
Magical★Explorer
9
Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim
Iris
ILLUSTRATION BY
Noboru Kannatuki


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"So I'm a demon, am I? I think it sorta makes sense."
"I don't want to hurt you all more than I already have."
Katorina (Demon Form)
Katorina
One of the main heroines in *Magical★Explorer*. Discovers she is the child of a human and a demon...


"I didn't even need my katana."
Kousuke Takioto
Levels up his attack power after receiving a new stole from Ms. Sakura.


“C’mooon, are you listening? It’s too hot, and I don’t wanna get all sweaty.”
Stef
Captain of the Morals Committee. As the Saint of Leggenze, she views all demons as the enemy, but...?


"Omigooosh ♡.
Seriously, mister,
you can't solve these ♡?
What a loser ♡."
Underwent Bratty Bitchification in the Bratty Bitch Dungeon.



Iris

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Magical★Explorer: Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim, Vol. 9

Iris

Translation by David Musto
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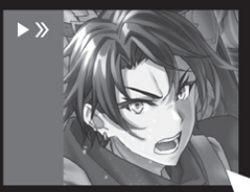
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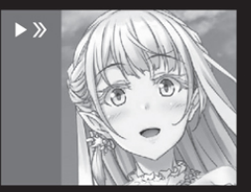
Characters

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Kousuke Takioto

The best friend character from *Magical★Explorer*. The soul of a Japanese eroge afficionado dwells within him. Possesses a unique ability.



Ludie

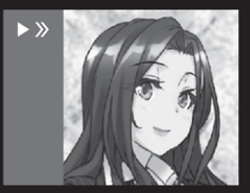
Ludivine Marie-Ange de la Tréfle.

Highborn second daughter to the emperor of the elven Tréfle Empire. A main heroine who appears on the game packaging for *Magical★Explorer*.



Nanami

A maid created to assist Dungeon Masters. Belongs to the angel race, who are few in number.



Marino Hanamura

Principal of Tsukuyomi Magic Academy, the game's main setting. Receives limited screen time in the game, so she's shrouded in mystery.



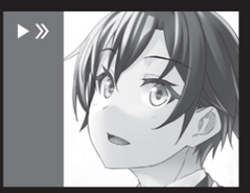
Hatsumi Hanamura

Marino Hanamura's daughter and Kousuke's second cousin. Generally very quiet and reserved. Teaches at Tsukuyomi Magic Academy.



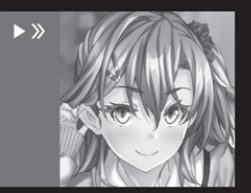
Claris

Elf who serves as Ludie's bodyguard and maid. Serious and devoted to her mistress, she has a tendency to beat herself up over her failures.



Iori Hijiri

The main character in the game version of *Magical★Explorer*. Ordinary in appearance. When developed, however, he becomes the strongest character in the game.



Yuika Hijiri

Iori Hijiri's younger stepsister. A main heroine who is featured on the game's box art. Transferred to Tsukuyomi Magic Academy.



Rina Katou

Katorina.

One of the main heroines present on the *Magical★Explorer* box art. A competitive spirit who is sensitive about her meager bust.



Monica

Monica Mercedes von Mobius.

The president of the Student Council. One of *Magical★Explorer's* Big Three and a main heroine who features on the game's packaging.



Stef

Stefania Scaglione.

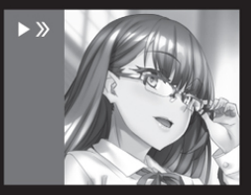
Serves as the captain of the Morals Committee. The Acting Saint from Leggenze. Although she is beautiful, compassionate, and popular with the students… is there more to her than meets the eye…?



Benito

Benito Evangelista.

Serves as the ceremonial minister, the president of the Ceremonial Committee. Despised by the students of the Academy, but beloved by eroge players.



Fran

Franziska Edda von Gneisenau.

Serves as vice president of the Student Council. An extremely earnest and diligent girl. Sees Yukine and Shion as her rivals.



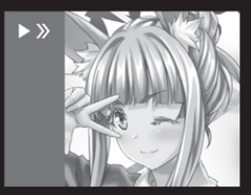
Yukine Mizumori

One of the officially recognized overpowered characters who are collectively referred to as the Big Three of *Magical★Explorer*. Lieutenant of the Morals Committee.



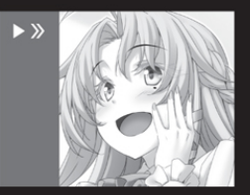
Shion Himemiya

Serves as ceremonial vice minister of the Ceremonial Committee. Always clad in a kimono instead of her uniform. Her strength is on par with the other main heroines'.



Ivy

Head of the *Tsukuyomi Academy Newspaper*. A rabbitfolk girl who's always fired up. Knows the roles the Three Committees play.



Ms. Ruija

Instructor at Tsukuyomi Magic Academy. Loose with money and indebted to the Hanamura family. Was Hatsumi's senior during their student days and challenged dungeons alongside her.



Rue Sakura

Tsukuyomi Academy's librarian. Has cared for many students over her long tenure at the Academy. Her true identity is…


CONFIG

—Katorina's Perspective—

"There's something we've been hiding about the Three Committees," President Monica said to us in the Moon Palace.

This confession wasn't news to the rank and file of the Three Committees. Based on the incident Ivy had kicked off the other day, it was clear we were being kept in the dark about something.

"After Benito, Stef, and I talked this over, we decided to tell whoever wants to know."

At this, gasps of shock escaped from a section of the group.

"However, we have two conditions," Monica said, holding up her pointer finger. She then gazed at us all.

"One—you'll need to clear the sixtieth layer to hear this information."

Most students didn't accomplish this until they were nearly graduated, and at present, only a handful of the third-years had even managed to do it.

Monica raised her middle finger while gauging our reactions.

"Two—I'll only tell those of you who brace for serious injuries and, potentially, death."

"Like that student in the Morals Committee," added Anemone the inventor.

Most of the items Anemone made were perverted and completely worthless, but she came up with something useful every now and then.

"And who, pray tell, would that be?"

Minister Benito's younger sister, Gabriella, who worked with Iori frequently on the student council, didn't appear to have any idea who this student was. I didn't know who they were, either, but it looked like the second-years had someone in mind.

"Right. None of you first-years have met them yet. They're a third-year student in the Morals Committee. They're away from campus right now, dealing with a separate matter."

So that was why we'd never seen them before. I whispered to Ludie beside me.

"You've never seen them, either, Ludie?"

"No, though Yukine did give me a brief overview."

As we chatted, President Monica raised her voice, drawing all eyes back to her.

"Listen up, everyone. There's something I want to make extra clear."

She fixed us with a stare.

"Even if you're strong enough to clear the sixtieth layer in theory, you'll need protection from me, Benito, or Stef to scrape by. Personally, I'd rather you be ready for the *seventieth* floor instead, but oh well."

Yuika was the first to react.

"Huh, you're calling it 'protection' not 'backup.'"

"That's right. Honestly, if you only have the bare minimum strength for the clear, you'll just be a hindrance."

Deadweight even at that level? To me, that felt like a hard barrier to break through, but some didn't seem to think so—namely, Takioto, Iori, and the vice presidents of the Three Committees.

"Hmmmm. I've already cleared the sixtieth floor, so would I be able to hear all this right away? Yukine, Fran, you must want to hear as well, no?" said Vice Minister Shion of the Morals Committee, signaling the other two vice presidents with her eyes. Yukine and Fran both voiced their agreement.

"Wait, wait, hold on! I wanna know, too!"

Jumping into the conversation was the person who had likely spurred this meeting—Ivy, president of the *Tsukuyomi Academy Newspaper*.

"Sure, we're fine telling you all. Right, Monica? Miss Stefania?"

"*Haah*... I guess. If we have to."

President Monica still didn't seem thrilled about telling anyone the truth.

"I'm sure Yukine and the others are fine, but...," Saint Stef said, looking at Takioto.

"But what?" Minister Benito asked.

"I can't help but think we'll just have to give the same explanation again soon."

Minister Benito chuckled in agreement.

After that, Monica thanked everyone for coming and adjourned the meeting. Apparently, there had been only one item on her agenda.

Following this, the first-years in the Three Committees came together.

No sooner had we bunched up than Kousuke Takioto threw his arm around Iori's shoulders, starting to poke and prod those squishy cheeks of his.

"Iori, buddy! I heard you've been making a lot of progress through the Tsukuyomi Dungeon."

Iori gave a bashful little smile at the praise…

"He-he-he, I've been working pretty hard. But I heard you've been getting pretty strong yourself, Kousuke."

Kousuke and Iori were the standouts of the first-years, racing to the top thanks to their rapid growth and fighting strength. Ludie, Yuika, Nanami, Gabby, Class Rep, and even Orange were sharpening their skills, too, encouraged by the two boys' rise.

"Make sure you aren't getting up to something on your own now, Kousuke Takioto."

As the two boys talked, President Monica showed up behind them. Resting a hand on Takioto's shoulder, she pressured him with a big smile on her face, driving her point home.

"What gives? Why am I getting singled out here?" he asked.

"If anyone's going to make a mess, it's you," she insisted.

"Hey, Iori's liable to get into trouble, too."

"M-m-me?!" Iori exclaimed in surprise, not expecting Kousuke to rope him into the conversation, too.

"You've got a point there. Iori? Don't do anything weird, got it?"

"P-President?!"

As I listened to the three chat away and watched everyone around them laugh, I suddenly thought about myself.

I wasn't smart like Ludie. I still had a ways to go to be as strong as Yuika and the others. Even Nanami outclassed me in terms of Thief skills, and I had been useless during the Book of Raziel incident. I also wasn't very good at looking at things optimistically like Gabriella was.

And that got me wondering: Did I have the strength needed to belong here? Was it really okay for me to be here?

“I’ve got some stuff I gotta get to,” I said to Ludie, before masking my presence and leaving the room.

Time to head to the dungeon. I wanted to catch up to everyone as best I could. I had to get stronger. I had to hone my skills.


CONFIG

Every morning, I would get in some training and take a shower afterward. Cleaning off was an especially vital part of my routine. Who would want to do anything while drenched in sweat?

After getting in my training and showering for the day, I flopped down on the sofa in the air-conditioned living room.

The forecast said today would be a "good day to hang laundry," and sure enough, it had been a scorcher out there. My run had been particularly hellish. Although I could enchant my stole with ice to keep myself cool while running, I had stopped doing this after getting some advice from Yukine: "*You're not always going to be able to use that enchantment, right? Shouldn't you get used to moving around in the heat just in case?*"

In battle, I imagined there would be times when I would need to swap elemental enchantments, depending on the opponent. And what if I was in a desert-themed dungeon but the enemy was only weak to light? Considering those possibilities, Yukine was absolutely right about my needing to get used to the heat.

That was why I used a bunch of different elemental enchantments while training. Though the area around the waterfall where I did my practice swings was always very comfortable, almost like it had its own natural air-conditioning.

A lot of time had passed since my morning training session, so it must have gotten even hotter outside. If I opened up a window right now, I would definitely take a blast of heat to my face.

Right as I switched gears to think about what to do next, I heard the living room door open.

It was Yuika. She complained loudly about the heat as she sat down on the sofa.

She must have been outside. She was wiping off the sweat on her neck with a towel and holding a soda-flavored ice pop with a sword drawn on the packaging. I'd had that brand of ice pop before; it was shaped like a sword, so I'd joked that it was like a

literal “ice sword” from a video game or something. They were pretty tasty.

Yuika opened the ice pop and stuck her hand out at me.

“Here, enjoy this present from a drop-dead beauty.”

KOUSUKE GOT THE ICE SWORD—not! Yuika was actually offering me the empty wrapper. Her garbage.

Little did she know, however, that some people wouldn’t consider this garbage at all.

Among the first-class perverts I knew of back in Japan, some would have been wild enough to slobber all over this wrapper of hers.

“Ah, well, if you insist…”

Of course, I couldn’t possibly lick the thing myself. I took it from her and threw it out.

“I didn’t expect you to actually throw it out for me, thank you. You can have a bite if you want.”

She held the ice pop in front of my face, and I opened my mouth big and wide. However, she immediately yanked it back away from me.

“What the heck?! I could have bitten my tongue off, you know! Why would you do that?”

“I was just kidding, geez.”

She held the ice pop out again, and I took a regular-sized bite.

If I had to compare it to something, I’d say it was reminiscent of G*ri Gari Kun ice pops. The texture and taste were very similar. If G*ri Gari Kun came out with a sword version of their ice pops, it would probably look like this.

Yuika took a bite of the sword, then looked out the window and mumbled something.

“Uhhh, so, Takioto, I feel like I’ve been seeing Ivy at the house a lot lately… Am I just imagining things?”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing.”

I took my eyes off Yuika and looked out the window.

There stood Nanami, wearing a helmet reading SAFETY FIRST, along with Ivy, her rabbit ears popping out of the top of her helmet.

So, like, if something actually did fall on Ivy’s head, then what the heck would happen to her ears?

“Takioto, you did something, didn’t you?” Yuika said, staring at the pair.

They had unrolled what appeared to be a blueprint? Maybe a schematic? They were also talking about something, but I couldn’t hear what it was.

“Oh, I mean. I feel like maybe I did, now that you mention it, but also maybe not?”

When I said this, Yuika glared at me.

“Oh really…? Whatever, that can come later. More importantly, what do you think they’re doing out there?”

Ivy pointed a finger at the blueprint, and Nanami shook her head, pointing to a different area.

“Judging by what we can see from here, I’d guess they’re doing some sort of construction or repair work?”

“That’s what I thought, too. But if that’s what they’re really doing…actually no, that’s not the point. No matter what they’re up to, I’ve got a terrible feeling about it.”

“Yup.”

In my mind, Nanami, Sis, Anemone, and Ms. Ruija were the elite four of bad omens. The next two after that were Gabby and Ivy. Anyway…

“Might as well ask them directly,” I said, standing up and opening one of the living room windows. The two girls noticed me before the stifling outside air could come into the living room.

“Oh, Master.”

“Good morning, my lord.”

“…My *what* now?” Yuika said from behind me.

I mean, yeah, hearing someone call me that out of nowhere was going to be a shocker.

“Ivy, cool it with the ‘my lord’ stuff.”

“Then what should I call you instead…? Chief? Boss? Master? Godfather?”

“Chief is a good option, but may I suggest ‘my dearest’ as well?” Nanami added.

“None of the above, thanks.”

When I said this, Nanami hugged herself and wriggled her body.

“*Nnah* ♥! *Ahn*… ♥! Chieeeef ♥!”

“…*Tch*, making it sound sexy isn’t going to change my mind.”

That was a close one. Nanami's voice was too damn good. A moment too late, and I might have just given her permission.

"In that case, may I assume Miss Yuika will call you 'my dearest' instead?"

"Where did that come from? That wasn't what we were talking about at all!"

Not only that, but she'd moved on from "chief" straight to "my dearest." Part of me did want to hear Yuika call me that, though. Still, it was never going to top her calling me "Big Bro"!

"To get back on topic for a second, what should I call you, then?" Ivy asked.

"My honest answer would be to just call me the same thing you always have."

"So, Takky? Isn't that a little too simple?"

Weren't you the one who came up with that nickname?!

"Also it feels way too weird to hear you sound so polite, so go back to talking like normal. It would be a hassle to have people ask where the sudden change came from, too."

"If that's what you want, Takky."

Ivy nodded begrudgingly.

With the question of what Ivy would call me settled, Nanami spoke up.

"Now, what can I help you with, Master? If you are looking for a spare helmet, there are more in Miss Hatsumi's room."

"Right, right. Those yellow helmets are just so cool, y'know. I wanted to put one on, point my finger, and start saying things like *'Get to work'*... Wait, that's not it! I didn't stick my head out here because I wanted one of those!"

"Why exactly are the helmets in Hatsumi's room?"

Yuika was absolutely right. What exactly was going on with Sis's room? It had seemed normal the few times I'd gone in there to wake her up, but now it felt like I had a better chance of finding her in my room instead. Could I even call it "my room" at this point?

For the time being, that wasn't important. The one thing I could say for certain was that Sis was involved with what they were doing.

"If you aren't after a helmet, then what do you need, Master?"

“Oh, I just was wondering what exactly you were doing out here,” I said, pointing to the blueprint-looking paper in Nanami and Ivy’s hands. Seeing the two of you holding that and talking among yourselves makes me real nervous, okay?

“Ah, this? I simply thought I would have everyone do *that thing* for me.”

“…Uh, so I have absolutely no idea what that means?”

Same here, Yuika. Okay, we needed someone to explain what was going on.

“All right, so what’s this construction stuff about? Are you erecting a memorial museum or something?”

“As discerning as ever, Master. I knew you would understand. Yes, I thought erecting a Nanami Memorial might be a good way to preserve your achievements for future generations.”

“Why is it a ‘Nanami Memorial,’ then? It should be a memorial of me, right? Not that I want one.”

“It would still have some of your information, too, just pushed off onto a tiny little display in the corner.”

It wasn’t very difficult for me to imagine what Yuika was talking about. Sure, there’d be some stuff on me, but it wouldn’t be the main focus.

“Incidentally, Miss Yuika, I was trying to decide whether I should portray you as a younger sister who starts to sexily fawn on Master after he gets a girlfriend and you start to worry he’ll be taken from you, or a sexy younger sister with an aggressive streak who is unable to live life without her big brother.”

“Whaaat? Yuiyui… That sounds awesome!”

“None of that sounds awesome in the slightest! I mean, it’s pure fiction. If this is a memorial museum, you should write down what really happened, thank you very much!” Yuika continued her tirade. “And what is all that sexy talk about anyway? Huh?! Why are you trying to make me out to be a pervert? I already get enough of that from Anemone and Takioto as it is!”

Her rant was a bit odd. She should have refuted the idea I was a pervert, too… Nah, that was never going to happen.

“The battle around Master was magnificent. If I had been hit directly by the Yuika Flashing Snippy Scissors Eye Poke, I would’ve been done for.”

“Yuiyui, you gotta work a bit harder on those names of yours…”

“That move’s got a real cute name for something so vicious.”

I mean, she’d be going for her opponent’s eyes, right?

“Uh, if I could jump in here for a moment?! I can’t use any attack like that, and I don’t even remember fighting you in the first place!”

“Oh? Back in the dungeon during the Newspaper Club incident, you threw out scissors, while I threw out rock. The story goes you used that on Master’s butt to—”

“Yes, yes, you’re right. I lost that fight, I admit it! Please don’t make me remember!” Yuika said, glancing over at me.

Ngh, what was that? I felt my anus twinge.

“So anyway! ANYWAY! What are you two doing?”

Yuika forced the conversation back on track. Nanami then nodded.

“Oh, yes, the truth is, I thought I would check everyone’s understanding of Master with a test. If I were to come up with a name for it, I suppose it would be the Master Comprehension Check?”

“Checking our understanding of him?”

“This all started when Ivy told me she wished to know more about Master.”

I glanced at Ivy, and she said, “Yup!” She could have just asked *me* if there was anything she wanted to know. Though I guess some stuff was hard to ask about.

“That was when a thought came to me: Do we all have the knowledge of Master that we should?”

“You really don’t need that, actually.”

And wasn’t this beside the point? Ivy was the one who wanted to know more about me, so why was Nanami focusing on everyone else?

“I was unable to contain myself. It bothered me so much, I only slept ten times the whole week.”

Nanami yawned, looking quite exhausted. But Yuika wasn’t going to let her nonsense slide.

“Uhhh, hold up, that number’s clearly off, right? You can’t have slept that much without throwing in some naps.”

“Sounds pretty healthy, if anything.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself.

“As such, I decided to test everyone in the Hanamura House on how well they understand Master. Hence, the Master Comprehension Check!”

So that was what was going on. I said the first thing that came to mind:

“I still don’t really get it… I need a simpler explanation.”

“We’ll be doing a point-deduction style test that will evaluate how much each of us knows about Master. An extravagant prize awaits whoever can answer everything accurately.”

Yuika instantly shot her hand into the air. That was fast. Quick enough to give an elementary schoolkid raising his hand to show off on Parent’s Day a run for their money.

“Takioto, I just remembered I’ve got something I really need to do!” Yuika said.

What a strange coincidence. I was just wishing I could remember some pressing business to attend to as well. All the signs here pointed to some extremely stupid nonsense.

Yuika turned on her heel and tried to leave, but Ivy stopped her.

“We were just looking to find some participants, with Master and Miss Yuika already locked in to appear.”

“Why am I are already confirmed to appear?! Ivy, let me go!”

“Sorry, Yuiyui. This is for your own good.”

I had no idea how Yuika was supposed to benefit from this, but more importantly…

“Wait, I have to join in on this, too?”

Wouldn’t the test be pointless if I was taking it? Did she want to see how much I knew about myself or something?

“But of course. I have also drawn up a plan to ‘accidentally’ bring Miss Ludie over…”

Time to pray Ludie could escape.

“With that in mind, let us reconvene in an hour. I shall go over to Miss Ludie,” Nanami said, taking off her helmet and putting it away in her subspace item bag before going off somewhere. I assumed she was heading for where Ludie was.

Huh, so *now* she takes off the helmet?

“Ummm, Ivy? Why are you tying me up?!”

I turned to face the source of the voice and saw Yuika, bound by rope. She had been tied up in a way that accentuated her boobs—what a view!

Ivy was lying down on the ground, her helmet removed.

“Huh? Why did I tie you up? ’Cause Nanamin said Takky would be energized if he saw you like that, duh.”

“Can you not say that like it’s the most obvious answer in the world? It makes me sound like a freak.”

Yuika glared daggers at me. A chill ran down my spine. Though I supposed you could say that counted as being “energized.”

“O-oh yeah, that remains me, I’ve seen you a lot over here lately. Why’s that?” I asked.

The quickest solution here was to change the subject. I decided to ignore Yuika’s look.

“Ohhh, that,” Ivy began. “Nanamin and Ms. Hatsumi lent me a closet and a space in the attic.”

I had a hard time deciding if Ivy was supposed to be a burglar or Dora*mon here. Hold on, though.

“You shouldn’t sound so happy about that. At least roll out a floor mattress in Nanami or Yuika’s room instead.”

“Why are throwing my name out there?” Yuika said. “I’m supposed to be the one giving her permission for that, right?”

Listening to Yuika, I suddenly remembered something.

“Wait, I thought we talked about you living in the apartment building, Ivy?”

I was pretty sure we’d talked recently about having her move into the same apartment building where Ms. Ruija and Ms. Sakura were staying.

“The apartment’s nice and all, but when I complained about not being able to rush to your side if anything happened to you, Ms. Hatsumi said she’d give me the attic.”

I understood now. The stuff she was doing was technically all related to me, then.

“Okay, we get why you’re always hanging around here; now could you undo all these ropes, please?!”

Ivy didn’t really seem like she was going to let Yuika go, so I figured I could do it for her.

“Takioto, you better not touch anywhere you shouldn’t, okay?”

“Like hell I would!”

Touching her skin a little bit was okay, though, right?

◇

We met up with Nanami again, and she brought us inside a building on the Hanamura property I didn’t really recognize. From what I had heard, it had been remodeled to be used for storage or something. Did that explain the blueprints? The helmets?



Ivy and Nanami both got up in front of podiums for game show hosts.

“Just how well do you know Master Kousuke Takioto? As his maid, it is only natural that I know him very well. Do you think I could give him the best possible service otherwise? Of course not. Maids, you see, are love—”

“Um, Nanami? Can we get the ball rolling already?” Yuika chimed in. She was sitting in her assigned seat, resting her head in her hand with her eyes narrowed. Unsurprisingly, she appeared to have no interest in participating.

“Then, I will leave things there for now and get right into the main event. Today, I have gathered together the people most likely to have a thorough understanding of my Master.”

“Wooo-hooo! A big round of applause!” Ivy shouted.

It must have been her job to support the host. I understood she was just trying to liven up the place with her clapping, but…

I turned and looked across the area.

The audience consisted of me, Yuika, Yukine, Katorina, and an empty seat. And Yukine was the only other person clapping here. I really couldn’t believe the other two were going along with this at all. Incidentally, Sis’s name was on the nameplate in front of the empty seat. I assumed that something had kept her from participating.

That aside, one of the contestants was obviously not part of our usual crowd.

“Why am I even here? I don’t know anything about Takioto, and I don’t even want to, either,” murmured Katorina.

Apparently, Ludie wasn’t able to make it. From what I gathered, she had some imperial elven business to attend to, and Nanami had dragged Katorina along instead because she’d happened to be with Ludie at the time. I was actually impressed Nanami had managed to get Katorina here at all.

“When I reminded Katorina, in a threatening tone, of all the advice you’ve given her, she readily came along, Master.”

“Wait, so you just outright threatened her?!” I turned to Katorina. “You can just leave, y’know.”

“Eh, I wanted to talk to Yukine, and I’m not doing anything today, so I’ll play along,” she replied kindly. Also, apparently the

comment about threats was a total lie, and Nanami had politely asked her to join.

Y'know, Nanami had a real bad habit of stretching the truth when she talked to me, didn't she? Though I guessed it was fine, since she made sure to drop the nonsense when it mattered.

That said, I was more curious about what exactly Katorina wanted to talk with Yukine about. It was just about the time for Katorina's event to start up, so perhaps this was the advice-seeking conversation that kicked it off. While I had largely prepared for her event, it would probably be best for me to be ready to act at a moment's notice. I needed to explain everything to Ms. Sakura for starters, along with Yukine, if things really went sideways.

Nanami cleared her throat as I got lost in thought. Seemed like she had more to say.

"Now then, to get back to the topic at hand. I have prepared a fabulous prize for whoever performs well: a pass to use Kousuke Takioto however you want for a whole day! There are also consolation prizes, so I hope everyone is looking forward to participating."

"This is the first I'm hearing about that," I said. "I mean, getting me for a day is totally worthless, right?"

Though to be fair, given all the trouble I caused the girls and how much they had done for me, I was okay with them using me however they wanted. For some reason, Yukine seemed a lot more excited to participate after hearing what the prize would be.

"Now for the rules! I have prepared a series of multiple-choice questions that any maid serving Master should naturally know the answer to."

"Uh, none of us here are maids, though?" Katorina quipped. Perfect, I really hoped she would keep those retorts coming.

Nanami ignored her and kept going. This was how it always went.

"There are five questions in total. I would describe this as less of a quiz and more of a proper test. So all of you will try your best to answer all five questions. I shall check the answers one question at a time and subtract points accordingly."

“Hrm. So the way it works is, you give us a question, and we all answer it. And after checking the answers, we move on to the next one?” Yukine asked, to which Nanami nodded.

“That’s correct, Miss Yukine. Furthermore, you will need to use not only your sight but also your smell, touch, and the rest of your five senses on these problems, making instant comebacks quite possible.”

“If the scoring is based on subtracting points, instant comebacks don’t make a lot of sense, do they?” Yuika asked me, but it wasn’t like I could make any sense of it, either.

“Additionally, contestants are not permitted to attack Master or the person giving the questions.”

“Why are you talking like there’s a chance of getting attacked? And why did you include me in the list of potential victims?” I asked.

Hearing that made me feel nothing but sheer terror. Hey, Katorina! I heard that disappointed tongue click!

“Now, allow me to go into detail about how points will be subtracted. Please look at this.”

Nanami pulled up a hologram in front of her.

“Let’s see, at the top is ‘Nanami-Class.’ From there, we have ‘First-Class Maid,’ ‘Second-Class Maid,’ ‘Novice Maid,’ and finally, ‘Ms. Ruija.’ What’s all this, then?”

“Everyone will start at the very top, in ‘Nanami-Class,’ and each mistake will take you down a rank, from First-Class Maid to Second-Class Maid, and then Novice Maid. Getting everything wrong will put you at Ms. Ruija level.”

“C’mon, leave Ms. Ruija out of this! Just make the bottom rank ‘regular person’ or something!” I said.

“It makes no freaking sense for us all to start out in ‘Nanami-Class,’” said Katorina.

“I see what’s going on here. You’re setting yourself up as the person who knows Takioto the most, huh, Nanami?” remarked Yuika.

Hold on a second—the setup of this game was almost exactly the same as a certain price-checking quiz show they had in Japan. This world wasn’t getting TV channels from Earth, was it?

“Now, let’s get to the first question. Take it way, Miss Ivy.”

“You got it! The first question is…this!”

Next, Ivy took out something. It was…

“A teapot?”

“You are correct, Master.”

Right as Nanami spoke, the words BLACK TEA appeared on the hologram.

“The first area being checked is black tea. One teapot contains tea Master has brewed himself. The other is a regular store-bought teabag brewed to be as delicious as possible.”

“I get it—Takioto’s black tea does taste really good. Pretty much a gimme.”

Yukine had praised my tea. I was delighted. She always complimented me, but I was still overjoyed. Happy enough to let out a weird sound while standing on my head with glee. Shoot, I couldn’t let myself bask in this feeling, I had to compliment Yukine back, fast.

“The green tea you brew for me tastes just as great, Yukine.”

As Yukine and I swapped compliments, Katorina sighed.

“Uh, pretty sure I’ve never even had his black tea before.”

“Don’t worry, Takioto’s black tea is really good, so just choosing whichever’s tastier should be enough.”

Yuika always complimented me whenever I prepared her tea, too, which really made me feel like it was worth the effort.

“Now then, you will be using your taste and smell to discern the truth. We have prepared blindfolds for you, so please put them on before drinking the two teas and making your decision. That just leaves the brewing next. Come over here, Master.”

Wait, I was brewing the tea? I supposed that was obvious.

“The Maid Team serving Master directly shall guide you and handle any miscellaneous tasks. I ask you all to act in accordance with their instructions.”

Oh, right, the Maid Team. A group Nanami had formed to assist with her duties. While I knew the group was technically acting on my behalf, I had a feeling they would get roped into her nonsense pretty often.

One of the members of the Maid Team led me to a designated area. There, I brewed several cups’ worth of black tea, and when I returned to the original room, only Nanami and Ivy were still there.

“Thank you, Master. Let’s get started, then. We have a live video feed from the tasting room.”

Nanami worked the hologram to show Yuika and the others. The members of the Maid Team were beside them.

That said, what the heck was with the eye masks the girls were all wearing? This wasn’t some bachelorette party or anything, so why the novelty mask with weird eyes on them? Anyway, I made sure to snap a picture.

Obviously, my mental quip didn’t reach the girls in the other room. The girls were each handed a cup of tea and were told it was cup A.

They all smelled the tea before taking a sip. After a brief pause, they did the same for cup B.

Once they were finished drinking, they were then shown into a room that corresponded to the cup they had chosen. It appeared that the three of them were all in agreement, selecting cup B.

Shortly afterward, Nanami announced how she would reveal the answer: She would enter into the correct room herself. That settled it—this was exactly like that *Celebrity T*ste Check* show they had in Japan.

And now, for the answer.

“Congratulations, you are all correct.”

Nanami walked into the room where the girls were waiting.

We all returned to the original area and sat down in the same seats as before. If someone got demoted to First-Class Maid, would the tables or chairs change somehow? “*Demoted* to First-Class Maid” isn’t something you hear every day, huh?

“While circumstances made it impossible for you to participate in the first question, naturally you will be joining in for the next question, Master.”

“Why would I participate in this myself…?”

It seemed completely meaningless to me.

“Now then, let us continue. The second question is extremely obvious, so anticipate a one hundred percent correct answer ratio. Also, the question concerns something extremely adorable, so I guarantee you will all be pleased.”

“‘Adorable’? What the hell does that mean…?”

“Don’t worry, it really is super adorbs, promise!”

Ivy answered in a manner that didn't actually answer anything at all.

"Something cute about Takioto, hmm? Like how after running twenty-five miles, he'll ask if you want to go around again?"

"Wait, you do that for real?"

You don't, Katorina? Whoa, what's up with that look of disgust in your eyes…?

"Something cute about Takioto? Maybe how he looks really happy when he eats?"

"Good point, Yuika. Takioto always makes everything look delicious."

If Yukine thought the same thing, then it must've really shown on my face.

In any case, that wouldn't really serve as a good question here. It wasn't going to be, like, pick which picture of me shows me eating or anything.

"I should have known you three would be so sharp. Given that all of you seem right on the mark already, answering is just a formality, but the second question is about butts."

Ivy produced a model of what looked like a woman's butt. Whew, those were some scanty panties!

"The hell was all that about 'right on the mark,' then?"

"Katorina's right—that isn't remotely related to what everyone was talking about."

It wasn't even in the same ballpark, instead veering off in a completely different direction, and honestly, I didn't know anyone out there who could've guessed the topic of this question!

"Speaking of butts, though, Nanami has a point. Takioto's got a pretty tight butt. It's cute," Yukine said, looking at my behind. Hold up, Yukine was saying I had a nice butt?

"Oh…"

It was as though something had struck me. I hadn't felt this way in a while.

I had received a mandate from heaven.

I needed to maintain this ass of mine. Was I supposed to add hip exercises to my training routine? Integrating some yoga might not have been a bad idea.

"Hey, Yuika? What should I do if I'm looking to improve my waist?" I asked.

“Have you lost it? Don’t sit there being stupid and quip back already! Knowing Nanami, we’ve got a torrent of dumb setups coming our way!”

R-right. I put the butt calisthenics aside.

“Butts?! What do you mean ‘butts’?!”

“The body part that’s split into two sides.”

“Not the explanation I was looking for! Also, that explanation sucked!”

“Any maids below Nanami-Class may not be able to truly know Master’s butt. However, once one reaches the highest level, it is fair to say that knowledge of Master’s butt is an absolute necessity.”

“So by that logic, someone could become a First-Class Maid without knowing his butt at all, right?”

Katorina was dead on. First-Class was more than enough, dammit! Wait, now that I thought about it, knowing about their Master’s butt was a *necessary* qualification of being a Nanami-Class Maid? Ummm?

“I ask you all to consider this carefully. This question is your opportunity to legally smack Master’s butt.”

“Oh, well, I gotta admit, getting a chance to smack it does sound great!”

“Hold up, Yuika! There’s nothing great about that, okay?!”

People’s butts aren’t playthings!

“At first, I thought about having Master put his butt through a hole in the wall to make it stick out on the other side, but when I considered the possibility of it swelling too much and getting stuck, I decided against it…and had a replica made instead.”

A butt sticking out of a wall, seriously? That’s a situation I’ve never seen outside of eroge and porn manga, dammit! And the fact that she was worried about swelling meant she was planning on smacking it right from the get-go!

“Making a replica sounds pretty dangerous, too, to be honest.”

“I have prepared three replicas. The first is one of Master’s butt, a re-creation pushed beyond its upmost limits. The next one is a perfect reproduction of Mr. Orange’s butt, while the last one is the best replica of Miss Yuika’s butt I was able to create, based on my own imagination of what it must feel like.”

“What the—?! Why would you even make that?! Don’t rope me into this nonsense!”

I did feel bad that Yuika had gotten mixed up in all this, but if she’d been paying close attention to Nanami, she would know that it wasn’t *actually* her butt at all. The larger issue was…

“So you perfectly reproduced my and Orange’s butts? How?”

Where did that information leak from?

And what was this about my butt being pushed beyond its limits? It was a total fake at that point!

