eyes, Shravis's upper torso had been sliced cleanly in half, split like a grotesque watermelon from the very top of his head down to his chest. Copious amounts of lifeblood soaked his mother's remains and her formerly white dress.

Jess let out a strangled, incoherent scream as she shrank away. Shravis was still holding his mother even though his head had been divided vertically.

A single man was standing behind the parent and child.

It was a middle-aged man with an impressive physique. His black hair had been trimmed shortly and neatly. Blood coated his face like a mask, and I couldn't make out his features because he had his back to the lighting, but I recognized him. This man had been present during the coronation ceremony.

Sito—that was his name. He was a commanding officer of the royal court's army and was at the highest rank possible as one of the five elders. His right arm was covered all over with black scales that were painted with a sticky layer of Shravis's blood. In his hand was a bladed weapon that reminded me of an enormous nata hatchet. The gilded blade, which shimmered gold, was dimmed by the red blood trickling down from it.

A specific term sprang into my mind immediately. Lacerte. A race of mage hunters.

Sito had ambushed Shravis at a speed that surpassed his defensive spells and slaughtered his lord with a golden blade.

My brain was chugging along sluggishly as it processed Itsune's horrified shriek. "Dad! The hell are you doing?!"

Dad. This man is Itsune and Yoshu's dad, I thought numbly.

"Dad had a relatively respectable status. If he had put his mind to it, there should have been a way he could've avoided Lithis's sentence. But, well, he obeyed the orders of his oh-so-mighty superiors and handed Lithis over without a struggle. It was all to keep up appearances. That man was a hopeless idiot who only had a successful career, a successful career, and an even more successful career in his mind."

"In my dad's case, both of his parents were Lacerte, and he was seriously, outrageously strong. He's one of the rare cases, even among Lacerte, where he has heightened senses like me and enhanced strength like sis. Thanks to that, he apparently climbed the ladder of success at a crazy pace."

The siblings' father, who'd risen up the ranks with his capabilities as a Lacerte, had remained in the royal court's army. *No, calling it "remained" doesn't cut it at all.* His successful career hadn't ended at being a commander outside the capital. He'd gained enough status to earn permission to enter the capital and even climbed into the privileged classes, possibly by becoming the adopted son of one such family. At the very end,

he'd reached the very summit—the highest rank possible in the royal court's army.

A part of him must have felt guilty about estranging his daughter and son with his cold actions. I didn't know how Sanon had contacted this man, but if my fellow teleporter had requested that Sito cooperate with the Liberators, there was a decent chance that the father would take the side of his blood-related children. Sanon had used that to his advantage and turned Sito into a trump card to assassinate the king.

Sito was indeed worthy of the title "trump card." A race with outstanding physical abilities that could take even mages by surprise and hunt them. A status that allowed him to remain near the king. Finally, a sturdy bond that tied him to the Liberators.

Sanon had chosen to use that card at the most effective time possible.

Shravis had been killed. He was gone.

I was frozen like a statue. Sito had stopped his movements, allowing the king's blood to dribble down from his golden hatchet as he fixed his eyes on the blood-ridden mother and child. I wondered what emotion flickered in his eyes—pity or sympathy? Or was it guilt from turning his back on his lord? I couldn't get a proper look due to the darkness, but it almost seemed like there were even tears in his eyes.

The black pig approached ever so slowly. "We have put an end to everything at last. The root of all evil, the royal family, has been stamped out with this finale." He paused. "Perhaps Shravis was a young man with a kindhearted disposition. But it doesn't change the fact that divine blood is still an underlying seed of danger. Truth be told, his power corrupted him, and he had even started his march down the wrong path. This was the only choice available to us."

Sanon addressed us and continued his speech as if to justify his actions. "This was a nation where the few monopolized power and used that authority to rule a population with force and fear. Such a society is fated to fall into corruption sooner or later. Absolute power reinforces the foolproof foundation of an absolute monarchy, and it was necessary to banish it from existence, even if it means casting away all compassion and mercy."

So that was your goal from the beginning. You wanted to kill

Shravis this entire time? There should have been more peaceful solutions available to us. Tell me, how is this "necessary," huh?!

I allowed my fury to take over and opened my mouth. However, before I found my voice, my ears picked up an uncanny noise.

"Gurble glop glop..."

From right beside me was a strange sound identical to boiling mud.

I saw Sito hurriedly leaping away and vanishing somewhere. Not a moment later, lukewarm blood showered down on my face again, robbing me of my vision.

The next time I opened my eyes, I saw *Shravis* climbing onto his feet in slow motion.

His face was grotesque—unbearable to look at. His head maintained the general shape of a human head, but a crack had split it vertically, allowing a vivid glimpse of his smashed bones. Even his eyeballs were still half jutting out. While he stood up, his bones connected, and his tissue wriggled like snakes as it steadily began regenerating. The transformation was happening right before my eyes.

