
Magical★Explorer
10
Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim
Iris
ILLUSTRATION BY
Noboru Kannatuki


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"...What's with you? You're pushy, you won't listen to anything I say, and you don't have a shred of tact. Keep it up, and everyone's going to detest you."
"You'd best be prepared, 'cause I'm gonna make sure you end up happy, got it?"
Hortensia
One of the heroines in *Magical★Explorer*. Infiltrated the Church of the Malevolent Lord to achieve her goal.
Kousuke Takioto


“Would you like to sleep alongside me? I’ll even sing you a lullaby.”
Sophia
Empress of the elven Tréfle Empire and Ludie’s mother.

[redacted]


"What's that look for, livestock?
Want to get kicked, too?"
Ludie
A domme queen awakening?!

[redacted]

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Magical★Explorer

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Illustration: Noboru Kannatuki

Graphic Design: Kai Sugiyama (Tsuyoshi Kusano Design Co., Ltd.)



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Magical★Explorer: Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim, Vol. 10

Iris

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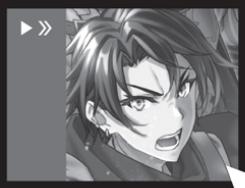
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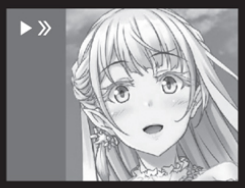
Characters

Magical★Explorer 10



Kousuke Takioto

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



Ludie

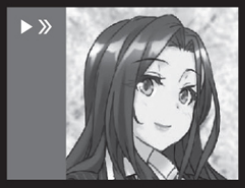
Ludivine Marie-Ange de la Tréfle.

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



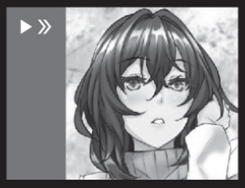
Nanami

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.

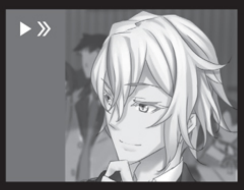
The president of the Student Council. One of *Magical★Explorer's* Big Three and a main heroine who features on the game's packaging.



Stef

Stefania Scaglione.

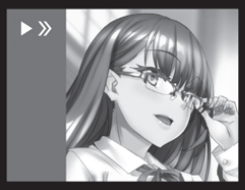
Serves as the captain of the Morals Committee. The Acting Saint from Leggenze. Although she is beautiful, compassionate, and popular with the students… is there more to her than meets the eye…?



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

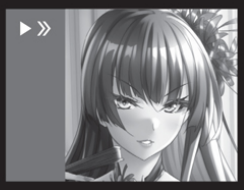
Franziska Edda von Gneisenau.

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



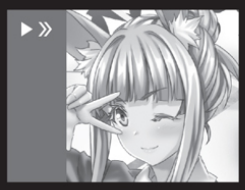
Yukine Mizumori

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



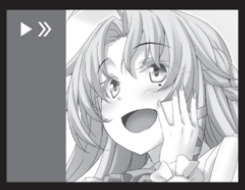
Shion Himemiya

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

Chapter 0 **Hortensia of the Church of the Malevolent Lord**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim "You want me to go to the Tréfle Empire?"

My boss nodded, sipping on incarnadine wine while the sun was still high in the sky.

"That's right. I have a big job for you!" he said, raising the left corner of his lips into a smirk. The expression suited him very well.

Not because he was handsome. Though I couldn't deny he *was* good-looking. His narrow eyes gave him a somewhat cold impression, but the individual parts of his face were balanced and well-shaped. His intellectual and compact physique made him even more attractive.

As for why the smirk fit him so perfectly, he was wicked to the core.

"This is a big opportunity," he said before gulping down some of the bloodred wine set in front of him. "For you and for me both."

Even among the members of the Church of the Malevolent Lord, he was especially morally bankrupt and depraved. The type who had no qualms about hurting others if it benefited him.

I had heard countless rumors about him.

If he happened to discover something harming his reputation, he would push it off onto others. Apparently, he had also killed his own subordinates to destroy evidence.

Once I had started working under him, I came to realize these tales were the truth.

"What would you have me do?"

"Our mole in the empire has reported they've devised a means to get to the Sanctuary. Using that information, I want you to sneak inside the Sanctuary and retrieve an item that's been sealed away in there."

"Aren't the defenses around the Sanctuary very tight?"

"Don't know much about the place, do you?"

How would I? The man refused to tell me anything outside of the context of my missions to prevent me from giving up important information in the event I was caught. Why would I need to go out of my way to learn things that didn't concern me in the slightest?

"Please excuse my ignorance," I replied, not actually feeling sorry. He probably didn't believe for a second I felt that way, either.

"No matter. You've risen up the ranks lately, so you'll have access to more information than you did before. Best if you took the initiative to learn some more."

"I will endeavor to do so," I said, taking a sip of my own wine.

"I'll give you a brief overview of the Sanctuary, then. The place has a special barrier around it that prevents regular elves and humans from entering. The only ones who can get through it are the imperial family and a select few in their inner circle."

"…Do I take this to mean you've captured a member of the royal family?"

"No, the truth is, there's more to the Sanctuary than that. Though we initially assumed we would need a member of the royal family to get in, we recently discovered there's a hidden key that will temporarily open the barrier to anyone. Chances are high we'll be able to get our hands on it."

This would let me to gain access to the Sanctuary.

"I understand the situation. Allow me to ask, then—should I go to the Sanctuary alone?"

"No, the plan we've worked out involves sending in a special squad. I've put in my recommendation for you to join them."

Interesting.

"Does that mean I should retrieve this sealed item together with them?"

"Yes and no."

There he went, spouting his roundabout nonsense again. This circuitous habit of his was one of his worst qualities.

"The Diamond Cross Knights will be going with you, but their primary task will be different. You need to focus on retrieving that

item, first and foremost."

"The Diamond Cross Knights…"

A force made up of the most talented members of the Church of the Malevolent Lord. If they were being deployed, then this mission was vital indeed.

"The Diamond Cross Knights will be releasing the seal on a particular elf. Ask them about it if you want the details."

"Understood. When will we be carrying out this operation?"

"Ludivine will be making a trip home soon. The empire is bound to assign her a fairly large escort when she's there. While that's going on, we'll launch several attacks at once in multiple locations. This isn't our true aim, of course," he said with a smile. It appeared the plan was to stretch thin the security force, so we could make our move.

"We'll use the chaos as our opening to obtain the key and infiltrate the Sanctuary. And then, all I'll need to do is grab the item?"

"That's right. There will be one thing to worry about, however… Kousuke Takioto."

Kousuke Takioto. Hearing the name made me remember what had happened at Amaterasu Girls' Academy. He was a boy with inconceivably large mana reserves who brought a weird maid everywhere with him.

"Kousuke will be accompanying Ludivine on her trip. As you know, he's the reason many of our recent operations have been foiled."

Whenever Kousuke got involved in the Church of the Malevolent Lord's plans, they would end in failure. Some claimed Ludivine would already be dead if it weren't for him.

"Of course, that hasn't stopped *everyone* from completing their missions," he said, looking at me. My successful retrieval of the *magatama* from the Amaterasu Dungeon despite Kousuke's interference had improved my standing within the Church.

"What's your read on him?" he asked. Kousuke Takioto. Right.

"As far as his abilities go, I can say he is extremely talented. He's also quite the…enigmatic individual."

Takioto's abilities were one thing, but it was his vast stores of knowledge that were truly astounding.

During our encounter, he had addressed me as though he knew me personally. It had been a bit creepy, really. Though visually, his features, height, and muscular physique were all pretty attractive in my book.

"I hear he's developed a unique style of fighting based on his vast pools of mana," he said.

"Going up against that stole of his will be quite irritating, I imagine."

"You managed it last time. Just do that again."

What an unreasonable ask. I only managed to succeed last time because I'd had a hostage, for one, and I didn't actually fight him. I definitely wouldn't make it out of a clash with him unscathed, so I would have really preferred to avoid doing so at all, thanks.

"I understand."

"Oh, right. One more thing."

"Yes?"

"You should get around to killing someone."

I had, in fact, not killed anyone before.

"Wouldn't it be better to avoid taking lives, if possible?"

"I can see where you're coming from. But there's a strength that only comes from killing, you know. That's your whole goal in the first place, isn't it? Hortensia."

Killing was indeed my goal.

By any means necessary. No matter how dirty I needed to get my hands to do so, even knowing I would die in agony.

And the person I needed to kill was none other than one of the cardinals, second-in-command of the Church of the Malevolent Lord.


CONFIG

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim —*Ludie's Perspective*—

"You start out the day after tomorrow, right?"

I heard Mother's voice through the phone.

"Yes, that's right."

The Tréfle Empire lay several thousands of miles away from my current location—the Hanamura House in Wakoku—yet her words came to me instantly.

"You be careful on your way home, got it?"

"I'll be fine. Kousuke will be with me, and… Oh, right that reminds me." I sipped the tea Claris had prepared for me. "I told you I wanted to bring some other friends who have really helped me out, right? Now there'll be three of them. Will that be a problem?"

Claris went to brew me another cup, but I stopped her with a gesture. I wasn't thirsty anymore.

"Oh, of course! I can't wait to meet everyone. Lilou's just as excited, too."

"I can't wait to play with Ludie and her friends."

I heard my little sister's voice. Clearly, she was sitting next to Mother and listening in on our conversation.

"I'm looking forward to it, too, Lilou. I can't wait to see all of you. I just wish I could get the chance to see our sister, too."

"She's always busy with something. Lilou wants to see her just as much as you do, but there's not much that can be done, I'm afraid… Which reminds me, Marino mentioned you've grown quite a lot, Ludie."

Marino talked about that with Mother?

I did think I had grown a bit since first leaving for school, but…

"It's all thanks to Ms. Hatsumi…and Kousuke. But I'm not nearly strong enough." When I compared myself to others, I felt keenly inferior in many ways—in knowledge, in ability, and in mindset. "When I compare myself with Kousuke, I feel like I still need to grow even more."

After I said that, I heard Mother's laugh on the other end of the line.

"Hee-hee."

"What is it, Mother?"

"My, my, you haven't noticed yet?"

"Noticed what?"

"Oh no, nothing at all, just thinking how I can't wait to see that face of yours, Ludie."

"That laugh just now must have meant *something*," I said.

"*It's nothing, truly,*" Mother said before giggling to herself again.

Just as I was about to press her further about why she had laughed, I heard the sound of someone entering the room on Mother's end, so I swallowed my words.

"Oh no… Looks like Father's here. What? You want to talk, too?"

"Father?"

Based on what Lilou had just said, the new person in the room appeared to be my father.

"Yes, yes, your father here said he has something to talk to you ab — Hey, hold on!"

"Ludie."

All of a sudden, the person on the other end of the call changed. My father. I could hear Lilou's angry "*geez!*" in the background, so he must have ripped the phone out of Mother's hands.

"Hello, Father."

"How are you doing?"

"Just fine. You already know that, don't you?"

He sent me messages almost every day, and I begrudgingly answered him every now and then, so he should have known how I was doing. While I could sympathize with how he must feel after what happened to me, I still wished he would stop being so overbearing.

"I worry because you only answer my messages once every three days."

"*Ludie, you don't have to send this man* any *messages, okay?*" my mother insisted, understanding my feelings on the subject. I heard my parents start to bicker on the other end.