“I give my deepest thanks to Miss Anemone for providing me with Mr. Orange’s information.”

Nanami gave a small bow in a random direction. Ah-ha.

“Oh, so Anemone gave it to you…”

It wouldn’t have been strange for her to have that information… Hm? What was I saying? It was definitely *strange* to have the information! And where did Nanami get the data on my butt?

“Now then, let us begin. This time, you will be judging based on appearance and feel alone. Contestants are prohibited from sniffing them.”

“Why would you reproduce the smell in the first place?”

Katorina was spot on. There wasn’t any need to replicate that, right?

“Ummm, so we can smack them all we want, right?”

“Of course. I’ll allow it as long as you do not break them.”

Uh, Yuika, why are you pumping your fist? Better yet, why ask about smacking the butts in the first place? That was totally unnecessary, right?

“You said there are three models, so what happens if we choose one of the non-Takioto butts? Will our rank go down?”

“You are correct, Miss Yukine. Choosing any of the incorrect options will drop you down a rank.”

I’d figured it would drop them down two whole ranks, but apparently not.

Nanami double-checked to make sure there weren’t any other questions.

“It appears everyone is ready, so let’s get started. This time, you will each go through one at a time.”

One by one, the girls were brought to a different room. I was last, apparently. One of the Maid Team members came to get me, and I entered the room.

“What the heck’s with this place…? It scares the crap out of me.”

It was no exaggeration to say the atmosphere in the room was downright bizarre.

The mannequins and overall vibe were the culprits. The interior was pure white, reminding me of some type of laboratory. In the middle of the room were three mannequins labeled A, B, and C.

All mannequins were white, muscular, and masculine. Except, for some reason, their butts alone were overly realistic and colored a pale orange.

When I approached the butts and got a closer look at them, I could tell that they were all distinct, despite having some surface-level similarities.

Butts A and B were both strong and muscular. B looked a little tanner than the other two models. C, on the other hand, didn’t have much muscle to speak of, looking plumper and bouncier, with far fairer skin than the other two.

C was clearly not the right answer here. Color-wise, A seemed the most likely to be mine.

“I really don’t see the others getting this one right… Especially Katorina.”

Nanami called this a gimme question, but there was no way the girls would get this. I mean, we were talking about butts here. If it was something that was easy to stare at for hours on end like Yukine’s nape, Ludie’s ears, Yuika’s thighs, or Sis’s boobs, that would be one thing, but my butt? Seriously?

I gave my answer to the Maid Team members and headed to the A room.

I wondered how many other people would be here. Maybe one or two? As I considered the worst case, that there might be zero girls with me, I entered the room.

Huh? Why was everyone in here?

“Fantastic! Even I did not think everyone would maintain their Nanami-Class,” Nanami said to us as after we returned to the main room.

“It was real easy, right? When I was testing out the question, I guessed Takky’s butt right, too.”

Ivy had been able to pick out my butt from the lineup, too, apparently.

But that wasn’t the issue. This was.

“Kousuke’s butt is a work of art.”

It was Sis. She was now in the audience—she definitely hadn’t been around up until a moment ago, right? Her nameplate had been here, but her seat had been empty.

Sis must have noticed me staring at her, as she gave me a thumbs-up with a deadpan but vaguely smug look on her face.

“I had work to do at school, but I cut it short to come here.”

Katorina shot her an accusatory glance, as if asking whether that was really how a teacher at a magic academy should be acting. I didn’t think so, personally.

“Sis, you all right? You sure you don’t have your priorities mixed up?”

No matter how you looked at it, she should have been prioritizing her work at the academy over a dumb test like this, right?

“By the way, Miss Hatsumi was given the title of Nanami-Class Emeritus during a previous test. Thus, she is participating as a guest this time.”

“This isn’t her first time doing this?!”

“Now then, on to the next question. This one will be wholly different, as it will require you to confront your memories.”

“I’ve already had more than my fill of this, to be honest,” Yuika grumbled. But Nanami obviously didn’t stop there.

“The third area being checked is…‘sweat.’”

When Nanami said this, the word SWEAT appeared on the hologram.

“What?”

“Excuse me?”

Yuika and Katorina both scowled and looked at me. Listen, no one wanted to scowl more than I did at this point. After all, they were going to have to smell it, weren’t they?

Hold on, something wasn’t right. Perhaps I wasn’t completely against the idea after all. The thought of pretty girls sniffing my sweat made my heart tingle a little bit.

“Takioto’s sweat? That seems like it’ll be pretty easy.”

“Mm-hmm. Easy.”

Yukine? Sis? What exactly sounded easy about that, hmm?

When I looked over at Yukine, I heard Nanami call my name.

“Master, I have good news. You’ll be tested along with everyone else.”

“Why the hell do I have to participate, too?!”

Sniffing my own sweat sounded like a new form of torture; I wanted nothing to do with it—

“Additionally, the other option will be a towel that has been drenched with Miss Yukine’s sweat.”

—but there was no way I’d ever say that. I was thrilled for a chance to join in. But why was Yukine involved? Wouldn’t she normally be totally against that?!

Had Yukine given Nanami permission for this?

“Hold up. Yukine, are you okay with that?”

I wasn’t totally against the idea of sniffing her sweat; in fact, I would get down on the floor and beg to join if that was what it took. If there was a lake of Yukine’s sweat out there, I would want to plunge into its depths while ingesting it all with my whole body, before registering it as a World Heritage Site and sealing it away to prevent anyone else from entering.

Normally, however, you would assume no one would want strangers smelling your sweat.

“Well, um, it’s embarrassing, but after Nanami asked me so much, well.”

So Nanami had gotten her permission ahead of time? Then why hadn’t she gotten permission from me, her Master?

“Yukine, Nanami doesn’t have some dirt on you or anything, does she?” Yuika asked.

Speaking of dirt, Yuika seemed like the type to have a lot of it. I mean, the girl was losing bets all the time.

“It doesn’t really seem like it. Can’t really imagine what it would be, either.”

“Oh right, on top of Yukki’s towel, we also have one of your towels, Yuiyui. Do you want to go with that instead?”

“Why the heck do you have that?!”

Yuika’s towel didn’t sound too bad, either. They should have just ditched mine altogether and gone with Yuika and Yukine’s

instead!

"Miss Ivy was half joking when she said that."

Half? What was "half" supposed to mean here?

"*Ahem.* Back to the topic at hand. The answer to whose sweat is on the towel becomes clear once you taste them, so contestants are prohibited from licking them or putting them in their mouths."

She'd said that as though there were people who normally drank sweat or something. No one would do something like that.

"Gah…!"

Um, Sis?

"Let us get this moving. We were unable to prepare multiple towels from Miss Yukine, so I will ask you to go one at a time."

Her phrasing made it sound like she could get as many of my towels ready as needed.

We were led away in order, and I went last once again.

I was brought to the same room the mannequins had been in before. But now they were gone, replaced by two towels.

These were the towels Yukine and I had used during our morning training. They looked exactly the same.

To start, I took a whiff of towel A. *Sniff, sniff! Huff! Huff sniff sniff huuuuuuuff!*

Aaaahhhh…

A feeling of invigoration rushed through me. I would liken the sensation to breathing fresh air after being locked away in a gloomy, damp underground room for a hundred days. This was it. No mistake.

I didn't need to sniff B to know. It was simple. Towel A was Yukine's. I was sure of it. I would have loved to just take the towel along with me, but I thought that was a step too far.

I was utterly convinced. Guided by the Maid Team member, I headed to the B room. When I arrived, I was surprised to find everyone else waiting there.

"Well, you have a pretty unique smell, Takioto."

"I sorta know what you mean, I think."

Though Yuika and Katorina put it gently, I had to wonder if I was stinky. I put my nose up to my armpit and took a whiff but couldn't really tell either way.

"Takioto, don't worry. You're not stinky."

Knowing Yukine, there was a chance she was just saying this to be nice and an equal chance she was being sincere. I decided to interpret it in the most self-serving way possible. I had to, or I wouldn't be able to go on.

"His smell is the best. I can't sleep without it."

Sis, enough with the bombshell comments!

After that, we were forced to solve more puzzles, and the end came at last.

"Everyone got them all right," I said to Nanami.

I couldn't understand how Katorina had put in a flawless performance. Even when I asked her about it, she just said, "Like I know, duh." Also, she seemed to have found it surprisingly fun.

Since everyone had come in first, we all received a piece of paper reading *Kousuke Takioto Free-Use Ticket* in Nanami's handwriting and went our separate ways. Incidentally, since Ludie had been unable to participate, she would be getting a Kousuke Takioto Free-Use Ticket of her own down the line.

In other words, this whole test had been totally pointless.

Yuika seemed suspicious and asked, "Can we even use these?" but I fully intended to go along with it if she did. Katorina gave the ticket a highly dubious look, while Yukine said it was so valuable, it felt like a waste to use it. Yukine must have been the type to hoard items in a game rather than use them. Personally, I thought it was best to use them whenever you could. That was what speedrunning had taught me.

Afterward, Katorina and Yukine went to Yukine's room to discuss something. Yuika went to the Hanamura House bathroom to take a shower. Ivy got a Kousuke Takioto Free-Use Ticket as thanks for helping out and said she was going back to her closet. Sis left for work. Seriously, Sis, don't ditch your job like that!

Finally, it was just me and Nanami.

"I am sure you noticed already, Master, but I purposefully asked questions I knew everyone would get right," Nanami abruptly revealed.

"…Why'd you do that?"

I hadn't noticed whatsoever—I thought those questions had been pretty damn hard.

“You said you wanted to do something to repay everyone for their help during the Ms. Sakura incident, yes.”

“…Sure, I can’t deny that.”

The problem was, I just didn’t know what I could do for everyone. Also, everyone appeared to be acting modest. Part of the problem was we were all busy, too.

“Well, this was my way of creating that opportunity. I believe those tickets will make it easier for the others to invite you to do something to repay them.”

That explained the Kousuke Takioto Free-Use Tickets.

“This was why I chose questions that everyone would easily be able to answer. I also had Miss Ivy help in exchange for lending her a closet to stay in.”

“No wonder everyone got them all right. Also, can’t you give her a better place to stay than that?”

Although I still couldn’t help thinking the gesture had been a bit too large-scale, with a lot of wasted time and effort involved…

“Thank you, Nanami.”

…I needed to show her my gratitude.

“Just doing my duty as your maid, Master.”

There was just one thing Nanami had forgotten.

I took out a sticky note and a pencil from my bag. Then I wrote something on it and passed it to her.

“Master…what is this?”

She stared at the green note, dumbfounded.

“It’s a Kousuke Takioto Free-Use Ticket. Since I’ve got a lot to thank you for, too.”

Honestly, she could use me however she wanted, whether she had a piece of paper like this telling her that or not.

“…Thank you, thank you very much, Master.”

Overcome with emotion, Nanami carefully inserted the paper in her cleavage. Sorry, but I was all quipped out for the day.

“It’s not really much of anything, though.”

“To me, it is far more valuable than treasure from any dungeon. I shall pass it on as a family heirloom.”

“Don’t do that! You gotta use it. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

As we conversed, a thought came to me.

Nanami had said she’d designed every question to be easy to answer, right? Even the butt one?


CONFIG

The day after that weird quiz show thing, Nanami came into my room in exceedingly high spirits.

“Master, Master! It’s finally complete!”

“What’s got you so excited?”

I put my hands up, signaling her to calm down a bit. Whenever Nanami came to tell me something like this, there was a 50 percent chance she was getting excited over nothing.

“You know what I mean, Master. The thing that got washed during the incident with Miss Sakura and the Book of Raziel.”

“Washed?”

“The piece of clothing, Master. Hurry! We’re heading to Miss Ruija’s home.”

Hearing her say “clothing” finally made it click. Right, I had requested that from Ms. Sakura.

“It’s all done?”

“Indeed, I just received word that it is complete. We should head over immediately,” Nanami said, bringing me along to Ms. Ruija’s place. Ms. Ruija lived in the apartment building I had somehow become the owner of, which was less than ten minutes away.

We reached her place without passing hardly anyone on the street.

But in a surprising turn of events, it wasn’t Ms. Ruija who opened the door to greet us.

“Welcome, Takioto. Come on in.”

“Hello, Ms. Sakura.”

Ms. Sakura was standing in the doorway. I’d heard Ms. Sakura would often come over to Ms. Ruija’s since they were neighbors, and she certainly seemed at home, judging by how she’d let us in herself.

We took off our shoes and headed to the bathroom to wash our hands. Nanami and I had come here several times by this point

and knew our way around the apartment.

Ms. Ruija's apartment was filled with a lineup of adorable furnishings and……huh?

……What the hell was with that pot?

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Then I opened them and looked at the thing once more. There was a huge cauldron in front of me. In a normal home, I'm sure there would be a bunch of ways to use it, but this was Ms. Ruija's place we were talking about. I nervously inquired about the pot to Ms. Sakura.

"Um, sorry, but what exactly is that mysterious and ominous-looking pot for…?"

"Oh, that? Don't worry, it's just a cauldron for alchemy. She borrowed it from Anemone, apparently," Ms. Sakura replied, putting me at ease. Thank goodness it wasn't a sketchy good luck charm, or bubbling over with weird, eerie energy. On second glance, it did resemble the cauldrons from the *At*lier* series.

"I was just as surprised. I nearly started sweating in some weird places when I saw it," Nanami said.

Just where the hell was she sweating from? Enough with the suggestive phrasing, please.

Ms. Sakura listened to us banter and smiled, appearing to enjoy herself. While the road to get here may have been bumpy, I was truly glad to see her looking so happy.

She told us to sit down at the dining room table, and we both complied.

I had wondered why Ms. Sakura had been the one to open the door for us, but apparently, Ms. Ruija had been busy getting ready to host us.

"Okay, everybody. I brewed us all some black tea!" Ms. Ruija said, appearing from the kitchen with enough tea and scones for all of us.

"Thank you very much; the tea is delicious."

"Tee-hee, I baked plenty of scones, so eat as much as you'd like."

I picked up one of them. Yup, these were yummy, too.

"Now then, let us get right to the topic at hand. You told me that you finally finished it?"

Nanami brought up the reason for our visit. Ms. Sakura nodded.

“Yes, we sure did.”

It was what I had been waiting for. The piece of cloth I’d received after bringing the Book of Raziel kerfuffle to a close. I’d asked them to refine it and turn it into my new weapon.

“It’s in the other room, so how about we move over there?”

We left the scones and tea behind and headed into the next room.

Inside was a single stole, hanging on a T-shaped clothing rack.

“This is your new stole, Takioto,” Ms. Sakura said, pointing at a scarf that had the same base color as the one I already had equipped. However, it also had new embellishments and patterns that my current stole lacked.

“So this is it…”

A golden Japanese pattern decorated the base red fabric of the stole. The hem fabric was sewn black, and in what was the biggest change of all, there were ornaments attached to either end of the stole. While the ornaments were probably made from the same material as the decorations on Ms. Sakura’s own clothes, the shape was slightly different.

“I made it with help from Ruija, Anemone, and Nanami. Thanks to them, I can proudly attest that it came out great,” said Ms. Ruija.

“My contribution was marginal. Miss Sakura and Miss Anemone helped out in many ways, but Ms. Ruija worked especially hard on it.”

“Ms. Ruija…”

She rubbed her hair, chuckling with a bashful grin. Did she know how utterly adorable this made her look?

“Ms. Ruija’s really good at sewing, right?”

She crafts a bunch of things for you in the game as well. There are even a few items she can make only after she joins your party.

“Master, while I hate to pour cold water on the joyous occasion…,” Nanami said, and a question mark floated over my head. What exactly did she mean?

“There’s one thing that we all need to apologize for,” Ms. Sakura said with an enigmatic look.

“Uwah?”

Ms. Ruija let out a weird gasp when she heard this. Uh, for someone who was supposed to be apologizing, she didn't seem to have a clue what the others were talking about.

"Uh, I don't really have anything to say about this, except how happy I am to get something so well made," I said.

"The item itself is fine. But if you sniff it, I'm sure you'll understand," Ms. Sakura said before Nanami dropped down heavily and lowered her head to the floor.

"I am profoundly sorry, Master! Miss Sakura began working on your stole after wearing it for a week…however, for some unknown reason, Miss Ruija went and washed it!"

"We are terribly sorry about this, Takioto, truly," Ms. Sakura said, bowing. Ms. Sakura, I definitely caught that little smile on your face just now.

"Come now, Miss Ruija, you need to apologize, too!" Nanami said, pulling on Ms. Ruija's arm to try to force her down to the floor.

"Why?! Why would I need to apologize for something like that?! What I did was totally normal!"

"What are you saying?! Please, take a good whiff—it smells like flowers and nothing else!"

"There's nothing wrong with that! That's just the scent from the fabric softener!"

I had to agree with her; it wasn't a bad smell.

"Miss Ruija, are you unaware of the value that clothing worn by a beautiful woman holds?! If properly musty enough, it would be more valuable than several months' worth of your allowance!"

"I never knew about any of that!"

"See, just look at Master's face! Look at how disappointed he is!" Nanami said, and Ms. Ruija looked at me. Then, a regretful apologetic expression came to her face.

"Ah! Sorry, Takioto."

"Why are you apologizing about this? If you do that, then you're basically saying I'm a freak mourning the loss of Ms. Sakura's smell from my stole."

"Oh no, this is quite a conundrum. I do not see Master recovering from this loss without you offering him your week-old socks as recompense."

"M-my socks?!"

“Hey, Nanami, can you stop going off with whatever nonsense that pops into your head? Look at how disgusted Ms. Ruija looks!”

Her socks would have her feet smell…Amaterasu Girls Academy, body odor…*hrngh*.

“I—I do have ones I’ve worn for two days…”

If I put out a questionnaire asking several people whether it was okay to wear the same socks two days in a row, the answer would probably be split down the middle. I’d heard that the question of whether it was acceptable to dry your towel after a bath to use it two days in a row was similarly split down the middle.

“Oh, you mean the white socks you had in the laundry net bag? Speaking for myself, I would just barely give them a pass. However, the question is whether that will satisfy Master or not…”

“Why were you sniffing those, Nanami?!”

What exactly did she think needed to happen for me to feel satisfied, hm?

“If I had to say one way or other, they certainly smelled to some extent, but…I suppose they will have to do.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know, they were right on that edge, though…,” said Ms. Sakura.

“Why did you sniff my socks, too, Ms. Sakura?! Takioto, my socks don’t smell, okay?! Not one bit!” Ms. Ruija said, desperate to convince me her socks smelled fine.

Stop, stop, don’t take your feet out! I heard you, loud and clear!

As we bantered loudly, Ms. Sakura became unable to hold back her laughter any longer.

“Pfft, hee-hee. I’m sorry, we went a bit too far, didn’t we? Why don’t you get to main point here, Takioto?”

I agreed, and she took the stole off the rack and handed it to me.

“Try putting it on.”

I doffed my old stole and handed it to Nanami. Then I picked up the new one.

It felt fantastic on my skin. The silk was high-quality, cooling to the touch. I passed my mana through it.

“Huh?!”

My mana spread through it far more easily than I was used to. There had always been a bit of resistance when I enchanted my old stole, but enchanting the new one was as smooth as could be.

That wasn't the only change, either…

When I filled this stole with mana, it stretched out limply down to the floor. My old stole would expand and contract to some degree, but the new one was more flexible. I could probably extend it several yards if I felt like it.

I slowly lifted the stole off the floor with my mana.

It wobbled and teetered, like a child taking their first steps. Since I still wasn't accustomed to using it, I couldn't manipulate it exactly as I wanted.

But one thing was clear.

"Holy crap, this is incredible."

The shock was about as intense as if game hardware had evolved from the original Nintendo directly to the Switch.

To put it differently, I was now able to make far subtler and more delicate movements than I had been before. It was how someone would feel if they suddenly developed extra nerves, extra muscles, or more fingers.

However, just increasing the number of buttons on a controller didn't mean using them would be second nature. The same went for more nerves or more muscles. Right now, I didn't have perfect command of my new stole.

I filled the stole with mana and tried hardening it.

My impression was that it seemed several degrees harder than before. I wanted to try out my other enchantments, too.

"After using it a bit, what do you think?"

"There are some drawbacks, but…"

Obviously, it wasn't a strict upgrade. This stole would require more fine-tuned mana control. It consumed more as well.

"Even then…"

I stretched out the stole and grabbed a cup. I stretched it out even farther—likely out of my old stole's range—and touched a book on the bookshelf. I then it took off the shelf.

However, the movements themselves were slightly erratic.

"One thing is certain: If I learn how to control this, it'll pack a hell of a punch."

“Only if you learn how to control it? But you’ll be able to do that, won’t you, Takioto?” Ms. Sakura said to me with a smile. I mean…

“I’ll just have to keep using it until I can.”

After replying, I looked from Ms. Sakura to Ms. Ruija, then Nanami.

Ms. Sakura’s smiling face, Ms. Ruija nodding in agreement, and Nanami with the same expression as always.

“Thank you all, truly.”

“You saved my life, so this is the least I can do it make it up to you.”

“Me too… What I mean is, my debts have caused a lot of trouble, so…”

“Just doing my job as your maid. Ah, Master, there’s one more thing.”

“What?”

“Miss Anemone also assisted us with this, so I would suggest you thank her at a later date.”

“Good point.”

Anemone, huh? I would have to pray that she wouldn’t seek some bizarre form of compensation.

It was time to equip my new stole and get to training! Or so I would have liked, but it would have to wait for later.

As for why, it was because of a message I received from Iori.

I have something I’d like to discuss with you a bit, Takioto. Preferably with Yuika, if possible… Are you free anytime soon?

Well, just wearing my stole and doing what I did normally was a simple form of training, and there was no way I could turn down an invitation from Iori. I needed to head over to him as fast as possible.

I’ll grab Yuika and be right there.

I messaged him back before calling Yuika. After pushing her to reveal her location, I took Nanami along to grab Yuika in the Ceremonial Committee room, then headed to the place where Iori had specified.

Waiting there were Katorina, Gabby, Ludie, and Iori.

“Hm? Huh? For real?”

“He really did show up…”

Katorina and Gabby looked at me as if they couldn't believe it. Katorina actually did a triple take when she saw me. How rude.

"Well, yeah, I'm going to show up when called for."

"You're always really quick to come, huh, Kousuke?" Iori said with a smile.

"I watched Iori send the message, but didn't you get here, like, *too* fast?"

Katorina may have thought that way but from my perspective…

"I don't really think so?"

It must've felt like I came here fast only because I got going as soon as I replied that I was on my way, right?

"Takioto, you always react immediately to messages from my brother, don't you?" Yuika narrowed her eyes at me.

I didn't know if Nanami was listening or not, but as we conversed, she started to brew some delicious-looking coffee. Thanks, Nanami.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"I actually haven't told this to you, either, Yuika, but…I chatted a bit with Ludie during class."

He talked to Ludie, did he…? Hmm, to Ludie, eh? Well then. Why did I feel this depressing sensation welling up in my chest?

"What did you do now, Big Bro? Help some old lady on the street and got all her riches as a thank-you?"

"Well, see, that's how this all started, but that's not exactly it."

Yuika cocked her head, baffled. She must not have understood what he meant. I think I had an idea, though. When I thought about the early-to-mid-game events that are triggered by the old lady on the street, I realized Iori had to be talking about the shop.

"I actually started my own store."

"A shop? Big Bro, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Okay, so I'll try to keep this short, but—"

Yuika's question prompted Iori and the others to give us a simple rundown of how he came to open a store. Obviously, I already knew all this from the game.

Iori saves an old lady on the street, and from there, he makes a series of trades to ultimately gain possession of the Magic General Store near campus; it's sort of like what happens in *Straw Millionaire*, that Japanese folktale. While this part of the narrative is exceedingly unrealistic and full of ridiculous plot holes worth

prodding, the fine men and women of the eroge player base didn't sweat the details and waved it off as just being part of the eroge experience. Plus, half of this substory is purely for comedic effect, which made it even less worthy of serious thought.

Now, this Magic General Store is another rather interesting system in the game.

The Magic General Store is a facility the player can utilize from early to mid-game that lets you sell your own unneeded items for a high price, buy rare items from others, and add player-developed medicine and weapons to the store's inventory.

The shop has three meters to manage: "level," "popularity," and "reputation." Raising these attributes results in more people coming to the shop to sell the player rare items. Some of these items lead to hidden dungeons, and others lead to the ultimate equipment for particular characters. That said, players have to raise the shop level pretty high for them to show up, and the prices are so exorbitant, it makes you wonder if they're bugged.

It's also possible to customize everything from the placement of products and shelves, the store layout, and prices, but most people just play with the automatic settings. There's even a merchant ending if you do everything yourself and get totally immersed in running the store until graduation.

Simply put, it's a shopkeeping minigame. It's a surprisingly deep system and pretty fun, too. On the second playthrough, you can access the Magic General Store super early in the game, so I would get a lot out of it during my runs of the game.

"—And that's the gist of it. So, Kousuke…"

I had been reminiscing while Iori was talking, but it sounded like I had been correct to assume he was talking about the Magic General Store.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Some of the products that came with the shop have useful info about mysterious dungeons. So I was thinking maybe you could use them, too, if you're interested."

"Huh?" I couldn't help sounding confused when I heard this. "Why, though? You got them, so shouldn't you be the one to use them, Iori?"

To me, it seemed obvious that the person who obtained an item had the right to use it.

“Sure, we may have gotten them with the shop, but you’ve been giving us all kinds of information, right? I figured we could repay you with this.”

“Huh, did I really do all that…?”

“Master, I think it is a bit of a stretch to play dumb here. Even I get the feeling you have been feeding various items and pieces of information to Iori.”

“Indubitably,” Gabby said, nodding.

“Nanami’s right. You’ve given us all that and more. Even Vice President Fran said giving you these items would be the right thing to do. Though President Monica actually said that you would keep getting stronger regardless, ha-ha-ha.”

What exactly did President Monica see me as, hm? She was right, though, since I had thought through my plans assuming I wouldn’t have the shop to help me out.

“Anyway, here’s a map that leads to a new dungeon. I don’t know what sort of place it might be yet, but if you’re interested at all…would you accept it? As a gift?” Iori asked, holding out a piece of paper.

Iori…?! All this, just for me…?!

“I’ll take it, gladly! Heck, I’ll take you along with it!”

“Uhhh, Takiotooo? You sounded a little serious about that—are you okay? Can you stop being ridiculous and get ahold of yourself?”

Phew, that was a close call. Maybe I should’ve said I didn’t need any dungeon information and just wanted Iori instead… No, no, calm down, if I said that, it would be all over, on many levels. Okay, how to bounce back from this…?

“If anything comes up with your shop, I can come over and help out.”

“I’ll probably be fine without the help. Ms. Sakura is assisting me with a lot of stuff, and it looks like it’ll work out. Though I do have one condition for you, Kousuke.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d really like it if you’d stop by to do some shopping sometime. Though I’m not the one setting the prices, so I probably can’t give you much of a discount.”

This silly guy just didn’t get it.

“You don’t have to worry about prices with me at all. Don’t worry about any unsold stock, either; I’ll buy up everything. Double the asking price, no problem.”

“Listen, enough with the dumbass routine, okay?” Katorina quipped, looking fed up. Hey, what did she mean by “dumbass”?

“So you’re saying I should just buy it at a bit of a higher price…?”

“I don’t believe that is the issue, I’m afraid,” Gabby said with a strained smile. I mean, I was pretty sure that’s what she meant? Was that not it?

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re so funny, Kousuke. So there was one other thing I wanted to talk to you about actually…”

“What’s that?”

“Our exams are coming up soon, right? I know you probably don’t need it, but I’m thinking of having a group study session and was wondering if you’d come. What about you, Yuika?”

“Hmm, I’ll have to pass.”

Iori reacted like he expected as much. I figured he would have felt bad about not inviting me at all. Me aside, there wasn’t much of a point in Yuika joining in, either.

Yuika glanced at me.

“Oh, well, about that. I don’t mind studying with you all, it’s just, there’s a chance it won’t matter that much…”

“What do you mean by that?”

I still hadn’t gone over everything with Iori yet.

“I briefly talked about this with Yukine and Ludie, but me, Yuika, and Nanami are cooking up an interesting little plan.”

“Oh, do tell. What is this interesting plan of yours? I would love to be a part of it, too.”

“Given the situation, I’d say it’s impossible for you, Gabby, sorry… I was thinking I better talk it over with President Monica and Iori in advance. This is as good a time as any, I guess, right?”

I looked at Nanami and Yuika, and the two nodded.

“That’s a good point. Going over it all ahead of time will probably make it easier to execute.”

“I shall leave it up to you, Master.”

It was time to tell them. We were just filling them in on something they would hear soon anyway. Also…

“I’d like your help with some of it, too.”

“I don’t mind helping out, but what sort of plan is it?”

Iori cocked his head. Well…

“A plan that’ll blow everyone away…and make people really hate the Ceremonial Committee.”

From there, I told them all about the scheme. Then I asked for their help on a few things, and we all went our separate ways.

Afterward, I received a suggestive message from Iori.

Can we meet up, just the two of us? We could just talk via messages, too, if that’s better.

I can meet up, that’s fine. Nanami might be with me, is that okay?

Yeah. It’s okay.

All right then, I’ll head over to you. By the way, what’s this all about?

I wanted to talk about Rina.

Katorina?

Yeah. Apparently, she’s been going into dungeons by herself lately.

◇

—Katorina’s Perspective—

I’m never gonna use this crap in real life. I’m pretty sure everyone has had this thought before, not just me. Heck, it would always pop into my head whenever I studied for an exam.

I would only ever use the random series of numbers I was memorizing on my upcoming test. I got the urge to chuck this textbook off the nearest bridge, but unfortunately, the Morals Committee had told me to avoid a failing grade at all costs, even if I had to bribe my way out of it.

Honestly, I would have been fine bribing someone if it were allowed, but in another unfortunate twist, this was apparently just a metaphor; the Morals Committee had no influence on exams.

“Iori, you get this?”

“Hrmmm…”

Iori peered down at the question. Then he frowned.

In the end, only four people—Iori, Ludie, Gabriella, and me—wound up coming to the study group. Yuika had said she wanted

to join in if she had time, but apparently, she needed to prepare for what was coming up.

“Sorry, Rina. I’m stumped.”

“Ludie, how are you supposed to do this stuff?”

“For that part… Think of it like this.”

Ludie started writing in my electronic notebook. Her explanation was super easy to understand, and just looking at it made me immediately figure out what to do next. It made sense to Iori, too, and he wrote down her method in his own electronic notebook.

“Thanks, Ludie.”

“Iori, Rina. While I am sure you are both aware of this, our exams are right around the corner. Are you sure you’ll be all right? You really need to give this everything you’ve got.”

Since she’d lost to Takioto the last time, Gabriella was the most serious out of all of us; she had to be gunning for the highest score in class.

“Like I don’t already know that.”

“In light of what the Ceremonial Committee is planning, we need to do our best wherever we can!”

Gabriella was right. The Ceremonial Committee first-years were trying to pull something off that had never been done in the history of the Academy. They’d probably need a considerable amount of skill to make it happen, but I had no doubt they could do it.

Compared to them…I was just so weak.

In the past, I’d assumed that even if I lacked on the academics front, I could make up for it with my skills and strength, but that wasn’t going to cut it anymore. There were a whole bunch of people I was no match for, Kousuke Takioto chief among them.

On top of that, I didn’t have the brains or the status that Ludie and Gabriella had going for them, either.

It must have seemed odd that I was even a part of the Morals Committee at all.

“Orange sure is running late. Do you think something happened?” Iori murmured, looking at the clock on his Tsukuyomi Traveler.

“Bet he just ditched, right?”

He was the type to think studying was a total waste of time. If I hadn't joined the Morals Committee, I probably wouldn't have gone to the study group, either, since I could just clear the dungeon to make up for bad grades.

I continued on to the next page of my electronic notebook that displayed the study problems.

"Ah-ha-ha, that is something he would do."

Iori's comment left Ludie sighing.

"I do feel he's the one who could stand to study most of all."

According to Orange, he felt like throwing up when there were too many words or numbers in front of him. I mean, it wasn't like I didn't know the feeling.

I was the same. Even now, I wanted to get the hell out of here.

But no matter how much I wanted to flee, I couldn't let myself.

"Hng!"

I unexpectedly flashed back to that moment. Just recently, there had been a time where I wanted to run away but couldn't escape.

In an unguarded moment, the memory came to me. My cowardice during the Book of Raziel incident. I hadn't been able to be much in the fight, and the thief skills that were supposed to be my specialty had been useless. When I'd looked at Hanzou from the Student Council, then back at myself, my worthlessness had stood out even more.

"What's wrong, Rina?"

"…Nothing. Sorry, can you show me how to do this?"

"You can leave this to me. Are you sure you're okay? The test is just a few days away, you know."

"I'm really not okay, am I?"

Whether it came to exams or my own skills.

◇

A few days later, the day of the test arrived.

I didn't see any sign of Kousuke Takioto. Yuika and Nanami weren't around, either. In fact, it seemed like not one member of the Ceremonial Committee was taking their exams.

They had all said they didn't plan on taking them from the start.

Their absence was reflected in the rankings.

“Just as planned and just as I expected.”

Kousuke Takioto’s name was missing from the top of the first-year rankings.

“Ludie’s really impressive. Gabriella and Iori, too.”

Excluding the Ceremonial Committee members, I was the only member of the Three Committees whose name wasn’t on the list. I had taken the written exam and participated in the practical exam. I had cleared down to the same layer of the dungeon as the others.

Still, my name was the only one missing from the top rankings.

I’d barely managed to avoid failing my written exams, while my practical exam score was among the top five in the class. However, the Book of Raziel incident had made me understand that your score on the practical exam meant squat when it came time to actually put things into practice in a dungeon.

I wanted to learn skills and techniques that would really take me places. I wanted to grow stronger.

That was way I spent yet another day in the dungeon by myself.

RANKING BOARD

1 Ludivine Marie-Ange de la Tréfle

ROYAL

RANK	WRITTEN EXAM	PRACTICAL EXAM	TOTAL SCORE	FLOORS CLEARED
	90 POINTS	92 POINTS	182 POINTS	50 FLOORS

2 Gabriella Evangelista

RANK	WRITTEN EXAM	PRACTICAL EXAM	TOTAL SCORE	FLOORS CLEARED
	96 POINTS	84 POINTS	180 POINTS	50 FLOORS

3 Iori Hijiri

RANK	WRITTEN EXAM	PRACTICAL EXAM	TOTAL SCORE	FLOORS CLEARED
	78 POINTS	94 POINTS	172 POINTS	50 FLOORS


CONFIG

As Yuika, Nanami, and I headed for the Tsukuyomi Dungeon, Yukia looked around the area.

"We're pretty much the only ones here."

Classes were going on at the moment, so we'd hardly run into any students or teachers.

"The masses are still in class, and probably sitting through a postmortem review of everyone's tests right now."

This time around, Yuika, Nanami, and I decided not to take our exams. There were several reasons why.

The first was that anyone in the irresponsible and frivolous Ceremonial Committee had no reason to earnestly take their exams. Why would the Academy's committee of cheeky delinquents actually take them when there was no risk of getting held back a year or being expelled? It sounded like the second- and third-year members had skipped pretty much all of their exams since they'd joined.