It appeared that the second batch of blood splattered on my face wasn't from Shravis but from Sito. The person himself had disappeared somewhere, but one of his legs had been amputated at some point along his thigh and was lying on the ground.

Jess and I, as well as the Liberators, could only silently watch Shravis rise to his feet.

His head still bathed in blood, Shravis slowly rotated his neck. A snap. A slurp. When coming from a human body, these sounds were the very definition of nauseating.

When he finished turning his neck, Shravis spat out a lump of bloody phlegm. I could spot several teeth and chunks of bone fragments mixed within.

With a solemn, wistful expression, Shravis lifted his blood-soaked right hand in front of his blood-soaked face. Wyss's ring gleamed on his middle finger. His bloodied left hand tenderly pressed on it. "Mother is protecting me... Oh, I never knew that a ring could be so warm."

The ring Wyss had left behind was likely fulfilling the role of healing Shravis in its crafter's stead. It had been enough to fully revive him from a state where his head had been sliced into

vertical halves, a testament to its extraordinary power.

The last king of Mesteria, who'd practically lost all his family, had obtained immortality through his mother's love.

A saying that I'd heard once upon a time continued echoing within my mind on repeat: the viper in the storm.

While everyone's eyes were on Shravis, a ridiculously deafening rumble suddenly resounded throughout the underground graveyard, as if something had exploded or collapsed. I turned to face the source of the sound. That was when I realized that Sanon had gone missing. In the place where the black pig had been standing only moments earlier was now a gigantic spectacle of blood. There wasn't even a single bit of solid matter bigger than a clenched fist to be seen.

"I owe all of you a great debt. I will let things slide just this one time." Shravis maintained his gaze on the ring as he spoke in his usual tone, as if nothing had happened. "But if you point your blade at me again—no matter who you are, I will kill you just like that pig over there."

As he finished his sentence, Shravis finally turned to look in Naut's direction. Ignoring his own blood that dripped down from his hair, the young king advanced until he was in front of Naut's eyes. "The Yethma have been liberated. Look, you've granted your dearest wish. Shouldn't you seem a little happier about it?"

Even the lionhearted Naut was struck speechless. For the next few seconds, he fumbled for his voice. When he spoke, he sounded like he was actively forcing the words past his throat. "Is that…all you want to say?"

Shravis answered matter-of-factly, "Regrettably, I'm afraid we have to put our alliance behind us. Though the days we fought alongside each other are unforgettable memories for me, the royal court and the Liberators mix like oil and water. I can only earnestly pray that there will never be a day when we must wage war between our two factions."

Naut looked as if someone had sucked out his very soul. He never replied in the end.

After that, Shravis lifted his mother's body onto his shoulder before brazenly marching out of the crypt in front of his stunned audience.

The fireballs that had shed light on the underground graveyard had blown out in sync with Shravis's exit. The rest of

us left behind relied on Jess's magical lights to navigate our way outside.

Night greeted us. It was currently Royal Year 130, second month, tenth day.

I craned my neck to look up. No clouds were visible, allowing me an unobstructed view of the abnormally dense starry sky draping Mousskir.

Today marked the day when the world had changed for good. Henceforth, over a thousand girls who secretly had magic in their veins had been set free.

I wondered what was going on around the girls who were formerly Yethma. I wondered how this world was going to change from here on out.

How was Shravis going to deal with all this? What were the Liberators going to do? I didn't have a single answer. The only things stretched out before my eyes were a despairing rift and a chaotic mess spelling doom.

Shravis's and Sanon's schemes had both pushed the situation in the worst direction possible.

Naut called out to us. "What are you guys gonna do from now on?"

Jess and I struggled to make a decision. After thorough consideration, I looked into his eyes. "I hope you can listen to me while maintaining your cool." But then, I saw Naut's expression and realized that it was a considerably difficult request. I closed my eyes briefly. "Right now, the worst possible scenario for this country is to leave Shravis all alone—to neglect him and leave him unchecked—after he was pushed to the brink like that."

I shifted my gaze onto Jess. There was a moment of silence, long enough for her to mull over things for a while, before she pressed her lips into a tight line. She bobbed her head in agreement.

Naut narrowed his eyes and demanded in a low voice, "Get to the point. So? What does that mean?"

I inhaled. "Jess and I will go back to the capital for now."

The swordsman's pointed gaze aimed at Jess. "Is that really what you want?"

Jess nodded gingerly. "Mesteria is currently fusing with the Abyssus, and it's apparently a phenomenon called spercritica. We need information if we want to return the world to normal, and such information is all within the capital. If we don't go back, we

won’t be able to progress in any direction.”