It was strange, really. I hadn't even left yet, but it sort of felt like I was already back home.

"Oh, be quiet. How are things going over there?"

Usually, Mother tore Father to shreds, but in a rare turn of events, he seemed to have won the argument. Though there was a chance Mother had reluctantly allowed him to have the receiver, instead.

"It's been a lot of fun."

"If you don't feel like living there even the tiniest bit, you could just stay here in the empire forever—"

"What are you talking *about! Like I'd let that happen!"*

I heard a smacking sound from the other end. A pretty intense one, at that.

"Ludie, make sure you bring Kousuke Takioto with you. There's something I'd like to speak candidly with him about."

Candidly? Why "candidly"? I had a terrible feeling about this.

"Erm, Father? I'm sure you don't need me to say this, but you're not going to do anything rude to Kousuke, are you?"

"K-K-K-Kousuke…?"

I didn't think I had said anything strange, but for some reason, Father's voice was trembling.

"What's wrong?"

"You call that b-b-boy by just his first name?"

Ah, now everything made sense.

If I recalled correctly, this same thing had happened once when Lilou was around four, when she had called a male friend of hers by just his first name. Father's whole face had gone purple.

"Ugh, I swear…not this again!"

Mother was mad at him. I could hear what sounded like a very large spell being cast—was Father going to be okay?

It was the same old bickering as always, so I probably didn't need to worry.

"Ludie, Mother and Father started fighting again, so I think you can hang up."

Lilou was unphased, too, so they would clearly be all right.

"Got it. I'll leave them with you then," I said, hanging up.

"Haaah…"

I hung my head in my hands.

"I see they haven't changed at all, then," Claris said with a strained smile.

"Seems so. They usually get along so well, so I have no idea why they end up like that whenever something concerns their children."

"That's because they care so much about you, my lady."

"I get that, but…it's a bit excessive, isn't it?"

Claris remained silent, her strained smile unchanged. She didn't deny it.

"I knew it, he's hopeless… Sheesh, should I be worried?"

This was my first time bringing a male friend home with me. I had nothing but bad feelings about this.

"Just don't embarrass me, Father."


CONFIG

Chapter 2 **Now That You Mention It**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim "I've never been in anything like this before," Yuika remarked as she sat in the VIP section of the high-speed train.

When an imperial family member like Ludie was set to travel cross-country, what was the right call?

If I was someone with authority over the situation, I'd probably set her up with a form of private transportation, then assign several bodyguards to watch over things.

The same thing had basically happened in reality; Ludie's parents had assigned her several personal bodyguards without a second thought and had opted to have her come home on a highly secure form of transportation.

Despite this journey having capable and powerful individuals like Claris and Yukine along for the ride, she had only slightly fewer bodyguards than usual.

"They really didn't need to go this far," Ludie said. Her exasperation made sense, as she had been given her own personal train car, and there were elf warriors on guard in the neighboring cars, too. This level of security was a bit overkill.

In addition to Ludie's bodyguard, Claris, there was me, Yukine, Nanami, and Yuika. Unless some seriously bad news popped up, we would probably be fine.

Still, I could understand the perspective of Ludie's family, too.

"I think they're spooked by what happened before."

A while back, Ludie had been betrayed by her fellow elves, and since there was no telling where the Church of the Malevolent Lord might be lurking, it was little wonder her family was anxious.

"Another reason for the extra security might be the fact that you're here, Master. You are a member of the Hanamura family, after all," suggested Nanami.

Oh, wait, because of me? Did the Hanamuras really need that level of consideration?

"Who cares about the reason? Travelling this way is super comfy and a lot of fun. My brother's really missing out. He should've come along, too," Yuika said.

"He did show an interest in coming. However, Master Iori was quite busy, so I imagine he didn't have a choice," Nanami responded from the aisle on the opposite side.

Yukine nodded. "And the student council has their overnight training camp this time of year, so his hands were tied."

Iori had actually been invited, too, but he declined the offer, saying he had stuff to do. Based on my brief exchange with him earlier, he seemed to be going through the class rep event. He also had his hands full with the student council events and his magic shop-related events, so his schedule couldn't get much more overloaded. Hell, he was probably knocking out more events than I was. I could only hope he'd keep up the pace and get even stronger.

"Okay, but the empire, though. What sorta place is it, anyway?" Yuika asked.

Claris was the one to answer her.

"It's a gorgeous land, abundant with natural beauty. Many of the people there are calm and genial owing to their elven heritage, so the atmosphere should be a bit different than what you're used to in Wakoku."

In the game, the empire is portrayed as a harmonious blend of nature and magic technology.

"Really? I'm excited," Yuika said.

"Me too," I added.

During a playthrough, all sorts of events happen in the Tréfle Empire, and several dungeons are unlocked there, too. A huge event for the empire was also added via an expansion disc, and since I was working on a time limit, it would probably be impossible for me to finish up everything while we were there.

This really brought back memories.

The empire expansion patch was sold for just five hundred yen, which came as quite the shock to me considering it had several

thousand yen's worth of content. Usually with this sort of DLC, my first impulse would be to balk at the price for how little content was on offer. But I would end up caving and paying the full cost regardless, as I had been trained into thinking buying the DLC would ensure the developers could keep making games.

"You say that, Takioto, but you're totally just excited about the dungeons, aren't you?"

"Hey now, that's not true! I've picked out a ton of places I want to check out, okay?"

The empire was an elven country filled with beautiful men and women, and it had a great many tourist attractions thanks to its scenic beauty. In fact, I had flipped through several of Nanami's *L*nely Planet* and *Fr*mmers* guides in search of sightseeing spots. I planned on going to… Hmm? Wait, something was off here.

"…Actually, I might've only planned on hitting up the ramen shop and the dungeons."

"Is that the ramen place I wanted to visit by any chance? Run by the elf who apprenticed in Wakoku?"

That was the place. Since the ramen shop was Ludie's idea, that meant the only plans I had actually made myself were visiting dungeons. Wait, seriously?

"Don't worry, Takioto, the dungeons are what I'm most excited about, too. We can find time and go together."

"Yukine…!"

Ever my guiding star. Whether it was in the game or in real life, Yukine was someone I could always count on.

"I mean, I'm interested in the dungeons, too. We just better be sure to hit up a treehouse café or something after we're done, got it?" Yuika said.

Actually, visiting a café sounded like a pretty good idea. I would be down for that, too.

"The coffee beans and tea leaves harvested in the empire are quite delicious, so I would certainly recommend it. Of course, visiting dungeons isn't a bad idea, either," Claris commented.

"It'd be nice if you could show us around a bit, Claris."

"Good point," I said, before a thought crossed my mind. "Yeah, that'd be nice and all, but first I'd like it if you could help us out when we meet Ludie's parents."

Even though we had Ludie with us, we were still meeting the imperial family. We had to be really careful.

"Yeah, talking with the Emperor himself? I'll be a bundle of nerves for sure."

"But everyone here has talked with Marino, and she's in a pretty high position," Ludie said with a weak smile.

"That's fair. But Marino is pretty approachable, isn't she?"

Yuika had a point.

"If I may offer a suggestion, how about we practice for the meeting while we have the chance? If it is not too presumptuous of me, I can stand in for His Majesty," Nanami said.

"That's not a bad idea," Yukine agreed. That said, Nanami playing the part of Emperor had me nervous. It looked like Yuika shared the same apprehensions.

"I'm cool with the practice itself, but I'm a little nervous about what kind of curveball questions Nanami is gonna throw at us…"

"Well then, allow me to give you an example? While I may fall short of Miss Yukine, I am confident I will be able to play the role far better than you, Miss Yuika." Nanami casually provoked Yuika, who took the bait hook, line, and sinker.

"Excuuuse me? That's some big talk there, Nanami. All right, go ahead! If you're so confident, show us what you've got."

"Control is an important aspect of conversation. Guiding the discussion toward a topic the other party can speak on comfortably is extremely effective," said Nanami.

She certainly wasn't wrong, but that was easier said than done.

"Miss Yukine, can you ask me something as the Emperor, then?"

"All right, let's see." Yukine fell into thought for a little while after Nanami turned the conversation to her. "Hm. Okay, something simple… Maybe likes and dislikes? Does that work?"

Sure, there might be a chance the emperor would ask us something like that? Maybe?

When she heard this, Nanami grimaced.

"What I like and dislike, is it? I like good governance, and I abhor taxes."

"Uhhh, yup, I'm thinking that's *lèse-majesté*!!"

Sure, nobody liked taxes. Still, that wasn't something you could say to the person who had instituted those taxes in the first place. That wasn't just dark humor, it was pitch-black!

"Wonderful, was it not? Feel free to follow my example, Miss Yuika."

"You get that to Ludie's parents, I'm just their daughter's school friend, right?! If something like that came out of my mouth, the whole room would ice over! Who could 'speak comfortably' like that?! I'm not even a citizen to begin with!"

"Then how would you answer, Miss Yuika?" Nanami asked.

"Me? Hmm… I like doing my nails, I guess?"

Now that I thought about it, Yuika's hands were pretty dainty for someone who fought with her fists.

"That's why your hands are so pretty," I said.

Yuika recoiled, hiding her hands. Why was I getting such a dubious reaction here?

"He's right, Yuika, your hands are very pretty, and you always have such cute nail polish. I bet my mother and Lilou will really be interested in them," Ludie added. Her hands were slender and pretty in their own right, of course.

"Hmm, I suppose that is worth about sixteen points."

"That's much lower than I figured."

"You'll probably be fine even if you slip up a bit, Yuika. But me? That's a different story…"

I couldn't afford to say anything weird to Ludie's overly doting father.

"Don't worry, Master. I used a pen to make a fake positive pregnancy test in case you need it."

"Listen, there are some things that are never okay to joke about. Capiche?"

That was *definitely* crossing a line! If the emperor took it the wrong way, I could end up dead.

"You don't need to worry so much," Claris said, by way of reassurance. "You all are very friendly. I'll be there to help if necessary, too. Of course, if you simply be your usual selves, I don't think there will be any problems at all."

Claris smiled. I mean, I certainly wished it would go that way, but…our "usual selves" definitely wasn't an option.

Then Ludie turned to Claris…

"Now that you mention it, I imagine Mother and Father will be surprised by you, Claris. Not in terms of your appearance, but as far as your fighting strength goes."

…and chimed in with her own thoughts.

"I agree. I'm proud of how much I've grown," Claris said with a smile. She was a whole lot stronger than she'd been when we first met, that was for sure.

"You've gotten so strong, I hardly recognize you."

"Honestly, I feel the same way. I'm now able to use varieties of magic I would have never thought myself capable of."

Claris stared at her hands as a broad smile stretched across her face.

"Eating a Seed of Potential will do that to you."

"Right, she did get one of those, didn't she?"

I had totally forgotten about that. I knew this wasn't a great way to put it, but it didn't really concern me. Or maybe, it was more that I didn't really see it as that important. Figures I would have forgotten about it.

After the words left my mouth, I realized that Claris had completely frozen up.

"…?"

"…?"

Ludie and Claris were staring at each other.

Oh, right, how exactly did we make her eat it again? We decided Claris wasn't likely to accept it, so we… Uhhh?

"Master, I believe that was supposed to be a secret."

"You might be right," I responded to Nanami.

A startled look came to Ludie's face.

The memories began to come back to me.