However, the biggest reason was…

"Exams are such a drag. We're lucky that we didn't have to take them."

I couldn't have said it better myself—they were a drag.

Studying for exams was the last thing I wanted to do. Though speaking as someone who had experienced life in the real world, I recognized that it was important to study to *some* extent.

Since we were skipping our exams, we made time for ourselves to train and clear dungeons. That time was very useful.

There was a drawback to this, though: The student body had started looking down on us for our slipping grades. But given that the Ceremonial Committee was supposed to be their enemy, this might not have actually been a bad thing.

"Takioto, did the other students say anything to you?" Yuika asked me as we headed to our destination.

Since I'd prioritized strengthening myself, I hadn't delved into the Tsukuyomi Dungeon since clearing the fortieth layer. Apparently, Ludie and Yuika had been invited by Iori to join him, and they'd all cleared several floors past that.

"Oh yeah, they were saying all sorts of awful stuff behind my back. None of it really mattered to me, so I just ignored it, though."

"Serves him right." "I guess that was all he had in him." "It's his fault for skipping all the time." "I wish he wouldn't act so tough."—I had heard students intentionally say things like this within earshot of me, and I'd seen others whispering among themselves to try and stop me from hearing it. Some students would look at me and laugh, while others would try provoking me.

Honestly, I couldn't be surprised about whatever they said about me, as I had dropped from the top rankings. I had skipped my exams, and I hadn't been delving into the Academy Dungeon, either. So obviously, my rank was gonna fall.

"Now the Ceremonial Committee has zero members at the top of the class, Master."

The students who despised me had to feel elated. One student had even gone to the trouble of printing out the rankings and showing them off to me. They'd looked really triumphant and all, but I couldn't help thinking it was weird for them to gloat so much when they weren't even at the top of the rankings… I would hope they would be at least in the top ten before coming to lord over me.

"You must've heard some stuff, too, Yuika, though I'm assuming nothing as bad as what I got it."

"Oh, yeah, sure did. I didn't really care, so I just let it slide. What about you, Nanami?"

"I haven't heard people say much about me… Maids are quite powerful, after all."

She was right in that I didn't hear anyone bad-mouth her very much. Maybe it was because she was doing streams and stuff as an influencer? I had no clue how being a maid factored into it, though.

"Honestly, I cannot believe that they would speak so poorly of Master and Miss Yuika. If I was looking at you from the

perspective of an average student, I would simply see you as creepy and eerily strong students, nothing more."

Well, that was likely because the Ceremonial Committee was effective at convincing the student body we were the enemy.

"Both of you make sure not to lash out at them, okay? We joined the Ceremonial Committee fully aware of what we were getting into."

As we chatted, we eventually arrived at the Tsukuyomi Academy Dungeon.

"It's been a minute."

I really had cleared forty layers of this thing by myself. I remembered Ludie and Yukine coming to meet me when I'd returned like it was yesterday.

It had been right in the middle of exams at the time, and I had done everything completely on my own.

"Master, you seem quite nervous. At times like this, the best medicine is singing. *Ohhh, Nanamiiii, maid supreme!*"

"Y'know, I actually don't feel the slightest bit nervous whatsoever. Also, why's the song about you?"

Ah well, I supposed I'd try singing anyway.

"Ohhh, Nanamiiii, maid supreme!"

After I sang, Nanami placed a hand on my shoulder.

"…It's okay, Master. The only thing that matters is putting your heart into it."

"That's the kinda thing you say to comfort someone who can't sing, isn't it?"

I wasn't tone-deaf or anything, right? So what was this all about?

"Can you stop with all the nonsense? Takioto, you're not godawful, but one step beyond godawful, so don't worry."

"So I'm still godawful?!"

By one step beyond, she meant that I was even worse than godawful, right? Or was it that I was just a little better than godawful? Which was it?!

"I'm joking—you're totally average. Let's just say you might want to avoid singing in front of others."

"So not a joke at all, then?"

I really needed Yuika to cut the comedy, or I was going to get nervous. I'd scored in the nineties at karaoke, dang it!

“Forget it, okay? We’re heading into the dungeon, so focus up and stop the silliness.”

Yuika was right. This was a serious venture into the dungeon.

“Yeah… That’s true. Still, I’m not nearly as nervous as I was last time.”

I had gone in here on my own last time to qualify for a bunch of different events. But now, I was going in with friends. With that in mind, I felt no anxiety whatsoever.

“Yuika, Nanami, you ready?”

“Totally! Let’s wrap this up fast and go get some ice cream.”

“Maaaaid supreeeeeeme.”

“How long are you going to keep singing?”

We were in a party of three for our trip down to the sixtieth layer, and we were all battle-hardened from the fight against the Book of Raziel, which was normally recommended for the second playthrough. Thus, the only future I saw…

“Time to run down straight to the Tsukuyomi Dungeon’s sixtieth layer.”

…was one where we traversed through it all.

There were a wide variety of floor types within the Tsukuyomi Dungeon. Some looked like caves, while others were just one large room. While I hadn’t been there yet, there was a frozen cavern layer, which was extremely cold, and floors that were so hot, they made you feel like everything in the vicinity was on fire.

While the ten floors before the fortieth layer resembled one large room, from the forty-first layer onward, it returned to being a single dungeon corridor. That said, this pattern held only until the fiftieth floor.

Since combat was obviously a breeze, we mowed down all the monsters in a single strike! Except not really. We actually decided to run from combat. If we ran into enemies that were pushovers, or ones that gave good experience or item drops, however, then I chose to farm them as we went.

There was one small problem. It was the fighting. The enemies weren’t strong or anything, of course. Though perhaps it was more accurate to say they were strong in one particular way.

“…Takioto, is it just me, or has it been nothing but cute young girls attacking us for a little while now?”

“I explained everything before we came in here, didn’t I?”

From the fortieth layer down, the number of anthropomorphic monsters increased. That being said, there were monsters of this kind that appeared before floor forty, such as bird people like harpies; centaurs, who had the lower body of a horse and the upper body of a human; and lamia, who had the lower body of a snake and an upper body of a human.

While each of these monsters had male varieties, the female versions were generally stronger, possessed better weapons, and were more dominant. In-game, the effort put into the female monster illustrations was leagues above those of their male counterparts, too.

“You mentioned that we would pick and choose what monsters to farm. So why are you only farming the pretty ones? Wait, is that what you’re into?”

“Of course not.”

I was generally after their item drops. I would take down other monsters if I was farming magic particles, but this time, I didn’t even need to do that, and even if I had felt like doing so, there were more efficient places to do it. Once I got past the sixtieth layer, then the good farming spots would really start to open up.

Tackling whatever came our way, we gradually progressed through one floor after another. After we had defeated the boss on the fiftieth layer, we decided to take a small break.

“Well, this is as good a time as any to review how we’ve been doing so far,” I proposed as I sipped the tea Nanami had prepared for me. Yuika agreed with the idea as she ate her own sandwich.

“Even I couldn’t help but sympathize with that monster you tossed back to its friends after crushing its head with your stole. Though it was good intimidation.”

While Yuika was overselling it, I couldn’t deny I’d caused a bit of a blood splatter. I mean, I was just trying out my new stole.

“Master, you were acting a bit like an evil leader. It was truly wonderful to watch.”

Nanami seemed overjoyed as she spoke, but was acting like an evil leader really so wonderful? I couldn’t help but find it suspicious, and Yuika apparently agreed with me.

“What’s wonderful about that? Nanami, what would you do if Takioto actually turned into some villain?”

“Then I would simply become an evil maid, which, I believe, would make you an evil little sister, Miss Yuika.”

“‘Evil little sister’? What the heck does that even mean? No way would I end up like that!”

Though, really, when I thought about all this “evil” talk…

“We’re all in the Ceremonial Committee already, which is basically an evil organization.”

“…I suppose that’s true. Though I’m not agreeing to that ‘little sister’ part, thank you very much.”

The conversation was beginning to go off the rails, so I figured it was time to rein it back in.

“We managed to run away just as planned today, and even when we’ve had to fight, we haven’t been too hard pressed. Anything bad stick out to you two?”

Yuika responded to my question.

“Actually Takioto, is it just me, or does it seem like you’re a beat slower with each move you make?”

“…I felt the same thing.”

That was, undoubtedly, the fault of my new stole. While I wouldn’t have had any problems using my old one for this dungeon visit, I’d gone with the new one as a training exercise.

“It’s probably better to use the new stole to prepare for the future, right? The enemies aren’t very strong, either.”

“That’s true, but it might take a while before I get back up to my previous speed.”

“It’s fine—just make sure you get your practice in and get faster and faster. The speed of sound should do the trick, right?”

The speed of sound? That was absurd—at that point I basically wouldn’t even be human anymore. Just then, however, I remembered there was someone like that close by: Yukine. She was the fastest of the Big Three, and because of it, she would sometimes move with inhuman speed. I hoped to get fast enough to at least keep up with her.

“Guess I’ll try to match Yukine for now. If I end up getting faster than the speed of sound, you’ll be sure to keep up, right, Yuika?”

“At that point, you’d probably be way too strong to need me, so I think I’d just watch from the sidelines instead, thanks.”

“Do not worry, Master. I will be sure to watch from afar as well.”

“Wait, neither of you are even going to keep up with me?”

“I’m just kidding,” Yuika said while sipping her coffee. There were some cookie crumbs around her mouth, but before I could point them out, she wiped them off with a napkin.

“Anyway, to be serious for a moment, maybe you should take a sec to reassess everything.”

“…? What does that mean?”

“Obviously, you rely on your stole, but you make sure to use your own legs and arms, too, right? Now that you’ve got a new weapon, wouldn’t it be a good idea to reevaluate all your movements across the board, too?”

Yuika made a good point.

I had to admit that my habit had been shaped by the last stole I’d used.

“That’s a good idea. Guess I’ll ask Yukine and Claris for some advice.”

Those two were pros when it came to moving the body. Ivy might be helpful in that area, too.

“You know, Takioto,” Yuika began, while I pondered, “I’ve always sort of felt this way, but you’re actually super adaptable.”

“Really?”

Yuika nodded.

“Yeah, like right now, you’re listening to what a little girl has to say and seriously taking it into consideration.”

“You’re not a ‘little girl,’ c’mon. Besides, honestly, I’m taking it into consideration *because* it’s coming from you.”

Yuika had an observant eye, a knack for combat, and most of all, she was cute. Of course I was going to hear her out.

“Impressive, Master. That casual way of giving praise is fantastic. You impregnated Yuika’s ears with that. I’ll be sure to add one thousand Yuika Points for you.”

“Nanami? Please, I’m begging you, don’t talk like a creepy virgin. What the hell are ‘Yuika Points’ anyway?” Yuika asked.

“N-no, don’t tell me, do you not know about Yuika Points?!”

“Of course I don’t! Why would you assume I did?!”

Y’know, this conversation was sounding real familiar. If these were the same as Nanami Points, then…

“Let me guess, the maximum number of points is one hundred, right?”

“That’s spot on, Master. The maximum is one hundred, and you currently have 120,326,300 points saved up.”

“That’s waaaaaay over the limit; I think you need to go look up what *maximum* means in the dictionary. Better question actually, why did you even know that, Takioto?!”

Whoopsie, I didn’t mean to throw a curve ball at Yuika. That said, while I was listening to Yuika’s remarks, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of déjà vu…

“And wait, ten thousand points isn’t even that much, then, is it?! What are these points even for?”

“There are several ways to spend the points, but were I to give one example… Hmm, by spending one hundred points, Master is legally allowed to give Yuika a massage.”

“*I’m* the one giving the massage?!”

Why, I wondered, did throwing the word *legally* in there suddenly make it sound so much more dangerous? Seriously, why did she even tack that modifier on in the first place?

“Hmmm… In that case, I’d be fine dropping the price to ten points instead.”

“You’re pretty keen on this, huh?! With that many points, it’d take more than a lifetime to spend them all.”

“Well, in that case…”

Yuika flashed me an adorable, devilish grin.

“Just spend the rest of your life devoting yourself to me.”

She even had the nerve to look up at me with puppy dog eyes, the whole damn deal.

Yuika, you may have been joking, but spending a lifetime like that sounded like a walk in the park.

Finished with our breather, we returned to our dungeon dive. The map grew even bigger past the fiftieth floor, but we had already discussed our course of action.

“Okay then, shall we proceed as planned?”

“Yup. We’ll generally try to run away and only defeat enemies that are hard to escape from.”

There were monsters with good item drops in this section of the dungeon as well, but they had a low appearance rate, and I could

try to get them at another location, so for now, we were fine to ignore them. There were also other places to more efficiently gather experience points, so these floors didn't feel like they had much going for them besides giving you cute monsters to look at.

I now had access to a large number of dungeons, so farming here seemed like a waste. At this level of difficulty, it would be more beneficial in multiple ways to go to a similar-level layer of the Amaterasu Girls Academy Dungeon instead.

Actually, in-game, you can go to the Amaterasu Girls Academy Dungeon whenever you want, even after the end of the event, but how exactly does that work? Do you transform into a girl each time?

From there, we ran almost nonstop for an entire day, taking only an occasional break along the way. And then at long last…

"We finally made it to the boss of the sixtieth floor."

"Aren't you skipping a lot of stuff?"

Yuika did have a point, but we'd basically just fled from monsters, escaped from traps, and run straight here. Honestly, it felt like there wasn't anything that needed to be said.

"Well, nothing was worth mentioning," Nanami said.

If there was one thing to bring up, it would have been the fiftieth layer boss fight, but honestly, the boss I'd fought on the fortieth layer during my solo clear had been stronger, so there wasn't much point.

"Up next is the sixtieth layer boss fight. Um, Fenrir, right? Shion said we'd be fine, so I'd assume we don't really need to worry."

"Fettered Fenrir, yeah."

Before delving into the dungeon, we'd asked Shion, Minister Benito, Yukine, and the other upperclassmen about what we could expect.

Of course, I had known all this from the start, but Nanami and Yuika hadn't. We'd gone over a lot of stuff, in part so I could make sure I remembered everything correctly.

"Well then, shall we?"

"Sounds good."

In the game, the player needs to clear the sixtieth floor at minimum to avoid the bad ending. This floor isn't just significant in terms of gameplay, though; it also holds some important

information about the setting. Thus, it has an outrageous lineup of monsters.

Fenrir is a particularly famous wolf monster that often shows up in fantasy worlds.

In Norse legend, it is said that the Fenrir will bring about disaster. For that reason, it is bound with a rope called Gleipnir. However, it manages to slip free in battle to swallow the chief god Odin, killing him. After that, Fenrir is immediately slain.

The monster awaiting us on this floor was indeed Fenrir. However, this version of the monster was sealed away, the ropes wrapped around his body indicating he was not in his normal state.

If this Fenrir had been free of its bonds, we wouldn't have stood a chance, and I would have recommended that we flee. We could rest easy for now, though, since Unfettered Fenrir didn't show up on this layer.

"Here we go!"

Fenrir howled, sending powerful vibrations through my body. The roar of a fettered beast god. It would have frozen me on the spot if I didn't have the proper resistances. Needless to say, however, I was aware of this and had prepared accordingly.

"…Doesn't look too strong, does it?"

I smiled awkwardly at Yuika's words. For the average student, this layer would have been a climactic hurdle, as they would have been surprised and bewildered by Fenrir's strength. When I'd first cleared the sixtieth floor in the game, Fenrir had been quite a formidable foe. Visually, it was a terrifying sight, appearing to be between thirteen and fifteen feet tall.

But since Yuika had beaten the Book of Raziel, Fenrir didn't seem like much of a threat to her at all. The overpowering aura the Book of Raziel had given off was definitely more powerful than that of this monster, no doubt about it.

In this case, maybe I could handle everything myself? I wanted to defeat it on my own if possible. That way, it would be easier to convince everyone when I explained things later on. I addressed the other two.

"Hey, if you don't mind, could you let me fight Fenrir solo so I can get more stole practice? I'm, um, being pretty serious here."

"For real?" Yuika sighed. Nanami didn't seem to mind.

“Hmmm. I mean, I’m guessing you have some sort of plan here.”

I nodded.

“All right then, fine, but I want to fight it after, so you better come all the way back here with me next time. Oh, and, if things get dicey, I’m jumping in to help.”

Yuika was going to let me handle the fight. I was really grateful for it. Now I’d have the chance to test out a lot of things.

I dashed off toward Fenrir, prompting the monster to also leap at me.

It was probably the fastest monster I had encountered in the Academy Dungeon thus far.

Except there was someone even faster on dinner duty tonight.

Fenrir was the first to attack. It built up momentum and pounced, trying to crush me with its right hand.

However, I guarded the attack with my Third Hand. I felt the stole give a little, perhaps a signal that I still hadn’t transferred enough mana into it yet. Fenrir must have thought it could tear through it, as it fell back before swiping with its other claw.

But I guarded this with my Fourth Hand.

As I battled the creature, a thought came to me—I needed to prep my stole before combat more, to make it easier to fill with mana. While it was easier to exert its power compared to my previous stole, it could also hold a lot more mana. Since putting more mana into it made it easier to handle, I needed to pour magic energy into it like a fire hose.

Consequently, I couldn’t produce nearly as much power as I wanted by going in the same manner as I had before.

“This thing’s super powerful, but it guzzles down mana.”

As I pushed Fenrir away, another thought came to me.

There was a chance I would consume more mana than I ever had up until now, so it would probably be a good idea to practice filling the stole with as much mana as possible.

If my stole ended up consuming so much mana that using it was impractical, then I would need to think about getting my hands on items that would boost my natural mana recovery. As a matter of fact, these items could help other people out, too, and I had the Golden Lucky Cat to boost drop rates, so there was no harm in trying.

“Whoa, a bite attack next?”

Fenrir retreated momentarily before barring its sharp fangs at me and energetically closing in.

While I did feel like I’d be able to withstand the attack like normal, I was a little scared to do so, given I still wasn’t accustomed to my new stole.

I spread power all the way to the metal ornaments on the tip of my Third Hand. Next, I crouched down slightly and built up strength in my legs, too. Watching for the right moment, I kicked off the ground. As I launched upward, I thrust my Third Hand up with it.

A Shoryuken. Performing the sort of uppercut a fighter from the streets would use, I scored a direct hit on Fenrir’s jaw. The monster’s jaw clamped shut as Fenrir was sent flying into the air.

Fresh blood splattered over the area. The monster had sustained a deep gash wound to its face.

“Oh, so those can be used as weapons, too,” Yuika said.

Yuika must have been referencing the metallic ornaments attached to the tip of my stole. They were apparently made out of the same materials as the cross decorations Ms. Sakura had on her clothes. They could serve as blades, and when I sharpened them as I had here, I could use them like claws.

If I stabbed them into the ground instead, I could probably use them like cleats. The ornaments seemed to have a wide variety of applications, and it was fun to think up how I would use them next.

I had no complaints about the power behind them, either.

Fenrir stood up to show the large cut across its face. Despite its thick hair and hide, I had managed to cut through, gouging its flesh.

My opponent appeared to be sizing me up, so this time, I decided to go on the offensive.

However, it had grown frightened of me after my last attack. Fenrir jumped back and to the side to escape.

I slowly but surely closed the distance. When I was close enough, I extended my Third Hand and grabbed its leg. I tried to pull it in closer toward me, but my attempt proved unsuccessful. Fenrir firmly stood its ground to stop me.

Yeah. This stole's overall power was weaker. It still didn't have enough mana. I needed to pour more mana into it. With that amount of power filling it, I got the feeling I could win.

I increased the mana I was sending into my stole. At this, Fenrir slowly began inching in my direction.

The monster looked almost pitiful as it was dragged by its leg toward me. I increased the strength behind my pull and then used my Fourth Hand to lift up Fenrir's body.

Although the monster writhed to and fro when I lifted it up, it couldn't escape from the grip of my stole. I could see the sharp white teeth in its mouth, drool dripping down from the gaps in between.

In the past, I probably would have found its tenacious maw and sharp fangs terrifying. Not now, though. Honestly, I felt like someone was gonna call me out for animal cruelty.

"Uh, for real? Seriously?" Yuika remarked. It must have been a real sight to see me lifting a wolf that was several yards tall.

Beside Yuika, Nanami took out a single-lens reflex camera and a tripod. She started filming it all with the intensity of a mother recording her child's kindergarten play.

If she was going to film all this, then I might as well go for a really big move next.

I took Fenrir, raised it up high, and slammed it into the ground. Then I lifted it up one more time and did it again.

My old stole would have been too short to pull off such a feat.

But the length and flexibility of my new stole had all kinds of novel applications, this type of attack included.

After slamming the monster into the ground several times, I hurled it at the wall.

Under normal circumstances, Fenrir could have landed safely, but after sustaining so much damage from being smacked into the ground, it was unable to immediately regain its footing.

That aside, Fenrir was truly impressive. It still managed to stand despite being tattered and beat up.

"I didn't even need my katana."

I glared at Fenrir. Watching its legs tremble unsteadily, I was assured of my victory.

Using my Third Hand to push hard on the ground and launch like a bullet, I reached Fenrir in a single leap. Then I used the

claws on my Fourth Hand to attack Fenrir as it barely managed to get back on its feet.

"Good jobbbb That wasn't even close."

Yuika came over to me and held up her hand. I promptly gave her a high five.

Then Nanami, standing right behind her, gave me a high five of her own.

"You even left your foe trembling. Brilliant as always, Master. BAAM."

It really had been a flawless victory. I'd managed to defeat Fenrir with my stole alone, not even touching my katana.

Unfortunately, the monster didn't drop any noteworthy items.

"You know, Takioto, you don't seem very excited for someone who's defeated Fenrir and cleared the sixtieth layer."

I mean…

"That's 'cause I figured it was obvious we'd manage all that. Let's stop standing around and hurry back outside."

We used the magic circle to leave the dungeon.

Stepping out of the spatial magic circle, we stretched out our bodies, basking in the sunlight. Some nearby students looked to be heading into the dungeon themselves, and several were staring at the three of us.

However, I was used to these sorts of looks, and Yuika checked her Tsukuyomi Traveler without giving them a second thought. She was probably replying to a message.

"I'm pretty hungry after all that. What's for dinner tonight?"

The question suddenly reminded me.

"Yukine's flexing her cooking skills tonight."

Right, I needed to send a message to Yukine and Ludie. They had taken great pains to remind me I needed to tell them when I was out of the dungeon. I figured it was best to send a message to Ivy and Iori, too.

"Hmm, so Yukine's cooking. Sounds like I'll get to eat a whole bunch, then."

Yuika was right. I was really hungry myself. I wanted a shower, too.

"Okay then, wanna head home?"

That next day, a breaking news alert was sent to every student's Tsukuyomi Traveler.

The title read: *Ceremonial Committee First-Years Clear Sixtieth Layer with Record-Breaking Speed.*


CONFIG

“Amazing, isn’t it? This is like the complete opposite of what we dealt with before our dungeon trek. All the students who laughed behind our backs are looking at us like we’re monsters.”

Everyone’s attitude toward us had reversed overnight.

The day after the results of the exam had been posted, countless students made fun of us. Despite our arrogant front, we had failed to get good grades. Our peers must have thought we were all talk. In my case, my grades were unchanged from the last exam period.

But then the next day, we had gone into the dungeon to clear the sixtieth floor, emerging triumphant just forty-eight hours later.

Thanks to the newspaper announcing that a “mere party of three” had “cleared the sixtieth floor in the fastest time ever for first-years,” we became the talk of the Academy.

The sixtieth layer was an area most third-years reached right before graduation, and there were many students who never ended up making it that far. Even elite students typically achieved that feat only in their second year. Meanwhile, we had cleared it in the first half of our first year.

There were no longer any students who ridiculed us. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say there were none who *could* ridicule us.

“You know, it feels pretty nice.”

Sensing stares from the people around us, Yuika hummed to herself. It must have been her first time getting this sort of attention. The Ceremonial Committee had always been an eye-catching organization, but Yuika had never stood out for being crazy strong before.

Thanks to Ivy skillfully fanning the flames with the newspaper article and bulletin board posts, our exploits spread beyond the

first-years and circulated through the whole student population. We must've been the hottest topic at school right now.

Except, well, in my case…

"Y'know, everyone's been staring at me like this for so long, I sorta don't notice it anymore."

I had always gotten attention no matter where I went.

Noticing my reaction, Yuika spoke up.

"Oh yeah, I've been meaning to ask this, but when someone tries to instigate something with you, Kousuke, you generally don't say anything back unless you know them, right? Why's that?"

"Is that true? I yell at people to get out of my way and stuff."

"That's not what I'm taaaaalking about!" Yuika replied. Why was she saying it like that? It was super cute.

"I don't mean that stuff. You're ending our next little incident by squaring off against my big brother, right?"

Ohhh, that was what she was referring to.

"You mean I don't say, '*Don't even bother studying*,' or '*You should just drop out*,' that kind of thing?"

"Yup."

Hmmm, I had to think about this one.

"I used to overthink things and not say very much, but now it's probably not worth the effort."

"Wait, there's a difference between then and now?"

"A little bit, yeah. Before, people used to say that skipping out on exams made me look like I didn't care at all and stuff, but I used to think they had a point, so I just resigned myself to the criticism. Plus, if I disavowed the classes here entirely, it could lead to people taking me at face value."

"That's because of your unprecedented achievement of clearing the first forty layers solo, Master. If you said class was a waste of time and told people to go to the dungeon instead, they would likely follow your example and start to skip classes to do so."

Yup, that was the rub.

"Heck, even I think class is useful, you know. I just chose to skip because I lacked the knowledge base to do well, and I have next to zero aptitude for magic. I think it's important to spend time learning about the Tsukuyomi Academy Dungeon and monsters, too."

I would be in trouble if people started going "*No class, only dungeon*," or something.

"You actually thought things over for a change? So what's different now?"

"And here I saw myself as the type to *always* think through things. Anyway, now it's too much of a pain to think about it all."

"A sharp turn to apathy, then."

"This might sound egotistical, but I think I'm gonna be a real big influence on everyone. There's no way to know how my comments will affect people, and thinking about it is a pain in the butt, so silence is the easiest option."

"Now that you mention it, that might end up happening with me and Miss Yuika, too."

My thoughts exactly.

"Yeah, I could see Yuika's remarks really packing a punch, too. If she said something weird without making sure to talk things through with Iori and the others beforehand like we did this time, she might lead someone to show up at school or drop out altogether."

While Yuika didn't say anything, the words *ugh, what a pain* were written on her face.

"Still, we have to drive home to the students that the Ceremonial Committee's the enemy, so we'll be walking a tightrope."

As we talked, we headed to the bulletin board, where students often gathered, to meet up with Iori and the others.

Iori and Gabby were already there. When Iori spotted me, he tapped his sword, signaling he was ready to go.

"Heya, Iori. How's it hanging, buddy?"

"Hi, Kousuke. I guess it feels like all my hard work paid off? I'm sure you know, but I was third in our class."

I laughed at his reply.

"C'mon, Iori. You're not seriously worrying about your grades or anything, are you?"

"I take them pretty seriously, actually."

"Ah, what a waste," I murmured as I looked around. And then, "Iori, buddy. Are you stupid?"

"*Pfft.* Big Bro, don't you know good grades are totally pointless without the strength to back them up?" Yuika added.

“They certainly aren’t pointless. Is something so basic beyond your comprehension?”

Gabby was next to join in the conversation. She stepped out in front of Yuika.

“Strength isn’t all there is in this world, I’ll have you know. A bit of extra power will all go to waste if you have the mental capability of a pigeon. It seems the Ceremonial Committee is quite a collection of wasted potential, isn’t it?”

“Excuuuuse me? I wonder who the real bird brain is here. Pretty sure that’s you, Gabby. Oh, whoops, I meant to say ‘drill brain’!” Yuika said.

“You dare insult my noble choice in hair style?”

Yuika and Gabby glared at each other, sparks flying between them.

We’d arranged for them to continue trading insults at each other, so I left them to it. Next, I turned to Iori.

“What Yuika said. Strength is what matters most. Don’t tell me that being around weaklings all the time’s made your brain go soft, too.”

“Weak? Who’s weak?”

“All those lowlifes standing around here. I’m telling you, they’re just holding you back, so you gotta ignore ’em. You’re wasting all that talent of yours. Also, get your head out of the books and get your ass in the dungeon.”

“…I don’t think everyone’s weak, and I don’t think our classes are meaningless, either.”

“Oh yeah? How so?”

“Sure, everyone may not have the same skills you do, Takioto. But I don’t think that they’re holding me back! Everyone has their own unique strengths. Some of our classmates even know things that you don’t, Kousuke. Others use their knowledge to do research, too.”

“What’s your point?”

“I’m saying, it’s all about what you develop, okay? If you only keep thinking about the dungeon nonstop, everyone’s going to pull the rug out from under you, you know? Might makes right isn’t the be-all and end-all.”

“Hmph.”

“Besides, everyone here is going to get much, much stronger. Right now, they all may not be as powerful as you, but don’t worry, they’ll catch up soon. I can tell.”

Iori looked to the surrounding students. Wow, it seemed like his words had given them all a bit of confidence. Though I had come up with almost all the lines Iori had said up until now. Because of that, it felt a bit like I was arguing with myself.

“What’s all this commotion about?”

The Morals Committee had arrived on the scene. Ludie stepped in between the two of us, while Katorina stepped in between Yuika and Gabby to reprimand them.

Their timing was perfect.

“Oh, if it isn’t Ludie. You’re looking as fine as ever! Whaddaya say we grab lunch today?”

“Um, thank you for the invitation. Unfortunately, I have some things to take care of today, so I must respectfully decline.”

Oh, right, Ludie was still technically a prim-and-proper young lady. Since I never talked to her in front of the other students, I had forgotten.

“Aww, you’re no fun.”

“Sorry, Kousuke. Unlike you, I am very busy. Also, let me ask you both again, what you are doing here?”

I imagined the other students must have felt like I was getting what I deserved as they watched one of the most popular students on campus give me the cold shoulder.

“What are you looking at me for? Iori and Gabby are the ones who came at us.”

Iori shook his head at my reply.

Ludie looked around the vicinity.

“Judging from the mood here, it would appear to me that the Ceremonial Committee started things. I ask you to refrain from causing any further commotion here, thank you.”

I slumped my shoulders, as if hurt by Ludie’s lack of faith in me.

“I mean, I wasn’t trying to start anything, y’know… Hey! Don’t you guys look at me like that!”

“It doesn’t seem like they feel the same way.”

I could sense their hostility. Given what I was saying, it wasn’t a mystery why.

“Ah, whatever. Fine. Heard you loud and clear, Ludie. Just one more thing, though— Hey, Iori?”

“What, Kousuke?”

“See, I think pretty highly of you,” I said, looking at him. “Y’know, you’re doing really well. I think you got a chance to be the second strongest guy among the first-years. After me, anyway. So quit getting so caught up with class, stop hanging out with the plebs like this, and join me at the top already.”

Obviously, I didn’t actually think this. My statement was super rude, something only the crappiest guy alive would say. No one understood that better than the dude saying it.

“Nah, you’re wrong. All of that is wrong.”

Iori shut down my asshole remark.

“Whoa, whoa, what about any of that was wrong?”

I put my hand on my katana, sending mana into my stole.

“That’s enough.” Katorina quickly flew out in front of me and issued a warning. To make things more realistic, she used enhance magic and took out her weapons. It appeared that instead of her usual daggers, she was using the rare dual swords she had picked up in a dungeon. Katorina had an aptitude for dual swords, too, so it was quite a nice choice on her part.

Nanami responded by trying to protect me. She had an apple in one hand, and she held Katorina in check with a fruit knife. I guessed the fruit knife just barely made sense, but what the hell was the apple about?

Iori also put his hand on his sword, but Ludie stepped in to stop him.

The mood in the air would best be described as a powder keg.

The first person to speak up and break the tension was Iori.

“Kousuke, I said it before, but I don’t think studying diligently alongside everyone else is wrong. I’m going to work together with them all to grow even stronger. Also…” He broke off for a second. Then he grinned. “Your whole premise is off to begin with.”

“Is it now?”

“Yup. Since I’m going to be the strongest. Kousuke, you can be number two.”

I couldn’t help cracking a smile. We had talked through the general flow of the conversation beforehand, but I hadn’t heard this line in particular.

Look who had started standing up for himself.

“Is that what you think? Then hurry up and catch me.” I dispersed all the mana I’d sent to my stole. “’Cause I’m the guy who made it to the deeper layers first. Let’s get outta here, Nanami, Yuika.”

Yuika turned her back to Gabby in a huff and headed over to me. I signaled with my chin that we were going somewhere else.

Nanami put away her fruit knife and handed me the apple she was carrying. What the hell? Crap, this was bad. I wasn’t able to hide how much this had thrown me for a loop. For the time being, I tried to stay silent as we walked off. Actually wait, she’d been carrying that fruit knife the whole time but never stooped to peel the apple for me? It was tasty, though.

Leaving the scene behind, the three of us went into the Moon Palace. I would say we put on a pretty good performance. Before we got to that, though, there was something I had to ask about.

Yuika put it into words before I could. She must have thought it was strange, too.

“Nanami, what’s the apple for?”

“You always think of apples when you think of maids, yes? The two words sound so similar, after all.”

“Uh, not in the slightest actually… So why did you even do that?”

“Master, you informed me that I would not have much of a role this time, so although I was convinced that could not possibly be the case, I was in fact sidelined, wasn’t I? I thought that I needed to do something impactful or risk people forgetting about me, so I bided my time for the perfect moment to bring out an apple.”

What the hell “moment” were you waiting for? That made no sense.

“Listen, your little stunt caught me off guard, you know.”

“It took everything I had to hold it in. Takioto, you got all serious out of nowhere and—*pfft*, ha-ha, just thinking about it makes me laugh. I bet Ludie was fighting back her laughter, too,” said Yuika.

“That was the other aim behind it, yes.”

Nanami flashed me a teasing grin. All that for a chuckle, huh? Ah well, whatever.

“Now that I think about it, what are you doing after this?” Yuika asked me.

Hmm, from here…

“Ah yeah, I figured we’d call it a day now. I was thinking I’d head for a solo dungeon run.”



“Would that be referring to the matter you mentioned this morning?”

I nodded. I’d made an announcement to the Hanamura House residents that morning.

This time, I was going to clear the sixtieth layer solo.

It was why I had asked Yuika and Nanami to let me fight the boss alone during our last dungeon run. It gave them all peace of mind; if I could solo the boss, then I’d probably be fine. During my last solo run, I’d made everyone anxious because I’d gone off and had done all sorts of stuff on my own. Incidentally, the photograph that Nanami took also served to ease their minds. I hadn’t overlooked Sis casually stuffing several copies into her pocket, though.

All that said, I was going to head to the dungeon, but…

“Anyway, I figure I’ll head out in an hour maybe.”

…Yuika cocked her head and crossed her arms when she heard this.

“Wait, remind me again what we did yesterday?”

“Miss Yuika, yesterday we cleared down to the sixtieth layer of the Tsukuyomi Academy Dungeon.”

“Right, right.” Yuika nodded in reply. “Um…are you not going to take a bit of a break?”