“All right then.” Naut sighed with resignation. “Well, I kind of figured that you guys would say that. No matter what path you choose, I ain’t got any right to stop you.” He hesitated. “That said, with the way things are going, the Liberators will probably end up on the opposing side of the royal court.”

Though she faltered, Jess still tried to appeal to him. “That’s heartbreaking to hear. Mister Naut, is there any room for—”

Naut shook his head, cutting her short. “That guy lied to us in the worst way possible. He tore apart the trust between us and returned it to dust. And though it was Sanon’s arbitrary decision, we’ve also done something irrevocable and wrong to him and his mother. You guys are heading over to the royal court’s side—your relationship with us is gonna become pretty tricky.”

That was all he said before he turned his back on us. “Would be nice if we get to see each other again,” he muttered, leaving us with those words as he briskly walked away.

Ceres turned to look at us several times as she followed him worriedly. The other members of the Liberators also disappeared in the direction of the port after their leader.

The only exception was Kento the boar, who stayed behind and faced us. He slowly exhaled. “Everyone is probably letting their emotions get the better of them right now, that’s all. Mister Lolip, Miss Jess, please come back after a few days. I will persuade the Liberators on your behalf.”

Now that Sanon wasn’t around, it was heartening to have a supporter who understood us on the side of the Liberators. I gratefully replied, “Got it, thanks. We’re comrades, and nothing can change that. Let’s make sure to keep in touch.”

The boar nodded before racing back in the direction of his companions.

I heard suppressed sobbing from my side. Jess sank onto the ground as if all the strength had left her body and mind.

Too many things had happened at once.

At the northernmost end of Mesteria, we leaned our bloodied bodies into each other, sharing a long moment of silence.

After washing off the blood, Jess and I made our way to the lodgings we’d stopped by once upon a time—the enormous residence surrounded by an iron fence. It was the fancy accommodation we’d planned to stay at the night of the New

Year's Festival.

Since it had been on the outskirts of town, it'd been spared from the destruction of wartime fire. The polished marble interior hadn't changed at all from the place in my memories, and it exuded an elegant atmosphere.

Our visit was late at night, but it appeared that they barely had any guests because once we paid for our stay, the staff readily led us to our room.

My mind wandered. This accommodation seemed to be in an excellent financial situation—did they possibly employ Yethma? *Even if there are Yethma around, they're probably asleep right now. But I wonder how they're going to react when they discover that their collars have come off as they wake up tomorrow morning.*

I bathed for the first time in two days and requested Jess brush me thoroughly. She washed away all of Shravis's blood, which had gotten stuck in my fur, until it was in pristine condition again. Utterly drained, we collapsed onto the bed right away.

It was a luxurious king-size bed with a canopy. My insistence on sleeping on the floor had been fruitless, and Jess had invited me under the duvet. There was enough space beside Jess to fit a sleeping pig and an adult human with plenty of room to spare, but Jess chose to huddle up against my flank.

A nagging voice in my mind muttered that her nightwear, which she'd tailored herself with magic, was a little too flimsy.

Fatigue crashed down on me vigorously, but I wasn't in the mood to fall asleep immediately. Jess reached out to enjoy the squishy sensation of my shoulder roast absentmindedly. I also wanted to enjoy her squishy sensation, but in a sad twist of fate, it wasn't possible to massage her with my pig trotters.

After a stretch of silence, Jess spoke up abruptly. "There's something I noticed."

"What is it?"

She rubbed and squeezed my grilled pork shoulders thoroughly for a while before she voiced her thoughts. "The First Collar closed, then opened. You must have thought it was baffling as well."

Now that she mentions it, yeah. "Right. The poem threatens that once the collar closes, it won't open ever again. It *is* rather weird."

"Exactly. I remember that you were thinking it was inconceivable for Lady Vatis to sacrifice the life of her own

descendants or their family, and I had the same thought. It would be ridiculous."

"I completely agree. After all, it would be going too far to actually take their lives when it isn't necessary. If she wanted to leave a threat that deters people from using the collar, simply writing 'you will die' should have sufficed." I cast down my eyes. "But…it's undeniable that Wyss passed away."

We'd personally confirmed her death. It hadn't been Shravis's trick either. Jess had analyzed her body and reported that not only was her blood stagnant, but there hadn't been any mana flow within her either.

I frowned. "Maybe Vatis planned to at least return the body of the deceased in a respectable state."

I felt Jess shaking her head against my neck. "I sensed the flow of mana when she put it on. Based on its movements, the First Collar extracted mana from Madame Wyss and spread it across the entire world."

True. With my eyes, I had seen the lights moving in a fashion that matched the description. "So…what does that mean?"