In this world, Seeds of Possibility were a ridiculously valuable commodity, the stuff of myths, tales, and folklore.

Naturally, such an item was on par with a national treasure and just attempting to put a price on it was totally impossible. In the game, however, Seeds of Possibility are actually pretty easy to get your hands on, as long you have sufficient knowledge and strength.

Looking at how Ludie and I reacted, Claris mumbled in disbelief and confusion.

"The time when we found that seed, the time when my lady ate hers, and the time when I grew capable of using magic…"

In any event, I couldn't talk about the game with the people here in this world. That left Claris to grapple with the realization that she had eaten a legendary, invaluable national treasure.

She must have connected the dots just now. She had even mentioned becoming outright skilled with magic she hadn't possessed the aptitude for previously.

This was, without a doubt, an effect of the Seed of Possibility.

Claris's face changed from pink to white to deathly pale. Then, a thought appeared to come to her, and she immediately shoved her hand down her throat.

"*Mrlgh, gahurlk!*"

"What the heck are you doing? Please calm down. I don't really know what's going on here, but I do know you must've digested the seed a long time ago!"

Seeing Claris's reaction, Yuika and Yukine sprang into action. Yuika pulled Claris's hand out of the elf's throat, while Yukine put her into a full nelson. With her joints pushed to their limits, Claris was rendered immobile.

That got me thinking—I would've loved for Yukine to put me in a full nelson. But would she actually do it if I asked?

No, no, Claris was more important here. Let's see, what was I supposed to say? I was planning on getting more Seeds of Possibility, so I really just wanted her to accept this as a little gift.

"Don't let it get to you, it's not that big of a deal."

When I said this, Yuika glared at me.

"Uhhhh, seriously? Takioto, if a Seed of Possibility isn't a big deal, what exactly *is* then?"

Watching everything play out, Nanami came over to me and whispered, "This is my big chance." Chance for what?

"While this must be quite difficult for you to process, Miss Claris, I'm afraid you will need to give my Master a special type of extra service. Why, after seeing how you oh-so-happily devoured the seed, your service must be quite special indeed. Alas, for a seed too vaaaaluable to name a priiiice, this extra service must beee so niiiice ♪!"

"Stop trying to brainwash her."

What exactly did she mean by "special service" anyway? You were straight up singing at the end, Nanami!

"S-special service…"

Claris, your face is red as a beet! What on earth are you imagining? At the rate this is going, people are going to start accusing me of things!

After a short while, we decided to come clean about everything in an attempt to calm down Claris.

Before pulling off my forty-floor solo clear, I had decided I would give a seed to Claris as a gesture of appreciation for how she'd spent her time training me.

In any event.

"So basically, don't let it bother you. Heck, you can forget all about it if you want."

"That's not going to happen."

My reasoning wasn't enough to convince her, but…

"Yeah, I figured…"

I had assumed things would end up this way, which was why I had kept it a secret. Though if someone had done the same to me, I'd probably feel crushed under all the guilt, too.

Troubled by how to handle this situation, I stared at Ludie. She sent an apologetic look back at me. She was the one who first let it slip, so it made sense she felt guilty.

"L-listen, Claris, you don't need to get so anxious about this."

"How could I not be, Lady Ludie? I wish you would've at least told me beforehand…"

"The consensus in the Hanamura house was that if we did, you wouldn't accept the seed," Yukine said, prompting a strained smile and a heavy sigh from Claris.

"True, I would have turned it down at all costs… *Gaaaah*."

"From here on out, you can keep training with Takioto and helping out around the house… I think that's enough."

"Isn't that what I'm already doing?"

"Yeah, but personally, I think that's a blessing."

As far as I was concerned, nothing beat spending your days with people you liked.

In that light, I thought moving to the big city without any friends or family was especially tough. In my old life, if I hadn't discovered eroge as a form of entertainment and the community surrounding it, I don't think I could've mentally handled it.

I hadn't meant much by my remark. However, Claris still didn't look convinced, and Ludie had on a strained smile.

"That's very like you to say, Kousuke."


CONFIG

Chapter 3 **Welcome to the Tréfle Empire**

"The city's pretty modern."

Yukine gave her appraisal while gazing at the scenery through the limousine window.

Trees sprouted up along the main road, and flowers grew in various different places, making the whole area overflow with greenery. Between all this nature were ordinary houses of modern make. We could also make out what looked like a magic-powered monorail.

"That's only true for certain areas. In other regions, the construction is far more harmonious with nature, and there isn't much in the way of public transportation," said Claris.

Apparently, cities in the empire with an exceptionally large number of foreign visitors or a large immigrant population tended to look more modern.

"Generally, we prefer architectural styles that are close to nature. That's why even though we have the technology and money to construct buildings like those in Wakoku, we still choose to build with wood or live in tree houses. Of course, there's some people who like living in areas with the latest magical amenities," Ludie added.

"Hm. In other words, the capital has been developed to meet the needs of its many visitors."

Yuika nodded at Yukine's summary. "That explains all the lovely tourist shops. Oh, Takioto, by the way, did you know my birthday comes around every month? You get what I'm saying, right?"

She glanced at an expensive looking wand. While she was clearly joking, she was demanding a monthly present from me. Hold on, though, if that was the case…

"Does that mean you're fine with aging twelve times as fast as everyone else?"

"If I can get a present out of it, then that's okay with me. Age is just a number."

"Master, my own birthday festivities will kick off about seven months from now, so if possible, I would like to get some fresh strands of your hair, toenails, and sebum."

"You trying to cast a curse on me or something?"

Just hearing that was terrifying. Nanami wasn't getting any of those.

"I can just give you something from the empire if you really want it, you know, Yuika."

"You're a really good friend, Ludie, so I couldn't accept a gift for nothing!"

"Are you saying I'm not a good friend?" I asked.

I decided not to think about it too much.

"So where are we headed after this?" I said to Claris.

"Since His and Her Majesty will be meeting a group of Lady Ludie's friends, they have reserved a private restaurant room to make it a more comfortable experience."

"A first-time meeting over lunch, basically."

If I had to give a definitive statement on whether I was nervous, then my answer was that I was absolutely terrified. A restaurant selected by the emperor had to be unbelievably high-end, right? Plus, this was the sorta thing they did for presidents from other countries and stuff. Though, I supposed it was better than meeting them in a royal audience room.

It turned out that my expectations had been basically right on the mark. We were all led into a very luxurious dining room.

By "luxurious," I didn't mean that it was gaudy, decked out in gold and silver. The wood, tatami mats, and walls scrolls used to decorate the space looked modest at first glance, though I assumed they were all of the highest quality. Nevertheless, everything was laid out with perfect precision, and the sunlight streaming in from an open sliding screen lent the space an ethereal, mysterious quality. Perhaps the best way to put it was that the room was exquisite.

"This place is like a traditional Wakoku restaurant."

Everything about the room said Wakoku. If Yukine or Shion were to invite me out for "tea and snacks," this is probably the type of place we'd end up. Of course, this room's atmosphere was several magnitudes higher in quality than somewhere we would go on our own.

"Um, I'm guessing they were trying to be considerate and pick out a restaurant we would feel at home in?"

"Takioto's totally right. I appreciate their concern, but I dunno if this was actually considerate of them. Personally, I feel really out of place in a room this nice," Yuika whispered to Yukine, trying to avoid letting the daughter of the people who had invited us overhearing.

"I don't think we need to worry about it too much. Just think of it like meeting our friend's family. Though I feel a bit daunted looking around this room, too."

Yukine forced a smile as she glanced at one of the wall scrolls. Yuika and I followed her gaze.

"I bet that wall scroll is worth enough to buy a car or build a cheap house somewhere."

"They sure don't hesitate to hang up museum-quality pieces around here."

A short while later, Ludie's family joined us.

As soon as they arrived, we all exchanged our hellos.

After we introduced ourselves, it was time for Ludie's family to do the same. Really though, a simple web search for *Tréfle imperial family* was enough to get a run down on them, so I imagined we were all somewhat familiar with them already.

"I am Marc Olivier Lucas de la Tréfle."

Ludie's father was a handsome, narrow-eyed man who looked to be in his thirties. Given he was an elf, however, I couldn't assume his age was a perfect match for his appearance. In reality, the elven emperor was over one hundred years old.

Needless to say, I knew all about him already. In the game, he stares daggers at Iori when they first meet. At the time, Iori mentions something about his back freezing up or something along those lines, but that was underselling it. I didn't just feel stiff in the presence of Ludie's father—I felt like I wasn't going to make it out of here alive. Fortunately, I was the only person to whom he flashed an arctic smile. When I thought about his behavior, though, it tracked.

"Sorry about this, Kousuke. I know he may look like he's in a foul mood, but he's always like this, so don't take it personally, okay? I'm Ludie's mother, Sophia Chloe de la Tréfle. Just 'Sophia' is fine, no need to stand on ceremony."

Ludie's mother had introduced herself with a cheery smile. There was a warm and friendly look in her eyes; the temperature difference between her and Emperor Marc was giving me whiplash. That said, "no need to stand on ceremony" was asking the impossible.

Sophia bore a strong resemblance to Ludie. While Ludie did have her father's eye color, she was the spitting image of her mother in every other aspect. When Ludie stood at her side, they almost looked like sisters.

Sophia didn't look much older than Sis, but the truth was she was even older than her husband. The question of how much older she was than him was strictly off-limits. Sophia was also stronger than her husband (physically).

"My name's Lilou Ines de la Tréfle. Nice to meet everyone."

If I had to describe Lilou in a word, it would be "angel." While strictly speaking, she was just an ordinary elf, the esteemed eroge community insisted she was divine. If this cute, innocent little thing wasn't the definition of cherub, then who *was*? Her existence itself was angelic. Ergo, she was an angel (totally brainwashed here).