“Hm? That’s basically what I’m doing right now, right?”

Yuika heaved an enormous sigh.

“*Uggggggh*, Nanami, don’t you think this guy’s messed up in the head? Even the most toxic workplace in the world wouldn’t run their employees this ragged.”

Whoa, whoa now, toxic workplaces were waaaay worse. They usually didn’t pay out any overtime, y’know.

“Well, this is my Master we are talking about.”

“Hey, Nanami? That’s not really giving me the support I’m looking for here.”

After chatting a bit more, we called it a day and went our separate ways. Now, I was standing here—

“Back again.”

The Tsukuyomi Academy Dungeon.

The boss on the sixtieth floor, Fettered Fenrir, had several items it could drop.

I wanted one in particular: Severed Gleipnir. However, its drop rate was extremely low, even with the Golden Lucky Cat equipped.

But farming Fenrir alone provided a good amount of experience points, and the sword it had a chance of dropping was pretty useful, too, making it a pretty popular grinding spot.

This was my largest reason for clearing the sixtieth layer. Since I had grown strong enough to easily handle the boss, it would be great for experience and great for item drops. By the way, solo farming was the most efficient method of all.

Boggling everyone's minds while stoking the students' animosity for the Ceremonial Committee was honestly just icing on the cake.

"Welp, that should do it for my prep."

I filled my stole with mana.

"Let's get this Fenrir marathon sesh started!"

Any regular student who overhead me say this would have probably fainted on the spot—that thought ran through my mind as I stepped onto the spatial magic circle.

Two days later, my Fenrir farming was going smoothly, and now I was having almost too much fun with it. That was when Yuika, Nanami, and I were called to the Student Council room.

When we arrived, the Three Committee presidents were already there, along with Hanzou, Anemone, and Ivy. Anemone noticed me and urged me to take a seat next to her.

Once we were in our seats, Ivy served us green tea.

"You get why we called you here, right?" President Monica said.

However, nothing came to mind for me. Yuika and Nanami seemed to have an idea of why, though.

"Ummm…is it that I'm farming Fenrir too much?"

President Monica sighed when she heard this. A long, heaving sigh.

"No, no, like we'd ever call you here for something like that… By the way, how many times have you defeated it?"

"Five times over the past two days."

At first, I'd been able to kill it only twice in a single day, but after pursuing maximum efficiency, I'd realized I could get up to

three times in one day. If I pushed myself to be even more efficient, I got the feeling I could hit four times in one day.

President Monica and the Saint looked at me with exasperation. Anemone, Minister Benito, and Ivy smiled. Hanzou remained silent. Three groups, three different reactions.

"…It's about the Three Committees," the Saint said, looking fed up with me.

Oh, right, duh—I almost said that thought aloud. It was a pretty serious topic, so they would've chewed me out if I'd responded like that.

In all honesty, I already knew what they were hiding, and my Fenrir farming had gotten so efficient, I'd gotten caught up in the fun and had forgotten the topic entirely.

"So do you three want to hear the secret?" President Monica asked us.

She had previously mentioned that it could put our lives in danger, so she was confirming if we were prepared or not.

"Oh, absolutely," I said.

Yuika and Nanami agreed.

"I do, too."

"My Master is the only one who could harm me."

Nanami, don't start with the weird stuff now.

"Really… *Gaaah.*"

President Monica gave a big sigh. Deep down, she still didn't really want to talk about it.

"You three are way too fast."

The Saint continued in President Monica's stead.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. More than just fast. Even I didn't get told the truth until the last half of my second year," Minister Benito chimed in.

"Well, let's just say we got here a little early. Now tell us everything."

Anemone laughed at Yuika's words. We were definitely more than a "little early."

"Before we get to the main topic," President Monica began. "Despite my promise to tell you, there's something I want to ask first: Did anything come to mind when you first heard about the way the Three Committees work?"

“Oh, that? I had some questions from the very start. It always seemed to me like the whole system could break down at any moment,” Yuika said.

“Break down, you say?”

She nodded at Minister Benito.

“I mean, am I wrong? Anyone could learn about the Three Committees system from an alumnus, for one, and if someone happened to have a sibling on one of the committees, they could fill their young siblings in on all of it. Truth is, Gabby already knew a bunch of stuff before she joined, right?”

“True.”

“That’s why, from the outset, I figured the Three Committees system was built on a really small bit of faith, basically a verbal promise. It seemed like its secret could fall apart at a moment’s notice.”

Yuika’s words were harsh, but she made a good point. Simply put, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise if the secret of the system was exposed.

“But lately, I’ve come around to the idea that you might not really care if the secret gets out. I don’t really know why, though.”

Everyone, save for Nanami and myself, looked surprised to hear Yuika say this.

“You’re really quick on the uptake, you know that? Benito, I’ll use my authority as President to increase the student council member limit, so can I take her?”

“No way. Yuika’s a valuable member of the Ceremonial Committee. Besides, she’s already gotten some results with us, so it’s a bit too late for that, isn’t it?”

Minister Benito turned down President Monica’s invitation.

“Too bad. You’re right, Yuika. The roles of the Three Committees we told you all about, three organizations in conflict with one another to improve the student’s abilities, were just a surface reason, and we don’t really care if word about that gets out.”

“Why would that be?” Nanami asked.

“You know what? Once most people learn a secret, that’s enough to satisfy them, and they don’t probe any further. That little secret serves to cloak our true duty.”

Yuika narrowed her eyes as she listened to President Monica’s explanation.

“Ohhh, our true duty. And that would be…?” she asked.

President Monica stared at us with solemnly, then sighed slightly before telling us.

“Our true role concerns the Secret Dungeon that lies within the Tsukuyomi Academy Dungeon.”


CONFIG

—Katorina's Perspective—

Kousuke Takioto has cleared the sixtieth layer solo.

The news left not only all the students in the school, but also the Three Committees and even the teachers, reeling.

Me, I thought he'd pretty much lost it.

Takioto was deranged—that basically had to be the consensus. However, I thought Iori and Orange also had a few loose screws of their own. That's because they looked at what Kousuke Takioto did and said *they* needed to push ahead, too, with complete sincerity.

Now, the aftereffects of this wackjob's achievements were huge.

According to the upperclassmen in the Morals Committee, they had never seen the Ceremonial Committee in a state like this before.

Apparently, the student population was usually a lot more aggressive toward the Ceremonial Committee, like they had been when the latest exam scores got posted.

The Morals Committee's role was to protect the Ceremonial Committee through it all. "*We can't let the morals of the school be tarnished, even if you're fighting against the Ceremonial Committee*," essentially. Glossing it all over by saying that even though they saw the Ceremonial Committee as bad, they didn't think resorting to violence was right.

"Normally, things should have stayed like this for a year, but they didn't even last a week this time," Lieutenant Mizumori had said, laughing.

Her theory was that the students' anger was transforming into fear, since the first-years on the Ceremonial Committee, Kousuke Takioto chief among them, were growing at such a rapid pace.

I had seen this myself during the performance that Iori and the others had put on yesterday.

Takioto, Yuika, and Nanami were feared. Still, the fact that Iori and the rest of us boldly stood up against them had inspired confidence in many of the students.

That being said, Yukine still didn't think any of the students would pick a fight with the Ceremonial Committee. She expected the Morals Committee would have an easy time this year.

"Though I don't think that's necessarily a good thing, either," Yukine said.

"If the students' enemies are *too* strong, there's a chance some of them could get demoralized."

Vice President Fran agreed.

"True. Still, there are also students who get more enthusiastic the stronger their opponents seem. Takioto's a perfect example. He's pushing full steam ahead to achieve the lofty goal of defeating President Monica."

"How's anyone supposed to get that guy under control?" I complained. I mean, I couldn't begin to imagine soloing all the way down to the sixtieth layer.

"Don't worry about him, Takioto's just a bit abnormal. All the first-years are improving really fast, including you, Rina. You're on track to easily eclipse where I was last year, too," Yukine said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. You're growing stronger, too."

Hearing this, I recalled when I asked Yukine for advice after that quiz we'd participated in at the Hanamura House.

I wasn't especially good at asking others for advice. Still, Yukine had been super easy to talk to. She was also really empathetic and gave me a lot of guidance.

"Just relax. You have real talent, Rina, and I'm not the only one who recognizes it, either. Even Captain Stef thinks so," Yukine told me kindly.

"She does?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right. I heard Takioto say as much, too."

Whatever he said had to be the real deal. Well, no, it might not be true, but he was taking it as the truth. Though if there was one thing that wasn't the real deal…

That would probably be me.

"You're working hard, and maintaining that effort is the important part. I had also hit a bit of a plateau, but an event in

my life helped me instantly get a lot stronger. Still, I believe I was only able to pull that off because I never stopped my normal training regime," Lieutenant Mizumori said before closing her eyes.

"If you want to take off and soar someday, you need to give yourself a big runway. I promise you, Rina—the time for your own big leap forward will come."

"I wonder."

"C'mon, if that doesn't happen, me, Iori, and everyone else will just give you a big push from behind. Though Takioto might throw you on his back and start sprinting ahead instead of just giving you a push. Ha-ha."

"But until then, I'm just going to be a burden on everyone."

"No one cares about that… Actually, I think you're the one who's most bothered by it."

Yukine chuckled and patted me on the head.

"You're really kind, Rina. I've grown fond of you."

Was I truly that kind?

"Everyone out here is supporting one another, okay? Even if you don't think anything of it, there are those who feel you've really helped them just be being here. Iori's one example already, and Captain Stef is the same way."

"You really think so?"

"Sure do. So don't worry about it too much, okay? You're growing stronger, Rina. Don't be reckless."

She told me I was getting stronger. But was I really?

"What's wrong, Rina?"

My focus suddenly returned to me.

"Oh, sorry, it's nothing. I have some stuff to do, so I'm gonna get going," I said, leaving the Morals Committee room and turning my back to Iori and the others.

Then I went into the dungeon on my own.

I knew full well that going solo was dangerous. That it meant there was a risk I could get injured or wind up dead.

Even then, no injury I suffered could be more painful than bearing my own weakness. It felt like my uneasiness was going to smother me.

Just look at Takioto and Iori, shooting ever higher—could I really rise to those heights along with them?

Iori, especially. A while ago, he'd obtained an item called a Seed of Possibility. He consulted with everyone on who should eat it, and the unanimous opinion was for him to have it.

I didn't have any complaints about him eating it, obviously. He had worked the hardest out of all of us during that incident.

However, the question of whether I could keep up with the speed of his development had become its own seed of woe for me.

Iori had grown stronger at an abnormal clip to begin with, but ingesting the Seed of Possibility had clearly accelerated his progress even faster. That was how I saw it.

I thought there was a chance I would drag him down.

Iori spurred the growth of everyone around him. He was kindhearted, the type to stop what he was doing if he saw someone with bad grades and offer to study with them.

Conversely, this put a lot of pressure on me.

I understood Iori wasn't the kind of guy to just leave me behind, sure, but I would always imagine the worst possible outcome.

Maybe I would never be able to get stronger, then wind up abandoned and alone. The Morals Committee was full of good people, too, but this also put pressure on me. If, by any chance, I ended up holding them back… If in the worst case, I was left behind and suddenly everyone started walking on eggshells around me.

…Apparently Minister Benito had once said, "Those without any talent should just drop out."

I figured Iori would have refuted this. But I didn't disagree with Benito; I thought he was pretty spot-on. After all, if someone didn't have any talent but struggled desperately anyway? If that resulted in their dreams being ruined, with things going unfinished, then it would be better to call it quits early and find a safer path.

"'Those without any talent should just drop out,' huh?"

I couldn't help thinking that applied to myself right now. If that was how things were going to go, I'd rather just suffer a terrible injury that left me no choice but to give up on being a mage or an adventurer.

As all these different emotions swirled inside me, I continued on through the dungeon.

Several hours later, I had grown sticky with sweat and monster blood.

“Time to head back.”

I returned the dual swords to their sheaths. I had just started to use dual blades for the first time, after deciding I needed to beef up my firepower to gain ground on Iori and Takioto. I’d thought they would increase the options available to me. I had just come across the weapons in a dungeon, but they still had the highest attack power of any of the weapons I owned, which was another reason for the switch.

Thanks to the Academy instructors and Yukine giving me an introduction on their usage, I was now able to wield them pretty well. I had managed to kill a large number of enemies today.

“Haah.”

I had figured a lot of people would spot me or try talking to me if I went to the Academy Dungeon, so I’d purposefully traveled to a faraway dungeon instead, but…

“Getting home’s a pain in the ass.”

At that point, travel would be much easier for me if I could just set up a room for myself in the actual dungeon. I took a towel out from my item box and wiped off my sweat and grime.

I hadn’t done any laundry yesterday, so I was definitely going to need to do some today. At the moment, though, everything felt like too much of a drag. I was hungry, but eating was a hassle. All I wanted to do was take a shower and dive straight into bed.

As I made my way back to the dorms with these things on my mind, something happened—a man appeared.

Outwardly, he was a suit-wearing gentleman. A man with silver hair, wearing a black fedora. In one hand he held a cane, and in the other, a bouquet.

There were people dressed in maid uniforms, kimonos, and other off-the-wall outfits strolling around the Academy, so if I had been on campus, I probably wouldn’t have thought much of him.

But right now I was near a dungeon Takioto had told me about, and it definitely wasn’t in a residential neighborhood or an office building complex. It was in a grassy meadow.

My gut was telling me this guy was bad news.

Two ideas came to my mind.

Turn my back and run, or pretend I didn't see him and walk past him.

But he was standing in the path toward town.

I wouldn't be able to return home, but should I still run away in the opposite direction?

"No need to be so guarded," he said to me.

However, it seemed like he hadn't opened his mouth at all. It felt as if the voice was echoing inside my head.

Obviously, this only made me extra cautious.

"It'd be impossible not to."

I drew my dual swords and looked at him. He slowly began to walk over to me.

It was like alarm bells were blaring all around me. I sensed a tremendous power in the man, though perhaps not on same the level as the Book of Raziel.

The man stopped when he was just in striking distance. He fell to his knees on the spot and held out the roses in his hand.

"Long have I awaited the pleasure of meeting you."

He said this as if he knew exactly who I was.

"Confessing your love? Sorry, but you're not my type."

"Rather standoffish, aren't we? Heh-heh-heh."

He had a nasty way of laughing.

"Well, if that's all," I said, trying to go past him. However, he stopped me.

"Now, now, please wait. What I have to say will interest you."

"Doubt it."

"I believe you will come to find our meeting a fortuitous one."

He laughed. I looked at his eyes and mouth and immediately drew my dual swords. Then I cut up the roses he was holding out in front of me.

"My, my, is something the matter?"

He didn't run. Even with blades pointed right at him, he wasn't perturbed in the slightest.

He smiled as he clutched the cut-up bouquet.

"I should be the one asking that. Tell me, what the hell's a demon doing here?"

Exceedingly pointy canines, red eyes, and that menacing aura. He was exactly like the demons President Monica had defeated in

the Beginner's Dungeon.

"Color me surprised. You picked up on that quick, didn't you?"

Despite what he'd said, there wasn't a hint of shock on his face.

"I've fought your kind before."

What was I going to do? I got the feeling fighting wasn't the best idea here. That just left running away. If I made a group call with my Tsukuyomi Traveler while I ran, would someone come to help me?

I applied my body enhancements and built up power in my legs.

"Please, just calm down. I have not come here to fight you. I'm here because I believe I can help you," he said, tossing aside the sliced-up bouquet before he lifted one side of his lips into a smirk. An unpleasant, suspicious smile.

"Help me?"

"That is correct. You are currently quite troubled, aren't you?"

While things were weighing on my mind, I wasn't so foolish as to give him an honest answer.

"I am having a hard time deciding what I'll have for dinner tonight, that's true."

"Your meal, hm? While that is important, it's not what I'm talking about."

"My height maybe?"

"You are close in that it does concern your body. What is troubling you…"

As the words left his mouth, a black fog emanated from him, and he vanished. I immediately whirled around while swinging my swords behind me.

A metallic clang echoed across the area.

"…Is strength. You wish to become stronger, yes?"

The demon was behind me, having produced a short sword at some point to guard against my dual swords.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I have watched you fling yourself at this dungeon day in and day out."

"*Tch*, how long have you been stalking me?"

"Only about two weeks now."

Yet I hadn't even noticed? That couldn't be right.

“You haven’t drawn out your power. This must be because it’s sealed away. I would wager that releasing this seal will make you several times stronger than you could ever get from dungeon crawling.”

Sealed away?

“Hold up. No one’s put a seal on me or whatever, okay? Also, there’s no way I’d ever need help from a demon. I want to be as far away from your kind as possible.”

The demon began to laugh, like I’d said something drop-dead hilarious.

“Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh. Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Haaaa-ha-ha-haaa!”

“You really know how to piss a girl off. What’s so funny?”

“Pardon, you took me by surprise there. Has your mother not told you anything?”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“Simple. I’m referring to your father.”

My father?

“Yes, I am talking about your father…and the daughter he brought into this world.”

My father was a stranger; I’d gone my whole life without seeing him. In fact, people used to bully me for not having a dad at all. Though that was partly my fault, since I was so weak as a kid.

“…Sorry, not interested.”

“You’re lying. Your desire to hear about him is all over your face. Allow me to guess: Did you have a weak constitution when you were younger? Were you ever sickly?”

I abruptly thought back to my childhood. There was a period in my life where I had been like that.

“Oh, did my questions bring something to mind? Well, given this seal of yours, that was likely unavoidable.”

“What do you know?”

“I could say that I know you better than you know yourself. For now, please take this,” the demon said, throwing something in my direction. I caught it in my hands.

It was a bouquet, the same kind as the one I had cut up. A letter was stuck to the top.

“It would be difficult to undo the seal here, so please come to this location. It would be my pleasure to remove it for you.”

“Why?”

“Hmm, primarily because I’m intrigued to see what happens. You won’t regret it, I assure you. Removing the seal will raise your strength to incomparable heights.”

“…I told you, I don’t get involved with demons.”

“That philosophy is so shortsighted… Regardless, I’ll tell you more on the subject if you accept my invitation,” the demon said, creating a magical circle at his feet, before he seemed to remember something. “Do make sure to come alone. I shall be waiting.”

Eventually, his body began to transform into black particles. Then, when the demon’s silhouette had turned to nothing but a collection of black specks, he disappeared entirely. The reaction was similar to what happened when you stepped into a spatial magic circle.

I stared at the red bouquet in my hands. Large thorns covered the stems of the beautiful flowers.

After that, I went back to my room without coming across anyone I knew along the way.

I took out the bouquet I had brought back with me, then opened the attached letter.

Inside were the coordinates for a specific location.

I put the letter down on the table before taking a shower and collapsing back-first into bed.

“I was sickly when I was little because there’s a seal on me?”

I had definitely been a weak child. That much was true. And then there was…

“My father, hm?”

Suddenly, I thought back to my mother apologizing to me.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into my selfishness.”

My mother had said that to me with a very sad look in her eyes. All sorts of thoughts raced around and around inside my head. How exactly had my mother been “selfish” anyway?

“That demon said I was ‘brought into this world,’ like I was some kind of mistake.”

No matter how I thought about it, I could only come up with awful conclusions. Who was I supposed to talk to about this? No, forget that. I had to keep this to myself.

“I’m curious about my parents, yeah. But more importantly…”

I wanted power. I sought strength.

I didn't want to keep dragging down the other members of the Morals Committee, festering like a tumor. I didn't want Iori and the others to leave me behind.

Even then, my gut was telling me this was a trap. There was no way a demon would lend a hand without there being something in it for them.

"If I'm going to get myself involved with demons, I gotta be prepared for the worst-case scenario. I might end up losing everything."

Demons were the enemy of humankind. Depending on the circumstances, I might have to abandon everything. Should I really have been seeking this power if it might cost me dearly?

Iori, Ludie, Class Rep, Gabriella, Orange, Yuika… None of them would have followed after this demon.

Suddenly, Kousuke Takioto's face came to mind. What would he have done?

Would he head off, fully prepared to lose it all?

But could I really stay like this, if I was going to grow stronger like him?

Did I really need to come to a demon for help to keep up?

This was an infernal creature I was dealing with here. Augh, I just didn't know what I was supposed to do.

I…

◇

"I've been waiting for you."

The following day, I headed to the designated location. The demon was already there.

"You had no idea whether I would come, and you still waited here all this time? Creepy."

"I was convinced you'd show up. And we demons perceive time differently from you humans. A few days is no trouble at all," he claimed, not denying for a moment that he had waited for me.

Ms. Sakura was similar, so maybe long-lived races actually did think this way.

"Let us be off, then."

"Wait, where are we going?"

He'd called me out to this strange place, only to take me somewhere else?

"A dungeon. I won't be able to undo the seal on you without borrowing its power."

"…Head into a dungeon, with you? That's nothing but bad news. You're gonna attack me from behind or something, aren't you?"

"If it concerns you, please carry a magic stone with you to return home. Rest assured I won't lay a hand on you. I've also had my subordinates clean things up down there. Shall we?"

"What would you do if I said I don't want to go with you?"

"You wouldn't have come here if you didn't. Come along now."

I took out my Tsukuyomi Traveler and sent everyone a message I'd written out ahead of time.

It was a good-bye. It was the least I could do, since I wasn't sure what would happen from here on out.

From there, the demon guided me to a dungeon that resembled a cave of crystal. Like he'd said, his underlings had taken care of the monsters here, so we pushed forward unimpeded.

He used this time to speak of demons.

"Though we all may be demons, each member of our species acts under their own set of principles. You shouldn't assume that all demons are evil. Of course, what I mean here is humankind's idea of evil."

Apparently, demons had human allies as well.

"Evil from our perspective?"

"From a mouse's point of view, cats are the enemy. But humans consider cats cute and value them for their ability to exterminate mice, which carry disease. But cats can also carry diseases, and in some cases, they despise humans. Perspectives change depending on how one views a situation, and what position one views it from, yes?"

I figured he was trying to imply that notions of "good" and "evil" could differ if one changed their perspective.

"While some people worship the Malevolent Lord, there are also greater demons—what you humans would consider nobility,

I assume—with followers of their own."

The demon continued to expound on the nature of his kind until we arrived at a spacious area with a massive number of crystals. This was our destination.

"I said that there were many kinds of demons, yes?" he said as he knocked on a nearby crystal.

"Yeah, you mentioned that."

"Well, one of them brought you into this world," he said, turning to me and staring. "I shall get straight to the point. Your father was a greater demon who allied himself with humans. His blood runs in your veins, and he is the one who sealed away your demonic powers."

"…No way."

"You said you didn't want to get involved with demons, yes? Pure absurdity. You already are one."


CONFIG

I got Katorina's text on my Tsukuyomi Traveler while I was having a conversation with Iori about the future.

Iori got the same message simultaneously, and we both opened it up, wondering what it could be.

It kinda pisses me off to admit this, but... You did a lot for me. So thanks.

"Iori, what's yours say?"

"...What? Uhhh, huh? Wh-what's going on? She said something about there being a problem with her, and that she's leaving the Morals Committee and might drop out of school, that sort of thing."

Yup, I was right.

"I basically got a thank-you message. Or maybe it's her last good-bye."

"Wait, 'last good-bye'?! That can't be!"

There was a chance this was all part of some penalty for losing a bet, but really...

"I'm ninety percent sure it's that latter. The text you got had that vibe to it, right?"

Iori read back over his message with a solemn look on his face. Seeing his grave expression, I took a deep breath.

I'd been wondering when the situation with Katorina would come to a head, so I'd done a bit of prep for it.

"Let's go, Iori."

"S-sure, but where to?"

If this was it, then the faster we went into action, the better. I had already decided who I would bring along with me, too.

"The Morals Committee."

First, I needed to get a handle on the current situation. I sent a message to Nanami on my Tsukuyomi Traveler. I had planned on calling her if I didn't immediately get confirmation she had read

it, but the word READ quickly popped up on screen. I made sure to fill Ms. Sakura in, too.

As I sent a text asking Nanami to come to the Morals Committee, I headed to their room in the Moon Palace.

When we arrived, several members of the Morals Committee were already there, talking about something. The Saint noticed we were there and came up to us.

"You know what's going on, don't you?"

I saw a hint of anger in her expression.

"Ummm, you mean about Rina?"

Iori answered the question with one of his own, and the Saint nodded.

"We don't really know what's going on. I don't know what she sent you, but the message I got said she was going to quit the Morals Committee and maybe school altogether…"

"*Haaah.* I thought she was only taking a day off from school, but she missed the next day, didn't come to the meeting at all, and instead all I got was a message like the two of yours. Why didn't she come to me for help?"

The Saint had received some sort of message and seemed to be in the middle of consulting with the others about it. Apparently, only me, her, and Iori had gotten the text.

"Where's Rina?" Iori asked.

"No clue, and I can't get ahold of her, either," said the Saint.

Well, at the present moment, there was no way to tell what was going on or where she might be.

Still, Katorina's message stuck out to me. In the game, Iori is guaranteed to get one, and rest are supposed to go to the presidents of the Three Committees. I had no idea why I'd gotten one, too. I figured it was just a marginal difference in how things would play out, but it was a bit scary that things were diverging from how they played out in the game.

"…If you two know anything about what she's been up to lately, spill it," the Saint said with a sigh.

"She seemed worried about her grades… I think she's been going into dungeons on her own sometimes, too."

The Saint narrowed her eyes when she heard this.

"She's not trying to pull off an instant reversal in the dungeon, is she?"

A dungeon instant reversal referred to clearing a dungeon that was highly risky, was potentially fatal, but gave huge returns. The Saint was thinking that Katorina had gone into a dungeon seeking power.

If that was the case, I felt like she would have consulted with Yukine on the subject, but maybe not. If I had pursued the route where Katorina joined the Ceremonial Committee instead, there was a chance that Shion would have talked to her about her own abilities, but I had never seen the two of them getting along together before, so I didn't really need to consider that.

Though after this event, they were going to get a lot closer.

Anyway, it was time to push this topic forward in one fell swoop.

"I just asked Nanami to search Katorina's room for me."

"I instructed Yukine to go on my end, too. I have Ludie and a selection of Morals Committee members searching the nearby area. Honestly, just what is she up to?"

I had wondered why I hadn't seen Yukine here, but this explained it.

About ten minutes later, I got a message from Nanami. She and Yukine had met up in front of Katorina's room and immediately barged in together.

And what they found was…

"A map, hm? It's a bit far. What's even here?"

Nanami, who had just walked into the Morals Committee room, answered the Saint's question.

"I just finished using the Hanamura's resources to investigate, and it appears there's a dungeon in this location."

Despite what Nanami had claimed, the truth was that the Hanamuras probably didn't have information on this dungeon, either. I'd just made Nanami claim as much to speed things up. In the game, you search the mapped area, find the dungeon, and then prepare to dive in. However, I figured that if I knew there was a dungeon from the start, I could cut down the preparation time.

The Saint heaved a sigh when she heard the word *dungeon*. She must have surmised from Katorina's message that the girl was saying good-bye.

“*Haaah*, what is it with this batch of first-years? Way too many problem kids, I swear,” she said, sending a cold look my way.

While I understood who she was directing this comment at, there was always a chance she could mean someone else, and I turned around to look behind me. Unfortunately, no one was there.

“Ah-ha-ha…”

Iori forced out a laugh. Y’know, I wanted to make one thing clear here.”

“You’re not far off from being one, either, you know that? Anyway…back to Katorina. So there’s a dungeon at this location, then?” I said, turning to Yukine.

“Right. We should head there right away.”

“Still, we can’t bring everyone along,” the Saint chimed in.

“Why’s that?” Iori asked.

The Saint showed him the message she had gotten.

“If Katorina was caught up in some huge incident, then sure, the whole Student Council or Morals Committee could head there. But clearly, Rina went into this dungeon of her own volition and sent out these messages personally.”

“…Meaning, she’s not in imminent danger.”

The Saint nodded at my words.

“That’s right. If we knew with one hundred percent certainty some dangerous monster was chasing her, it would be fine to send everyone after her. But the Academy would be in trouble if the whole Morals Committee up and left when she’s not even in urgent danger. Esmeralda, how many days would it take to get here?” she said, glancing at the map.

“Judging from the position, it’ll take ten hours to get there. Then when considering you factor in the clear time…it might be two or three days until you’re back on campus.”

“We need to maintain the Morals Committee’s presence on campus… Hmmm, I’d prefer if no more than half of us went. Accounting for travel, and the search for Rina, it comes to a few days. Who’ll go?”

“I’ll go!” Iori immediately replied. I glanced at Nanami.

“Me and her are coming, too,” I added. I’d decided for Nanami, but she nodded, showing her agreement.

“Miss Ivy and Miss Yuika are on their way here. I believe we can include them as part of our party.”

Most members of the Ceremonial Committee didn’t really need to come to school. So there weren’t any problems with us joining. Even the Student Council would be fine if Iori was missing from their ranks for a few days.

“I’m real worried about Rina, Captain Stef. I’d like to join in, too,” Yukine said.

“I would like to go with you all as well. I know she’s an underclassman who’s only just joined, but I’m still worried,” added Esmeralda.

The other members of the Morals Committee all voiced a desire to participate.

The Saint closed her eyes and began to think.

“Who will go? That’s the question.”

She sucked in a lot of air. She then slowly let out a deep, long breath.

“In any case, I’m going.”

I felt relieved to hear this.

“Katorina’s working under me now. If she’s being reckless for some stupid reason, I’ll drag her back here if I have to.”

In this event, Katorina discovers one of her parents is actually a demon, making her a half demon. The Saint of Leggenze, who views all demons as the enemy, then comes to her aid.

Knowing that, you would expect this to be the most dangerous outcome possible.

But this was exactly how I wanted things to go.

There really isn’t anything the Hanamuras can’t do, is there? I’d found myself thinking that a lot lately.

When I consulted with Marino on how to get to the dungeon, she immediately made arrangements for me. Thanks to that, we managed to cut down on the transport time significantly. Nevertheless, the trip still took several hours.

Once we had reached our destination, my party of eight—myself, the Saint, Iori, Ludie, Yukine, Yuika, Ivy, and Nanami—headed into the dungeon.

From my perspective, the lineup of people for this event was basically perfect. The Saint seemed to have some problems with it, though.

“I didn’t expect there would be a dungeon in a place like this.”

“I had no idea as well.”

It was no surprise everyone was saying things like this—in truth, the demons were actively hiding this dungeon. This dungeon contained a unique magic stone, and the demons concealed the place in order to make use of it. So it made sense that no one had been aware of it.

The entrance was an open hole in a rocky stretch. Inside was a cave-type dungeon, exactly as the surroundings would suggest. But it was no ordinary cave.

“Quite a magical place,” Ironwall Esmeralda murmured, looking at the glittering objects growing on the walls and ground of the cave.

“Crystals, maybe? They’re absolutely everywhere,” the Saint remarked as she touched one of the gems.

“A true crystal cave.”

As Nanami said this, she looked around at the endless number of crystals growing in every possible direction.

They came in a range of sizes, with some tall enough to look like pillars and others small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand. They were varied in color, too, with some blue, some purple, and others white. A quick glance suggested no two crystals were exactly alike.

Incidentally, this dungeon’s name—the Crystal Cave—was perfectly in line with its appearance.

Ludie touched one of the crystals sprouting from the wall.

“It’s strange… It feels a bit like we’re surrounded by sparkling jewels.”

Given this was in a cave, you would think the crystals needed a light source to glow. But that wasn’t necessary…

…because each crystal gave off a light of its own.

The glow was a bit similar to that of a magic stone filled with mana. However, they weren’t as luminous as mana-filled magic stones, only giving off light to slightly illuminate the area. So basically, it was just another variation of the mysterious light that illuminated most dungeons.

Whatever the light source was, there was no question that any random picture of the area would do numbers on social media. The cave was so beautiful, I could easily see view counts shooting to the moon.

"You think it would be all right to break some of them and bring them back with us?" Ivy said.

"Seems like you could fetch a pretty good price for them, but can they even be destroyed in the first place?" Yuika asked as she touched one of them.

"Who can say…? *Haah.*"

The Saint looked at us and sighed, probably because things hadn't gone her way.

She must have wanted a different group to come with her, but me, Iori, Ludie, and Yuika had insisted we were going no matter what, telling her we would just come here on our own if she turned us down. That had left her no option but to bring us along.

If Orange and Class Rep had known the circumstances, I imagined they would've wanted to come, too, but they hadn't been filled in.

The Saint had justified not telling them by saying she didn't want to cause unnecessary panic, since we didn't know what had actually happened to Katorina. But I figured there had been other reasons at play, like the Saint not wishing to make the situation widely known, or because she thought it would be annoying to bring a huge cadre of first-years along. Not that I knew in detail or anything.

Personally, I also thought the fewer people who knew Katorina was part demon, the better, so I appreciated her discretion.

"Nanami, any suspicious areas or traps around here?"

"It does not appear so. We should be able to continue forward."

"Let's go," the Saint said after hearing this, beginning to walk off.

"Did she really come in here?" Ludie murmured as we walked.

"That is almost undeniable. The old hag confirmed her device's last seen location and said that this was where the signal was lost," Nanami said before taking out her Tsukuyomi Traveler. On the map, there was an icon placed on the dungeon we were currently walking through.

As for what could possibly cause a loss of tracking information, the only explanations were that she was either inside a dungeon where communication devices couldn't be used or the device itself had run out of mana or broken.

But the chances of her device breaking or running out of battery right in front of a dungeon were slim; that definitely couldn't be it. In all likelihood, the dungeon itself was blocking the signal.

"Right, right. Still, why did Rina send a message like that, anyway?"

Of course, I knew the reason why, but I was unable to answer.

"Master, we've arrived at a fork."

After continuing on a little while, we found the path split apart into two.

"Which one shall we proceed down?"

Well now, what was I supposed to do here?

The Crystal Cave had a fixed layout. As such, I knew which paths were correct, which led to dead ends, and which led to treasure chests.

"Hmm, if it's up to me, I guess I'm feeling left?" I suggested.

"Let's go right, then." The Saint immediately shot down my proposal. "You just look like you have terrible luck, okay?"

Iori, Ludie, and even Yuika all agreed, looking at me with pity in their eyes. Esmeralda was the only one who comforted me and said that wasn't true. She was so nice.

Ultimately, my opinion was ignored, and we went with the right-hand path. This led to a treasure chest.

After we had advanced a bit from there, there was a sudden shift in Nanami and Ivy's demeanor.

"Master, I sense monsters."

We all prepared ourselves for combat and inched forward.

"A golem made out of crystals, by the looks of it," Esmeralda said as she held her shield at the ready.

If we didn't need to fight it, then obviously we wouldn't have engaged. Unfortunately, this particular golem had taken up position at the entrance to the floor, and while we could double back, we couldn't go forward without confronting it. If it had been just a bit farther back, in the center of the floor, we might have been able to run by it, but this wouldn't work, either.

“We just have to fight it,” the Saint said, and we all readied our weapons. Nanami and Iori fired off their long-range attacks, and the battle began.

The golem approached us, making loud, crackling thuds. In order to stop its advance, Esmeralda, Iori, and I ran forward.