"I think that mana was used to remove the collars from all the Yethma across Mesteria. Perhaps Madame Wyss wasn't killed by a fatal enchantment but perished because…she couldn't endure all the mana being pumped out of her."

Her words sank in. The First Collar didn't have the power to kill. It was only a device that extracted mana from the wearer. My eyes widened. "You mean Vatis never planned on taking a life after all?"

"Yes. Just like how the part about the collar being closed forever was a lie, the part about the wearer's body being left to rot was also an empty threat." Her hand continued massaging my grilled pork shoulder. "I believe that Madame Wyss truly braced herself for death when she decided to sit on that chair. But if she were gone, she wouldn't be able to protect Mister Shravis anymore. Which was why she used her own arm as a material to craft that ring—the ring that granted her son healing abilities close to immortality."

My heart broke a little. "Oh… I see. That's the reason her right arm was missing."

The ring had been adorned with a gem that seemed to be a diamond. Diamonds were made with carbon. It should be feasible to use her arm as the raw material.

“At Madame Wyss’s level, it should have been effortless for her to regenerate her own arm. However, she didn’t do that. It must be because by regenerating her limb, the amount of mana that should have dwelled in her amputated arm would return to her body.”

Her statement reminded me that magic remained infused in the remains of Yethma. The mana of mages was distributed throughout their entire bodies. Therefore, Yethma bones, remains harvested from mage bodies, could wield residual mana and enhance the effects of ristae.

“Then that ring…is something similar to Naut’s shortswords, huh?” I muttered.

“It should be, yes. Like his twin shortswords, powerful magic is infused inside that ring—which means Madame Wyss lost an equal amount of power.”

I realized what she wanted to say.

The detective had arrived at a certain truth at the very end of the case—a truth that was heartbreakingly cruel for Shravis.

“In other words, Wyss passed away…because she was overly reckless in her attempts to protect Shravis…” I muttered weakly.

Ultimately, Jess couldn’t fully withhold her tears because I heard her sniffling softly. “If the one who sat on that chair was Mister Shravis or me… No, if Madame Wyss at least took a seat while having command over her full powers… We could have come out without losing anyone along the way.”

Her voice was nasally. She pressed her forehead against my back and rubbed it against my skin. “Mister Pig, if only I were more intelligent. If I managed to become the kind of *ace detectife* you described, then… Even if that’s too much to ask, I could have at least noticed that Mister Shravis was acting abnormally much earlier. I only needed to be just a little bit more competent to avoid things coming to this!”

I shook my head. “Jess, you’re an admirably intelligent girl. At the end of the day, we wouldn’t have known whether Vatis’s warning was true or not until someone tested it by sitting on the throne. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Furthermore, even Shravis’s own mother couldn’t perceive his alarming change—how in the world were you supposed to know? On the topic of missing the warning signs, I share the blame too. I’m his friend, after all.”

Jess sobbed uncontrollably. I wasn’t sure what the right things

to say were. Gently, I continued, “It’s not your fault, Jess. I was the one who was overly obsessed with pursuing the truth. I ended up rushing ahead too quickly. We should have had a proper discussion with Shravis first and searched for a solution together.”

If we hadn’t found the First Collar, tonight’s worst-case scenario wouldn’t have come to pass. The same thing could be said about the Destruction Spear incident. In a world where we hadn’t retrieved it, Hortis would have survived. Though I knew this was me speaking in hindsight, I still couldn’t stop feeling frustrated at myself. We’d succeeded at arriving at the truth every time, which we excelled at. However, when it came to how we handled that truth…we were lousy to the point of labeling it as nightmarish.

Letting out choked sobs, Jess shook her head fiercely. “It’s not your fault at all, Mister Pig. The one truth doesn’t belong to anyone… Pursuing the truth should always be the right thing to do.”

Those words rang a bell. I soon recalled that it was a line I’d said to her a long time ago.

I considered it. *Let’s take our current situation as an example. If it’s true that Wyss could have avoided her untimely fate, should Shravis learn about it?*

On the topic of truths, the same can be said for the way Marquis passed away. As a father, he begged for the lives of his family to be spared. He was crying, insisting we kill him for his son’s sake, before he perished. Shravis remains oblivious to this fact. Marquis has forbidden us to share this truth with him, but a part of me wants to tell Shravis right now, after everything he’s gone through.

That was when it hit me. *I’m a hypocrite. In the end, I’m also monopolizing the truth that shouldn’t belong to anyone and am trying to use it for my own convenience.*

Following this thought, I recalled yet another truth we hadn’t shared with Shravis. On the night of his coronation, Wyss had shown a moment of weakness in front of Jess after she’d left the dinner banquet. She’d told us how she truly felt.