Ludie and Lilou had another older sister, but according to Sophia, she had business with her husband's family and hadn't been able to make it. Incidentally, she never makes an appearance in the game,

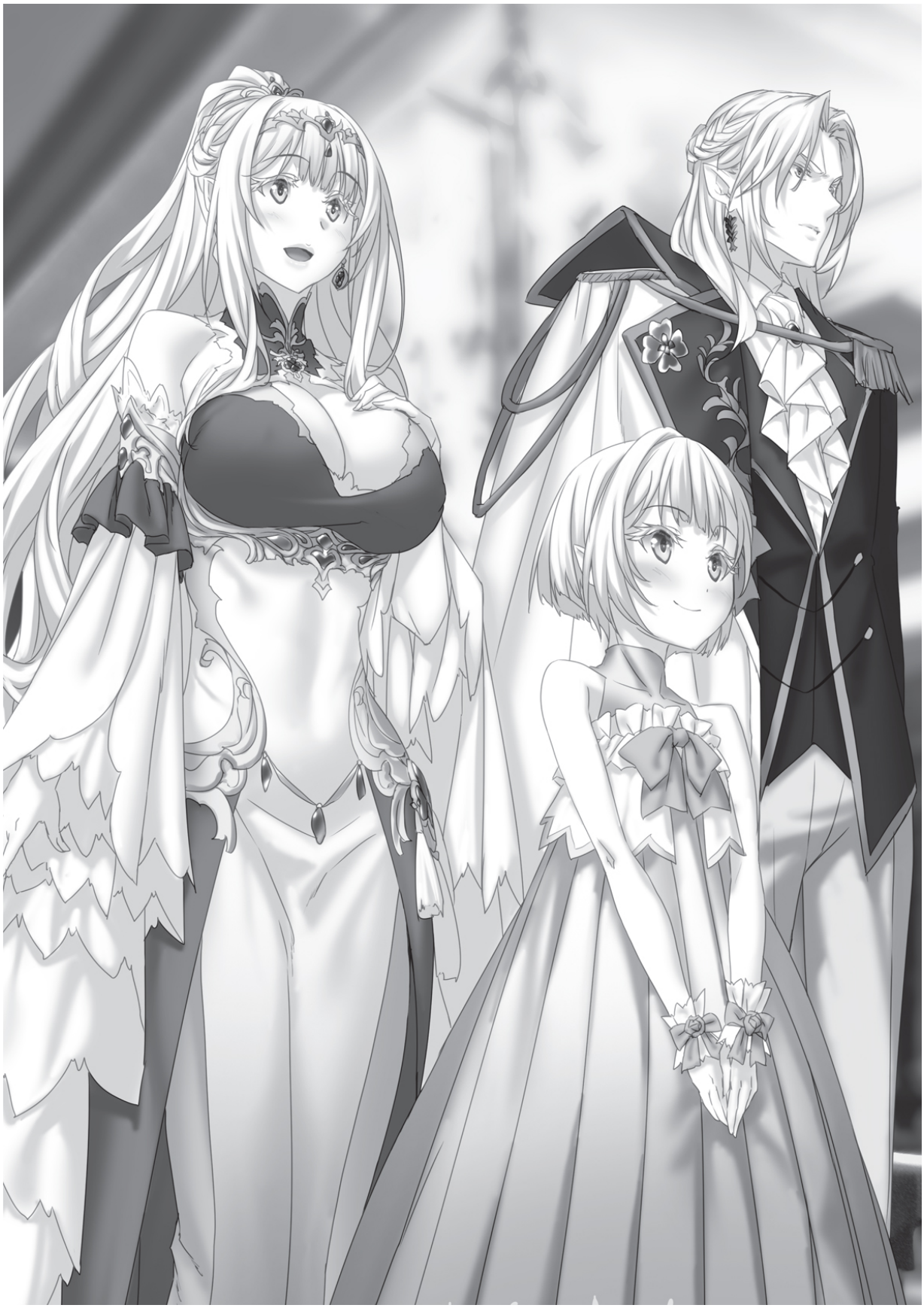
and since she's never really talked about, she was quite the mysterious figure.

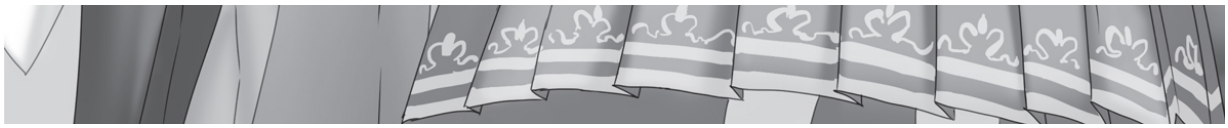
With the introductions out of the way, it was time for the highly anticipated meal—just kidding. Ludie's family had something they absolutely had to tell us before anything else.

"You remember saving Ludie and Claris at the hotel, I assume."

The hotel incident the emperor had invoked had been my first interaction with Ludie and Claris. So yeah, I remembered it really well. It all seemed so long ago. There had been a traitor among the elves, and both Ludie and Claris had ended up with their backs against the wall. That had been my first combat experience… Thinking back on it now, I couldn't believe I had made it out unscathed. I would never forget the blissful sensation that still lingered in my hand.

"You have my deepest gratitude for that. Thank you."





As they spoke, Ludie's family, Ludie, and Claris bowed at us.

Inwardly screaming in fright at this show of reverence, I politely asked everyone to lift their heads, but they didn't budge.

"Of course, I heard that you have saved Ludie countless times after that, as well. And the Hanamura family has taken good care of her. Actually, it would be more accurate to say they *are taking* good care of her."

The emperor shouldn't be bowing to anyone, right? Was this really okay? Even if it was, I was still downright terrified, so I really wanted him to lift up his head already.

"If you hadn't been at Ludie's side, who knows what could have befallen her… I cannot thank you enough."

"I just happened to be at the hotel back then, really, and your daughter has also saved my skin many times at this point. Not to mention, Claris and the other maids have shown us so much hospitality, and, uh…"

As I basically just blurted out whatever thoughts came to mind, everyone finally lifted their heads.

"So, I'm just as thankful for all that Ludie's done for me, too."

As we thanked each other back and forth, Claris offered a tactful recommendation.

"Master Kousuke seems to be at a bit of loss, so would Your Majesty like to start the meal?"

From there, we began our lunch.

Now, I was fine with Sophia taking charge to decide on the seating, and I got why she had done so.

I could also understand putting our group across from Ludie's family, since it allowed us to see each other while we conversed.

However, I *did* think it was a mistake to place Emperor Marc right across from me, where I was completely unprotected from his glares of contempt. Having Ludie sitting directly to his left was a small salvation, though.

"…*H-haha*, wow, this is delicious."

His majesty nodded to my comment.

This was so awkward. It almost felt like I was being kept under watch. The emperor must have also been behind the abrupt surge of mana I'd felt when Ludie had wiped a bit of dust from my clothes.

It was Ludie's mother, Sophia, who actually responded to my comment.

"*Hee-hee*, I'm glad you like it. At first, I planned on treating you all to Tréfle cuisine, but our country has some rather *unique* dishes…so I thought it would be better if our lunch today was mainly the Wakoku food you're all accustomed to."

The consideration was very welcome.

"That said though, this food is seasoned to the tastes of our people, so give it a chance."

"Thank you, I'll do just that."

The Tréfle Empire was an elven country. As general nerd knowledge would suggest, elves liked vegetable-focused food. Similarly, their seasoning emphasized an ingredient's natural flavors.

That was why I considered the elf sitting diagonally across from me—who could slurp up thick pork broth packed with garlic and oil—a rare breed.

"Kousuke? Is something the matter?"

"Crunchy stiff nood— Uh, it's nothing."

"Stiff, *hee-hee*, are you saying you're nervous? Father, can you stop glaring at Kousuke like that?"

Hearing Ludie say this, His Majesty sighed as though offended.

"I was not glaring at all. This is how I always look."

Ludie's mother Sophia pushed back on his assertion.

"Oh, don't be silly. I swear you always get like this, dear. You're so much softer and doting when you're talking to Lilou, and you know it."

I had been bothered by the look he was giving me, so I appreciated her saying this. Though, actually, I would have been even more uncomfortable if Ludie's father started doting on me.

Uh-oh, now the emperor was glaring at Sophia. I decided to follow up a bit to smooth things over.

"Well, both Lilou and Ludie are very pretty, I can understand why His Majesty might feel that way."

However, my comment might have backfired a bit.

"You can't have Ludie or Lilou."

Ludie's father whipped his head toward me with tremendous force, his voice taking on a deeper, threatening quality. Okay, he won, I was scared stiff.

"Sheesh, you're being ridiculous. Kousuke was just being polite, so stop getting your feathers ruffled by every little thing."

"Ah-hah-hah." All I could do was laugh. Though, truth be told, I hadn't just said that to be polite. Incidentally, Sophia was also drop-dead gorgeous herself, yes siree.

"Sorry about him, Kousuke."

"Um… Mother? Is it all right if I talk with Mister Kousuke, too?" Lilou had been chatting with Yukine and Yuika, but expressed an interest in joining our conversation. "Would it be all right if, um, I touched your stole?"

"My stole? Sure, go ahead."

She got out of her seat with a huge smile on her face.

"Lilou, where are your manners? Wait until after lunch is over."

After Sophia's chiding, Lilou apologized and sat down again, looking very disappointed.

This wasn't good. A lovely little girl's…uh, rather, *Lilou*'s glum expression would leave a terrible mark on the world.

I had an idea and filled my stole with mana. I then used it to grab a bottle of sauce near me and bring it over to Lilou.

"Lilou, would you like any extra sauce?"

"Yay! Oh…"

Lilou peeked over at her mother.

"*Haaah*, Kousuke, you're incorrigible. Sorry about this. Go ahead, Lilou."

"Eh-heh-heh! Thank you!" she said before lightly tapping my stole. "Whooooa, it's amazing! It's super hard, just like Big Sis said."

"I can make it softer, too," I said, changing the nature of my mana to give my stole a bit more elasticity.

"Wow, that's so cool! Now it's all floppy!" Lilou said, enjoying the fabric to the fullest. When I went to bring my stole back to my side, though…

"Kousuke. Could you pass me the sauce as well?" Sophia asked. Apparently, she wanted to touch it, too. Hearing this, Lilou pouted.

"You wanted to touch it just as much as I did, Mother!"

"Of course I did! I was just holding back from asking. Lilou, from now on, you need to wait until after the meal to ask about stuff like this, okay?"

Lilou stared at her with a look of displeasure.

"If you do that sort of thing, the wickedness will come and steal your soul, okay?"

After Sophia told her this, Lilou reluctantly answered.

"…Okaaay."

I extended my stole toward Sophia, stretching out enough so that His Majesty could also touch it if he so desired. He must have been interested as well, as he touched it several times.

"This sure is something. I've heard that you can enchant it with elements, too?"

"I do it like this. In my daily life, for example, I can adjust the temperature with my stole even when it's hot out."

I enchanted it with ice, prompting Sophia to touch the chilled fabric and remark, "Incredible. Both the quality and amount of mana. It's even better than I was told."

Apparently, she already knew about my massive mana pool. Maybe Claris or Marino had told her?

"Mother, that's not fair!"

Little Lilou was looking quite indignant. I immediately stretched my stole toward her, too, and she gleefully began touching it.

"Wowee ♪! It's nice and cool!" Welp, now she was wrapping it around her neck.

At that moment, I felt something cold run down my spine. It wasn't the cold from my enchanted stole, either. It was a psychological chill, either from a change in atmosphere or someone's intense resentment toward me.

"Takioto, thank you."

I turned to his Majesty upon hearing his voice.

It then occurred to me that it was the emperor's icy gaze that had chilled me. Despite his statement of appreciation, was it just me, or were his eyes filled with hostility? This was terrifying; I needed to change the subject. Um, I needed something, *anything* else to talk about… Right!

"P-please, don't mention it… E-er that reminds me, Empress Sophia, you just said something to Lilou about souls being taken. right? What did you mean by that?"

I desperately tried to change the topic. This prompted a giggle from Ludie.

"It's a folk tale we use in the Tréfle Empire to admonish misbehaving children. It goes something like this: A long time ago, there was a terrible child who used to bully elves. The child kept doing such horrible things that eventually, the Arch Elf couldn't let it go on any longer. And so, they ripped the child's soul from their body and turned it into a puppet. The Arch Elf is said to be one of the superior types of elf."

"That's pretty scary…"

It was one of those stories you told to kids to shock them into behaving, basically. Japanese folklore around the *namahage* was kinda like that, wasn't it?

"Eventually, however, the Arch Elf is overcome by his powers and goes crazy. Then he uses all the puppets he made from the souls of children to go on a rampage, but another superior kind of elf, the High Elf, refuses to let him go on any longer and seals him away."

"Oh yeah, is that so?"

Yuika chimed in at Ludie's explanation.