Esmeralda was the first to trade blows with the golem. As she closed in, it raised an arm and held it there for a second, before slamming its fist down on her.

A massive *clang* echoed around us. The noise rang out from Esmeralda’s shield—almost as big as she was—as she blocked the attack.

“I thought my eardrums were going to burst.”

“Uh, her feet are digging into the ground.”

The impact from the golem’s attack looked massive. I might have been able to block it with my stole, but the creature’s arm strength probably would have sent the others flying.

Regardless, Ironwall Esmeralda was as impressive as ever. She also blocked the golem’s follow-up karate chop without any strain at all.

She looked so unbelievably cool, not giving an inch of ground to an opponent ten times her body weight. If we were in an eroge all-girls school, she would definitely have been getting asked out by her classmates left and right.

As she withstood these haymakers, a gentle light reached out toward her from behind.

“Thank you very much, Captain Stef. However, I don’t need any healing yet.”

It was the Saint’s healing magic.

“Really? Good luck, then.”

Magical ★ Explorer players often paired the Saint with Esmeralda. They would make Ironwall Esmeralda tank, then assign the Saint, or sometimes Yuika, to heal her. In this way, the pair could take the bulk of the enemy’s attacks, allowing the rest of the party to go on the offensive and wipe out their foes.

With Ironwall’s overwhelming defenses complemented by the Saint’s healing prowess, the pair could take on monsters that were up to two ranks higher than them. And since Yuika was also capable of tanking and healing, I would bet my life savings we weren’t ever losing a battle again.

If the situation stayed the same, Nanami, Ludie, and Yukine would easily reduce the golem to magic particles. *If* it stayed the same.

However, it seemed it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Hey, Kousuke. Maybe I'm just imagining it, but do you hear footsteps right now?"

"That's funny, Iori, I was just thinking the same thing."

I ran past Esmeralda's group, which was fighting near the entrance, and attacked the newly arrived golem.

"Hiyah!"

This golem must have come from farther in, rushing over when it heard the sounds of combat.

Esmeralda might have been able to withstand two of them at once, but I couldn't leave everything up to her.

"Kousuke!" Iori shouted from behind me.

"I'll keep this one busy, so clean that other one up for me," I responded, readying my stole. The golem's first move was a punch, similar to the one Esmeralda had faced before. The monster lifted its fist in the air and held it there for a moment, then slammed it down.

I handled the attack by turning my Third Hand into a curved surface and hardening it. I then immediately extended out my Fourth Hand and pulled one of the golem's legs toward me.

The golem fell in my direction with a loud *thud*. Since I'd parried the golem's attack, its center of gravity had shifted, giving me an opening to sweep its legs with my stole. There was almost no way the monster could have avoided toppling over.

This was the first time I'd been able to pull off such a maneuver.

"Who would've thought that increasing the elasticity would change so much."

I instantly unsheathed my katana in the direction of the golem. It slipped perfectly between a joint in the crystals, severing one of the monster's arms.

But the golem wasn't done yet. Its body seemed to be made out of several large crystals linked together. I had sliced it at one of these joint areas, but the rest of its body was totally unharmed.

That meant I would have to sheathe my sword and try to attack again—but things weren't going to work out that way.

"That was *close*!"

I jumped to the side and put distance between myself and the golem.

Unbelievably, the golem spun its body and legs three hundred and sixty degrees to attack me. The movement reminded me of a millstone. If I'd had some wheat on hand, I could have easily made myself some flour.

As the golem continued to spin its body around, it used the centrifugal force to stand back up.

And on top of that…

"Ahhh, I knew it. The crystals cling to one another… Sort of like magnets."

If my eyes weren't deceiving me, the golem simply picked up its arm and reattached it. To make matters even worse, it began moving its hand again.

How exactly were we supposed to defeat these things? Normally, golems had a core or runes on them, and destroying these would make them stop.

However, I couldn't find anything resembling a core on or in these golems, despite the translucence of their crystal bodies. There weren't any runes on them, either. Maybe the runes were etched into the points where their joints connected, or some other hard-to-see area.

This was still just my hypothesis, but they must have conquered their core weakness by turning their entire body into the core itself.

In-game, the golems have extremely high defense and the ability to self-regenerate, so I figured this core structure was to blame. Obviously, attacking the golem with enough power to outpace its self-regeneration would eventually reduce its health to zero. In other words…

"If we keep on attacking, we can win… Right?"

I sent even more mana into the metal fittings on the end of my stole.

The golem saw me standing still and must have thought this was its chance, arching backward and using its massive head, which was close to the size of my entire torso, to headbutt me.

I met its incoming head with the end of my stole.

A loud crash, followed by the sound of something hitting the floor. The golem's head had fallen to the ground, severely

lacerated.

I looked down at my stole, in awe of the power of my own attack. The edge of the stole had been sharp enough to cut through Fenrir's thick hide, but apparently, it also had the durability to chip through crystal. This thing was practically like the claws of a divine beast.

From there, I continued attacking and dodging several times, until an arrow flew past me.

It was Nanami's arrow. The other battle appeared to be over.

Once everyone had come together, the golem didn't even last another minute. The creature shattered to pieces, falling bits of crystal changing into magic particles for us to collect.

The Saint walked straight over to me and took my stole in her hands. Then she stared hard at it, squeezing it in her fist.

"What's wrong?"

"I just remembered a really awful fight. Is this thing from Ms. Sakura?"

"Ah-ha-ha." I gave a strained laugh.

The cross-shaped metal ornaments I had attacked with were the same as the ones on the end of the Book of Raziel's clothes; that must have triggered the Saint's memory of the battle. Well, the materials *were* the same, and I was using the same method to attack after all.

"Yes, Ms. Sakura gave them to me, so I had her modify them for my own use."

"Those things have some tremendous power…," Esmeralda said, praising them.

I agreed that they packed a punch, but…

"Nah, I've still got work to do. I can't shake the feeling that I'm not in full control of my new stole."

Not yet. I needed to get even better at using it.

From there, we checked the golems' item drops and continued onward. At the end of the path was a treasure chest. I knew what was inside—a recovery item.

We would have ignored it if there had been any traps, but since there weren't, we immediately retrieved it and searched for Katorina.

We continued fighting as we went until we had gone about three floors deeper.

At this point, several of us began to sense something was off about this dungeon.

“Strange.”

Yukine was the one to voice this feeling aloud.

“There are way too few monsters, even if there weren’t that many to begin with.”

We had found demon-type monsters along the way, but their numbers were clearly far fewer than what would be in a regular dungeon.

“Yes, you’re right.”

The Saint agreed with Yukine.

“I thought maybe it was the type of deal where they appear only on floors and not in the paths between them, but it doesn’t look like that,” Iori said.

“Maybe someone came through here first?” Ivy wondered aloud, and Nanami nodded at the possibility.

“That could be, but unless they came through right before us, it would still be strange. It feels a bit like someone purposefully thinned their numbers. There is one other thing that has me curious.”

“What would that be?” Yuika asked.

“Well, in these crystal and mineral-type dungeons, it is normal for monsters like the golems we first fought to show up frequently, but we haven’t spotted many. Instead, we’re seeing nothing but demon-type monsters. This is extremely rare.”

I couldn’t help letting out an impressed sigh.

As I listened to everyone speculate, I thought to myself they definitely weren’t wrong. Nanami’s dungeon knowledge in particular left me speechless. She had pretty much hit the nail on the head.

Normally, only inorganic mineral-type enemies showed up in this dungeon, but during this event, it was different. It was changed so that only demon-type monsters would appear along the route Katorina took through the dungeon.

That was because the demons had all cut down the golems themselves.

“In any case, we just have to hurry.”

We all nodded at the Saint’s words. Then we pressed forward.


CONFIG

—Katorina's Perspective—

After the demon told me that I was one of his kind, I almost tried to reject him but stopped myself.

While his claim was shocking and sounded completely made up, it nevertheless resonated with some part of me. It explained several moments from my life.

My mind then drifted to the past.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into my selfishness."

This was something my mother had often told me when I had been sickly. I had a weak constitution when I was little, and I remember my mother bringing me to the hospital a lot. Up until I was ten, I used to take a lot of time off from school.

When I would be crying and moaning from my fever, she would never fail to apologize like this as she took care of me.

My mother used to take care of me when I was sick. My father was never there to begin with. She told me he'd died right after I was born.

My mother was almost entirely unable to work because of my sickly constitution, and without my father to pitch in, we lived in poverty.

Nevertheless, Wakoku provided extremely generous support to children from poor and single-parent households, so when it came to going to school, having food to eat, or going to the hospital, I never wanted for anything.

However, I was unable to experience the types of entertainment and amusements that other kids my age had.

As a result, I would often complain to my mother about it. However, all she ever did was apologize to me. Whenever I did something bad, she would get incredibly angry, but when it came to this, she only ever offered apologies.

My body was weak, I had only a single parent, and I wasn't able to buy what I wanted; these circumstances prevented me from keeping up with what other kids would talk about. I was also bullied a lot, probably for these same reasons.

Other kids would make up lies about me and spread them through class, and people would treat me like I was diseased. I didn't understand why things had ended up this way.

"*Why am I like this?*" I would ask my mother. "*Why don't I have a dad?*" "*Why don't we have any money?*" I bet it really hurt my mother to hear these questions.

Still, all she ever did was apologize to me. Without fail, she would tell me "*I'm sorry for dragging you into my selfishness.*"

Why did my mother say that sort of thing? Why wasn't my father around? Why had I been so sickly when I was child?

"So I'm a demon, am I?"

If that was true, that apology of hers were the fiendish words that tied it all together.

"I must say, your seal is pristine. It's beautiful, really. I am sure hardly anyone would notice it."

"Oh yeah?"

"Hmmm… That's not much of a reaction. Did you expect as much?"

"I think it sorta makes sense."

If that was true, it would explain everything. Still, there was part of me that didn't want to think it was true. I wanted my bad feeling to remain just a feeling. If this was indeed the truth, then my mother…

My mother must have known about it.

She must have understood what she was doing, which was why she had never told me any of this.

"My selfishness," was it? Y'know, normally, there would be more to say than that, right? Why would she say it was "my selfishness" like that? After hearing the demon's explanation, how else was I supposed to think about it?

"Now you have learned the truth. The question is, what are you going to do from here?"

"From here?"

"Indeed. I promise, you will be able to draw out tremendous strength from the blood of your father, which courses through

your veins. Yes, the power of a greater demon."

"I mean, even if I can do that, there's no way I can begin to think about what I'm supposed to do from here."

First of all, now that it turned out I was a demon, what exactly was I meant to do? After all, if I was a demon, then there wasn't anywhere for me to belong, was there?

The Morals Committee, my class, the Academy itself—I didn't belong in any of those places.

It was ironic, I thought. I had been delving into dungeons and training this whole time because I sought the strength in order to preserve my place of belonging and to avoid being left behind by everyone else. But after taking this big risk to come here alone with this demon, I was still going to end up losing the place I called home, even after gaining the power I sought.

"…I have an inkling of what is troubling you. The same quandary of the half elves of old."

"Half elves?"

"Yes, in times past, half elves were shunned by fellow elves and humans alike. When a half elf child lost both their parents, they would be left with great anxiety, unsure where they were supposed to live out their lives. Though now, they can live a normal life anywhere, outside of Leggenze, of course."

Leggenze was a human supremacist state, and there was still discrimination there. I didn't get the impression that Minister Benito and the Saint were bigoted, though.

"I shall create a place for you. Shall we take the world together? With your power, combined with my knowledge and strength, it can be done."

Take the world? Hold on.

"Do something like that, and the humans will kill you."

"Humans? Please, they can perish for all I care. Frail, foolish creatures, oblivious to true worth. Yes, I think annihilation would suit them quite nicely."

The demon's face twisted. His flippant smile from moments prior had vanished, as though it was entirely at the mercy of his anger.

"…Is that what you've been after all along?"

“Oh my, pardon me for not saying so sooner. Now, what do you say? Will you come with me? There is an enjoyable future waiting for you.”

Except it would mean becoming an enemy to humanity—including Iori and the others.

“I felt really comfortable and at home where I already was,” I said.

That was why I didn’t want to be left out. That was why I’d done all this to avoid getting abandoned, and yet…

“So it’s not happening, sorry,” I told the demon. “I don’t want to fight them. If it comes to that, I’d rather just hide away in the mountains somewhere.”

I figured that this demon was hatching a plot to eradicate humanity. I didn’t want that to lead me into fighting against the people who had done so much for me.

“Hm. It would appear I’ve been turned down. Though if I am being completely honest, my goal was, in essence, achieved the moment you came here.”

Hearing this, I immediately put my hands on my weapon. Then I looked around me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Whatever your intentions may be, they are almost entirely irrelevant. If you were more obliging to my proposal, then perhaps I could have made a slightly different choice. Though I was ninety-nine percent convinced you wouldn’t be. All according to plan, really.”

I had a terrible feeling about this. I had thought this was a trap, and it turned out I was right.

I had to get out of here immediately.

“Huh, what the heck?! My feet won’t move!”

I knew I had to run away, but for some reason, I couldn’t summon up any strength. My feet, my arms, my neck, and my head—I couldn’t move any part of my body.

“Mweh-heh-heh, hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

The somewhat gentlemanly air the demon had was gone. He gave a creepy, disgusting laugh.

“…Now you’ve shown who you really are.”

I frantically tried to move my body, thinking I needed to do *something*. I put all my strength in my right leg, telling it to move.

My body grew hot, my breathing grew ragged, and sweat dripped down my brow, as if I had just finished an intense workout. Despite it all, I still didn't move.

"Of course you can't move. I made sure you wouldn't. Simply put, no matter what your thoughts are on the situation, I was going to use you for myself regardless."

I suddenly glanced down at my feet to see there was a large magic circle drawn on the ground.

"When did you…?"

It wasn't sucking up my mana, either. The opposite—it felt like a strange, unknown power was being forced into me.

At that same moment, what looked like geometrical patterns appeared on my skin. On my arms, on my legs, on my stomach.

"Ah, how beautiful… Exquisite indeed. Those are the seals you've been under. Mweh-hee-hee."

My body rapidly grew hotter.

"Once I am able to freely manipulate your power, why don't I kill a few of your classmates as a test run? I really do believe you should taste the sense of superiority and loss that comes from killing your close friends. It's an utterly exquisite feeling, truly."

This freak was insane. His phrasing suggested he had killed someone he'd been close with before.

"Once things settle down a bit, having children may not be a bad idea, either. Children with a mix of my blood and yours. I am certain we'll create quite wonderful offspring."

"I'm never going to do what you tell me to do!"

"It doesn't matter whether you want to or not. All I need to do is use magic that makes you obey me."

"Even then…!"

I tried to resist, but it was useless.

It felt a bit like there was someone else inside me, as though something besides myself had appeared and robbed me of control over my body.

"It's too late. You became my puppet the moment you set foot in here."

◇

—Takioto's Perspective—

Personally, I thought our timing was absolutely perfect.

When we finally reached Katorina's location, she had already changed into her demon form.

"What exactly is going on here?"

From an onlooker's perspective, it was probably best to call it the absolute worst timing, though.

"Rina has horns…?"

Two curling horns had sprouted from Katorina's head, and the color of her eyes had changed. She turned to us in agony.

Iori was shaken to see Katorina changed into a demon.

"You, demon. Release Rina at once."

The Saint immediately figured out the demon next to her was to blame and glared at him as she gathered mana in her staff.

"Release her? Whatever could you mean? You have at it all wrong! Can you not see this for yourself?" he said, extending both arms out wide.

"See what? You're not making any sense at all."

"Oh please, spare me the jokes. Don't you understand? Oh, I'm sure you do. You see, if anything, I *have* released her. From all the seals imposed on her, that is."

Katorina groaned in agony. The Saint heard her voice and glared at the demon, irate.

"Enough already! What are you talking about?!" the Saint shouted.

"Hee-hee, none of you really know, then, hmm? In that case, allow me to be the one to enlighten you."

Yuika grimaced at the demon's nasty smirk. Then, in a quiet murmur, she said, "Ugh, this guy is obnoooooxious. Takioto, he's got *no friends* written all over him."

"Bet his subordinates hate him, too. He's the kinda guy everyone complains about whenever he orders them around," I replied. The demon's ears twitched a bit, but he couldn't hear us all the way over there, right?

"Takioto, Yuika, *shush*. Demon, spill it."

However, it seemed that the Saint *had* heard us.

"I suppose there is no reason not to, so allow me to elucidate. This girl was born a demon. I am merely drawing out her power, nothing more."

His words shook everyone in the room, save for me.

“No way, you’re lying!” Iori shouted.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t dream of it. I certainly do not possess the power to turn the average person into a demon, nor do I possess the tools to do so, either. I am, however, very skilled at making magic circles.”

“Rina’s a demon?”

Ludie looked at Katorina in shock.

“Yes, her father was a famous demon. As a demon spy, he fathered this girl with a human woman, sealing her powers until the time came to release them.”

This guy could lie like it was nothing.

While it was true that Katorina’s father was a demon, the stuff about him being a spy was nonsense. If fact, he had been one of the rare demons who stood on the side of humanity.

However, I didn’t have any proof of this with me. Maybe I could have countered with something along the lines of, “*Then why did he seal Katorina’s powers away?*” but if the demon claimed it was for the purpose of integrating Katorina into the human world and releasing her when the time was right, that would be the end of it.

This demon wasn’t really the type who could be bested with words. It was better not to say anything careless around him.

After all, this was Andrealphus we were up against. He is one of the seventy-two demons in the Lesser Key of Solomon on Earth, and his in-game persona is that of a sophist demon. In other words, whatever I tried to argue, there was a chance he would twist my words and throw them back in my face. If Ms. Sakura, Nanami, and Anemone had all been here with me, perhaps they could have argued with him.

But since that wasn’t the case, then I just had to say something along these lines.

“Okay, so let’s assume for a second that Katorina is a demon.”

Everyone turned to me. Currently, I had no means of proving Katorina wasn’t a demonic spy. Regardless, I did have the means of persuading them.

“The way I see it, so what? Doesn’t matter much to me if she’s a demon. I mean, we already have an angel here with us to begin with.”

“Oh, stop, you’re making me blush,” said Nanami.

That wasn’t supposed to be a compliment, y’know.

“Basically, what I’m trying to say here is, Katorina’s just Katorina, okay? Nothing more, nothing less. Isn’t that right, Iori?”

I may have been the one saying it, but even I thought that this was some pretty dreadful logic. It was the sort of thing a meathead protagonist character would say, and taking it seriously would probably lead to a lot of unconvinced groans. Personally, though, I think that this wild theory really got at the truth.

Despite how wild my explanation was, it ended up sounding logical. This was because Katorina had made friends who could trust her based off the way she had always acted until now.

“That’s right, Rina is just Rina. Demon or not, she’s still our friend,” Iori said as he pointed the tip of his sword at the demon. He wasn’t the only one, of course, as everyone there readied themselves for combat.

Ha-ha. Using twisted logic on a demon skilled at manipulating people felt pretty damn good.

“Well, well, this is quite a predicament, isn’t it…? And what does Miss Saint over there think about all this?” Andrealphus said, calling out to the Saint.

Religion formed the bedrock of Leggenze. He understood that the Saint, representative of the country’s religion, couldn’t possibly overlook a half demon, her theological foe.

“…I like to put off the annoying stuff for later. So for now, I’ll save that for after we eradicate you.”

“I see. I prefer to take care of the most troublesome tasks first myself,” Andrealphus said, closing his eyes and twisting half of one side of his lips into a smile.

“As such, I will rid myself of you all.”

The demon then took a staff seemingly from midair, generating a magic circle at his feet.

In myth, Andrealphus was said to be a demon skilled at geometry, measuring and surveying, and astrology. Perhaps to reflect this, *Magical ★ Explorer* portrays him as a magical researcher who is extremely gifted at constructing magical circles. Basically, he’s one of the more cerebral demons.

As such, he'd created a unique magic circle to release the seals on Katorina. Incidentally, there is this convenient plot contrivance after Katorina goes missing where he is unable to completely brainwash her and gets held in check. Andrealphus is surprisingly strong, so this is to maintain plot consistency while the player goes to other dungeons to level themselves up more. Depending on the situation, a whole month of in-game time could pass without the brainwashing fully taking hold.

Nevertheless, I wasn't sure how this would play out in real life, so I'd made sure to act as fast as possible. I really felt that my timing had been almost perfect.

"…Rina's a demon, hmm?" the Saint said, looking at Katorina.

If there was any other big change outside the horns, her eyes, and her growing tail, it had to be the bat-like wings sprouting from her back. They weren't very big right now, but later on, once she was able to wield her demon powers at will, she would gain the ability to change their size and put them away. She'd also learn how to hide her horns and tail, too.

Furthermore, given that demons could fly even when their wings were stowed, the size of their wings probably had nothing to do with their capacity for flight. After getting used to her powers, Katorina would also gain the ability to fly.

Though she was pretty petite, so perhaps *impish* was the best word to describe her.

"Hrngh!"

A grunt escaped Katorina's lips. She was clenching down on her teeth as if she was enduring an intense amount of pain. Big, Dracula-like fangs were sticking out of her mouth.

"Everyone, please run," Katorina said with trembling hands, her body not listening to what she told it to do.

"I'm not going anywhere," Iori replied immediately.

There was no way we were going to escape and leave her behind. I figured everyone else here shared the sentiment, too.

"I'm begging you all—I can't move my body like I want to. At this rate…"

She slowly raised her quivering hands, fighting against the magic controlling her. From there, she unsheathed her dual swords and pointed them toward us.

"I'll attack you all."

As soon as she said this, she took a furious leap forward. In response, Yuika and I both jumped out in front of the group simultaneously.

Yuika was the first one to get out ahead.

Katorina swung one of her blades at her from below.

“Yikes!”

Yuika reacted too slowly to the speed of Katorina’s attack. She barely managed to bring up her gauntlet and block, but the force behind the attack was so great, it sent her flying into the air.

The other sword rapidly closed in on her next. Yuika immediately curled her body up and generated a shield of holy magic around her.

However, this shield proved almost meaningless as well. Katorina’s attack broke through it, hitting Yuika’s gauntlet.

“Yuika!”

I hesitated over whether to go help Yuika as she flew right across me, but when I noticed Yukine head over to her, I turned to Katorina instead.

Katorina attacked me from below just like she had done against Yuika a moment ago. I met her strike with my Third Hand.

“What?! I’m getting overpowered?!”

The strength behind her swing was on par with a direct hit from Yukine. Just like Yuika, I was launched into the air before Katorina’s follow-up attack closed in.

But things would be different this time; I had just seen her use this move, and more importantly, I had my Fourth Hand. Using it to grab on to a crystal pillar nearby, I changed my position to dodge the attack.

Something was definitely off. I had thought this watching Yuika a moment ago, too. Katorina shouldn’t have been this strong when she showed up here.

I glanced over at Yuika. Yukine appeared to be looking after her. Lucky girl. I would’ve loved to have Yukine looking after me, and I would’ve loved to care for Yuika’s injuries myself. Wait, wait, none of that was important right now.

The problem was…

“Katorina’s attack power has gotten a helluva lot stronger than it was before… And she wasn’t even coming at me with her full strength, was she?”

Katorina still wasn't putting her all into her attacks.

She would've used her entire body if she was going to attack at full force, but that last attack of hers appeared to have only involved her arms. The proof of this was her immediate follow-up attack.

It was kinda like volleyball. When you went for a spike, you didn't just use the muscles in your arms. You built up speed and jumped, using all the muscles in your body to spike it home. If you did move like that, though, there was no way you were going to be immediately able to fire off another spike afterward.



To spike a second time, you would have to switch hands. Of course, once you did something like that, the power behind each single hit would be weaker.

"I wonder how much a full-strength attack from her would hurt."

I didn't want to get hit by it or anything. If I could manage to successfully defend against a blow like that, though, it would create a big opening. That said, such an opening was basically meaningless.

Since I didn't want to attack Katorina.

"Kousuke, are you okay?!"

I responded to Ludie's question with a lie.

"Oh yeah, this is nothing! Nanami, I need you to do that thing for me. Everyone else, get that demon!"

When I said this, Andrealphus let out an impressed murmur.

"Well, well, you put up a good fight. However, Rina Katou has much more room to grow. She still isn't fully capable of handling her demon powers. Once she adapts to them, then… Heh-heh."

Right as he laughed, Katorina let out an agonized cry.

Her horns appeared to be growing larger. The mana enveloping her was intensifying as well.

"Stop it!" Iori shouted as he ran straight toward the demon.

However, that was the most I saw of their battle. Katorina had closed in on me, as though she wasn't going to let me fight back.

"*Hrgh*, s-stop… *Auuugh*, Kousuke… R-run…"

This time, Katorina slashed at me while spinning.

"Don't worry, I'll take everything you've got."

Perhaps she thought I had gotten away last time because she'd used multiple attacks. This time, she used the power of her momentum and centrifugal force to challenge me. But I wasn't going to lose here. I rotated, too, meeting Katorina's blades with my stole.

The power behind her blow was truly on par with Yukine, perhaps even stronger. When it came to speed, though, Yukine was clearly superior. She also had Katorina beat in terms of weapon proficiency. However, Katorina still packed a harder punch.

My legs dug into the ground as I stood firm. After finishing her swing, Katorina got up close and slashed at me with the sword in

her other hand.

I averted the attack by pushing down on Katorina's shoulder and arm. I had used jujutsu moves occasionally during my sparring matches with Yukine, and I was surprised by how much they came in handy.

Before Katorina could perform another attack, I kicked off the ground with my stole to put distance between us. Katorina readied her dual swords and glared in my direction. Then she walked around my periphery, circling me.

"Damn, you're strong as hell."

Katorina was way too powerful, far more than I'd expected her to be.

But if this was how it was going to be, I still had options. Her attack patterns were relatively one-note. I didn't know if it was because she was being controlled or because she was at the mercy of her power, but it felt like her reactions, reflexes, and technique had all taken a step back. Most importantly, the strongest weapon in her arsenal—her intuition—wasn't a factor here.

"Whew."

With a small gasp, I stepped forward, gathering power in my sheath.

Katorina moved at almost the exact same instant I did. Jumping left and right as she approached, she swung her right-hand sword at me. I unsheathed my katana to meet it.

Sending out a katana slash too fast to perceive with the naked eye, I repelled Katorina's blade. My blow strike was so powerful, it forced one of Katorina's arms back, knocking her off balance.

I got even closer to her and delivered a full-power punch from my Third Hand to the bottom of one of her sword's hilts.

I was trying to knock her weapon away. My goal was to punch the bottom of the hilt and make the sword slip from her hand, which appeared to have worked well. The sword in her right hand went flying in the complete opposite direction.

Katorina was taken aback at having one of her swords knocked away. I immediately closed in on her and restrained her body with my stole. Then I sent a full-force kick right at the hilt of the sword she gripped in her other hand. Just as I'd hoped, it slipped from her grasp and fell to the ground below.

“Nanami! Gleipnir!”

At my shout, Nanami took out a rope Fettered Fenrir had dropped. It was a super-useful item that was able to completely immobilize monsters whose level of strength was fixed.

That said, it had an extremely low drop rate, so it was difficult to use regularly.

I held down the thrashing Katorina, and Nanami used Gleipnir to tie her up.

“Mrrnnggh!”

I wanted to punch myself for assuming before that this event would pose me no problems and that I still could have managed without Gleipnir. Thankfully, I’d managed to obtain it and used it when it counted most, so it was all good. I figured I could leave Katorina here for now.

The real problem was Andrealphus. How were things going on everyone else’s end?

I turned to them and just managed to catch Iori slicing into Andrealphus. It appeared that Yukine had created the opening for him.

His sword was glowing white, so I assumed he had enchanted his sword with holy magic to fight against the demon. It was the correct call, as Andrealphus was weak to that type of magic. However, I also knew that, at this present moment, Iori’s efforts were meaningless.

Iori did indeed land his attack on the demon. He must have felt the feedback from the blow, as he quietly congratulated himself.

However, as for the now sliced-up Andrealphus…

“Hee-hee-hee, ouch! Mweh-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

…He was laughing.

Cackling, as if to say Iori’s attack was totally ineffective.

“We’ve already broken through his shield magic and defenses, so why…? How can he stand there laughing?!”

Iori stepped back a bit, perhaps feeling a sense of dread from Andrealphus’s strange demeanor. His face went pale as he stared at the demon.

“*Ahhh* yes, come at me! More, more, moooooooore!”

He laughed as if tripping on some dangerous drug. Though that description wasn’t entirely inaccurate.

“Huh? Wait, what’s going on? It can’t be. His wounds!” Ludie cried.

Everyone trained their eyes on the demon and the wound in his gut. The once painful-looking gash grew smaller and smaller… until it closed up completely.

“My, my, whatever is the matter? You all look as if you’ve seen a ghost. I’m still ready and raring to go, you know. Are you not going to attack me?!”

This abnormal self-regeneration was one of the reasons the battle against Andrealphus proved so grueling for us esteemed eroge players.

His healing abilities were so powerful, they seemed to make him go a bit loopy, one side effect being his speech becoming incoherent. Though this wasn’t really much of a drawback during combat.

“Ngh!”

This time Iori wreathed his sword in flames and slashed at Andrealphus. However, the demon didn’t make any attempt to dodge and meekly accepted the blow.

“?!”

“Ow, that hurts, you know! Hee-hee, mweh-hee-hee!”

Yukine’s face turned grim as she looked at the demon’s slash wounds.

“They’re closing up again.”

Andrealphus’s injuries began to close up, as if rewinding in time. The impact of this was strong enough to rob everyone of their hope.

“A fantastic attack, truly. I shall need to respond with one of my own,” the demon said, rubbing the previously cut-up area, when a large wolf head formed in front of him. The black wolf’s head was covered in scars, with blood pouring out from its bulging orange eyes.

“…Gross,” the Saint murmured.

The wolf head was missing everything from the throat down. It floated in midair, blood dripping from its neck.

However, this freshly severed wolf’s head’s eyes and mouth moved as if it was still alive.

“Now then, shall I return the favor with this? But simply throwing back what you’ve given me is rather uninspired, I’d

say… Yes, yes, I think double the amount shall do nicely.”

It happened right as the demon said this.

The wolf head flew straight for Iori, emitting black miasma as it went.

“Iori, that’s the Pain spell! Run!”

“!”

Iori tried to block the attack with his shield. However, it was the wrong play.

“Gauuuugh!’

The head tried to bite Iori to death. At first, Iori dug in his heels and guarded with his shield. However, he was only able to hold out for a few yards, his feet carving through the terrain as he was pushed back. Unable to stop the attack, he was launched over thirty feet in the air before slamming into a nearby crystal.

“Iori!”

The Saint quickly sent a healing spell at him. Iori reassured her as he immediately rose to his feet and adjusted his stance. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Nanami murmured, “Our foe is not taking us seriously.”

Andrealphus had had plenty of openings to attack Iori just now. He could have launched Dark Lances as Iori was thrown through the air, for instance, but he hadn’t done that.

He watched Iori fly through the air while clutching his stomach in laughter.

He was toying with us. Fooling around because he was confident that there was no way he could lose.

I figured he had been humoring himself earlier, testing whether he could defeat us without using his recovery ability. Iori had mentioned they’d broken through his shield magic.

Still, I had been dealing with Katorina, so I didn’t know the truth.

“Try this, then!” Ludie shouted.

She summoned a large magic circle, and spear-like missiles, glowing light green, shot vigorously from it.

Given the electric charge from the spears, I knew that she had cast Lightning Lance.

Just as the name suggested, Lightning Lance was a spear-like attack made out of electricity. A direct hit on the target dealt electric damage, and it was a fairly powerful attack spell.

However, the demon made no effort to dodge it. He took the attack with a nasty smirk on his face.

“Esmeralda! To Ludie!” I shouted, and Esmeralda jumped in front of her.

Ludie’s attack had scored a direct hit. A crack, like lightning striking from above, echoed around the area. Although the demon had been hit by the attack and sent flying…

“Mweeh-heh, mwee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

…He was laughing. Jubilantly cackling.

The next moment, Andrealphus fired Pain at Esmeralda.

“This thing packs quite a punch…”

Esmeralda, who had the strongest defense in the game, fully blocked the attack.

Nevertheless, even Ironwall Esmeralda appeared to have not gotten by unscathed. She propped her shield up on the ground, perhaps from her arm going numb.

Yuika immediately cast a healing spell on Esmeralda.

Pain was a dark magic spell that Andrealphus used. The move would return the damage you inflicted on a target with double or several times the intensity, making it a bit of a double-edged sword. The more powerful the caster, the more magnified the damage would be, and judging by what I saw…

“Looks to be about double.”

…Andrealphus’s Pain spell could deal about double the amount of damage he took, just like in-game.

Katorina and Shion could learn the skill after fulfilling several conditions. While everything had to go right for it to be effective, it was really useful in low-level runs. That was how intense the spell was.

“He just heals any damage we deal and then multiplies it back at us?! What the heck are we supposed to do here?!” Ivy grumbled as she threw her kunai.

A magic circle appeared where the kunai lodged into the ground, and it cast her spell, Restraining Ninjutsu. However, this demon was a magic circle master. He immediately dispelled it, rendering it ineffective.

Any magic circle we put in front of him would wind up destroyed. This meant our only options were enchantments or spells that didn’t need any invocation.

“Oh? Oooh? What’s all this, then? You’re more than welcome to hit me with even stronger attacks! I promise you, I’ll take them all!”

“My, you’re quite the extraordinary masochist. What am I to do? You’re just like Master.”

“I can’t even compare to a freak like that, I’d never win! And hey, who said you could decide whether I was a masochist or not?!”

If I tried to do the same thing this guy was doing, I would have probably departed for the afterlife a long time ago.

“Still, what’re we to do here?”

“I can’t damage him at all…!”

Ludie followed up after Yukine.

There were a few different methods of taking on our endlessly regenerating foe.

One was to deplete his HP before he could heal himself. Once you beefed up your characters to almost near their maximum limits, it was easy. Unfortunately, we couldn’t do that here, as we lacked the raw firepower.

The second was the method the developer’s intended for you to use.

“Y’know, I think I sorta get the trick behind that power of yours,” I said to Andrealphus.

“…Hee-hee, trick? Whatever could you be talking about?”

Andrealphus grinned wickedly at me. I nodded.

“The trick behind that recovery of yours. Am I right, Nanami? I bet you’ve figured it out, too, yeah?”

“But of course. Nothing escapes my Nanami Eye.”

I had no idea what this “Nanami Eye” was, but her words appeared to catch the demon off guard.

“Nanami Eye? What are you talking about?”

I would have never expected her bluff to work. But hey, no need to refute it, I guessed.

“It’s been on my mind the whole time. Why did you make sure to bring Katorina into this dungeon? It must be because you’d set something up here beforehand. Specifically, a dungeon magic stone that would give you the mana to heal yourself and brainwash Katorina. You’re here ’cause you need to draw on the dungeon’s power.”

The instant I said this, the look in the demon's eyes changed. He pointed his finger at me.

"Rina Katou, kill him!" he shouted.

His command indirectly proved that what I was saying was correct.