“My wish…is that Shravis finds happiness. I could never tell him that directly. As the queen mother, it is something I mustn’t say. But as Shravis’s mother, I…I could never—never—care less about him becoming a great king.”

However, the last words Wyss had left behind had been these instead.

“Become a great king, my son.”

Become a great king, she’d said, foisting a heavy burden on his shoulders. Because of that, she’d likely been unable to tell him her true feelings even during her final moments. She had literally rather died than ask him to find happiness, which was her real wish.

To Wyss, cutting off her right arm and handing it over as a ring of protection had likely been the only way she could express her love.

I sighed. The love of parents was almost always a tricky thing—it was clumsy and rarely ever got across properly to their children.

Casting down my eyes briefly, I muttered, “Maybe pursuing the truth isn’t the most important thing.”

Jess let out a “Huh?” of surprise.

I deeply etched this lesson into my heart as I said, “When the truth is hidden, and you have to search for it, it’s pretty much too late by that point. So what actually matters is probably sharing the truth without hogging it all to yourself.”

There was no response. Jess appeared to be slowly digesting my words.

I continued, “The fatal mistake Shravis made during this incident wasn’t the fact that his plot was exposed. Rather, it was how he decided to monopolize the truth, deceive the Liberators and us, and try to solve everything by himself. The same can be said for Sanon’s scheme. His blunder wasn’t how he failed to fully eliminate the royal family. It was wrong of him to decide to end the monarchy with brute force and make that choice all by himself.”

“I think…you have a point there.” Jess blew her nose into her handkerchief.

A detective’s role was to see through the truth. But the world would be a much simpler place if you didn’t hide the truth from the beginning. At the very least, we should have been candid with our friends who we trusted.

Say, if I tell everything to Shravis—if I tell him all the truths about

his mother and father, would he reconsider his policies, even if a little? I…hope he does.

She must've read the narration because Jess whispered, "Do you think that everything can work out somehow…?" She sniffled. "Do you think we can make this country a happy place?"

In a world where even her own happiness was fleeting, her heart went to the happiness of the entire nation. *It's just like Jess to think that,* I thought fondly.

"I'm sure we can," I promised her. Our situation was challenging, like a maze, but it wasn't as if there weren't any ways out. "The Yethma have been freed from their collars. At the moment, we have two big missions left."

I sensed Jess nodding behind my back. "One is to reconcile the relationship between Mister Shravis and the Liberators."

Taking over from her, I continued, "And the other is to restore this world to its former glory—to find a resolution to the spercritica."

No one knew where things would proceed from here on out. In the scenario it goes badly, we might have a repeat of the Dark Ages. That said, we were powerless to affect it in any way right now.

One step at a time, we had to search for the best possible path available to us within our powerlessness. And further along that path, we had to find our own happiness as well.

Jess asked feebly, "Do you really think we can make it work out somehow?"

I replied with a firm nod. "I'm sure we can. Once we get back to the capital, we'll go up to Shravis right away and—"

"Um, that wasn't what I meant."

I blinked. "It wasn't?"

"It wasn't. What I wanted to ask was…the part about our happiness."

This was the moment when I, extremely belatedly, remembered that Jess had hounded me about our marriage. I almost couldn't believe that it had only happened two days ago—too many things had happened within an alarmingly short span of time.

"Well," I muttered lamely, "I'm sure we can make our future together work out somehow too."

"Do you really believe that?" Jess said right beside my ears. Her tone was more solemn than when she'd been concerned

about this nation's future. "Are we truly going to be all right? You aren't hiding anything from me, are you? You have made sure to share all the truths with me, right?"

I considered her question. "I mean… I suppose I might have fibbed a teeny bit."

The maiden's fingers clamped down on my back fat. She didn't question me any further about it, but I'd only just said that sharing truths was important. The right thing to do was to confess right now.

Sucking in a deep breath, I began my speech. "I said that I don't fully comprehend marriage, but I was lying. Honestly, I want to marry you super badly. If possible, I want you to share your entire lifetime with me. But being a gloomy introvert comes with some bad habits—you're royalty while I'm a pig. I thought it would be insolent of me to say something like that, so I shrank back into my shell. All the stuff about being ready was just an empty excuse to dodge the topic. You don't have to become an ace detective to get married. There are no such unreasonable requirements. Please don't be so anxious."

I twisted my neck to peer at her. Tears were in the maiden's eyes, but her mouth was wide with surprise. A thought occurred to me, and I added, "One more thing: It's also out of the question for you to become Shravis's little sister. I would never, ever tolerate you gaining an older brother other than myself. I'm the only one you can call big brother. Am I clear?"

Her gaping mouth widened even more. A moment later, Jess burst out giggling, as if she couldn't hold it back anymore. "I can't assume the roles of a wife and a little sister at the same time."