"But we tell kids that if they don't behave, the Arch Elf will be revived, and they'll have their souls taken away and turned into puppets."

"I've heard this story many times already! There's picture books of it and stuff, so there's no elf who doesn't know it."

Huh, so the Arch Elf situation was really that big of a deal here?

We were going to have to fight the Arch Elf at some point. Ludie would need to fully awaken in order to defeat him, so I assumed it would still be a bit further down the road.

From there, we started talking about Yuika and Yukine's weapons of choice and their fighting styles.

◇

Our meal came to an end, though I had been so nervous my memory of what we talked about or how the food tasted was hazy. We all headed to the hotel where Ludie's family had booked rooms for us.

Despite my earlier statement, I did have *some* recollection of how the meal had played out. Ludie's father had barely said a word, just looking on with kind eyes as his daughters talked.

As if to make up for it, Ludie's mother and little sister had talked almost nonstop the whole time, or at least it had felt like it.

Lilou in particular still seemed like she had more to say and asked if we would chat with her again tomorrow, which we readily agreed to. We decided we would visit the castle where Ludie's family lived the next morning.

With all that in mind, I was getting ready to take a shower and get a good night's rest—until the intercom in my room suddenly rang.

Assuming it was Yuika or Nanami stopping by, I looked at the camera screen in front of the door to find a gorgeous elf woman.

"*Hwah!* What the—?!"

It was a very familiar face. Ludie's mother, to be exact. I quickly made myself look decent before opening the door, inviting her in and apologizing for making her wait.

"I should be apologizing for dropping by so suddenly."

"Oh no, it's okay."

Yeah, so what was going on here? There wasn't an event like this in the game, right? So why was Sophia here? My head was left spinning.

"Is it all right if we chat for a little bit?"

"O-of course."

For the time being, I invited her to take a seat in the room's chair. I then turned on the hotel room's electric kettle and began to rummage through my luggage to see if I had brought any ultra-high-quality tea leaves with me, but Sophia laughed and urged me not to put myself out on her account.

Still, I had to prepare *something* for her at least. In the end, I brewed the black tea I often made for myself and handed her a cup.

"Thanks."

"…Um, did something happen?"

"There's something I wanted to be absolutely sure I talked with you about," she said.

…Okay, seriously, what the hell was with the situation?

"Wh-what exactly would that be?"

"First, let me ask you something: What do you think of Ludie?"

The fact that she had led with "first" had me worried.

"Ludivine? Err…"

"You usually just call her Ludie, don't you? That's fine. So, do you think Ludie's cute?"

"E-er, well yes, she is cute. I think she's a brilliant and sharp-minded girl."

"Really? Well, I can ask you more about that stuff another time, but since it's so late, I'm going to get straight to the point, okay?"

She smirked a bit as she continued. I wondered why this was, but right now, I felt the same way I did when talking to Marino—as though I was being seen through.

"Let me ask you, Kousuke: Do you know anything about Seeds of Possibility?"

Oh yeah, I definitely knew all about those, sure.

"What are those? I've never heard of them before."

However, I answered with a lie. I had a feeling that if I admitted to knowing about the Seed now, it would only lead to trouble. Immediately after saying this, however, I pontificated over why she had asked me this and realized I might've been better off telling the truth.

"Hee-hee, now that's quite the interesting answer."

Great, now she was laughing at me conspicuously.

I unconsciously heaved a sigh. This was just a guess on my part, but I think I knew why she was asking this.

"Claris said something, didn't she?"

Sophia nodded.

"Yes, I made her tell me all about it. Though, if Claris came up to you and said she was thinking about resigning, you'd press her for a reason why, wouldn't you?"

Yeah, that made sense. I hadn't specifically forbidden Claris from mentioning the seed, and her telling her employer was fine.

"You knew full well how valuable it was, didn't you?"

"Yeah…"

"Why did you give it to her?"

Though I tried to come up with a plausible reason…

"I guess, because at the time, she had helped me out a lot and I owed her? I'd prefer it if you didn't worry about it too much."

"Come now, that's impossible. Even our nation has been unable to track down one of those."

…From an outsider's perspective, this was probably one of those *have I done it again?* moments, huh?

"Ah-hah… Yeah, makes sense. But I still don't really think it's something to be concerned about."

"Of course it is. Though, if I'm being honest, Claris has her own life to lead, so I think it's fine for her to do what she wants."

Sophia paused for a moment. And then…

"But it's different when my daughter comes into the picture," she declared.

"I see what you mean; Claris is Ludie's bodyguard, yes."

While I figured this wasn't what Sophia had meant, I feigned ignorance for the time being.

"…That's not it. You gave Ludie a seed, too, didn't you?"

Had Claris blabbed to Sophia about Ludie, too? It wouldn't be out of the question for her to mention it, and I wouldn't have been surprised if Ludie had brought it up herself.

"…I did. Did Claris tell you about that, too?"

"Hmm, how to put it? I know Marino and Hatsumi are very talented instructors, but that still can't explain some of the magic my daughter is using. All of the sudden, she's firing off spells she showed no signs of ever being able to cast, and she's using magic she previously had zero aptitude for."

Yup, that was definitely Seed of Possibility's doing. It wasn't a surprise Sophia had found her daughter's improvement unusual.

"That in and of itself was an effect I've only ever heard spoken about in legends before. What now, then?" she said with a strained smile.

"Ummm, er…"

Seeing me struggle with how to answer, Sophia laughed. She then apologized.

"Personally, I'd hope you wouldn't be too worried about giving her one, either."

"…All right, we can leave at that for now. I see that Marino really was telling the truth."

Marino? The truth? Hmm…

"I don't really want to know, but I still have to ask," I said. "What did Marino say, exactly?"

"She said you're quite the devilish boy."

"She said *what* about me? That Marino, I swear…"

"I'm just kidding. Though, she did say if I wasn't careful, you might make me fall for you."

"Wouldn't you say that basically means the same thing?"

"Maybe."

"That aside, Your Majesty, are you sure you should be in a room of a boy described like that this late at night?"

In a roundabout way, I tried suggesting she leave. If she stayed here any longer, I felt like my life bar would drop to zero.

At this, she clapped her hands.

"Oh right! Now about the way you address me."

"Where is this coming from?"

"The way you address someone is a very important part of getting closer. The way you've been referring to me so far just doesn't click with me. Not at all. Use something else."

"Um… You are the empress, right?"

"Sure, that's my formal position. But I'm also Ludie's mother, okay?"

So she was telling me to address her as I would a friend's mom? She was easily over a century old at this point, so I couldn't call her something I would a young woman, but at the same time, "auntie" was definitely off the menu. In which case…

"How about Mrs. Tréfle?"

"Hmm, I suppose, but I'd be fine with 'Mom,' too."

Hmmm, yeah, there was no way in hell that was happening!

"*Ah-hah*, *hah*…"

All I could do was weakly laugh and nod.

"In that case, it's fine if I just call you Kou, right?"

Absolutely, Your Imperial Majesty! Except hearing you call me that makes my heart all jittery inside!

"Kou, yes, that will do. Perfect. I look forward our long and happy acquaintance."

She looked me over before suddenly saying, "Were you about to go to sleep, by any chance?"

"Um, yes."

"I'm sorry about coming by so late like this… Oh, I know!" she said before getting up and sitting down on the bed. "Would you like to

sleep alongside me? I'll even sing you a lullaby. Lilou always goes right to sleep when I sing to her."

"Uhhhh? Ummm, I-I can't let you do that. I'm not even one of your children in the first place!" I said in fluster before Sophia burst into laughter.

"Hee-hee, I was just kidding. Marino suggested I try teasing you since your reactions are fun to watch. Sorry."

Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on just a second! Seriously, Marino, what were you going around telling people? Thanks to you, I got treated to a wonderful moment of bliss! Amazing!

◇

After we stayed the night, our first stop was *not,* in fact, a dungeon. Of course, I would have loved to go to one, but instead we had headed to the castle, which doubled as a comfortable living environment and work of art.

This was the palace where Ludie and the rest of the imperial family lived.

Unlike the stylish and slender-looking castle at Disneyland, this place had a bit more of a short and stout feel to it, but it was still quite adorable. According to the game reference materials, the designers had taken cues from Château de Chaumont in France. At the time, the Château had seemed very pretty to me, and I had wanted to make a pilgrimage to it one day, but now that the real thing was right in front of me, I could forget the reference castle. I had to imagine I was the only one in the world who had ever experienced something like this.

Now, as for *why* we were here.

Lilou had extended to us an official invitation. While she had been excited by the chance to play with Ludie, apparently, she had been looking forward to meeting all of us just as much. This made sense to me, as she had shown us a glimpse of that enthusiasm during our lunch the previous day. I'd felt like I was looking at my niece or

granddaughter when she'd invited us the other day, y'know? It made me real happy.

A child's smile was something else. Just like with watching dogs or cats at play, the sight of a young child having fun warmed your heart right up.

Except, something strange was going on here.

Ostensibly, I had been invited to the castle by Lilou. No doubt about that. Just yesterday, she had told me she wanted to hang out with us more and show off her magic.

Heck, I had thought the invitation amounted to some sort of honor, the kind I'd normally have to get on the ground and beg to make happen.

However, for some reason, I wasn't standing face-to-face with Lilou right now.

"…"

Instead, a handsome man stood before me, fixing me with a glare so sharp that if someone said he possessed evil eyes of petrifaction, I would have believed them.

Yes, I was currently having an audience with Lilou's father, Emperor Marc. He stared unblinking at me.

"U-um, is something the matter?"

I had been convinced I would have the chance at a few hours in utter bliss with Lilou. However, after the girl had greeted us in the front of the castle, excitedly waving her hands, I only got to chat with her for less than thirty minutes.

For some reason, the emperor summoned me, and only me, from our group.

Leading, ultimately, to this silence.

"I have something to ask you, Takioto."

"What would that be, Your Majesty?"

If only Ludie or Claris were here, this whole thing would have been way easier. However, the emperor had claimed he wanted to talk man-to-man and had stopped Ludie from joining me, so I was forced to fend for myself.

"What do you think…of Ludie and Lilou?"

"Uh, they're the crown jewels of the empire, I'd say?"

Not just the empire—those two girls were so great that they had grabbed the hearts of fans across dimensions. I assumed that among my fellow Ludie aficionados in particular, whose love had made them plow through her route and go straight through to the fan-disc released afterward, not a single one disliked Lilou. Though, if there were, I would've punched them out for sure.

"…That's right," the emperor said, turning his back to me. "If I were to lose my daughters, I'm not sure I could keep myself together. The nation would be equally distraught. However, there are people who are after my daughters' lives."

Obviously, I could understand where he was coming from.

"I am aware. I wish to protect Miss Ludie to ensure she can be calm and carefree, even if it should cost me my life."

When I said this, the emperor visibly trembled. Huh? I hadn't said anything with the intent to anger him.

"*Ngh*, you can't have my daughter…!"

"Uh, what?"

"Cat got your tongue, does it…? Let me make myself clear, I—"

Just then, I heard a loud noise come from behind me. Turning around, I saw Sophia, a huge smile on her lips, yet not an ounce of joy in her eyes. For some reason, she was enveloped in powerful mana.

"*Dear,* what exactly are you doing?"

Her intensity practically made my body go cold. And it appeared I wasn't the only one to have that reaction.

"Sophia, I was just having an important discussion with Takioto."