"Pfft, c'mon, not happening. Katorina's—"

I looked at her. Uh, were her horns getting even bigger? And was that some sort of dark magic on her hands…er, claws? Huh? W-wait, why?!

Gleipnir seemed to swell against Katorina. The next instant, the magical rope…

"*Hrnk*, Kousuke, run!"

…fell to pieces, torn apart by Katorina's claws.

Watching this had convinced me. While the fact seriously made me want to pull my hair out, this event wasn't playing out exactly the same as it had in-game.

"Nanami, get everyone up to speed. I'll keep Katorina in check."

I couldn't afford to waste time explaining the details to the others. I brought my stole up to meet Katorina's claws as they closed in.

The sound of the impact reverberated instantly. The impact and the noise were so intense, I thought my eardrums would burst. I knew that this was going to be a dangerous attack, so I was able to dig in my heels and pull through somehow, but this made it clear to me that her attack power had risen even higher.

"Um, Takiotooo? Are you sure you're all right over there?!"

"Takky, I can help with my ninjutsu…"

Yuika and Ivy had called out to me. However, there was something I wanted them to do.

"No, I can handle her just fine on my own. Instead, I want you two to stop the supply of mana he's using to control Katorina."

Her arm vigorously swung down at me once again. I blocked. As it went on, Nanami began to explain to everyone.

"I saw it with my Nanami Eye. Deeper inside the dungeon, there are some magic stones that serve as his mana source."

"You annoying little…"

This time, it was Nanami who had earned Andrealphus's glare.

"If we destroy them, then his unnatural recovery abilities should disappear, and Katorina should go back to normal."

Nanami pointed to two paths. At the end of each there should be a crystal-shaped magic stone.

While Andrealphus had both knowledge and skill, his mana pool was the size of a regular demon's. As such, he didn't naturally possess enough mana to undo Katorina's seal and brainwash her.

This was why he'd chosen this location. The two magic stones in this dungeon could supply him with that mana. Realizing this, Andrealphus had hidden the dungeon, saving it for when the time was right—which was now, basically.

Incidentally, we would need to get past the demon to go destroy the magic stones. He had picked this specific area to undo the seal to ensure he could protect the magic stones providing him with his power.

You wouldn't normally try to head deeper into a dungeon while locked in combat with someone. Consequently, no one would have realized that they couldn't defeat him without destroying the magic stones farther in.

However, in the game—whether it was to expedite the plot or to prevent the player from getting stuck, I couldn't say—he would make comments like, "Heh-heh, you shall never defeat me without finding the source of my power on this floor," revealing his weakness to the player. Since it was a game, I supposed this was to be expected.

"Let us split up into different teams, everyone."

Nanami began to assign everyone to different teams in accordance with the conversation I'd had with her beforehand.

Nanami, Esmeralda, the Saint, Iori, and I would be staying here to confront Katorina and Andrealphus. The reason for this was simple—we were the best at holding out against enemy attacks. I could defend myself with my stole, and I didn't want to let Ironwall Esmeralda go anywhere else. The Saint had healing magic to sustain us, and Iori had the ability to defend and cast healing magic of his own. Finally, Nanami was here as backup.

"I'll head this way, then. Ludie, can you back me up?"

"Leave it to me, Yukine! Kousuke, take care of Rina."

Of course, the demon hadn't simply abandoned the magic stone that was healing him, either. There was a proper guardian

stationed in front of it. Yukine and Ludie would be able to defeat it and destroy the magic stone for us.

“I guess that leaves us to go this way? Yuiyui, you coming?” said Ivy.

“I’m fine, let’s get this over with. Big Bro, don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

Ivy and Yuika would likely be able to defeat the guardian awaiting them without issue, too. Even if Ivy made a weird screwup, Yuika would be able to sort things out somehow. I had faith.

“You’re not getting by me. You again… Quite an eyesore, aren’t you?” the demon said, trying to cast a spell, but Iori put a stop to this with a slash attack.

“I wonder why you’re not letting us head back there?”

If what Nanami and I had said wasn’t true, he could have simply let us go. But Andrealphus was doing the opposite—he was actively trying to block both paths.

“Looks like we’ve found our answer,” the Saint said, sending healing magic at Iori as he guarded against Pain.

“Welp, it’s just an endurance test from here.”

Okay, everything had been going well so far. Extremely well. However, if there was one thing that surprised me…

“Jeez, she’s relentless…”

…it was Katorina. She was strong. Unbelievably strong, in fact.

In-game, Katorina isn’t particularly tough when you fight her during this event. But in the real world? She was way, way, way stronger than I’d expected, nearly three times more powerful.

I figured the differences between the game and reality here were to blame for her increased power.

In the game, there is no correlation in strength between the playable version of Katorina and the imp version of her you fight in this event. If playable Katorina’s attack stat was 500, it would drop to 100 when you fought her, then jump back up to 500 when she rejoined your party. Ultimately, the stats she possessed as a playable character were not reflected in her stats as a boss character.

But things didn’t work out that nicely in real life. In this world, Katorina’s demonic transformation amplified the strength she

had cultivated at Tsukuyomi Academy. It was like her attack stat of 500 had jumped to 1000.

Now that I thought about it for a moment, it was obvious this was going to happen. How in the world had I convinced myself that Katorina's imp form wouldn't be that strong?

With how much power she had right now, it was a given she would free herself from Gleipnir.

There was one other thing that I hadn't been expecting.

"Hey, Nanami? This might just be my imagination here, but are Katorina's horns still getting bigger?"

"I regret to inform that this is not your imagination, Master. Her horns are still growing… Not only that, but their mana and aura are increasing, too."

This was totally unexpected, seriously. I couldn't believe she was still getting more powerful.

◇

—Ludie's Perspective—

"Nothing else is showing up, right?"

When I said this, Yukine nodded.

"Maybe the dungeon perceives the demon as a foreign, hostile entity, too."

Perhaps it was natural for the dungeon to see it that way.

Nanami had told us that golems and other similar monsters could readily show up in this dungeon. However, we'd met such enemies only at the start; after that, we'd run into nothing but demons.

Monster encounters were low in frequency here, too. If that demon was a foreign element in this dungeon, then the monsters here would have attacked Andrealphus and his underlings.

This would then serve to explain why there were suspiciously few monsters. Maybe the demons had thinned out their numbers for us.

As I thought about all this, Yukine murmured that something wasn't right.

"I've got a bad feeling. I find it hard to believe we'll be able to head straight to the mana source and destroy it without any

fighting… How about you, Ludie?”

What did I think? Hmmm, were I in the demon’s position…

“I don’t believe we will be able to destroy it easily, either. If I were Andrealphus, I would set up some kind of countermeasure, like putting the stone somewhere completely safe from harm, having something guard it, or rigging it with some kind of trap.”

“…Right. I’d probably do something to protect it, too. Not sure if that would be a trap or a guard, but it would definitely be something.”

I shared her opinion. There was no way the stone would be unprotected.

Thanks in part to how fast we were moving, we quickly found the magic stone.

“This is it.”

It was a rhombus-shaped rock, so black that it felt like it would suck us inside.

“Is this magic stone making this part of the dungeon look dark?”

Black particles were floating out of the stone, likely due to the intensely powerful mana being drawn from it. The stone was also shimmering like it was in a heat haze, even though the area wasn’t hot.

Beneath the creepy magic stone, which stood out from the other crystals in the cave, was a magic circle. I assumed that this was how the demon was being supplied mana.

I stared hard at the area around the stone.

“There’s…nothing here? Do you not see any traps?”

Yukine also poked at the rock with her *naginata* and investigated the area but wasn’t able to pick up on any traps.

“…Let’s destroy it.”

Yukine readied her weapon. The instant she raised it overhead to bring it back down on the stone, it happened.

“!”

A *thing* appeared from within the magic stone. At first glance, it looked like a black humanoid shadow. After it repelled Yukine’s *naginata* with its long claws, the thing sent a kick flying at her.

Yukine jumped to the side to evade it. “So there was something awful guarding it after all…,” she murmured.

It was…

“Rina…? No, wait, it’s not.”

The aura surrounding it was different from both regular Rina and the demonic version of her we’d encountered just now.

“Yeah. It’s not quite Rina,” Yukine asserted.

The thing stood in front of us, protecting the stone. The Rina-shaped shadow grew jet-black claws and slashed at Yukine.

◇

—*Yuika’s Perspective*—

“I-Ivy, are you all right?!”

“S-somehow,” Ivy replied.

The two of us found an overly suspicious-looking magic stone and attempted to destroy it. That was when *it* showed up.

“Phew, that was a close one! Never expected something like this to hop out. Thought I was a goner!”

Ivy used Substitution Jutsu to just barely avoid the shade’s surprise attack and put distance between her and the magic stone. After leaving that much space between them, she wouldn’t have to worry about any follow-up attacks for the time being.

“Do you think that’s supposed to be Rina?” Ivy asked, looking at the girl who had appeared from the magic stone.

“Hmmm, it just sorta feels a bit off from Rina, y’know? If I had to describe it, it’s like something wearing her skin, I guess?”

“Imposter Rina!”

It was almost a perfect match for the demonic version of Rina we’d just seen, except it had a different aura from hers.

If this shadow had been in front of the magic stone this whole time, then that meant…

“That thing’s gotta be guarding it, then, right?”

“Yup. I’d say so. Looks like a guardian and all.”

Well, it was hard to think of any other possibility.

“Yuiyui, I know we gotta smash up that stone, but do you think the imposter is going to let us do that?”

“I mean, I seriously doubt it. Still, we have to either way.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Ivy took out her kunai and attacked Imposter Rina with a thrust, a side swipe, and a throw.

However, Imposter Rina parried everything. Thinking she had found an opening, Imposter Rina responded with an attack of her own. A ridiculously powerful attack at that.

"Eeeeeeeeeep!"

Ivy arched her body back and fled from Imposter Rina's approach as if she were in a children's cartoon. Maybe Ivy had been a mollusk in another life. I had never seen someone do that sort of thing outside of a cartoon. Honestly, it kinda put me off.

"N-nice dodge… But seriously, what is that thing? Is her speed throttle just totally broken or something?"

These attacks might have been on par with what Takioto had just dealt with. Maybe they were even stronger. The imposter's attack was just that fast and powerful.

"I would've been torn to shreds if that had hit me!"

Ivy was right—a direct hit could very easily pulverize us. Its strikes were just that intense. Heck, it was practically as strong as Yukine.

If we were going to slip past it, then…

"Ivy, I've come up with a strategy."

"Really?!"

"Yup. You go out in front, and while you're getting smashed up, I'll destroy the magic stone. A perfect plan."

"Perfect plan, my ears! You're just sacrificing me!"

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. I'll buy us some time, so try and come up with a way to take out that magic stone."

"Hmm," Ivy replied, shaking her head. "I'm not into that idea, either."

"…Then what *are* we going to do?"

"Leave Imposter Rina to me. Yuiyui, you get the magic stone."

Was that really okay? I looked at Ivy, and she winked at me.

"I'm still your upperclassman, y'know. Leave it to me."

I still had an inkling she'd screw something up, but oh well.

"That makes me a little anxious, but… Okay, I'll leave her to you."

I felt this strange confidence behind her words and decided to leave it up to her.

"Okay, let's go!" Ivy said, throwing several kunai up to the ceiling before taking out her straight sword and attacking Imposter Rina.

Although I was in melee range, it would be difficult to deal any damage to Imposter Rina. She was simply that strong.

I went past the two of them as they fought, and I headed for the magic stone. Then I sent a spinning kick straight into it.

My kick had definitely connected. But…

"…You're kidding me, right?"

The magic stone didn't break at all. While a crack had formed on its surface, it still didn't seem like it would break anytime soon.

As I wondered how many kicks it would take to break the stone entirely, Imposter Rina switched targets to me.

She vigorously closed in on me. Vigorously? Wait a minute—

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

I used all my power to dodge her. Imposter Rina had attacked me while flying through the air.

"Hold up, I didn't hear anything about her flying!!"

Sure, I knew that she had cute little devil wings on her back or, more precisely, her waist. No one had told me that she could actually fly with them, though.

"I think they look pretty cute, but I guess they weren't just for decoration."

Uh, Ivy, please, don't sit there looking impressed.

"If she's going to come over here, either shout something or help me out! I almost died there!"

"Oh, sorry, sorry. You noticed her coming, so I soooorta figured it'd work out. Anyway, Yuiyui, come over here."

I immediately went over to where Ivy was, but Imposter Rina pursued me, like she didn't want to give us the chance to regroup. Unfortunately, not only could my foe fly, but she did so at great speeds.

"She's *definitely* going to catch up to me here!"

There was no question about it. Was I supposed to keep luring her in and dodge to the side at the last moment?

"Yuiyui, it's okay, just keep running! I have an idea."

Ivy beckoned me over to her with a wave. Well, at this rate, I was going to be a goner anyway.

"I-I'm trusting you here!"

My only option was to believe in her and follow. I ran exactly as Ivy had instructed. I ran and ran.

Right as I was about to be overtaken, I planted my legs on the ground, then leapt to the side. That was when Ivy activated it.

“Nice one, Yuiyui! Eat this!’

A pillar of crystal appeared out of nowhere. Apparently, it had sprouted from above.

I looked closer and saw that there was a star-shaped magic circle and several kunai where the pillar had been summoned. That must have been why Ivy had been throwing those kunai at the ceiling. Nice work, Ivy!

Right as that thought came to mind, Imposter Rina destroyed the pillar as if it were nothing, sending it flying right by me.

“Oh…oopsie!”

“‘Oopsie’?! If the pillar hadn’t missed me, it would have put a hole through me!”

“Maybe that’d work out as a kinda intense diet plan?”

“Are you kidding me?! Instead of shedding pounds, I’d be shedding this mortal coil! Thanks, but no thanks!”

“Okay, sure, Imposter Rinarina’s injured at least… Oh.”

“Um, Ivy? Tell me if I’m seeing things, but it appears that she’s healing her injuries.”

The wound gradually grew smaller, almost exactly like the demon we had fought beforehand. Fortunately for us, it looked like she couldn’t use the Pain spell. Also, while she healed herself, she couldn’t move from where she was. Or at least, that’s what it seemed like.

Was now the perfect opportunity to destroy the magic stone? Except how much time was it going to take to break something that tough, all while Takioto and the others were locked in an even riskier fight? We had to get rid of it, and fast. That said, if we had to slip past these super-deadly attacks the whole time… Wait. Hm? Hold on a second…

“Um, Ivy? I’ve come up with something.”

I roughly explained my idea, and Ivy nodded.

“I can do that. Great thinking.”

“Okay, so… I’ll try to buy time however I can; can you get things ready?” I asked, turning to Imposter Rina as she brandished her claws and flew at us.

If I was going to defend against her attack, I’d have to put all my strength into it; otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to stop it. There was

a chance I'd get hurt even while guarding. That meant—

"I need to do everything I can to dodge or turn it away," I said, summoning light shield magic while dodging Imposter Rina's attack. I brought my gauntlet up against the follow-up attack to barely evade it. Dodge. Dodge.

This made something very clear to me.

I couldn't keep this up for long. I needed to do something, or I'd be in trouble. Sweat beaded on my brow.

I didn't know how many times I had managed to keep evading her attacks, but Imposter Rina eventually put some space between us. It was at that moment…

"Yuiyui, I just finished all the prep work! The timing's perfect!"

Ivy had finished preparing on her end. And she was right—this may have been the perfect opportunity.

"Go for it, Ivy!"

Watching Imposter Rina fly at me fiercely, I broke into a run. That same instant, Ivy cast a spell.

It was a smokescreen spell. A gray smoke rose up over the whole area, and I ran in a set direction. Then I purposefully made a loud noise, as if to tell Imposter Rina where I was.

Deducing my location from the noise, Imposter Rina attacked me. It was a ferocious move. She flew with the momentum of a peregrine falcon, and the gust of wind she generated dispersed the smokescreen.

Once the smoke had cleared to some extent, Imposter Rina seemed to realize what she had done.

She had attacked not me, but a scarecrow. One that was right in front of the magic the stone.

"If destroying it was going to be that hard, then we just needed to get her to do it for us."

Imposter Rina had destroyed the magic stone by attacking my scarecrow substitute.

I had thought up the strategy in a hurry, but fortunately, it had gone off without a hitch. Imposter Rina crumbled the instant the magic stone split open, changing to magic particles and vanishing.

"Nice one, Yuiyui!"

Ivy stuck out her hand in front of me. We high-fived each other.

◇

—Ludie's Perspective—

That Rina-looking shadow possessed power completely unlike the Rina I knew.

She moved freely on jet-black wings and broke through rock as she attacked us with the claws sprouting from its hands. Her speed and her strength were far greater than I would have thought possible.

I might have lost to this version of Rina if I had fought her. She was so strong, I couldn't help thinking so.

However, there was someone even stronger in front of me.

"She's got power, but she's just throwing it around haphazardly. It's too bad."

Despite how powerful this Rina-looking shadow was, Yukine overcame it easily, to the point where I almost felt bad for the demon.

Yukine battled as if she were entertaining a child in her spare time. In terms of simple brute strength, she might have been the lesser of the two. But that slight discrepancy in power was nothing she could not overcome with her superb technique.

The Rina-looking shadow groveled on the ground. Then she slowly began to heal herself.

After witnessing Yukine's overwhelming strength, I couldn't help but think, *She's practically on President Monica's level.*

Something about the spectacle reminded me of the strongest fighter at the Academy, President Monica. Obviously, their fighting styles were completely different, and they wielded different weapons, too. Still, the way Yukine had effortlessly dodged her foes' attack, then brought them low, was classic President Monica.

Before long, the Rina-looking shade stopped moving completely.

"Ludie, let's destroy this thing," she said, glancing sidelong at the shade lying on the ground and healing herself. After Yukine and I launched our attacks, the magic stone quickly crumbled away.

"I hope Yuika and Kousuke are all right…," I said.

Yukine nodded.

“Let’s hurry back to Takioto. I’m worried about everyone.”

◇

—Takioto’s Perspective—

“I thought this would work out…!” Iori cursed.

I could sympathize—I’d thought the same exact thing when I was playing the game, too.

“None of us expected this demon to start hurting himself like this,” Esmeralda said as she guarded against the demon’s Pain spell.

At first, Iori and Esmeralda had assumed the demon wouldn’t be able to use Pain if they refrained from attacking him.

While this powerful technique could send back the damage taken from an attack twofold, it wasn’t scary once you understood how it worked. Iori and Esmeralda had assumed they would just need to hold out against Andrealphus’s regular dark magic attacks and wait for good news.

However, they had no such luck.

“Here it comes again!” Iori shouted, readying his shield.

The demon smirked as he summoned several Dark Lances and —shockingly—fired them at himself.

“*Angh, aaaugh!* I-it’s working.”

To be blunt, it was a bizarre sight.

Countless dark spears ran through the demon’s body, and yet in spite of this, his smile never faded.

Then he immediately cast several Pain spells at once.

These attacks, fired mostly at Esmeralda and Iori, and occasionally Nanami and the Saint, were impossible to dodge. They seemed to possess a homing ability, and they wouldn’t disappear until they hit someone or something.

“Self-harming, of all things,” the Saint murmured with irritation. She then used healing magic on Esmeralda and Iori as they defended her.

“Honestly, hurting himself? His resemblance to Master is getting stronger by the minute.”

Nanami interrupted with a joke. My mental health was doing just fine, thank you.

“Pain is already enough trouble, but these other underhanded attacks of his are so vexing.”

Just as the Saint had said, Pain and Dark Lance weren’t the only irritating moves in the demon’s arsenal. He was also using Vampiric Blade, a skill that healed himself while dealing damage; Grudge, a spell that afflicted a foe with a movement-dulling Curse status effect; and poison magic.

Since the demon had the magic stones at his disposal, he was able to attack without end, but under normal circumstances, his strategy would probably be to inflict Curse and Poison on his foe and use Vampiric Blade to attack and heal at the same time, while countering with Pain. Insidious, right? This guy really had to be friendless.

I was deeply grateful that we had the Saint here with us for this.

Since she was both a healing specialist and an anti-demon specialist, the others were managing to avoid serious damage and status effects with her help.

Regardless…

“Things have still gotten a bit dicey…”

Although we could hold out for a long time by devoting ourselves completely to defense, we wouldn’t last forever. Around thirty minutes had elapsed since the others had gone to destroy the magic stones, but unfortunately our opponent’s magic and stamina were basically endless, and he didn’t show any signs of exhaustion. We were the only ones running out of steam.

I made sure to carry a large reserve of mana recovery items with me at all times. However, when I saw that the Saint had started using them like they were going out of style, telling me, “Why do you have so many of these, Takioto? I’ll be taking them, then,” my worries only intensified. In an absolute pinch, I could donate my mana to her, but the question would be who would handle Katorina in the meantime.

Still, there was something even more troubling than our waning stamina…

“Yikes, Katorina. A hit from that would’ve broken some bones, y’know.”

Katorina’s power.

Going off appearances, she should have been weak. Katorina was short, her boobs were tiny, and she had beady eyes. She had a dirty mouth, and she got embarrassed when anyone thanked her. Her demonic transformation had given her horns, a spade-shaped tail, and cute wings, which looked utterly incapable of supporting her body in the air—the classic cute little devil girl look.

Yet despite all that, her strength and speed weren't insignificant in the slightest.

"Think you could give me a chance to catch my breath here?"

Despite my request, Katorina didn't stop. I mean, she was being controlled, so there was no way she would stop, but still.

"!"

Katorina exhaled loudly while swinging her claws at me.

It was a sideswipe this time. I jumped back from her arm, swinging at me like a whip. In response, Katorina kicked the ground and closed the gap between us before attacking with the opposite arm.

Uh-oh, my gut was telling me I couldn't dodge this one. I immediately brought my Third Hand up to block it. This time, however, I didn't dig my feet in at all.

In order to curb even the slightest amount of her unbelievable force, I jumped in the same direction as the attack.

A powerful impact hit my Third Hand. After I was sent flying several yards, I used my Fourth Hand to make an acrobatic landing.

I quickly moved to change my posture. I needed to stand out in front to ensure that Nanami and the Saint wouldn't be hit.

"Yeah, it's way better to parry these attacks."

While I was capable of blocking her strikes, I opened myself up to taking some damage by doing so.

As I stood between Katorina and the Saint, I was enveloped in a gentle light.

"Thank you very much, Saint Stef."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Just make sure to keep me safe," the Saint said before turning to Iori and Esmeralda. She was focused on those two since they seemed to be losing ground in their battle. I really had to avoid requiring her healing magic the best I could.

Nanami was busy aiding them, too. Though I also needed to prevent Katorina from getting hurt by Nanami's attacks, so that was unavoidable, really.

As I continued to handle Katorina's offensive onslaught, Andrealphus abruptly gave her an order.

"Finish off Stole Boy and come over here to help me!"

It appeared the demon was lacking offense. While he had his recovery magic, he was one against many, and Iori's team had the Saint helping them, too, so I imagined the tides were gradually turning against him.

But it was going to be difficult to get through me. I was pretty confident in my defensive skills, after all.

While I continued to pin Katorina down, Andrealphus began to laugh, as though suddenly realizing something.

"Honestly, who would have ever thought? You're truly beyond my expectations. Heh-heh," Andrealphus said, an edge to his voice.

What did he mean by "beyond his expectations"…?

"You're surprised at how strong we are, right?"

"That, I cannot deny. You children are strong. I'll grant you that," he said, clapping. It was all too clear his praise wasn't genuine.

"However, that was not what I was referring to. It is Rina Katou who is beyond my expectations."

I suddenly felt powerful mana coming from Katorina. Magical energy gathered in her wings, and an agonized look came to her face…before her body rose off the ground.

"How very unexpected. Who could have known Rina Katou would grow so strong from her demonic transformation? This is a pleasant surprise, of course. I never believed she would have such an aptitude for being a demon. It's enough to make me a bit jealous, really."

I couldn't help but sweat as I watched Katorina.

"Huh?"

"Rina's…flying?"

Katorina was hovering in the air.

"Who could have expected she would be even stronger than me, and I would end up borrowing *her* power instead?"

Oh, I got it now. I had to agree—normally no one would have considered that. I bet Andrealphus really hadn't thought this would happen.

Funny he should say that, though. I was surprised, too. I hadn't thought this possible, either.

I looked at Katorina as she flew through the air.

One reason Rina Katou, one of the main heroines, is considered to be so strong is because of her ability to wield her demon powers. She already packs a punch in her usual form, but her speed and strength increase even further as a demon, and she gains the ability to use dark magic.

However, these aren't Katorina's only strengths. Her mobility increases as well.

In *Magical★Explorer*, ninjas have the highest mobility. They can use an overpowered, nigh-instant teleportation skill and are very fast. The only characters who have a similar degree of mobility are those who can pull off legitimately instantaneous teleportation, and Katorina, who can fly in her demon form.

Of course, there are other characters who can fly. However, she is faster and more mobile in the air than any other. Since she has access to both powerful combat abilities and invaluable thief skills, many players would include her in their parties.

The only ones who didn't were the kind of people who were exclusively into girls with big boobs.

There is one thing to be aware of when using Katorina, though: She doesn't have immediate access to flight after her initial demonic transformation. Her flight skills are locked behind an event where she gains a deeper understanding of her demonic abilities. Katorina never flies in her boss fight.

Yet despite that…

"She's flying."

"Sure is."

As Nanami and I spoke like unconcerned onlookers, I heard the Saint sigh.

"So those cute little wings weren't just for decoration, hm? Could we tear them off her, then?"

Well, that was quite an ominous thing to say, now wasn't it?

I then saw Katorina start to move, heading toward the Saint. Sensing danger, I stepped out in front of the Saint.

I immediately confronted Katorina; if she did go over to where the Saint and Iori were, there was the risk she might kill someone. Even I probably wouldn't have been able to hold out against the Demon's Pain spell and Katorina's attack chain at the same time.

Fortunately, when I went out in front, Katorina tried to attack me instead.

It wasn't the same type of attack as before. Now that she was floating in the air, she wasn't just attacking with her claws.

"Since she's in midair, she can use both her hands and legs in combination." It felt a bit like I was on the other end of a fighting game character's one-sided flurry.

Right arm, left leg, left claws, a right-handed kick. If I didn't guard properly, I would have gotten hit with all the attacks in succession and been knocked out cold.

And now, the downsides of my decision to use my new stole were coming into play.

"My defense is a second too slow…"

My body was rapidly accruing damage.

If I had practiced more thoroughly with this stole—if I had been able to exhibit its true power—I would have been able to block all of Katorina's attacks.

Nevertheless, I didn't necessarily believe I could have gotten by with my previous stole, either. The amount of mana the new one could hold was on an entirely different level, allowing it to harden twice the amount as my old stole.

As I slowly took more and more damage, a healing spell hit me from behind. The Saint had sent some my way.

Now thinking I could still hold out a long time, I readied my stole and tried to fire myself up, but things didn't quite work out that way.

Katorina was looking down and had stopped moving.

"Rina Katou, what do you think you're doing? Hurry up and kill him!"

Andrealphus ordered her. However, Katorina simply trembled, as if she was trying to hold out from attacking us.

On top of that, her black claws had disappeared, too. Still shaking, she lifted her head.

She was crying.

“Kousuke, please. Kill me.”

Teardrops flooded down her cheeks.

The fact that she had regained some of her senses must have meant the others had destroyed a magic stone. Maybe even both.

“Kousuke, please. I’m just barely keeping my body in check right now, but I won’t be able to last long. I don’t want to hurt you all more than I already have.”

At first, I couldn’t understand why Katorina would suddenly say something like this, but then it hit me.

It was because I was weak.

Despite my boast that I could take everything she threw at me, I had suffered quite a bit of damage. Katorina hadn’t wanted to attack me or Iori and the others. Until a short while ago, these things had been fine because I had remained pretty much unharmed, but now I was quite hurt.

The thought must have crossed Katorina’s mind. Whether she was being manipulated or not, she had harmed her friends. She cared about her friends, and she’d even showed a brief moment of genuine concern for me when I had joined the Ceremonial Committee. She must have been under an unimaginable amount of anxiety and strain right now.

But that was precisely why…

“Nah, we’re not going anywhere.”

I wanted to save her at any cost.

“I’m saving you no matter what. Hearing you say that just made me even more determined.”

I figured Iori and the others felt the same way—the looks on their faces remained unchanged.

There was one person, though, who heaved a big sigh, as if to douse our enthusiasm.

“…Foolish nonsense,” Andrealphus spat. “Rina Katou. Think this through—you’re a demon. Look at your body. Look at the reality of your situation.”



At his words, Katorina looked at herself.

“A-ahhh!”

Katorina cradled her head in her hands at the sight. Her eyes widened, and her expression grew panicked.

“I-I’m, a demon. A demon. Humans and I can’t…”

Hearing this, I got the gist of what she was thinking.

Katorina must have thought she didn’t have anywhere to belong anymore.

“You’re such a dummy, Katorina.”

I let the words escape from my lips.

Katorina slowly lifted her head again. Her face was red and messy with tears.

“Kousuke said it earlier, didn’t he? You’re always going to be you!”

Iori told this to Katorina as well, prompting Andrealphus to shout, “Enough chatter! All of you!”

Andrealphus summoned numerous magic circles around him, firing off Vampiric Blades at Iori and the others.

As I watched him panic and fire off attack after attack, a thought came to me. For some reason, he wasn’t using Pain. Maybe, just maybe…the magic stones had been destroyed?

In which case, Andrealphus wouldn’t be able to regenerate anymore.

“Iori, I think the others might have destroyed those magic stones.”

When I said this, Andrealphus gave a demented scream.

“Hyeeaaah, heeh, heeh, heeh, hyeeeeauuuuugh, hnraaaaaaugh!”

While Iori and the others turned to Andrealphus, I shifted to Katorina.

If this setup was as I remembered, the brainwashing spell on Katorina was also linked to the magic stone that had been healing Andrealphus. In-game, the brainwashing is dispelled after defeating him, but perhaps there was a chance I could undo it right now.

I didn’t know how this would go. My only choice was to give it a shot.

“Hey, Katorina.”

I was about to reveal a few things that normal people would have no way of knowing. So there was the chance Katorina would grow suspicious of me, but it was way too late in the game to care about that.

I didn't want to see her in any more pain.

"Y'know, when I joined the Ceremonial Committee, you really worried about me, didn't you?"

"*Nggh*, nope, I don't remember anything like that."

No way, she definitely remembered. She didn't need to activate her thorny *tsundere* mode at a time like this.

"The truth is, that made me pretty happy. Seriously, thank you for that."

"I just said I don't remember doing that!"

Oh yeah, that was definitely a lie. She was shaking even more now. In any event, I had to keep this up.

"Don't worry about your body. It'll be fine. That demon asshole didn't mention it, but you'll be able to control this power yourself, sorta like how beastfolk control their Bestial Transformation."

When I said this, Katorina looked at me as though she couldn't believe her ears.

"N-no way."

"It's the truth. I know of a few cases like that."

Though I only knew them from the game, so I was clueless about the details. For now, however, I figured I'd just say whatever I could to assuage her.

"And Ms. Sakura, the Angel of Knowledge, is on our side. Don't worry."

Ms. Sakura's reputation was incredible. Just mentioning her brought Katorina a measure of relief.

"B-but I'm a demon. I can't be in places with other humans, just think about it. Are you stupid?"

It looked like she'd need one more push.

"In that case, you can just come over to my place. You shouldn't underestimate the Hamamura family, okay?"

"But—"

"No buts. Me, Iori, Ludie, Yuika, Nanami, Yukine, Orange, even Class Rep—none of us would ever abandon you."

I sensed Katorina's power drain from her all of the sudden.

“I mean, at the very least, I’ll be right there with you. Hell, Nanami will be there, too. I’m going to stick by you no matter what.”

A shattering sound rang out, like something had broken. A crack appeared on one of the magic circles visible on her skin.

“And if you’re scared of staying in one place and having your half-demon secret getting out? Then come with me, and we’ll go adventuring ’round the world. I’d be happy accompanying you for a lifetime or so, no sweat.”

Katorina slowly but surely flew down toward me. She reached her hand out to me, and I gently caught her in my arms and stole.

She didn’t attack me at all. With ragged breaths, she simply gripped my clothes tight.

“My puppet magic was undone? Impossible! How?!” the demon shouted.

If what he’d said was true, the magic on Katorina was completely dispelled. The shattering sound I heard must’ve signified that.

As I thought all this, ragged gasps escaped from Katorina’s lips. “*Hnh, haah, haah.*” I felt her moist, warm breath on me.

Y’know, this was kinda hot.

Perhaps it was an effect of the seal being undone, but her eyes and mouth were half open, and her face had the same relaxed, languid look one got after a good massage. And her blood must’ve gone to her head, since her face was dyed vermilion, and sweat dripped down her brow.

“*Tch*, you’re worthless when it really counts. Even your chest is inadequate.”

Hearing this reminded me. Right, this demon wasn’t just trying to use Katorina’s power for himself, he was trying to have a child with her, wasn’t he?

That aside, did he just say Katorina *wasn’t* cute? I couldn’t let that slide.

“No way, she’s super cute! Absolutely, one hundred percent, super-duper cute!”

She was a *tsundere* among *tsundere*, the most elite *tsundere* of all.

Her facial features were adorable, her physique fit her perfectly, and her voice was wonderful. Her loli-plus-pigtails-

plus-*tsundere* look wouldn't just sweep the world over but carve its beauty in the history books for all time. I'd drop to the ground and beg if it meant I got to hear her curse me out. If she showed a bit of her affectionate side after the abuse, though? I wouldn't be able to ask for anything more—heck, they could probably get three seasons of an anime adaptation outta that.

As all this ran through my head, I felt Katorina move in my arms.

"Whoa, Katorina. You all right?!"

She flexed her stomach, slowly sat up, and raised her hand. Then her hand came down at me…with a lot of momentum? Huh?

The crack of her palm echoed around us.

"Ow, ow! What was that for?!"

For some reason, Katorina had slapped me across the cheek.

"Wait, Katorina, why are you attacking me like that? You aren't still brainwashed, right?!"

Despite this, Katorina glared at me, her face beet read.

"Shut up, dumbass!"

"Master, it seems that you were saying your thoughts out loud. She heard you call her super cute," Nanami told me as she fired arrows to keep Andrealphus in check.

"Huh?"

Katorina brought her face closer to me as I sat there confused.

"You're embarrassing me, stupid! You're obnoxiously loud, too, ugh. Everyone heard you, moron! Do you have *any* brains in there?! Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

I watched her as I cupped my stinging cheek. C'mon now, she didn't need to call me "stupid" so much!

It was then that I felt healing magic come to me from behind. It was the Saint.

"Rina and Stupid, we're in the middle of a fight. Get back if you're not going to join."

"Can I ask you not to call me 'stupid' like it's my name? Please?"

"I think you've only got yourself to blame for that one," Esmeralda said to me with a wincing grin. I didn't understand any of it.

"Master, it appears to have run out."

"What has?"

“That demon’s recovery magic, Kousuke,” Iori said before attacking the demon.

He was right; Andrealphus’s intense healing seemed to have disappeared. It looked like the magic stones were truly gone. No wonder Katorina had been able to return to her senses.