"Then it'd be great if you could go on a daily rotation, thanks. You can be my wife on even days and my little sister on odd days."

"Okay, got it. It's already past midnight, so I'm your little sister right now." She nodded to herself. "Good evening, big brother."

We haven't gotten married yet, though… But, well, the right thing to do here is to be honest and squeal like a pig!

I'm sure that we'll be all right. The future hasn't come yet—it's something to look forward *to, after all.*

It will work out somehow. We will make *it work out somehow, no matter how battered and bruised this world may be.*

Determination burning in my heart, I softly said, "I think it's

about time we get some sleep. Once we open our eyes again, morning will come. Starting from tomorrow, we will be able to take on the world again, and whenever we set our minds on something, nothing will stop us.”

Jess smiled and threw her arms around me. “Nothing can stop us… You’re right.”



“Hey, we’re staying at a fancy accommodation and all. How about we enjoy a yummy breakfast before we leave?”

“Yes, let’s! I will give you delicious fruits, Mister Pig.”

“That’d be great.”

We exchanged such banter as we fell asleep in each other’s company.

Night at the northernmost end of Mesteria, Mousskir, was still considerably quiet.

2019 CE, August 14th, Witching Hour

Mechanical beeping resounded. Nurses came and went in a flurry. The hospital ward had fallen into utter mayhem.

This was all because one of the three patients, whose chances of recovery had been considered dismal, had abruptly woken up. Only a month ago, a similar event—which had been nothing short of a miracle—had occurred at the same hospital.

After hearing the news, a girl who'd been in a separate ward came running right away.

When she arrived, the bearded man who'd opened his eyes was crying. The moment he spotted the girl, he opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, but he wasn't capable of holding a conversation right away due to intubation.

The girl hurriedly rushed back to the ward she'd originally been in. It was a private ward. The girl's younger sister was waiting for her, having raised the back of the bed to make a more comfortable seat. More precisely, she was yet another maiden who was borrowing the body of the first girl's younger sister.

"Hey, Blaise, you've got to hear this!" The girl who'd rushed in proceeded to explain the situation in a foreign tongue. Blaise—or at least, the maiden addressed as such—minutely nodded while listening attentively.

Perhaps Blaise's prayers had been heard. Having found hope, the pair embraced each other tightly in elation. Blaise decided to dedicate a new round of prayers.

The maiden prayed single-mindedly. All she ever wanted was for them to come back alive—it was the only thought that filled her heart.

Please.

Please, you must come back to this world soon.

It seems that your bodies are already at their limit. You must make haste—otherwise, you might not return in time.

Earlier, one of you returned. His name is Mister Sanon. He was in a perilous state, but he is safe.

I am also waiting for you in this world.

The remaining two of you, please hurry back here before the link between the worlds severs altogether.

Afterword (Sixth Bite)

Hello, it's been a while. Takuma Sakai here.

It's been seven months since the release of volume 5. I ended up taking a giant stride and skipped over the long, harsh winter of Aomori, not leaving any footprints for you to find along the way. My deepest apologies for keeping you waiting for so long. At the same time, I can't thank all of you enough for being so patient with me!

Now then, let's begin with some delightful news. Believe it or not...

Thanks to all your warm support, the anime adaptation of *Butareba: The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig* has been greenlit!

With the help of countless dedicated staff, the story of *Butareba* will be transformed into an animated series, which will reach even more wonderful people. Just thinking about it makes me realize how blessed I am as an author.

If it weren't for the support of everyone involved and all of my wonderful readers, such happiness wouldn't have been possible. I know I'm repeating myself, but please let me express my gratitude properly. I can never thank you enough.

I'm eagerly waiting for the day I can enjoy the anime together with all of you!

All right, it's time for some digression. After I became an author, there was actually something I was ecstatically looking forward to: being interviewed!

Getting asked questions like "What inspired you to write such a novel?" or "Why did you decide to become an author?" would be a bit embarrassing, yes, but I'm sure that anyone would fantasize about such an opportunity.

Unfortunately, no interview requests have come fluttering into my humble abode yet. March was only last month, marking the second anniversary of my debut as Takuma Sakai, the author. Despite that, I haven't been interviewed even a single time.

Just as I was thinking about this, I received a text from my

editor. It read: “Due to the distribution of pages on the flatplan, there is a lot of leeway to adjust the number of pages for the afterword according to your needs. Feel free to write two, four, or even six pages. I’ll leave it up to you!”

Those knowledgeable about the publishing process are likely aware of this, but because you have to fold paper to make books, there are apparently certain page numbers that are convenient for printing. As long as I stay within my given range, even if the afterword becomes rather lengthy, it doesn’t change the overall number of pages. (What happens is that the number of advertisements at the end of the book decreases.)