I was aware the emperor could not hope to out-argue his wife. I also knew that she was older than him despite her youthful looks,

and that they had used to have a lot of fun together. Finally, I knew His Majesty would be totally outclassed by her in a fight, whether he had access to magic or not. She really had him under her thumb.

"Well then, I'm going to take Kousuke for a bit, okay?"

She grabbed my hand. Wow, talk about a firm grip. Just like Yukine, I felt a level of strength in her hand I never would have imagined from her outward appearance. In all honestly, it was a bit terrifying.

Led along by Sophia, I exited the room.

"Sorry about that… He didn't say anything weird, did he?"

"Oh, uh, no. He didn't really do anything to me, either."

"Okay, got it. Don't worry, I'll teach him a lesson later."

She had no interest in actually listening to my answer, did she? Also, what did she mean by "teach him a lesson"? While the phrasing terrified me, at the same time, I felt this mysterious desire bloom within me to have her "teach me a lesson" as well.

With these weird feelings swirling around my head, Sophia took me into what appeared to be the parlor. There, Ludie, Lilou and the others were all busy having fun.

"Miss Lilou, how about I tell you a secret about my Master?" Nanami said. No doubt she deliberately brought this up the moment she saw me come in.

"Like a s-special secret?! Just for me?"

Lilou must not have noticed I was here. Her eyes sparkling as bright as a child who had just won a raffle for the latest new game console. Little kids love it when something is special, don't they? After seeing Lilou smile like that, I lost the heart to stop Nanami.

"That's right, just for you," Nanami said, putting her pointer finger up to her lips and winking. She was implying that it was a secret, except everyone else was still right there, including the actual subject of the conversation.

As for this "secret," the sheer number of possibilities gave me nothing but pure dread. I could only hope Nanami wouldn't start bringing up what had happened at Amaterasu Girls' Academy.

"Okay, just for me, got it! I won't tell anyone, promise!"

"…The truth is, Master can actually move faster sliding on his butt than he does walking on his legs."

"Whaaaaat?!"

Lilou's eyes shot wide open in shock, her eyeballs looking as though they were going to fly out of her sockets.

"They don't call him the 'Tsukuyomi Thunderbolt' for nothing."

"Ludie, is that true?!" Lilou asked.

"About half of it's a lie."

"Awww, so it's not the whole truth. Wait, does that mean *half* of it is true?!"

Like hell it was!

"*All* of it's a lie."

Lilou whipped around when she heard my voice.

"Whaaaat?! When did you get here?!"

"Hee-hee." Nanami dauntlessly giggled at Lilou's shock. "This clearly proves Takioto moves with his butt. Stealth butt."

"Enough with the nonsense, okay?" I said.

"H-how can I walk with just my butt, too?!" Lilou asked.

"First, you need to have your butt split in two before you can begin the training," Nanami said.

"Oh, oh, mine's already split in two!"

C'mon seriously, someone stop her! She was way out of control here!

Nanami's attempts to befuddle and my retorts continued back and forth before Ludie finally took action.

"Sorry about all this, Lilou. It was all just a joke."

Ludie explained the truth to her sister. Why was she close to believing you could walk with just your butt anyway?

Watching as Lilou laughed and gave a sulky "sheesh," I began to think she really was an angel, after all. While there was already a biological angel here with us, Lilou was a whole different kind of angel.

Something suddenly came to Nanami as she watched Lilou complain about being teased, and Yukine and Ludie tried to calm the girl down. Nanami leaned over to whisper to Yuika.

"By the way, Miss Yuika, what are you going to do now that you have a powerful rival?"

Nanami's nonsensical comment earned a dubious look from Yuika.

"What is 'powerful rival' even supposed to mean here? What are you talking about?"

Nanami glanced at Lilou.

"I am referring to your rival for securing the little sister position, of course. The LSP. A true little sister has entered the ring."

"The *what*? What the hell is a 'true' little sister, anyway? There's nothing 'true' or 'false' about being a younger sister, okay? I mean, I'm not even Takioto's little sister in the first place."

At this reply, Nanami cocked her head.

"Hm? But, Miss Yuika, you are Master Iori's stepsister, yes?"

"…Well, yes, he is my big brother."

Nanami nodded in the affirmative.

"Then would it not be perfectly reasonable to call Master 'brother dear ♥'?"

"Not at all, actually! Don't frame it like it's the most natural thing in the world. What, is Big Bro supposed to be married to Takioto or something?! This makes absolutely no sense at all! Someone, anyone, translate this for me!"

"Fret not, Miss Yuika. You are a natural little sister, the little sister of destiny, and above all, your existence in and of itself is very little sister."

"Can you explain what 'my existence is little sister' means? Don't think I've ever heard *that* before."

Don't ask me, Yuika. The natural little sister and little sister of destiny stuff was just as baffling.

"While you've been hemming and hawing, Miss Lilou could rack up even more Little Sister Points than she has already, so get moving, Miss Yuika. You need to strip and fast."

"What the hell are little sister points?!"

And what was up with the suggestion to strip?

"Little Sister Points are gained whenever you eat Master's ice cream without permission, whenever you wake him up while he's sleeping, whenever you play video games with him, or whenever you clear dungeons I hesitate to describe right now with him. You should know all about them."

"I've done all of that before, sure, but I've *definitely* never heard anything about little sister points!"

"Oh, sounds like you've already saved up a buncha points by now."

Unfortunately, it didn't seem stripping would be at all necessary. And hey, wasn't Yuika the one who ate my ice cream?

"Oh! I knew it, Miss Yuika's secretly a devious little sister…!"

"Ugh, I don't get any of this anymore, so just little sister is good enough, thanks!"

Uh, Yuika, I don't think that's actually… Wait… So, does that make me your "big bro"?! B-big brother?! Me?! Big bro?

Perhaps Yuika really was a devious little sister.

◇

"Phew, I'm beat."

I couldn't help but say this. After getting out of the shower, my fatigue hit me all at once.

Talking with Lilou and Sophia had been fun, but I'd felt like there was this strange pressure being put on me.

I sat down in a chair and heaved a sigh.

What am I going to do from here? Before my shower, I had gotten in some light exercise with Yukine and Yuika, so I'd be fine to just fall asleep on the spot. That said, something was telling me I wouldn't be able to nod off right away, since I usually stayed up a bit later than this. With some time to kill on my hands, I decided to get some reading done and took my book out from my luggage.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It brought back some very specific memories, and I jumped.

I braced myself after the night prior, but fortunately, it was Ludie who came into my room.

"Is now a good time?"

"Sure."

She was in her nightgown.

When she sat down next to my bed, she smiled with a tinge of exhaustion.

"Sorry about today. On top of Father and Mother, you had to deal with Lilou, too… It must have been tough."

I shook my head, telling it her it was nothing of the sort.

"I had a ton of fun. Sure, some of it was rough going, but I'd say seventy-five percent of my issues came from Nanami's quips."

In the end, we had all wound up playing a game together for some reason.

If I had to guess, Nanami had been throwing out all those gags in an attempt to help Lilou get along with everyone. There was, of course, the explanation that she simply sowed chaos because it was fun for her, though.

"With everything that's happened with me lately, I think poor Lilou's been really constrained and uncomfortable."

"…You mean with the Church stuff?"

"Right. Actually, Mother came to me for advice. She told me Lilou's been smiling less and less."

The Church of the Malevolent Lord, for various reasons, had the Tréfle family in their crosshairs. Since Ludie had been attacked recently, the family had tightened their security, and they had been avoiding going out unless absolutely necessary.

"She really had a lot of fun today."

Ludie giggled, as if she was calling something to mind.

"Glad to hear it. I had fun, too."

When I gazed at Ludie, something abruptly jumped out at me. I could see it on her face more than usual…

"Ludie, you're really tired, aren't you?"

Ludie's ears twitched when she heard this. Then she gave me a weak smile.

"…You can tell?"

"Of course. I mean, how much time do you think we've spent together at this point…? Though, guess it hasn't even been six months."

It felt a bit like we had always been together, but really, it hadn't been a significantly long stretch of time in the slightest.

"Hee-hee, fair enough. Though I feel like you've seen everything about me at this point, Kousuke. We've gotten caught up in several lifetimes' worth of big events. Why, we went through quite a bit just today."

She had a point. While our lives may not have compared to those of the protagonists in a mystery novel or manga, a lot of stuff had happened up to this point. Heck, we had experienced things that a normal person would never even see in their lifetime, between the Church of the Malevolent Lord's meddling and the incident with Ms. Sakura.

As I thought back over all the major events we had experienced, I suddenly noticed Ludie staring hard into my eyes.

"…Hey, Kousuke? Thanks again."

"I told you I don't mind playing with Lilou; it's fine."

"That's not what I mean."

"?"

"What I meant is, thank you for everything until now."

"…I feel like I should be thanking you, if anything."

Ludie laughed when she heard this.

"Being in the imperial family comes with a lot of difficulties—constraints, rules, and threats on your life. But if given the choice, this would still be the life I'd choose."

"That right?"

"Of course! My position is what allowed me to meet you," she said, smiling. "Obviously, I'm also glad I got to meet Yukine, Marino, Hatsumi, Yuika, and Nanami, plus Rina, Iori and the others, and all

our teachers, too. Even with my obligations as a princess and the incidents with the Church, I'd still want to live the same life over again."

"Wow, you wouldn't change anything?"

That was saying something; the stuff with the Church had been pretty serious.

"That's right. Because no matter what happens, you'll be there to protect me, won't you?"

…Well, that went without saying.

"Of course I will."

"Hee-hee."

Ludie slowly lay down on the bed and stretched both arms up high. "I guess I am worn-out. I'm really sleepy all of sudden."

"You sure it's a good idea to sleep here?"

For a variety of reasons.

"It's okay, as long as you're here… I wouldn't mind anyway."

Ludie totally had her guard down. I assumed being back home had something to do with it. There weren't any enemies around, either.

After a short while, her breathing took on a calm, steady rhythm.

"Nothing about this is fine with me, though."

I moved her into the middle of the bed and covered her with the blanket. I watched Ludie's sleeping face all while imagining what would happen if her father or mother caught us like this.

She really was beautiful. I could hear the sounds of breathing escape from her pretty, dainty lips, surrounded by porcelain smooth skin. Oh yeah, she was *out*. Totally conked. I probably could have teased her a bit, and she'd never know.

"…Oh well."

I didn't really get it myself, but when I saw her sleeping face, I felt like I'd be able to do absolutely anything, and that it would all work out somehow.

It also seemed far too uncouth to wake her up and bring her back to her room.

So what was I going to do here? I rummaged through my luggage to find something to kill the time. Then, when my hands landed on a book, I turned back to Ludie.

I stared at her sleeping figure, and the quilt rhythmically rising and falling, before I finally tore my eyes from her and slipped into the world of my book.

She continued sleeping like that until Claris eventually came for her.


CONFIG

Chapter 4 **What I Want to Do, What I Must Do**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim —*Ludie's Perspective*—

I was surprised at how soundly I slept.

I'd wanted Kousuke to enjoy himself a little, but I got the feeling he wasn't having a very good time because of Father, Mother, and Lilou.

Maybe, just maybe, I actually trusted him even more than I did Father and Mother.

That was a testament to how far Kousuke had gone to protect me, despite being put in harm's way.

"Kousuke, hmm."

Just what did he want to do?