In that case, it looked like it was time for me to join in the fight and get this over with. Without his healing magic, Andrealphus was no better than a trash mob.

Just then, I felt a tug on my stole.

“Kousuke.”

Katorina was the one pulling on it. Seeing the awkward look on her face and overall vibe, I could sort of tell what she was going to say. But.

“Than—*mmph*!”

I wasn’t going to let her say it. Instead, I covered her mouth with my hand, giving her an exaggerated wink.

“That can come after everything’s over. Also, say that to everyone and not just the guy saying all the dumbass stuff, okay? Everyone was just as worried about you as I was, and all!” I said before taking my hand off her mouth. Katorina really was a cutie.

“Now then.”

I turned from Katorina and set my sights on the demon. Iori and the others had done a great job holding out this long. I applied my body enhancements and went to join in the fray—but at the exact moment, I felt another tug on my stole.

“Wait, Kousuke, I’m going, too.”

Katorina stepped up beside me. She was still in her demon form.

“Listen, Katorina, are sure you’re okay? Think you can use that new power?”

“…No idea,” Katorina said, looking at Andrealphus. “But I bet I could take down that guy.”

“That’s plenty, then. Let’s go finish him off,” I said, running while she flew in the air.

The demon must have seen how Iori and Esmeralda’s group were still ready to fight and sensed he had utterly lost. He flew high up in the air, attempting to flee the floor. Maybe he would keep going until he got out of the dungeon.

I had no intention of letting him escape, though.

“Nanami!”

“Leave it to me.”

Nanami’s arrow cut through the air and flew straight at the demon. Hitting a bloody and bruised foe with an arrow was child’s play for her.

Right after the demon slowed down from being hit by the arrow, Katorina grabbed him by the head.

“You made me attack Kousuke a whole bunch, didn’t you?”

It appeared the demon wasn’t as strong as Katorina in her imp form. She delivered several kicks to his stomach. Then looking my way, she tossed the demon to me.

Time to end this.

I waited for the right moment and released my katana from its sheath.


CONFIG

I made sure everyone was safe, and a short while later, Ludie and Yukine returned to where we all were. Ludie and Yukine were startled by Katorina's state and asked her something briefly, but they didn't delve any further. I had explained that, first things first, we needed to get out of the dungeon, but…

There were still problems. Yuika and Ivy hadn't come back yet. As a result, Iori began to worry about Yuika's safety. Considering we'd managed to defeat that demon, the two girls were probably just fine, but it was still concerning.

Then Esmeralda said she would go look for them. She probably figured that sending Iori out alone would be dangerous in case anything else cropped up.

Now we had to deal with the next problem.

Andrealphus, a nuisance to the very end, activated a specific trap at the same moment of his death.

The trap sealed up the entryway with crystals. We had to do something about it, or we wouldn't be able to return home.

The "something" was the usual. Yes, the "reward." More like a punishment.

Simply put, we had to go into an erotic dungeon, or we would be trapped here forever.

We needed to press a specific magic stone switch that allowed us to escape. Once we did, the crystals blocking the entryway would return to normal, and we would be able to keep on moving, plus regain the ability to use escape items.

Pressing the switch on the magic stone, however, was a trap itself, locking anyone nearby into a magic circle that went straight for the erotic dungeon.

In other words, we had to activate the pervy dungeon. But maybe I could avoid the dungeon altogether if I fled from the

switch as soon as I pressed it, or I used my stole to press it first.

Still, I decided not to push my luck. I would be all the more miserable if something did go wrong and the damage spread even further.

I glanced at Katorina and the Saint. They seemed to be searching for some means to get out, and it looked like the Saint wasn't probing Katorina too deeply about her demon form.

I saw this as my chance to talk to Ludie and the others.

"Ludie, Yukine, Nanami. I have something to tell you."

"What's going on? Why are you whispering to us?"

"So there's a pretty intense dungeon here. Intense in a lotta ways."

Everyone immediately knew what I meant. It also appeared to bring something to mind for them.

Ludie closed her eyes and cast her face up to the heavens, as if enduring intense pain. Then she began to giggle, as if she had given up. Tee-hee, hee-hee-hee-hee…

"Hee-hee-hee-hee, of course there is."

"But you don't need to worry. This time, I think I can go in by myself."

Ludia and Yukine both looked surprised to hear this.

I had learned a lesson from the recent event with Ivy, who had activated the dungeon by hopping down differently colored tiles and striking a cool pose. I had thought, *Pfft, there was no way anyone would ever do something stupid like that.*

However, Ivy had smashed this expectation to pieces. This impressed on me the understanding that I would never know what to expect.

While we hadn't gathered yet, Ivy was here this time, too. On top of that, we needed to summon a teleportation circle to the pervy dungeon in order get out of here.

Anyone—not just Ivy—could make a mistake and accidentally send themselves to the erotic dungeon. It had been like that when Gabby was in trouble. I had no idea what sort of twist of fate might happen.

That meant I had to turn the tables after making sure to update everyone on the situation.

"This time, I'll go in on my own!"

Not as a group but by myself. Things would be only half as embarrassing if I was on my own. And given the characteristics of the dungeon this time around, I could probably pass right on through a bunch of it if I was by myself, right? Right.

Now, obviously, I would have loved to have everyone come to the erotic dungeon with me if possible. I wanted to see Ludie, Katorina, Nanami, the Saint, Esmeralda, Yukine, Yuika, and Ivy all dressed in sexy outfits, acting cocky and arrogant.

And when I thought about how no one was going to see me, I felt an inexplicable forlornness, as if a hole had opened up in my heart.

Still, when I thought about how everyone else would feel, I realized it really was best for me to go alone after all. That would lead to the least amount of harm.

"I—I will go—"

"Hold on, Ludie. I appreciate the thought, truly. I'm overjoyed. But I'm pretty sure me going alone this time will keep the damage to a minimum. You know what I'm trying to say, right?"

When I mentioned this, Ludie averted her eyes.

She understood.

She knew if clearing a pervy dungeon was unavoidable, then me going in alone would bring everyone greater peace of mind.

The shame of being seen by everyone really was that profound. The others might end up with wounded pride, but considering my pride was already as limp as a piece of paper, and I had gotten used to it all by now, it wouldn't be an issue.

"You'd stop me even if I tried to go with you, right?" Yukine said.

"Of course I would. I, er, would never want to see you looking like that, no siree."

A massive lie. The truth was, I wanted to see Yukine looking lewd and sexy; I wanted to see it so, so much. I wanted to see her acting like an impish little brat. I mean, sure! I loved kind and gentle older women, loved calm and collected big sister types, too. But I also really loved the sexy ones! I wanted a badass but kind older woman to dress up in a sexy outfit. A lewd older woman's voluptuous bust would bring moisture to my parched heart!

“Takioto, you’ve made your determination clear!”

Yukine lowered her eyes.

“Yukine?!”

“Ludie, Takioto’s resolve is hard as steel.”

“She’s right, Miss Ludie. We should respect my Master’s intentions.”

“Not you too, Nanami. B-but—”

“C’mon, Ludie. This isn’t my final farewell or anything, okay? My body will make it through one hundred percent unscathed, and it’ll only be a few hours of endurance at most.”

Indeed, a few hours of perseverance. While I still had some trauma from past experiences, I needed to overcome it.

Ludie went to say something, but the words didn’t come out. Then she hugged me, clinging to me as if she didn’t want to let go.

“I-I’m sorry, I wanted to protect you, Kousuke. I even joined the Morals Committee to do so, but in the end, I…I haven’t done anything…!”

“Sure you have. Heck, it was thanks to you that I managed to help Katorina. Seriously, thanks.”

I gently peeled Ludie’s hands off me.

“Takioto,” Yukine addressed me. “I’m really proud of you. I couldn’t be happier to have an underclassman like you.”

“And I’m just as happy to have an upperclassman mentor like you,” I responded.

At this, I turned around. Then I began to walk off.

“Master.”

I turned my face to look at Nanami. Her expression was sadder than normal.

“May fortune favor you.”

Grinning, I turned my head back around. Then I strolled off to the climactic battle awaiting me, casually raising my hand in the air.

Y’know, this always popped up in movies and stuff:

The scene where the protagonist or a close friend heads out to their doom with an infinitesimally small chance of survival.

In moments like those, they’re always smiling, right? I sorta understood where that feeling came from.

I mean, who would want to see their companions looking sad? Or be crying as you leave?

So I was going to head off wearing a smile.

I turned back to Yukine and the others and headed toward the magic stone that activated the erotic dungeon. This magic stone, shaped like the wings of a demon, was the one. I immediately touched it.

When I did, a magic circle suddenly formed underneath my feet in a blinding flash of light.

A spatial magic circle. At the same time, I saw the path for us to leave begin opening up.

The particles from the magic circle floating around me were so very beautiful. Before long, they enveloped me, and I began to teleport, as if being dissected.

Wow, I really am about to head in there, I thought to myself as I watched this unfold.

Into the Bratty Bitch Dungeon.

…Hm? Huh?

Was that a pair of women running toward me?

“Dammit, Kousuke!”

“I swear, this idiot’s always trouble!”

U-uh, Katorina and the Saint were running over to me, a frenzied look in their eyes.

I wasn’t seeing things, was I? No matter how many times I blinked and rubbed my eyes, trying to flee from reality, I could not see anything but Katorina and the Saint running at me. Nanami was following them at a clip behind.

Not only that, but Yukine and Ludie were in a serious panic. Wait, did this mean what I thought it meant?

Were the two of them trying to save me?!

“W-wait, it’s dangerous! Stay back!”

“There’s no way we’d stay behind after you told us that!”

“I’m the one who’ll be responsible if anything happens to you, idiot!”

The two women shouted as they jumped inside the magic circle.

“You gotta be kidding meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

◇

Life was a continuous stream of the unexpected.

If I had to describe the half of a lifetime I'd lived until now, this was probably how I'd describe it. The things I was convinced would never happen occurred all too easily.

Like now, for example.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"…I'm not hurt, but I certainly feel awful. Okay, I'm willing to thank you for catching me and all, but could you let go all ready?"

Whoopsie, I was still holding the two of them in my arms. Their bodies…how could I put it? While it felt like Sis was holding me tight, the sensation of their bodies against me made me want to protect them at all costs. The two were short and delicate, with chests on the smaller side—sheer cliffs, really. And…

"Did you say something?"

"N-nope, not at word."

The Saint was glaring at me.

"Forget that, Master. What's that thing?"

Nanami's remark left me all jumbled up for a moment. Hm? Nanami?

"Huh? Is that a school? Or something like it?"

I immediately looked over when I heard Katorina say this. She was right; the building standing over there resembled a school.

I unconsciously let out a sigh. Of course, I knew full well what kind of school this was. I also knew that we had to go over there, since passing through was the only way forward.

Before that, though…

"Um, Saint Stef, Katorina. Thanks."

Regardless of how things had turned out, they had jumped into the magic circle in order to help me. All I'd managed to do in return was to catch them and ensure they didn't get hurt in the process.

"*Tch.* I guess I worried for nothing."

"Exactly how much trouble do you need to cause before you're satisfied?"

"Sorry…"

"This does not appear to simply be a school, Master," Nanami chimed in.

I'd been thinking about it, and I could understand why the Saint and Katorina were here. While I didn't *want* to understand, nor did I want to face the reality of this situation, I *could* comprehend it.

Here was the question, though: Why was Nanami here, too?

"I just had to get in on the latest craze," she said, appearing to guess what was on my mind. Were you here to copy the latest viral dance or something?

I spoke quietly to Nanami to prevent Katorina and the Saint from hearing me as they investigated the school gate.

"It sure sounded like you were sending me off with a good-bye, you know."

"Master, please think carefully for a moment. You have Miss Katou and Miss Stefania with you. I cannot imagine a funnier…er, a more difficult combination than that, so as your maid, I had no choice but to come and help you."

You said what you were really thinking, Nanami! Though if I'd been nothing but an onlooker here, I would've understood where she was coming from.

"Just kidding, Master. That was a maid joke. More pressingly, Master, everyone else might be worried about us, so we should get out of here as soon as possible, yes?"

Ah, yeah. She was right. Ludie and Yukine had to be concerned, so I wanted to get through here fast.

I headed over to the Saint and Katorina, who were discussing something.

"Want to head inside for now?" I asked.

We all entered the school through the grandiose gate before us.

In the front entrance were ten large shoe lockers and a blackboard for bulletins and news. Some instructions were written in chalk on the board: CHANGE INTO THE CLOTHES INSIDE THE SHOE LOCKERS AND CONTINUE FORWARD.

Yup. Clothes, huh?

The Saint went up to the shoe locker, took out a box from it, and removed the lid. Then she took out the piece of fabric.

"Hmmm. Looks like an average school uniform, doesn't it…? Wait, wh-what is with this stuff…?!" she said, her voice quivering as she held the piece of fabric.

The outfit in her hand consisted of an extremely short school uniform top and a skirt that, without a shadow of a doubt, left one's ass on full display. There was also a pair of underwear that would perfectly show off one's contours in the sexiest way possible.

After flipping the outfit from front to back, then back to front again, the Saint stopped moving as if time had ground to a halt.

Had her brain overheated from trying to process it all? This was her first erotic dungeon, so it was unavoidable, really.

That aside, the Saint in lewd underwear? This sort of underwear had an almost sacred aura about it, so it matched her surprisingly well. Not that I would ever say this to her directly.

After the Saint stood frozen there for a little while, her hands began to tremble. Her face also convulsed as she tried heading down the corridor on her own. However, she was blocked by an invisible wall and couldn't continue on any further. Slamming her fists against the wall and letting out the sort of enraged cry that was unbecoming for a Saint, she chucked the underwear in her hands at the invisible wall.

Watching this, Katorina also went to a shoe locker and took out a separate outfit. She trembled with fear just like the Saint, before the idea to take out a magic escape stone seemed to come to her.

Needless to say, nothing happened.

"*Tch*... Is this magic stone broken or something?"

Nope, it wasn't. The only thing broken here was the mind of the person who had come up with this place.

"It appears that escape items cannot be used in this dungeon. If what is written on the blackboard is true, then our only option is to wear these clothes."

Nanami's words were a death sentence to the two of them.

"Hey."

The Saint came up to me with an intense look in her eyes, taking steps that were several times more forceful than usual. The panties she had just thrown at the wall were back in her hand.

"Y-yes?!"

She showed me the piece of fabric she was holding. Yup, that was one sexy pair of underwear, all right.

"U-umm, so, err..."

“What is this?”

“S-something you wear to protect your most important areas!”

She must not have been satisfied with my reply, as she shoved the piece of fabric into my face.

“What the heck are these?!”

“P-panties, they’re panties! B-but, please, hear me out!”

“What?!”

“A-apparently, they have a really powerful enchantment on them! So please, spare me!” I shouted. If the panties were the same as in-game, equipping them came with several benefits.

“Master is absolutely right. If what is written on this blackboard is true, they have a beautifying effect that accentuates the butt.”

The message on the blackboard read, SUPER EFFECTIVE ON EVEN THE SAGGIEST OF BUTTS! SUPER BUTT-LIFTING UNDERWEAR!

Then the Saint grabbed my collar and forced her face right up to mine. Why, it would seem that this gorgeous young woman had blown her top!

“I don’t even *want* an effect like that, okay?!”

Uh-oh, she was rubbing the panties in my face more and more forcefully.

Incidentally, the outfit that Katorina had just picked up for herself was enchanted with magic that made one’s thighs look extra plump and thick. Yes, yes, I know, so what, who cares, I get it!!

“Miss Stefania, please stop. My Master is not personally responsible for any of this.”

At Nanami’s words, Stef pulled her hands back. Such tremendous intensity. By the way, I wasn’t really sure if I had been put through an interrogation or an extra-special reward. Probably an extra-special interrogation reward, if I had to guess.

After that, everyone went silent, and they spent time looking at the clothes as the reality of the situation settled in. Then…

“*Tch*, we’ve really got no choice but to wear this crap?” Katorina muttered, looking as if she had given up.

“At least it covers up the most important parts, I suppose.”

Still, the clothing sizes were adjusted to fit, right? Nanami was one thing, but the other two’s busts were…uh-oh, the Saint was

looking at me with an absolutely arctic expression on her face. She hadn't caught me peeping, had she?!

"…Hey, Kousuke Takioto?"

"I-I'll go get changed, then!"

Grabbing a random set of clothes, I tried to leave the school building. However…

"Wh-what the?!"

I was blocked by an invisible wall. Apparently, the route through this pervy dungeon was one way. Still, I could feel a fierce presence closing in from behind.

Crap, crap, crap, if I gave up now, it was game over. I tried punching the wall, hoping maybe I could destroy it somehow, but of course, this proved impossible.

"Where exactly were you looking just now, hm?"

I heard a voice directly behind me. Nevertheless, I couldn't bring myself to turn around.

If it had been Ludie and Yukine here, they might have complained, but they still would have readily changed into the required outfits.

In a certain sense, these dungeons were training them. They understood they couldn't progress without wearing the provided outfit. And I, too, was being trained by these dungeons.

"This is one of the better ones, I guess."

After searching every nook and cranny, I found an outfit for men I could put on: a pair of swim trunks and a buttonless Hawaiian shirt. What the hell was with this getup? Had I come here to soak in the sea or something?

Though even if we wore these outfits, depending on how everything played out, it might end up being meaningless.

"Master, we have finished our preparations. You may look over here."

I had figured since this was a school, there were bound to be locker rooms, right? Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

I had been singing a song in my mind to suppress the maddening, wicked urge to look, but now they were finally finished.

"O-oh wow."

Nanami was wearing a cute cow-print bathing suit. Why would there even be a cow-print bathing suit in a place like this, and better yet, why was *that* the one she chose? Maybe because I was in a beach getup, too? Ah, well, whatever. It looked great on her either way.

"Y-you're always really cute, no matter what you wear."

"But of course. Also, Master, I believe I have told you this before. If you stare at me so much, you will make me give birth."

"I think you skipped a step there."

"I wonder when exactly I started to produce milk. Perhaps the cow print is to blame?" Nanami continued, but I ignored her completely and looked behind her. Katorina looked embarrassed, while the Saint's whole body was quivering, her face crimson.

Katorina and the Saint actually had a lot in common. Though their heights were different, they were both slender and delicate and had prickly personalities. The sight of these two in sexy costumes they would never wear otherwise threatened to destroy what was left of my mind.

"…Wh-what do you think you're staring at?" Katorina asked me.

I mean, obviously I was going to look, right? Clothes that left the belly button exposed absolutely ruled. The outfit looked adorable on her.

"Oh, er, I just thought it looks great on you. You, uh, look really cute."

I lowered my eyes as I said this. I wanted to look longer, but I couldn't let myself stare, for her sake.

"Even with a scrawny body like mine?"

Katorina understood her own body well. So did the Saint. In the game, the Saint is actually the one who agonizes the most over her small chest. The two of them were basically flat as a board.

"Nah, it's not about how slender you are or anything, and yeah sure, the outfit's a bit much, but, er, sorry, it's just, you're plenty cute in it, and it made my heart race a bit."

"S-stop being so stupid."

I looked up at Katorina. That anger on her face was just as cute. But wait, stop pouting while you're embarrassed—my heart can't take it!

"You're an idiot to get so worked up over this. Maybe I should just cut that thing off, hm?"

The chillingly violent quip had come from the Saint. I knew that she was simply speaking from embarrassment, though. Still, her sexy school uniform looked *really* good on her, too.

"You've got this really precocious look to you now, and that gives you a kind of captivating charm all its own."



“…Enough.”

The Saint had already turned red, but now the crimson stretched to the tips of her ears.

“Let’s get moving,” Nanami said, urging us on. We all continued forward.

We arrived at a single classroom. Inside were student desks and chairs like at any other school, along with a hologram display and a device that appeared to be used to control it.

“Looking more and more like a school,” Katorina said as she started riffling through the desks.

Meanwhile, Nanami began looking into how to control the hologram display. The Saint watched as Nanami worked and leaned against the special desk at the very front of the class, staring at the screen.

“Master, I’ve got it working.”

This was what was written on the display.

WELCOME TO THE BRATTY BITCH DUNGEON!

YOU GOTTA USE YOUR WITS AND STRENGTH TO PROGRESS, OKAY?

IF YOU GET STUCK, GO AHEAD AND ASK EVERYONE FOR HELP! DON’T BE SHY!

YOU MIGHT GET CHEEKY AND REFUSE TO LISTEN, BUT GIVE IT ALL YOU’VE GOT!

EVERYONE’S GOTTA WORK TOGETHER AND HEAD FOR THE GOAL!

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At the present moment, this was a bit hard to understand, but Nanami was bound to explain things for us after this.

Simply put, this dungeon allows you to turn the heroines into coquettish brats. Once they transform, they gain a unique ability. In the process, however, they become standoffish and childish—in other words, they turn into bratty bitches.

The unique ability is required to progress through the dungeon, but the bratty bitchification makes the whole trip into a huge nuisance.

I mean, think about it—would a brat obediently listen to what someone told her to do? No, of course not.

As a result, the protagonist needs to manipulate the heroines to some extent to lead them to the goal, but that rubs up against the biggest problem.

Eventually, you have to undo the bratty bitch brainwashing. How exactly do you do that, you ask?

By putting the bratty bitches in their place.

Ostensibly, the protagonist has to do this to punish them for the teasing, rude remarks they make throughout the dungeon and to force them to mend their bratty ways. By the way, the punishment takes the form of a spanking, of course.

The Saint and Katorina froze up once they learned what they would have to do. I figured their brains must have overheated. I was impressed by Nanami and her battle-hardened, pervy dungeon veteran demeanor. Not only was she totally unfazed, but she also began checking the data to see if there was any other pertinent information.

Eventually, she found something.

“Good news, Master!”

“What is it?!”

“For a limited time, we can add on crotch tattoos and a tanned skin option as well. Shall I?”

Of course not! Give me a break!!

Katorina and the Saint, realizing that they would have to become bratty bitches to go forward, stepped into the bratty bitchification facility, their expressions looking as if they had given up on life altogether. Nanami, of course, passed right through like it was nothing.

This facility was a roughly five-foot-square glass box. As such, everything that went on inside was totally visible. Apparently, a special type of gas was going to be pumped in from holes in the floor.

Once the girls had closed the door behind them, a large amount of white gas filled the room.

As I watched it unfold, I psyched myself up for what was to come. Bratty bitches were powerful. I needed to be prepared for

them to tear my mental spirit to shreds.

By the way, during the procedure, an alternate personality would be implanted in the girls' bodies, leaving them with only the barest of essential information—their name, their age, and some general knowledge. As a result, while they would know things like their names and their favorite foods, they would probably forget who I was.

As for what would happen to Katorina, the Saint, and Nanami's original true selves, and the memories of this alternate personality…unfortunately, they would remember everything. I supposed the situation would be similar to watching TV. Because of this, the girls would remember the things they had done in their bratty bitch forms even after the transformation was undone.

I decided I would start things off by introducing myself to them.

"All right! Come on, then, hit me with everything you've got!"

The door opened about a minute later, and the smoke began to dissipate.

"Uhhh, where aaare we?" Katorina asked.

She looked around the area, rubbing her eyes, after exiting the room.

"So why is it, like, so smeeeelly?"

The Saint was the next to exit. She furrowed her brow and brought her hand up to her nose.

"I'm…a maid. No, a bratty bitch…a bratty bitch maid!"

Nanami was the last one. I had no clue what was going on with her.

"So, uh, who are you, Mister?" Katorina said, scowling when she spotted me.

"Huh? Look at that ♥!" The Saint smiled as she put her hand to her mouth. "What's with the lame-ass Hawaiian getup? You're so gross, Mister, for real ♥. Omigosh, so funny ♥."

"Huh ♥?! OMG, this is ridic ♥! Waaait, don't tell me, are you actually, like, the Master of my soul? Nooo way ♥! Y'know, I think I want you to call me 'Gorgeous Bratty Bitch Angel Maid Nanami,' 'kay thaaaanks ♥!"

I'd mentioned something about steeling my nerves for whatever came next. That was a total lie.

I mean, I was already moments away from breaking.

Here was what I wanted to know: Why had Katorina and the Saint completely transformed into bratty bitches, while Nanami had become a rather irregular form of brat instead? This wasn't how she was supposed to act!

"I'm not nearly old enough to be called 'Mister,'" I said. "I'm not gross. And that nickname was way too long!"

Seriously, "Master of my soul"? What the heck was that anyway?

"Whaaaat? You're *suuuuch* a Mister, duh! I can totally smell your old man stink from here ♥."

"Hold up, this stench is Mister's BO? Ohhhhhmigosh, that's, like, the *worst* ♥!"

Hey, Katorina, I don't have any old man smell at all, dammit. And you, Saint—it's hard to believe you hate me when you've got that cheeky grin on your face… Actually, wait, Nanami, quit sniffing me!"

"Omigosh, you *reeeeeek* ♥! If I sniff any more, it's gonna jump-start my maid-mating season ♥."

That was it, I couldn't take it. This was way too chaotic. For now…

"H-hold on. First let me introduce myself."

"I'm totally fine talking to you two, but I don't want to talk to that old man at allll."

"If you're gonna ask us for something, Mister, you need to show us you got the attitude for it, soooorry ♥."

"P-please, let me introduce myself."

"Omigosh, are you for real? You're bowing to us? What a loser ♥."

"Aren't you, like, ashamed to bow down to us, or what?"

My paper-thin pride wasn't just gone at this point; I felt my entire mental fortitude being scraped away.

"Well, I gueeeeeess, if you're gonna be like that, I'll consider it ♥! Oh, I know, how about some tasty treats? What do you say to that, *Mister* ♥?"

"Oh, I liiiike that idea ♥. Pudding for me, 'kay thanks. It better be tasty, or else, okay ♥?"

Give me a break! You have two jiggling pieces of pudding on that ass of yours, dammit! This was bad. All this bratty bitch-speak was making me loopy. I needed to calm down.

“I’ll treat you to as much as you’d like. Seriously, whatever you want. But I’m going to introduce myself first, got it?”

At times like these, the best move was to just push on through and give your name.

“My name’s Kousuke Takioto. I’m a student.”

Okay, great. Hopefully, this made it clear I was a student and *not* some older guy.

“Mister Takioto, huh? Woooow ♥. Well, my name’s Rina Katou. Super cute, right ♥?”



“I’m Stefania. Not to brag or anything, but I’m actually the Saint ♥? I live in a totally different world from you, Mister, so don’t you forget it ♥.”

“Maaaaster, you remember who I am, right ♥? I’m the Mega Angel Babezord, Nanami Bratty Bitch Z ♥!”

Nanami, you said something totally different a minute ago! And just what were you “combined” with, anyway?

“Katorina, Saint Stef, and Nanami, then.”

Finally, we were done with the introductions. Just getting to this point had been exhausting enough.

“Okay, so it’s waaaay too hot, right? Is the AC broken or something? Ugh, I’m getting all sweaty, this sucks ♥!” the Saint said, wiping off her sweat. Looking at her outfit, I suddenly remembered something.

Now that I think about it, there is a hidden erotic element to this dungeon that makes the clothes go see-through from sweat quicker than normal. Plus, it’s perpetually summertime in this area. That’s more than enough to paint a picture. This place had some sweaty, swampy weather.

The Saint looked left and right around the area to see if there was a towel anywhere. Then Katorina started pestering me, and I looked over at her.

“You *finally* looked at me. Hey, so, Mister Takioto? That’s way too long, so is just Mister fine? Must be, right ♥? ’Kay, thank you ♥.”

Please, just drop the Mister and use Kousuke or Takioto instead!

“C’moooooon. Are you even listening to me ♥?”

The Saint pulled at my clothes. Where did this come from? Wasn’t she just searching for something on her own a second ago?

Also, the way she said “C’moooooon” was unbelievably cute.

“It’s *super* hot in here, okay? Do something to fix it already ♥!”

Her face was so close, too close! She was so pretty and smelled so nice! Her face was riiiiight up in mine, and damn, was her skin gorgeous, too!

“She’s the ♪! Stunningly beautiful angeeeeel ♪! Bitchy braaaaaat maid ♪!”

Meanwhile, Nanami was singing gleefully to herself. I’m begging you, Nanami, help me out here!

“Oh hey, what’s that? It’s so cute ♥!”

Don’t wander off in a weird direction on your own! Gimme a break!

“C’mooon, are you listening? It’s too hot, and I don’t wanna get all sweaty.”

“There’s water to drink up ahead, so just put up with it until then.”

Hell, I didn’t want to sweat, either. I was wearing the kind of easily see-through clothes that always showed up in eroge, too.

The only thing we found ahead of us was food, and any amenities to deal with the sweat didn’t come until the end!! But I couldn’t mention this since the moment I told them, I knew it would turn into a nightmare!!

“Heeey, Master? I wanna play the king’s game. Soooo, how about I’ll be the king the whole time ♥? And you, Master, can be the freak ♥!”

“That’s not the king’s game! You just want to give orders to the ‘freak,’ right?” What the hell type of fetish was this? Though, actually, giving it a try did sound fun…

But here was the thing…

“Arrrgh, I can’t get this under control!”

What the hell was I supposed to do about this chaos?!

It was strange really. Normally Katorina and the Saint were on the quippy end of the spectrum, but now they had flipped to the silly side of things. Reining in Nanami, who was basically several people’s worth of idiotic nonsense all on her own, was going to be basically impossible, wasn’t it?

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I had no idea how much time passed after that. I somehow managed to calm everyone down and ask them to cooperate.

“So basically, I’d like your help with getting out of this dungeon. Katorina, Saint, you both want some tasty treats, right?”

“Woo-hoo, tasty treats ♥!”

“I’d rather eat Master up instead ♥!”

Katorina’s straightforward answer was so cute. Nanami’s incomprehensible reply was cute… Actually, that was a pretty

problematic reaction to have.

"Fiiiine, I guess we'll help you, Mister ♥. Buuuut didn't anyone ever tell you? You're not supposed to wander off with strange older men, duh ♪! Wait, don't tell me you didn't know that? Looooser ♥."

It was strange. I'd be fine being a loser for the rest of my life if the Saint was going to say it like that.

From there, we headed down the hallway, and I endured condescending insults all the while.

True to its appearance, this dungeon was built like a school. When we continued down the hall, the path split off in several directions, either to stairs or forks in the corridor, which was also another tricky element to the place.

Bratty-bitichified Katorina looked at the guide sign stuck to wall and exclaimed in surprise, "Nooo way! This school's got a heated swimming pool and a sauna ♥! That's awesome; c'mon let's go this way ♥."

"No, stop, stop! They're mixed-gender facilities!"

There were a few facilities here that were bad news. This heated pool and sauna were an example. Given that the outfits in this dungeon turned see-through from sweating, suffice it to say these facilities complemented them perfectly.

"I don't know, you're pretty funny, Mister… Maaaaybe I wouldn't mind that ♥."

"What?!"

I couldn't hide my surprise at the Saint's words. I—I could have a look? N-no, that wasn't happening. From the very start, I had decided to keep any damage to the absolute minimum.

As I stood there agonizing, the Saint laughed.

"*Pfft.* Omigosh, ewwwwww♥! Rinarinaaaa, look ♥! Mister is making *such* a face right now."

"No way, you *actually* believed that ♥?"

"Weeeell, I *guess* if you really want to see that badly ♥, I could give you a li'l peek ♥," the Saint said before lifting up her skirt slightly. Every bone in my body wanted to look, but nevertheless, I had to remain a gentleman.

For just an ever so brief moment, a mere millisecond, so short a span of time I wondered if it wasn't all a dream, I looked at what she revealed, then averted my eyes.

“Y-you shouldn’t debase yourself like that. When you find a more suitable partner one day, you can show him instead.”

The same scumbag who had snuck a peek was now prattling lofty morals. I knew being gifted a peek from someone who, under normal circumstances, would absolutely never do such a thing would have a cataclysmic impact. My heart still tremored, as if it had been struck by an earthquake.

“Maaaster ♥. Hurry up, let’s go. I’m sweaty ♥!”

Nanami had a good point. This was a school in the summertime. I was sweating just standing in the hall.

“Let’s go.”

Despite the trouble along the way, I finally arrived at a specific classroom with the girls in tow.

“What’s the deal with this place?”

When the three entered, they all started acting as they saw fit.

“Hey now, cut it out.”

Of course, no bratty bitch would let this stop them. A bratty bitch ever a bratty bitch was. Their existence was one of freedom. They scavenged through desks, searched through lockers, whatever struck them. This wasn’t harming me at all, so it wasn’t really a problem, but I still needed to stop them…

On a blackboard, the following was written: COOPERATE TOGETHER AND SOLVE THE PUZZLE! Beside it were several questions that I didn’t really understand.

Now, as for how we were supposed to solve this puzzle, that would be by asking the bratty bitches for help. Though I supposed the entire dungeon was set up that way.

When the girls underwent their bratty bitchification, they should have each received a unique ability. At this stage, I needed to discover which girl had gained additional knowledge and have her solve this problem for me.

On another floor, you had to rely on one of the bratty bitches who gained sewing skills to continue on, while another who was good at physical education would have to jump over a vaulting horse or do gymnastics.

But would the three of them readily solve these for me? Nah, no way was that going to happen.

They were all bratty bitches, after all.

“Hey, anyone know the answers to these?”

“Omigooosh ♥. Seriously, Mister, you can’t solve these ♥? What a loser ♥.”

It appeared that Katorina was the one gifted with knowledge. She looked at me with a grin.

“What am I gonna do with you, Mister ♥? You get how this works, right ♥?”

I absolutely didn’t, but I nodded along for the time being.

“If anything happens, you can put the blame all on me, and I’ll take on any punishment you want. So please, I need your help.”

“Oh yeah? So you’re fine with me riding you like a horse and spanking your butt, is that it ♥? *Pfft*, just imagining it is sooooo funny. ♥”

Wh-what the hell, was that a punishment or a reward?

I couldn’t stop myself from looking down at her lower body—her shapely butt and enhanced thighs. Because of the sweat dripping down her, her clothes were beginning to become see-through. I was in danger.

“If you *really* insist, then I *guesssss* I’ll be nice and solve this for you, Mister ♥.

Katorina picked up the chalk and smoothly wrote out the answers. All of them, of course, were correct.

Then, right as we went to leave the classroom—

“…Maybe just for today, I’ll be nice and call you ‘stud’ instead,” Katorina said, putting her hands together behind her back, and tilting her body slightly to peer up at my face.

“Awuh?”

It was so unexpected, I was at a loss for words. My train of thought totally derailed. The echoing of the word “stud” filled my head.

“Uh, for real? Don’t tell me you were, like, excited about that, were you?!! *Pffpfft*, I get it! You wanna look younger, don’t you, Mister ♥?”

I was pretty sure I looked plenty young enough already, but perhaps the old man smell in my heart was leaking out.

“That’s the face you’re gonna make? Hmmm ♥. What was it again, ‘If anything happens, you can put all the blame on me’? I can’t believe you can say that stuff with a straight face ♥.”

Y’know…that one stung pretty hard.

“I guess you sounded a little cool when you said it, so just for today, ’kay? Stud ♥.”

My heart skipped a beat.

This couldn’t be real. What was happening to me? The pounding in my chest wouldn’t stop. I felt like my heart was about to burst.