Oh, well, well, I thought. *I can just make the afterword section slightly lengthy and insert an interview within it!*

It was a stroke of genius. This was my golden opportunity!

That said, I was hesitant about taking up an entire six pages. Even in volume 5, when I used up a whole four pages for the afterword, I felt extremely remorseful. I was worried that such long rambles might be tedious for my readers. People might think that a Mister Pig who prattles on nonstop is annoying. I was stuck in a ferocious tug-of-war with myself.

Not to mention that in the afterwords until now, I’ve already written about what inspired me to write this novel and what motivated me to become an author. An interview sounds nice, but what in the world do I even talk about?

Now that I think about it, I don’t even have an interviewer present. Rather than an interview, it’s more like a session of literal self-questioning.

With a part of me thinking that maybe I should have ended this swiftly after all, I believe it’s about time we begin Takuma Sakai’s interview. I, Takuma Sakai, shall take on the role of the interviewer.

Q: Well then, I look forward to working with you today.

A: Nice to meet you. Same here. Have we possibly talked somewhere before? You don’t feel like a stranger to me.

Q: Let’s start with a question right away. What’s your favorite food?

A: Pig liver. I especially like the type that is cooked thoroughly.

Q: If you eat raw pig liver, will you become a pig in another

world where a beautiful maiden will fuss over you?

A: Please refer to the title on the spine. After taking six bites, I believe my warning is already clear enough: Cook your pig liver. You wouldn't want to experience the story of a man turned into a pig, would you?

Q: Due to social distancing, which is currently necessary, this is an online interview, and I haven't seen you in person. There is something I have to ask... I have caught wind of rumors that Takuma Sakai is a pig. But you are a human, right?

A: No, I'm a Mister Pig. My latest photograph corner in volume 1 and my Twitter icon are both self-portraits.

Q: Who are your favorite characters in this series?

A: Obviously, it's cutie-pie Jess—is what I'd like to say, but I'm also fond of cutie-pie Ceres. Now, I'm not being unfaithful, of course. I simply like everyone. I also took quite a liking to a guy like Hortis as well.

Q: You are a pig with no self-restraint, aren't you?

A: I am.

Q: Please tell me cutie-pie Jess's bust-waist-hip measurements. Heh heh heh...

A: That's a prohibited topic, I'm afraid. Though she might still grow taller, her height is 156 cm. As for her weight— Oh? It sounds like someone is knocking on my door.

Q: You cut the call for quite a long while... Are you all right?

A: I'm all right, yes. It's nothing life-threatening, at least. Please proceed with the interview.

Q: Are there any challenges in the process of writing your novel?

A: Hmm, occasionally the schedule...ends up rather tight...like, it's quite tough sometimes...perhaps.

Q: When I link the first character of every segment in your answer, it spells "H e l p." Are you all right?

A: ...I-It's a mere coincidence. As an aside, it's been decided that deep-fried pork cutlet is on the menu tonight.

Q: That sounds delicious. Do you cook?

A: Sometimes. When I cook, there are a few occasions when an idea for my novel suddenly comes to mind. I often get flashes of inspiration during leisurely activities such as walks or when I'm soaking in a hot spring as well.

Q: So far, there hasn't been any useful information besides cutie-pie Jess's height... We'll reach the end of six pages very soon. Please tell me something more meaningful.

A: In such a scenario, I think you ought to be the one who puts in more effort, Mister Interviewer.

Q: Okay then, I won't hold back. Please tell me cutie-pie Ceres's bust-waist-hip measurements. Heh heh heh...

A: No can do. Though at the moment, she is 151 cm tall.

Q: Oh no, we're already reaching the end of our allocated pages. The interview will finish soon, but there's one thing I have to ask. In the afterword of volume 4, you mentioned that the adventure will "go on for just a bit longer." How many volumes, exactly, will that be?

A: I was only borrowing that expression from one of Master Roshi's quotes, I'm afraid... Nothing has been decided about when exactly it will end, so I can't give you a precise answer. That said, I plan to properly conclude the story at a good place to leave off.

Q: Will it have a happy ending?