It was obvious "getting strong" wasn't his only objective. He had saved people like Ms. Sakura and me, and he'd said he wanted to protect us, too.

There was *something* he knew that we were in the dark about, and he was acting with it in mind.

"I want to be there to help him."

The thing was, Kousuke tended to speak vaguely on a great many things. More often than not, he would avoid bringing up his goals and his true objective entirely.

The only thing that he had clearly conveyed to me was his desire for me to grow stronger. I wanted to get stronger myself, so in that regard, our views aligned with each other. I didn't want to always be protected—I wanted to be his strength, too.

I had started thinking like this in part because I'd watched Kousuke grow right before my very eyes, but seeing Iori and Rina grow was another motivating factor, as well.

I wasn't in the Ceremonial Committee, and I generally had no choice but to live a normal school life. That was what made me feel like there was a growing gap between my strength and Kousuke's. However, Iori and the others were also gaining power at an unbelievable clip, following after Kousuke.

Rina had been especially remarkable as of late.

I didn't know quite how to put it, but it was like everything about her had jumped up one whole size.

Of course, I didn't mean she had gained a few pounds or inches, but rather that her abilities had dramatically improved.

The last time I had gone into a dungeon with Rina, I simply stood behind her dependable vanguard and fired off my spells. It had felt less like we were fighting together, and more like I was being protected somehow.

"In the end, I'm still just being protected all the time, aren't I?"

With how Iori and Rina were now, I figured they could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Kousuke eventually. The same wasn't true for me.

My conversation with Lilou suddenly came to mind.

"If I could unleash the power of the imperial family, I'd actually be able to stand at his side."

I couldn't stop thinking about it. About the legendary elf whose power was exceptional among our people, and who had sealed away the calamitous Arch Elf. There was a chance I could draw out the same power myself.

Supposedly, his blood ran in my veins.

However, my father had the same blood and still couldn't reach such heights, so was there really any hope that I could?

"Thinking about it won't get me anywhere. For now…I just need to do what I can."

When I next saw my father, it might be a good idea to get him to tell me about this elven hero.

But he wasn't here at the moment. And even if I did talk to him, there was very little chance it would solve my worries.

I needed to do what I could do now, or I would be left behind.

"If I knew more about Kousuke's goals, I'd have a little more to go on."

What I was able to do would change depending on if I could visualize Kousuke's end goal or not.

If he was looking to bake a cake, he was preparing the heavy cream and whipping it, while I was simply along with him to help—that was our current situation. However, if I knew that the end goal was to ultimately bake a cake, I could work on other aspects, like readying the batter or getting the fruit toppings in order.

Was there a chance Nanami was aware of something?

She certainly knew about him more than I did.

"I'll go over to see Nanami."

I decided to search for her.

I found her relatively quickly. This was because she was currently having a strange conversation with Claris.

"But he won't accept it. What should I do?"

"It's quite simple. Master is bound to end up together with her. In which case, we could simply both serve him together."

"But will he accept someone else…?"

"Oh, but of course. You essentially have an extremely powerful person on your side, after all. Though, I believe you would be more knowledgeable on that front, yes?"

"It does seem that she is quite taken with him, true."

"It will be just fine. The problem…lies with yourself, Miss Claris."

"With me?"

"Indeed, the time after they come together will prove the most difficult for you. Once the time comes for the two of them to do you-know-what, you will have no choice but to take part."

"Whaaaat?! T-take part?! I've never heard anything like that before!"

"I believe it is a rare case. However, I imagine things will take on a different shape than normal for you, Miss Claris, and you might be called upon, though I assume infrequently. As it is the occasional purview of any first-rate maid, I would recommend getting accustomed to it while you can."

"*Gulp*."

“For now, we will be heading into a dungeon to…… Then, you go together. From there, you……or say something similar to depend on Master. From there, you…”

“Huh? But would that even…?”

“Oh yes, he will be quite pleased. And it’ll make him even happier if you say something like, ‘J-just kill me!’”

“Huh? Would saying that really please him?”

“Ah, Miss Claris, I see you still have much to learn. When an elf—a cool and strong-willed one in particular—talks like that, they become twice as attractive.”

“…I had no idea. Thank you for the lesson.”

“I don’t really get what you’re talking about, but you don’t need to do any of that, okay?”

When I said this, Claris jumped. Nanami seemed less shocked by my arrival and replied with a “good morning.”

“Claris, I have something I’d like to talk with Nanami about… Am I interrupting you two?”

“No, it wasn’t…anything of much importance. U-um, well, I’ll step out for a breath of fresh air, then,” Claris said, leaving the room. She must have surmised this wasn’t something I really wanted her to hear.

“What can I help you with, Miss Ludie?”

“I want to ask you about Kousuke a little.”

In response, Nanami murmured, “I see. Please tell me what you wish to know.”

Of course, I intended to do just that. So, after I began by talking about my own inadequacy, I asked about Kousuke’s ultimate goal.

“The thing with Kousuke is he’s never specific about anything. So I thought you might know something about him. You two are always doing stuff together, right?”

From my perspective, it was an enviable situation, really. It felt almost like he was relying on Nanami more than me.

“I understand. While I can see why it would appear that way, generally speaking, I’m in the same boat as you are.”

"The same?"

"I do not know any particulars, either. I follow along with him without knowing anything, simply doing as he tells me."

"Huh?"

I was at a loss for words. The phrase *that can't be* filled my mind. Nanami was doing all that without a word of explanation?

"It is exactly as I said. In your situation, I would simply do whatever it seemed like Master wished to me to do."

If that was the case…

"So that's how it is… Now what am I going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

How was I supposed to explain this?

"Part of me just doesn't know what I'm supposed to do. Right now, at least, I have this vague desire to grow stronger and help Kousuke. Except, I'm not getting as powerful as I want to be, and I feel like I'm being left behind."

Nanami nodded. "I see. From my perspective, you are not being left behind at all, Miss Ludie. I believe you can simply continue on as you have been."

"You really think so?"

"Master has said the time will eventually come when he will reveal everything to us. While I think he should spit it out now, he still refuses, so I have been gathering the people and items that I believe he will need. This was the reason behind why I formed the Maid Team and the Antihero Team, and even why I procured the school swimsuits."

"You're saying that you didn't do all of that mostly out of a joke?"

I had only heard about it from Kousuke, so I was fuzzy on the details, but apparently there was a part-timer from a pizza place among the people she had hired? I had the sense that Nanami should at least let her go. And what did she mean by "school swimsuits"?

"While I admit that, yes, I did do all that for a laugh, those people are working very hard behind the scenes for Master's sake."

"Oh, really now?"

"One time, the Maid Team presented Master with some rare items. However, Master regularly stumbles upon far more incredible items, so… In fact, he occasionally gives *me* ridiculous items, saying that the maid team could probably make good use of them. Honestly…"

He must have given those things to Nanami without a second thought, the same way he'd handed us the Seeds of Possibility like it was nothing.

I smiled weakly as Nanami gave one last exasperated sigh. Pontificating over Kousuke's goals was causing me to get my priorities mixed up.

"It really seems like Kousuke knows everything, doesn't it…? Hidden doors in dungeons, items he can amass with the Golden Lucky Cat—it's like he knows the location and item drop of every last monster, or what's coming up ahead."

"I've been operating under the assumption he does indeed know everything."

"So it wasn't just me."

"I do believe if we were very forceful about it, he would spill his secrets. However, I'm confident he shall tell us when it's necessary."

"You have a lot of trust in him."

"Is that also not true of yourself, Miss Ludie?"

"…I suppose so."

"Simply asking him upfront may not be a bad approach, either."

"Just come out and ask him?"

"Exactly. He might be surprisingly forthcoming. Also, there are certainly things Master can only tell me, yes, but there have to be matters he can only discuss with you as well."

Was there really anything like that?

"Anyway, I suppose one thing I can do for now is work on improving myself, then."

Though that was something I was already doing.

—Takioto's Perspective—

What came to mind when one thought of the Tréfle Empire?

I imagine for most esteemed eroge aficionados, it would be elves. I was no exception, of course.

They would think of elves, beloved by all. If I searched the whole world over, I imagined I would find very few who claimed to hate them.

After taking that into account, I think the next thing to come to mind would be several different dungeons. Though I might have simply focused on not forgetting about them because, you typically weren't able to visit them on a first playthrough.

With that in mind…

"Here we are, Thorn Cavern."

This latest dungeon was a limited time dungeon that generally could only be cleared while visiting the Tréfle Empire. From the second playthrough onward, however, maximum expediency and convenience was the goal whether you were grinding exp or doing endgame content, so there was a method to make it always available.

Even in real life, the distance to reach this dungeon was an issue, so it would be hard to consider coming here on a whim. While I was sure it would have been possible if we skipped class, that would be difficult for most of us to do, save for the people on the Ceremonial Committee, who didn't even know the meaning of the word "class." This made today all the more important.

"We gotta enjoy everything this place has to offer while we can."

I had to make sure I did everything I could.

"Oh, thank goodness," Nanami murmured, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief while looking at me. Incidentally, she hadn't shed a single tear, so what was the point?

"I am simply relieved. Your arms and legs have been trembling nonstop as of late, Master."

"C'mon, don't make it seem like I'm going through withdrawal…"

Though really, Nanami's quip may not have been too far from the truth. My urge to go to dungeons was indeed that strong. Back home, I also went into dungeons on a regular basis.

If a regular student usually headed into a dungeon two, maybe three times a week, I generally headed out to a dungeon between five and six times. On rare occasions, I would go to one every day of the week. I just felt antsy if I didn't. At this point, someone might've thought I was dependent on them or something. Wait, was that a withdrawal symptom?

Yukine was also stricken with the same illness as me. However, her duties as Lieutenant of the Morals Committee kept her from dungeon diving as often. If she didn't have that responsibility, though, there was no doubt in my mind she'd be going into dungeons at the same level of frequency as me. There were apparently a lot of different places she still wanted to check out, and when I had talked about the Amaterasu Academy Dungeon, her desire to visit was palpable.

I glanced over at her, and she forced a smile.

"I meeean, this is definitely the most excited Yukine and Takioto have looked since arriving in this country, that's for sure. I can't believe Takioto set up a log cabin for himself right next to a dungeon like this."

Why wouldn't I, though? Having a base of operations near the dungeon made it so much more efficient to come and go as needed, right? Sure, I wouldn't have needed it if I could just click a button to come here like in the game, but that wasn't how it actually worked in real life.

Though, I did also feel a bit guilty about continuing to impose on Ludie's family.

"He did look like a kid the night before a field trip yesterday, that's for sure," Ludie said.

Claris seemed to share her opinion as well.

"Personally, I'm a bit conflicted. The Tréfle Empire has so many great tourist attractions that I would have liked you to experience too."

"Ha-ha-ha, sorry."

By the way, we had already decided on going out for ramen. Prioritizing a ramen trip over tourist attractions seemed like such a Ludie thing to do, it made me warm and fuzzy inside. Tourist stops were great and all, but ramen was, too. If anything, going out for ramen had a sort of touristy appeal to it.

Nanami gazed at Ludie and whispered that the situation looked very serious.

"Master, if I am not mistaken, I believe Miss Ludie has not been getting her daily dose of you lately. A healthy girl her age should be getting two thousand Masters a day!"

"What the hell does that mean? I'm not an adult's necessary daily caloric intake here."