That settled it. I was going to make today a national holiday—Bratty Bitch Day. If I was ever put in charge of this country, I would do whatever it took to get it on the calendars, no matter how low my approval rate plummeted.

If I were to die today, the fact that Katorina called me “stud ♥” would reverberate through history.

Bratty bitches forever. No objections. None.

“Omigosh, that serious look of yours is *sooo* cute, Stud!! I sorta want to keep you as a pet ♥.”

Whoa, wait, you too, Saint Stef?! You were going to call me “stud,” too?!

Also, I sorta wanted her to keep me as her pet, too. I’d do *anything* to be the pet of a beauty like her anytime. I’d eat my meals on all fours no problem, and I’d pay all my own living expenses, so please, take me as your pet.

“In that case…I’ll call you Studster ♥.”

All right. So yeaah, Nanami was fine sticking with Master. Stop coming up with weird new words.

As the joy of being called “stud” filled me, we exited the room. What was there waiting for us was…

“Omigosh! Doesn’t that water look super cold?”

A cooler filled with bottled water. Except, for some reason, there were only three bottles. There were four people here right now—the three bratty bitches and me.

Of course, the bratty bitches scrambled to each grab one for themselves. Well, I wasn’t going to die in this dungeon or anything, so it didn’t really matter. There were other places I could hydrate, too.

Katorina noticed my predicament and held out her bottle after she had loudly gulped down her fill.

“Aww, hee-hee ♥. You want some, don’t you ♥?”

Sure did. More than that, though, I wanted to help myself to the impish bratty bitch in front of me. But that obviously wasn't happening, sorry.

In any case, I wasn't sure whether it was all right for me to drink any. There were only three bottles, after all.

I had thought to get some from Nanami, but she suddenly doused herself like a marathon runner, using up the whole bottle. Was she so hot that she wanted to splash herself, or did she think it would be more entertaining if I wasn't able to get any water from her? The latter, right?

I hadn't anticipated this, but the water also made their clothes a little see-through, too.

After going back and forth…

"O-okay, sure, I guess I'll have some."

"Ew ♥. You're really going to drink some? Groooss ♥."

"……"

My expression must have looked pretty funny, as both Katorina and the Saint erupted into laughter. The Saint wheezed as she laughed, clutching her stomach.

"_____♥!!"

Still, I wanted to protect this smiling face of hers. I knew that she was laughing at me, but even then, she was super cute.

"Just kidding, obvs ♥. Here, I won't say anything, promise ♥."

Katorina threw her water bottle at me. Delicious. The only problem was that Katorina must have been really thirsty, as she had drunk most of it, so I was left a bit unsatisfied.

"_____ ♥ ! Omigosh, that was soooo funny ♥ . Aww ♥ , not enough for you? Ha-ha ♥ . Fiiiiine, I *guess* if you're going to be like that, then you can drink all of mine. I'm just feeling generous today, so you better be grateful ♥."

The Saint also gave me her water. Neither girl seemed concerned about indirect kisses. After I had downed the entire bottle, I urged us forward.

We continued through the school from there, feeling a bit more energized after the water break.

The next floor was a music room.

What was the first thing that came to mind when thinking of a music room? For me, it was obviously instruments. There were

many inside the classroom, from pianos and guitars to violins and trumpets.

As usual, the bratty trio went off to pick their instruments of choice. Katorina began to blow into a recorder, and the Saint chimed on a triangle, while Nanami meanwhile…

Shredded a squealing lick on a guitar.

Why the heck was Nanami shredding out of nowhere? Had she ever played guitar before? Was she a human interface meant to communicate with organic life-forms? Was this the beginning of a legendary cultural festival episode?

“It looks like Nanami’s meant to handle the music room, then.”

Though Nanami seemed like she could play the guitar even without the bratty bitchification effect. If that was the case, I probably wouldn’t have batted an eye at the revelation.

“Nanami.”

I sent her a knowing look, making sure she knew what to do.

“M-Master ♥! I think two children is the perfect number ♥.”

“What the hell?! That definitely wasn’t the look I was giving you!”

Was it just me, or was Nanami the only one who wasn’t a bratty bitch? Instead, she had just become completely incomprehensible!

“Ewww♥*.”*

“Gross ♥.”

“Gah, enough, I was saying to get up on that platform and play!”

I moved Nanami onto the platform and had her play the score exactly as written. After clearing the music room, we continued to the next floor.

It all happened on our way to the next destination.

“Whoopsie, I brought this with me by accident ♥,” Katorina said.

I looked over and saw she was still carrying the recorder.

“You’ve got pockets, right? Carry it for me ♥. I’ll get it back later, ’kay?”

She handed me the recorder. I thought about leaving it somewhere, but Katorina had played it. That fact alone multiplied its value tenfold.

I put the recorder in my pocket as instructed. It stuck out a little, of course, but we wouldn’t get into any fights here, so it

wasn't an issue.

After we had gone even farther, the Saint gasped out loud. I looked over at her, wondering what it was this time.

"That means ice cream and stuff, doesn't it?"

In front of one of the classrooms was a banner reading FROZEN NOVELTIES. I put both hands up to my temples. It was at that moment that I remembered there was a pretty wild CG event in this dungeon.

Obviously, there was no way the girls *weren't* going to pounce on the idea of ice cream, and we headed to the classroom. I thought about telling them they should probably hold off, but… keeping them away from iced treats was going to be virtually impossible.

Nanami opened the freezer inside the classroom and checked what iced treats were inside.

"Hmm, I see vanilla, yogurt, and Calpico flavors."

Naturally, all the flavors were of the white and cloud variety. I needed to get something off my chest there.

Okay, so listen, Mr. Eroge Writer. This has always bugged me, but why the hell were there only white-colored ice cream choices here?! Were you trying to cut down on the number of CGs to make? Gimme a break!! There are a whole bunch of other flavors, aren't there?! What about watermelon?! Soda flavor?! Use your brain next time, dumbass!

Phew. Apparently, I had a lot of pent-up emotions on the subject.

As if not to waste a single second, Nanami took one of the vanilla-flavored ones. It was a long, thin ice pop.

Nanami then charmingly stuck out her tongue and began flicking it back and forth across the ice pop.

Oh great…was she seriously doing this? Was she trying to tempt me or what?

"*Mmm* ♥! *Mwaah* ♥. *Slurp* ♥. *Eek* ♥! Gaaah, not again! It's so cooool ♥!"

In an unbelievable turn of events, the treat Nanami was eating melted, sending big drops of ice cream plopping onto her skin and cow-patterned bikini. Vanilla ice cream and a cow-patterned swimsuit really complemented each other like peanut butter and jelly. Wait, no, that wasn't important right now.

So, uh, Nanami? What the hell were you doing here? Did you have a screw loose? Why were you eating it like that? I've seen a lot of people eat a lot of ice cream in my life, and none of have eaten it like *that* before. Oh, actually, sorry, I lied! I've seen this all in an eroge before!!

"Hey, Masteeeer? I bet you want to wipe me down? Well, go ahead, I don't mind ♥," Nanami said with a devilish grin, pointing to the melted slush on her.

She was supposed to be an angel, so what the hell was that smile about? Here she was, letting it dribble artistically from her cute belly button down to her plump thighs! She was letting it mix with her sweat and turning it into a serious problem here!

"Wipe it off yourself!"

If she made me wipe it off, there was a nonzero chance I'd end up sucking all the vanilla ice slush with my mouth instead. It looked downright delicious, after all!! I had to avoid that possibility at any cost.

"Whaaaat? You're not going to wipe me up, Master? You coward ♥."

I had no idea what was cowardly about that! She needed to forget all that and learn from the Saint and Katorina instead! Actually wait, those two…

"*Shlick* ♥! *Shlmch* ♥! *Slurp* ♥! *Mhnn* ♥!"

"*Ah* ♥! *Mmmnh* ♥! *Haah, haah* ♥! *Shlrrrrp* ♥!"

…were also out of their damn minds? Hey, you two know the sweat has already made your clothes see-through, right?

Why was the Saint holding the ice with both hands like she was praying and moving her head up and down? Why was she taking her tongue out to lick it up and down from top to bottom? Oh, and Katorina, why did you have an ice pop in each hand, and why were you alternating between them? And did you really need to look up at an angle like that while you ate?

So I just had to know—was this really their usual way of eating ice cream?

One final question, though, for both Katorina and the Saint…

W H Y W E R E Y O U D R I P P I N G I T O N Y O U R S E L V E S ?

That was it; this world was done for.

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“That ice cream was soooo tasty ♥.”

“Riiiight ♥?”

“What’s wrong, Master?”

“Yup, it was damn good all right!” I exclaimed, growing defiant.

The vanilla ice cream was super rich and tasty, huh? Must have been Jersey cow’s milk, right? Oh yeah, super delicious, yum. It was a bit too thick and rich in certain ways, and I felt like all the blood vessels in my brain were going to burst, sure, but yeah, it was tasty. Goddammit.

After that roller coaster, we continued to the next floor, the gymnasium. Here was where the Saint went into action. With a superb jump that would’ve put any professional gymnast to shame, she vaulted over the horse.



I thought that the brief glimpse of her shapely butt's contours I caught each time she jumped would give me a cerebral hemorrhage, but I was totally fine (this was a bald-faced lie)!

Naturally, she didn't do all this out of the goodness of her heart. Her proposal was that in exchange for completing the puzzle, she would receive a One-Day Slave Ticket that would allow her to use me however she deemed fit. It appeared that she had taken a liking to me and wanted me to be at her mercy for a day.

I mean, I'd gladly become her pet if she wanted me to.

After some other trials and tribulations, we finally arrived at the last floor. The other three were shiny and glistening, while my mind was in tatters.

The final floor was the principal's office, though this was in name only, as there were bondage implements and gags strewn about the area. What sort of deranged pervert was in charge of this school?

Of course, I wasn't going to use any of them. I couldn't. However, I would have to use the table in the middle of the room, which was commonly referred to as the bratty bitch discipline table.

"Uh, hold up. What the…?"

Katorina and the Saint stiffened as they took in the abnormal sight.

I assumed that the words written on the wall—WILLFUL CHILDREN NEED PUNISHMENT—were one major cause of their worsening fear.

The Saint turned around and rattled the doorknob, but it didn't budge. They couldn't escape.

Their bratty bitchification needed to be undone, or the teleportation circle wouldn't appear.

They seemed to suss out the strange vibe I had, as their expressions completely changed from how they had been until this point. They looked ready to burst into tears at any moment.

"I-is this because we kept acting so spoiled…?"

"O-okay, I'll apologize. I'll apologize, promise! I'm sorry!"

I stopped the two of them as they tried to apologize. Meanwhile, Nanami had already set herself on the pedestal.

Her stance was absolutely perfect. She pressed her breasts down on top of it and shoved her ass toward me. A tremendously powerful sight. But I needed to delay for a moment.

"No, no, I should be apologizing. Sorry, I'm about to do something terrible to you both."

"Huh?"

"You're not mad at us?"

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't, I guess. But I did have fun adventuring with you three."

Nevertheless, we couldn't get back home with them like this. I needed to return the bratty bitches to their senses. In this dungeon, bratty bitches needed to be put in their place.

Spanking their butts on top of the pedestal—it was something that had to be done no matter what. To progress in this dungeon, I'd needed to turn them into bratty bitches. And thus, I would now need to put them in their place as well. It was unavoidable.

In the game, you spank them while they kick and scream, but I wanted to avoid being forceful if possible.

That, and I really did have a good time. A lot had happened along the way, and I'd caught some of their sexier sides, so it was a wonderful memory. I needed to steel my heart, though.

"So I wanted to express my gratitude to you both. Thank you. Thank you, and I'm so—"

"Whoa, c'mon, stopppp it ♥. Ewww♥."

Katorina stopped me before I could apologize.

"Whatever ♥. You look weak and scrawny, so I guess I don't mind ♥."

"Just know you're never getting a chance to do this to me again. Besides, no matter what you do to me, Stud, I bet it'll be a walk in the park ♥."

Both of you… Thank you. Hearing them say this helped soothe my guilty conscience.

"Heeeey, Stud ♥? I guess I can say this now that we're here."

"Say what, Katorina?"

"It was sorta fun for me, too ♥."

"At first I was, like, what the heck is with this old dude, right ♥? Buuut…," the Saint said, peering up at me. Then, with a devilish grin, she continued, "You were sorta cool, just a little ♥. I had fun, too. I'll give you a passing grade, then, Stud ♥."

Her overwhelming cuteness derailed my train of thought before I heard a voice from behind me.

"*Nnnhhhaash* ♥, Master, how long is this abandonment play going to go on for?"

Whoops, my bad. I'd completely forgotten about her.

I immediately went over to Nanami's butt. I instinctively gulped in the face of its intense presence.

She was sweaty. Her bathing suit was almost translucent, and she was basically hiding nothing. Her most precious areas were miraculously still hidden, and that was it.

I put a hand on her sweaty back. Then I slowly lifted my hand into the air.

Her butt bounced. Nanami's buttocks, so powerful they could probably defeat the Demon King on their own, trembled like jelly.

"*Ah* ♥! Master ♥! Yes ♥! I-if you hit that hard ♥! *Mnhgh* ♥!"

Ten seconds after I was done spanking her, Nanami lifted herself up.

"The stunningly beautiful maid Nanami has made her return."

She appeared to have come to her senses. I mean, she was spouting her usual nonsense, so I couldn't really say for sure, but she was probably fine now.

Next up was the Saint.

"Uppsie-daisy ♥!" she said as she got herself in position on the pedestal.

It was an amazing sight. The Saint, dressed in a sexy school uniform, was sticking her butt out at me. I instinctively gulped back my spit and attempted to raise my hand…but found myself unable to do so.

I began to feel uncertain about whether it was okay for me to do this.

I mean, it was the Saint in front of me. Would this fly? I was about to *spank* her and all.

The Saint appeared to notice my sudden loss of will.

"Omigosh, you're getting cold feet *now* ♥? Laaaaame ♥," she said to provoke me. Deciding I didn't have any other choice, I took a good look at the Saint's butt, when I realized something.

"Oh…"

Her fair-skinned, beautiful, sweaty buttocks were trembling.

She was scared. The Saint was terrified at the prospect of being spanked. Yet she had tried to provoke me to give me courage.

"…Saint, this is going to hurt, so prepare yourself."

"Hold on, just call me Stef ♥."

"Huh?"

"Just for this one second, I want you to call me Stef. I want you to call me by my name, 'kay ♥?"

I needed to steel myself as well.

"Got it, Stef. Here I go."

"Give it to me, Stud ♥. I'm *sure* that I can take whatever you've got, no problem ♥."

I put a hand on her sweaty waist. Her body jerked. I raised up my hand and slammed it down on the Saint's ass.

The sound of palm on flesh echoed. Sweat splashed up into the air.

"*Mhn* ♥! *Ah* ♥! N-no, I can't— ♥! *Mhnnn* ♥! *Eek* ♥! *Aaaaangh* ♥!"

After I had finished spanking her five times, I gently helped her back up. It appeared that the Saint's bratty bitchification had been reversed.

It must have hurt, as the Saint looked at me with tears in her eyes, her butt and face equally crimson. All of her memories from her time as a bratty bitch were clearly intact. As such, she knew I had been privy to all of her shameful behavior.

Unfortunately, there was no way to clear the dungeon other than put up with the bratty bitch routine.

Both the Saint and Katorina understood this.

That was why the Saint didn't say a word.

Next was Katorina. She got her body in position and shoved her butt at me. I grabbed her demon tail with one hand, and her body twitched.

I swung my hand down on her sweaty butt.

"*Eep* ♥! *Ahn* ♥! *Hnnggh* ♥! *Mrnhh* ♥! *Nnnnha* ♥!"

Then Katorina also went back to normal. She and the Saint still wouldn't say anything. Faces and butts bright red, they silently stepped into the teleportation circle that had appeared.

There was likely a shower room and a change of clothes waiting for them on the other end.

It was at that moment, right as I took a step toward my own long-awaited shower…

“Oh, by the way, Master.”

“What is it, Nanami?”

…Nanami called to me, and I turned around.

“We had to do all sort of things to get through that Bratty Bitch Dungeon, yes?”

“Sure did.”

If I had been all by myself, I would have chosen a route that didn’t require the bratty bitchification, like the one where you had to wear see-through clothes that left nothing to the imagination. I hadn’t chosen the route because revealing the full monty with Katorina and the Saint around would’ve been bad news, though.

“I probably could have cleared all of those rooms without the bratty bitchification. I knew the answers to the questions in the first room, I was able to play the instruments just fine, and correct me if I am wrong, but even you could have handled the vaulting horse yourself, Master, yes?”

I looked up to the sky.

…Now that I thought about it, Nanami probably could have handled all of it.

“Don’t say a word about this to the Saint or Katorina, got it?”

If a day ever came when they found that out, it would likely be my last day on this earth.


CONFIG

—Katorina's Perspective—

After we escaped from the dungeon, we found Ms. Sakura waiting there to meet us. I then succeeded in suppressing my demon powers, albeit while borrowing the strength of Ms. Sakura and Nanami to do it.

Thanks to that, I was able to return to my regular human form. And on top of gaining the ability to wield dark magic, I also became able to transform into a demon at will.

Apparently my demon form was still unstable, however, so if I did end up using it, I would need to be extra careful and make sure someone who knew my circumstances was with me, too.

Since now it was okay for me to practice with darkness magic, I thought I'd start with that.

For the demon transformation, well…I needed to think on it a little more. At this point, I definitely couldn't use it in front of regular people. It was powerful, sure, but I needed practice with it.

As for why things had progressed so smoothly, apparently that was because Kousuke had done a bunch of stuff for me. He'd acted almost as if he knew how everything would end from the start.

After that, Ms. Sakura gave me all sorts of advice before I finally returned to my own room in the dorms.

Collapsing into bed, I was assailed by a gnawing uneasiness and sadness.

Back in the dungeon, my urge to escape as fast as possible had been so strong, I didn't have any head space left to think about myself. But now that I could reflect on the events of the day and the blood flowing in my veins…

I felt the urge to cry.

The fact that my father was a demon. The fact that my mother knew. What was I supposed to do the next time I saw her? I

thought over everything again and again. Eventually, I grew unsure about how I should proceed from here.

Just then, however, a single person's face floated into my mind.

I had gotten in touch with him the day after we'd returned from the dungeon. I couldn't tell if it was because I had messaged him so suddenly, or because I said I wanted to meet during the day, while class was still in session, but he seemed pretty surprised.

Principal Marino Hanamura's house, were he lived, was pretty close to the campus. Still, since classes had already started, I reached his house without running into any other students.

Kousuke Takioto and I weren't really close enough to meet one-on-one like this very often. We had gotten together a lot with the whole group, though.

He showed me into the living room, and an elf maid wearing a sword immediately served us some tea. I took the cup, and before she left the room, the elf told Kousuke to call for her if he needed anything.

Nanami came next, bringing us some snacks and placing them on the table. The hospitality left nothing to be desired.

"Go ahead and eat as much as you like, okay? So what's up?" Kousuke asked me as he sipped on his tea.

"I wanted a little bit of advice."

He looked a bit surprised.

"From me? Not Iori?"

Though I wondered why Iori's name was the one to come up, I continued.

"I thought about asking Iori, but I sorta felt you'd be better. Though if I'm bothering you, I ca—"

Kousuke interrupted me before I could finish my sentence.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on. I wasn't asking 'cause I didn't want to hear you out. I was just wondering if talking to a guy like me was the right call, is all. If you're coming to me for advice, 'course I'll hear you out."

He was right that Iori and Ludie would've worked, too. It was all related to the Morals Committee to begin with, so I could've just talked to one of the people there instead. Everyone, except the Saint anyway.

Except Kousuke Takioto had been the first person to pop into my mind.

“I’m not really sure, honestly. Just thought it’d be better to talk to you about this… What am I even trying to say here?”

“That right? Well, everyone’s got their own stuff to deal with. Anyway, hit me,” Kousuke said and turned to Nanami, who knocked lightly on the wall. Then Ivy showed up out of nowhere, and the two of them departed the room together.

Ivy, huh? I glanced at Kousuke, and he gave a sheepish grin.

“She said she wants to serve me, whatever that means. Don’t worry about it.”

I took his advice and decided not to think about it too hard. I needed to focus on myself first. I had to resolve the situation I was in.

“See, I was thinking, I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do from here.”

When I said this, Kousuke closed his eyes and heaved a big sigh.

“Well, what’s wrong with doing what you’ve been doing already?”

“That’s not gonna fly. I’m not a half elf, dwarf, or beastfolk. I’m a half *demon*, okay? You know what that means.”

“Sure, I do. It’s just that, to me, it doesn’t really change anything.”

“It doesn’t?”

“What did I say back in the dungeon? To me, it doesn’t matter whether you’re a human or a demon. There’s plenty of humans who do good things, and plenty who do bad things, too. So what’s so strange about a demon who does good deeds? Simple as that.”

“You might feel that way, sure. But there’s a whole buncha stuff I’m still worried about.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Look, you and Iori are a couple of idiots, so you might accept me, sure. And I bet Ludie and the others would, too. But your average person, on the other hand…”

They might not accept me for who I was.

“…If you’re not going to tell anyone, your only choice is gonna be keeping it a secret forever,” Kousuke said after a short silence.

“And then there’s the Saint. She’s got her status to think about, right?”

In the worst case, she might just kill me. Leggenze defined demons as a mighty and powerful evil. The entire country might

try to attack me if word got out about my bloodline.

"Y'know, Katorina, you and everyone else are assuming a lot. It's always the Saint this and the Saint that when people talk about Stef, but you're all wrong. Er, well. You're not *wrong*, I guess."

"Can you get to the point?"

"President Monica and Minister Benito know. I think Yukine probably knows, too?"

This was so annoying. Why couldn't he just come out and say it? Kousuke really loved the sound of his own voice sometimes.

"Stefania Scaglione is the Saint, sure, but she's also just a regular girl. She's rude, she never tries to hide what she's feeling, and she hates anything that brings her extra work. But she's also a really kind person."

He took a pause to breathe before continuing.

"And that's why I doubt Saint Stef is thinking about doing anything to you at all."

So he said, but it really didn't seem that way to me.

"Okay, so if Leggenze tells her to kill me, then what?"

"Hmm, that's definitely a possibility, but it'll work out all right."

"How the hell would it be all right?"

"'Cause the Saint won't harm you. If she gets targeted instead, I'll be there to protect her. I've already started preparing for when that ends up happening to you or the Saint, so rest easy and enjoy school."

What do you mean, "already started"?

"Hey, this has always bugged me, but what's with all this info you have? Like, seriously. Something's not right."

"I guess I'd say I know a lot about stuff? Anyway, don't sweat the small stuff. I'll figure out a way to help you and the Saint. Oh, right! Sorry about this, but I was planning on borrowing that power of yours when push comes to shove between the Saint and Leggenze."

"Okay, hold up just one damn second—is your head screwed on straight? You're talking about going up against an entire country?"

He grinned.

"What about it? We're the Hanamuras, y'know. Besides."

"Besides what?"

“I know about a whole buncha stuff.”

Y’know, this had always bugged me. He chalked it all up to being a Hanamura or whatever, but even when you took that into account, it was clear he knew way too much.

This dude was hiding something from everyone, no question about it.

“Then hurry up and spill it.”

“Whoa, whoa, why? Things would get real hairy if you knew, okay? This stuff’s even more dangerous than that secret the Three Committees are hiding.”

So based on that, then I really needed to get him to fill me in.

“That’s stupid. Aren’t you and Nanami gonna stay by my side if anything happens to me? What happened to taking me on an adventure around the world?”

I mean, if things got bad, I was going to have to rely on him, wasn’t I? So I needed him to not keep secrets from me.

“Sure, I plan to anyway.”

“Then we’re both in the same boat here, right? In that case, you gotta spill it.”

A strained smile came to his face.

“…You got me there. All right, when the time’s right, I’ll tell you.”

“Okay, but do you seriously think it’s cool to stir up trouble with Leggenze like that?”

“It won’t be an issue,” he said, pointing a finger at himself. Then his tone got a little goofy.

“Since I—”

The words were something I had heard him say once before. But I didn’t find them ridiculous.

They sank straight inside me.

After saying good-bye to Takioto, I headed back to school alone. He was planning to skip the rest of the day. So I went straight to the Morals Committee room. Yukine had summoned me there.

It worked out perfectly really. It would have been a drag to head to class when morning period was almost over, for starters, and I wasn’t in the mood to sit in class anyway.

When I got to the Morals Committee room, I saw that Yukine was already there, along with Saint Stef.

“Sure took your time,” the Saint said, looking at me. Then she ordered me to take my seat.

“…Sorry, I had something to take care of.”

Yukine served me some tea.

“It’s fine,” Saint Stef said, bringing her teacup up to her lips. I thanked Yukine and took a sip of my own. I remembered this flavor. I had just drunk some at the Hanamura House, so I recognized it immediately.

“You’ve got something you want to say to me, don’t you?”

“…Yes, Captain, if I may.”

“Hey, Rina, no need to be so stiff. Captain Stefania, you didn’t call her here for an interrogation, right? So then, why not just talk to her like normal?”

“Oh, be quiet, Yukine. You do the talking, then.”

“Allow me. All right, Rina, just relax.”

Easy to say when you weren’t the one in the hot seat.

“We want to hear more about your situation, basically. Whatever you’re able to talk about.”

“You mean the demon stuff, right?”

“Right.”

Yukine nodded.

“Not sure if you’ll believe me or not, but I was raised by my mom, and I grew up knowing nothing about my dad. And according to what the demon I met in that dungeon told me… apparently my dad was a demon.”

“I see. That would explain why you can transform like that. It’s not that you’re part of the Church of the Malevolent Lord, is it?”

“No. I’ve got absolutely nothing to do with them.”

When I said this, Yukine’s expression instantly brightened.

“Really? Then there won’t be any problems. How are you doing?”

“Just fine, I guess? I feel refreshed, honestly.”

“I’m glad. I figured you were doing all right after hearing from Takioto, but I just wanted to make sure.”

“From Kousuke?”

“Yeah, he was really worried about you. He said you were pretty depressed and asked me to look after you.”

“Ugh, that guy…”

“Takioto and Ms. Sakura filled me in on a lot of stuff. They told me that you’re not dangerous. Not that I needed to hear that to know you were okay,” Yukine said with a smile.

“If anything comes up, come talk to me or the captain. Got it?”

“But…”

What about the Saint?

Right as I trailed off, the bell signaling the end of class rang through the halls.

“What about lunch? You bring your own?”

“No, I figured I’d buy it or head to the cafeteria.”

“All right, then how about you eat with us? We were planning on going to the cafeteria.”

While I was grateful for the invitation, I wasn’t too jazzed about the idea, since I had wanted to quit the Morals Committee altogether.

“Um, Captain Stef, so about that message I sent earlier asking to withdraw from the Morals Committee.”

“Oh, I deleted that.”

“D-deleted it?”

“Of course. Don’t think giving up on us will be that easy.”

As I stood there dumbfounded, Yukine looked at her Tsukuyomi Traveler before addressing Saint Stef.

“Captain Stefania, it sounds like we’ll have to put lunch on hold for a bit.”

“What does that mean?” Saint Stef said, displeased.

“Apparently Minister Benito and President Monica bumped into each other in front of a lot of other students and started arguing. They asked if you could come out and settle things.

“It had to happen right before lunch? Honestly…what a pain.”

She slowly got up.

“Should I come with you?” Yukine asked.

The Saint thought for a moment before shaking her head.

“No, you’re fine… Rina, you come with me.”

Hearing this, Yukine patted me on the shoulder with a grin.

“*Ha-ha* this sorta stuff’s going to happen a lot, so the sooner you experience it, the better.”

“Yukine, stop giving her weird ideas and get lunch ready for us or something.”

“Okay, got it,” Yukine said, giving me a big smile before leaving the room.

“Come now, let’s go.”

We both placed our teacups in the sink. Then we left the room and headed off to the quarrel in progress.

“Are you sure this is okay?” I asked.

“Is what okay?”

“I mean, I have demon blood in me, right?”

“Okay, so what? I make sure not to judge people by how they look. Though there are people like Takioto who are just as crazy on the inside as they look on the outside.”

Was that really true? Doubt swirled inside me. I mean, I was talking to a girl who had a position of power in Leggenze, the human supremacist nation that saw all demons as the enemy.

“…I’m saying you shouldn’t be so anxious about it. Do you not get it? Okay, so this is just a hypothetical. But what if I told you that I was an orphan who didn’t know what sort of blood ran through her veins? Or that I was saved by beastfolk and lived together with them? What then?”

“Huh?”

Beastfolk were loathed and despised within the borders of Leggenze. Conversely, the beastfolk should have resented the Saint, too. She was a central figure of the very religion persecuting them. So what was this about them saving her…?

“…Never mind. Forget it.”

I could sense that the Saint had her own complicated circumstances to deal with. My earlier conversation with Kousuke came to mind. Based on what he had said, and the implication of his words, maybe he already knew?

“Oh, that’s right, Rina. We both share a secret we can’t tell anyone else, right?”

“What secret?”

“That dungeon.”

I let out an uncomfortable gasp. I felt so mortified, I could barely contain myself. The memory made me want to crawl into a hole and never come back out.

“I don’t want that getting out, either. Does that make it a bit easier to trust me?”

“…It does.”

“Good. Oh right, about the demon stuff. If Leggenze finds out about it, I might not be able to do anything for you at that point. Even if I don’t act on it, some unsavory characters might show up and try to exterminate you. You better not let it get out there.”

I nodded, then decided to try bringing up what I had just been talking about with Kousuke earlier.

“So actually, I just saw Kousuke a little while ago, and he said something about helping you out when he talked about saving me.”

Hearing this, the Saint put her head in her hands.

“That idiot… He told you the same thing, did he? That’s absolutely impossible, okay?”

Her reaction told me that Kousuke had already talked to her about it.

“I think the same thing, but for some reason, I sorta get the feeling he might pull it off.”

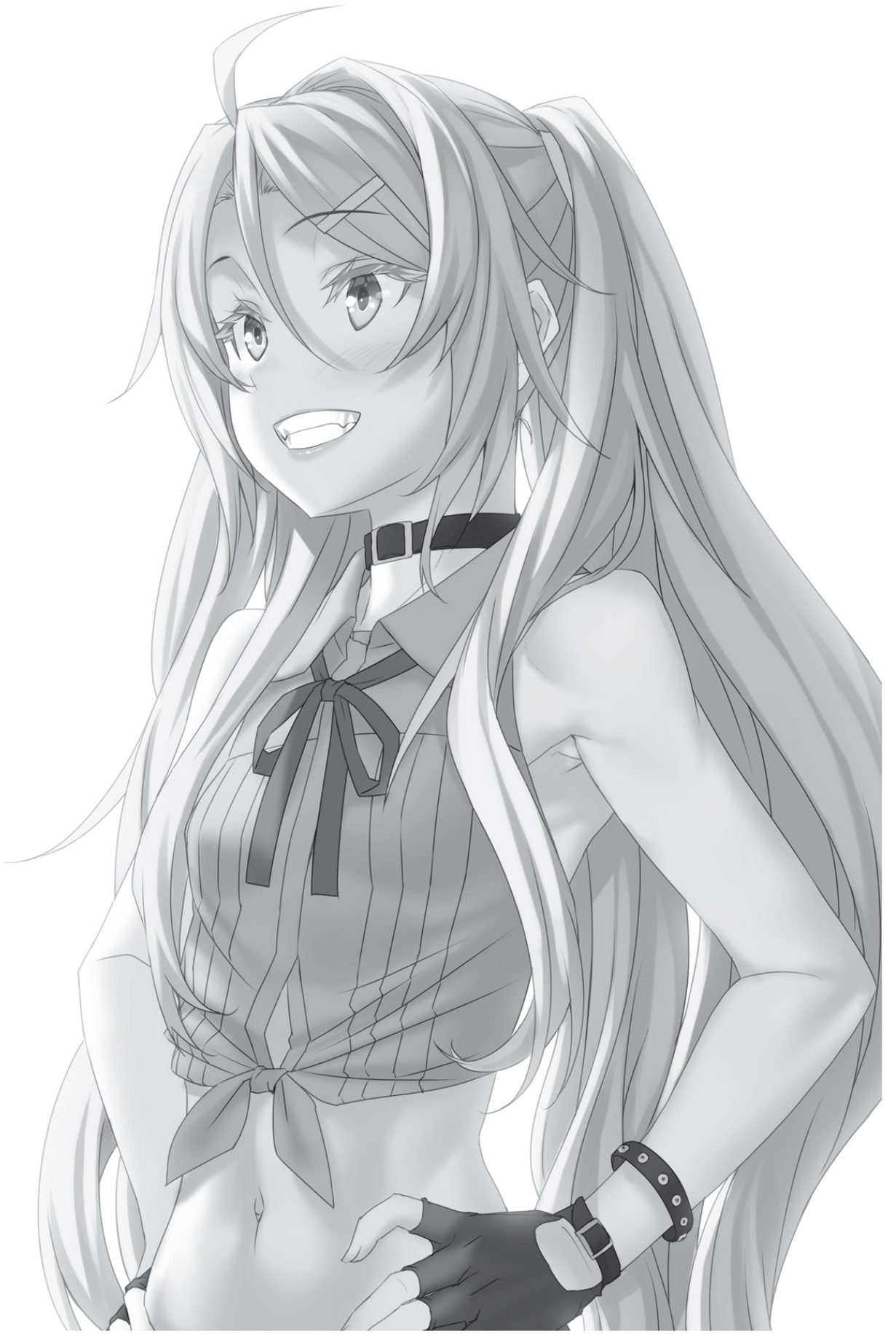
“Why’s that?”

What Kousuke had mentioned earlier was something that would normally be considered impossible. Yet somehow, it also sounded like something he could wind up doing.

I didn’t know why, but I couldn’t help but think back on his face, brimming with confidence. For some reason, his smile made me feel like everything was going to work out okay.

What the hell. I might as well try channeling him a bit and say it like he would, overflowing confidence and goofiness and all.

“’Cause he’s gonna be the strongest in the world.”



Afterword

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim

Good day, everyone. I am managing to keep myself alive. An anime adaptation was green-lit.

—Acknowledgments—

Noboru Kannatuki, your illustrations for this volume are wonderful. Thank you, as always.

Your perspective was very helpful when it came to Takioto's stole. Your design is fantastic as well. Also, the illustrations of the Saint and Katorina are superb.

Yukari Higa, thank you as always for your manga adaptation. With the latest installments, you draw out the charm, adorableness, and sexiness of the heroines to the fullest.

My God, my Buddha, my editor: I don't know if I should say "once again" or "as always," but I gave you quite a lot of trouble with this volume. You have my apologies, and my thanks.

—Regarding the Anime Adaptation—

Kanna, Higa, please allow me to thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am sure that this adaptation would have never materialized without you both. To my managing editor and Miyakawa, thank you very much for putting in so much work toward this anime. It really is a dream come true.

Finally, to you, the readers: I've managed to come this far thanks to all your support. Thank you very much.

Iris


(Noboru Kannatuki)
The Saint's bratty bitch outfit really beefs up her booty.

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