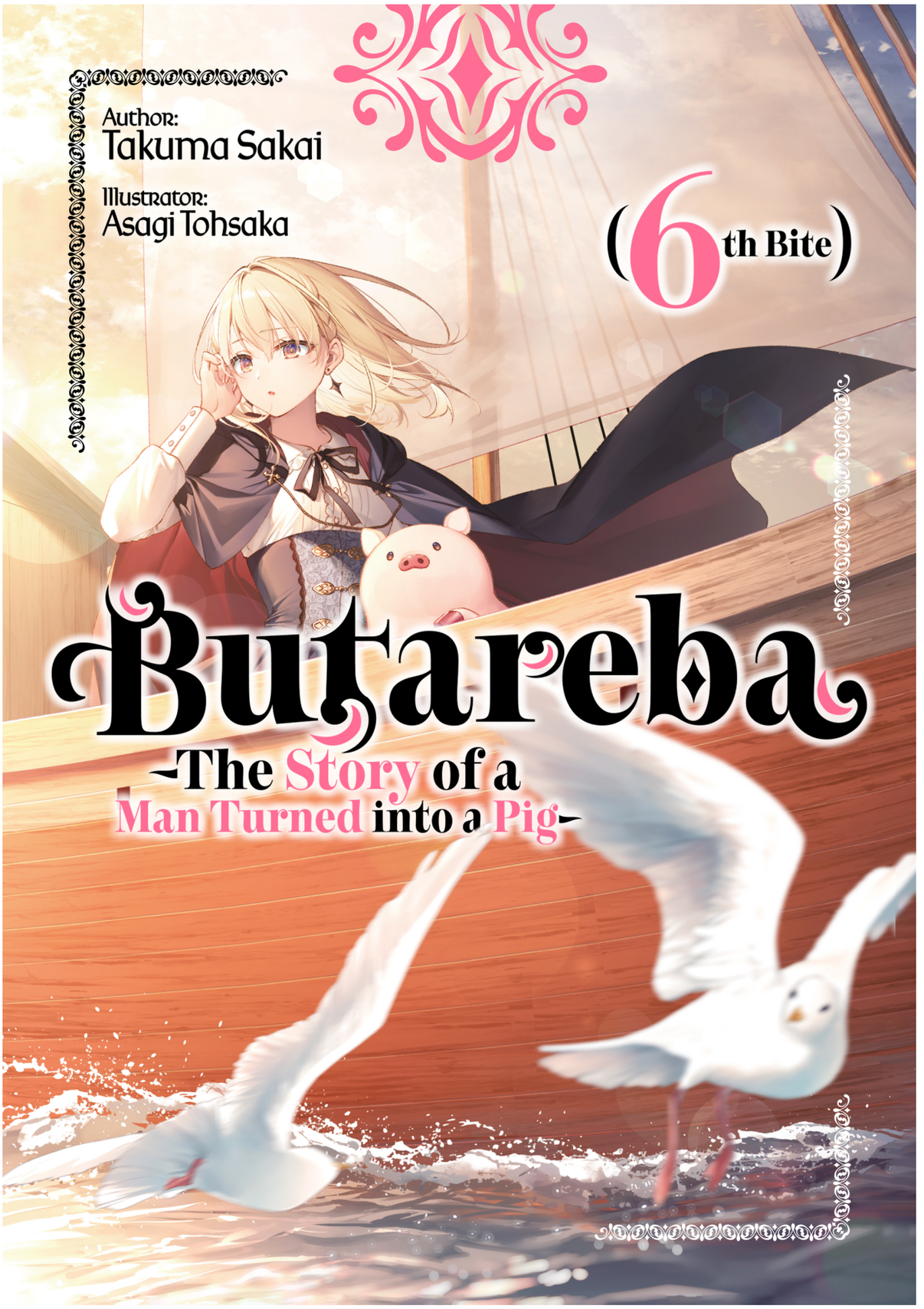
A: It definitely will, no matter what form that happy ending takes...

Q: Thank you for your time. Well then, could I have a few words for your readers to tie things up?

A: Those of you who have read all the way to the end, I'm very sorry for making you go along with such a silly charade. I will invest my all into writing volume 7 as well. I'm afraid you might have to wait a little while again, but I'd be delighted if you would be patient with me.

I hope you'll continue taking care of me and *Butareba*!

Takuma Sakai—April 2022


Author:
Takuma Sakai
Illustrator:
Asagi Tohsaka
(6th Bite)
Butareba
-The Story of a
Man Turned into a Pig-

Author: Takuma Sakai

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Butareba

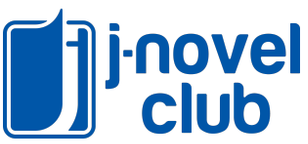
-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-

(6th Bite)


"I will definitely solve this case... I swear it in the name of my grandfather, Eavis!"
This was a serial murder referencing "The Chain Song" and simultaneously a challenge toward the royal family who wanted the collar.
With these many conditions fulfilled, the principle behind the murders was evident.
The corpses had been dealt with according to the lines of the nursery rhyme before being arranged like malicious trophies. As if that wasn't enough, each bore the *Sanguyn Cros*, which could only be carved with magic.


Butareba
-The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig-
"I'll become an *ace detectife!*"





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Butareba -The Story of a Man Turned into a Pig- Sixth Bite
by Takuma Sakai

Translated by Zihan Gao
Edited by Nicole D'Andria

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