"Regardless, she still needs it, stat. Hurry, quick, you have to strip!"

"Hey, so what's this new urge of yours to make people strip?"

Actually, if I remembered right, I think she rated my ass just a little while ago, too…

"Listen, Master. A healthy lifestyle requires an adequate amount of exercise, a proper diet, and plenty of sleep."

Nanami clearly didn't plan on answering my question. Oh well, that wasn't new.

"Sure."

"Balance is particularly important when it comes to one's diet. It is not simply about counting calories; you need to have proper meals with vitamins, protein, Master, iron, and fiber."

"Feel like I heard a weird 'nutrient' in that lineup. I'm clearly not necessary, right?"

"Master is an especially important nutrient. As long as one gets the proper amount of it, they don't need anything else."

"Now you're blatantly contradicting everything you just said. Why don't we all make sure we're eating a full meal, okay?"

"However, you must be careful not to have too much of Master, or you risk forming a dependency."

"Now I just sound like some sketchy drug!"

"Ha-ha, she might actually have a point there."

"Yukine?!"

Why was Yukine cracking jokes here with Nanami? If anything, *Yukine* was the nutrient essential for life. I would die if I didn't get a periodic dose of the Yukine Mizumori nutrients (dead serious).

"All right, let's leave the jokes here. Right now, this dungeon is more important. It looks pretty dangerous," Yukine commented as she looked around the area.

My overall impression of Thorn Cavern was a cave encased in prickly ivy.

In game, the dungeon is described as being covered in thorny ivy, but since it isn't expounded on any more than that, I had completely forgotten even that minor detail. In real life, it looked like it would be best to avoid the ivy as much as possible.

This was because the thorns growing out of the ivy were about the size of a woman's pinky. Brushing them awkwardly could very easily result in injuries.

"Oh, it's *definitely* dangerous all right. The ivy makes for terrible footing, too," Yuika said, snapping a nearby thorn. She tossed it aside in a completely different direction.

"I bet slamming our enemies into the walls would deal a lot of damage, but I'm not sure I want to see a humanoid enemy suffer through that."

Yuika looked at the thorns and echoed Yukine's sentiments. I agreed that it would probably turn into an X-rated gorefest.

"The ivy might not have much of an effect on elves, though," Claris chimed in.

"Right? We're used to walking through stuff like this, and as for the thorns, I mean…," Ludie said, before thrusting her hand out at

the wall, causing the thorns to flop and bend almost into a "U" shape.

"Huh, what'd you do?!"

"I applied my mana to bend the thorns," Ludie said, reaching out to another thorn. This one was similarly loosely bent, and Ludie touched a part of the vine that didn't seem dangerous. It looked like this process had interfered with the ivy on the ground, too, as they had moved slightly.

"That's incredible."

I couldn't help but express my admiration.

The truth was, there was an effect in this dungeon that gave a special boost to elven character's speed and mobility. I concluded that this game mechanic must have come from the unstable footing and thorny walls.

However, the fact that the thorns were actively impeding the movement of us non-elves was a bit different from how it works in the game.

After stretching and doing some light warmup exercises, we looked deeper into the cave.

"Let's be off. I've been here before, so I'll be able to show you around. Leave it to me!" Claris declared.

For some reason, she was raring to go today, looking over at me with a bright smile. Though, I had to wonder, why was she occasionally glancing over at Nanami?

"Heh-heh, if anything happens, Claris has got you covered! I'll be your shield!" Claris added, saying she'd go even one step further.

I wondered where this was coming from before I immediately recalled the Seed of Possibility. This was just a guess, but perhaps she felt like she owed us and was trying to work hard now to make up for it? I appreciated the offer, but it put me in a bit of an awkward spot.

"Oh, could you leave this place to me?"

"*Hwah*?"

A cute gasp escaped Claris's lips.

I agreed it would be safe and simple to have her guide us through the dungeon. However, in Thorn Cavern, there was a secret route that was impossible to learn about until the second playthrough.

That was where I wanted to go.

And while I obviously knew about this secret route, I doubted anyone around me did.

"This way."

At first, I'd considered playing off my knowledge of the route by claiming to have "read about it somewhere," but after consulting with Nanami earlier, she'd told me, "I am of the mind that everyone already understands something is strange about you, Master, so I believe just playing it straight will be fine."

And so, I decided to simply reveal that Thorn Cavern was supposed to have a secret passage and plow on ahead without anything to back up my assertion.

"Look over there. It seems like we can't go any farther through this briar wall, right? But after you use a certain item here, just wait… Ludie, can you move that ivy up against the wall?"

When I asked Ludie to do this, she looked at me as if to say *that's obviously impossible, are you kidding?* but still did as I asked.

Lo and behold, the moment she did, the brambles slithered away from her even more than the ivy had earlier.

Finally, the briars retreated to the wall entirely, leaving the way forward completely clear.

Seeing this, Yuika…

"…*Haaaah*."

…let out a massive sigh. Meanwhile, Yukine broke into a strained smile, while Claris looked dumfounded.

Claris was the only one to grill me about why I knew about the secret passage, but all that accomplished was making Ludie reprimand her, saying that this was always how things went when I was around. Who exactly did she think I was?

And the thing was, Claris was absolutely right here.

We were in her home country, after all. Why the hell would someone from another country know all about this stuff?

"Okay, so what's down there anyway?" Yuika asked, looking at the pathway that had appeared.

"In short, a bunch of useful items."

While there were a variety of helpful items and equipment to obtain here, the majority were for elves in particular. There was also one item that anyone looking to strengthen themselves to the limit would definitely want to grab.

After I gave a simple explanation of the dungeon, we continued onwards.

"What the heck is that?" Yuika asked, looking at the creature. It was like a seed, attached to the briars on the wall. When it fell to the floor, it rapidly sprouted up in mere seconds, forming into a singular shape.

"A tree? Well, it doesn't really look like one."

Its appearance…was that of a beautiful woman.

"It's an Épine treant, stay sharp."

They were different from normal treants.

As for *what* was different, it was their appearance. They were so pretty that the dyed-in-the-wool perverts playing the game would have pounced on them even knowing full well they were monsters.

"!"

The treant swung its arm, similar to a tree root, at Yukine, who was at the absolute vanguard of our party. The monster tried to slam her into the ground with its attack. Yukine immediately noticed what we were dealing with.

"Be careful, this thing's branches have thorns!"

The Épine treant's most unique characteristic was their thorns. Normal treants didn't have any, and as such, this variety was much more powerful.

Also, while ninety-nine percent of them were female shaped, there was one group of them that resembled a man instead. But regardless of appearance, they all had those damn thorns.

As I watched everyone move, it was clear to see that our footing was going to be pretty important.

Yuika seemed to be having particular difficulty. Given her inherent physical prowess, she seemed to be fighting like normal, but you couldn't say she was moving with ease. While I could move with my stole to mitigate the drop in mobility, I couldn't deny it made combat a lot more difficult.

At the moment, Claris and Ludie were the ones doing the most.

Claris boldly advanced forward, as if paying no mind to the perilous terrain whatsoever. The treant tried to use its branches and roots to wallop her, but she easily parried the attack with her shield.

"Claris!" Ludie shouted from behind. Reacting to her voice, Claris smoothly dodged to her right, and a spell struck the spot where she had been standing, scoring a direct hit on the treant.

The spell Ludie had used was called Wind Blade. Claris closed in on the treant, horribly cut up and recoiling backward, cleaving the thing in two with a shout.

"I've seen them practice that before, but it really is incredible in action," Yuika said, looking impressed. I was amazed they could move like normal on such terrible footing.

Claris blushed a bit at Yuika's words.

"Thank you. This is all thanks to Master Takioto, though."

Or so she said, but…

"I don't remember doing anything really," I said.

Just then, Nanami appeared to sense something and readied her bow.

"Everyone, while it pains me to interrupt your pleasant chat, our next foe is approaching."

Following Nanami's gaze, I saw that another seed had dropped to the ground up ahead and had already begun to sprout.

The monster that appeared this time had the body of a young girl. However, it wasn't any normal girl. It carried what looked like a large log on its back, and from the stump, branches extended out like octopus tentacles.

"…A dryad."

While dryads looked quite cute and charming on the outside, they were a pretty powerful enemy in *MX*. The reason for that was their tentacles.

They could control the stump branches at will and to fight at range. They also used these same tentacles to defend, making them a pretty tough enemy to crack.

Coupled with the poor footing, we were likely in for a difficult fight.

However…

"I'll go see what it's like."

…this didn't seem to pose any problem for Claris. She approached the dryad and slashed it with her sword.

"Huh?!"

After doing so, she fell back to where we were, looking shaken.

"Crap." The word slipped out of my mouth when I looked at the dryad. The clothes it had been wearing suddenly vanished, leaving it in only underwear. This was a phenomenon I was quite familiar with.

"Uh-oh. That's the *Undress* skill!"

"The *what*?"

Yuika turned to me, unamused. Hey, c'mon, don't give me that look! This wasn't my fault!

"…'Undress'? What the hell? Is that your signature move or something?"

"No, no, at least rope Anemone into this if that's the joke you're going for."

Everyone sent me stares of incredulity. But it was already too late. The look in their eyes seemed to question why I even knew about this in the first place. With my hands tied, it was time to explain.

"Th-the Undress skill is a rare ability that only certain monsters possess. When their HP falls below a certain level, they strip their

clothes and increase all their stats."

Yes, *all* their stats. This was the sort of ability I would've come up with if I had to create the most powerful ability of all. Though, actually, even if I made the *very generous* assumption that taking off one's clothes would raise one's evasion rates, it still baffled me how it could also raise one's defense.

"Uhhh, *excuse* me?! What the hell kind of pervert would use that?!"

Seriously. How could someone bring themselves to even use a skill like that? Hey, wait, stop looking at me like that; I'm not a perv (a blatant lie).

"So if we attack that thing…it'll get stronger regardless of how it may look, is that it?"

I nodded at Yukine's summary.

This skill's effects would change depending on the user's remaining HP. In the game, the dryads get half-naked at fifty percent HP and receive slightly buffed stats. Then at thirty percent HP, they shed all their clothing and receive a significant stat boost. Incidentally, if you train the heck out of the Undress skill, it will fully activate at fifty percent HP instead, making it easier to use. For that reason, the worst possible thing you could do was hit it with half-hearted attacks. When the enemies suddenly became totally nude in that one eroge, I had thought it was a bug at first.

So how was I supposed to explain this?

"Basically, that monster's ability makes it stronger the more they strip. Um, so if the dryad takes a bit more damage, well, how can I put it? It'll look much more liberated? It'll be in its birthday suit? A real feast for the—I mean, it'll be real hard on the eyes… See, it's very hard to explain properly."

"So you're saying all its clothes will come off."

Ludie came out and said what I had been dancing around.

"Yup, that's absolutely right. Forgive me."

This wasn't my fault whatsoever, yet for some reason, I couldn't help but apologize out of an intense sense of guilt. I included a

groveling bow with it.

"We have to damage it to defeat it, though," Yukine said as she pointed her *naginata* at our lingeried foe. She was asking about what we were supposed to do when fighting an enemy with the Undress skill.

There were several methods, but the easiest one was to defeat it before it could activate the skill. The Undress skill was powerful, but if the user's HP never fell below a certain amount, it wouldn't activate.

"The easiest solution is to simply deal enough damage to surpass the HP threshold for the skill to activate. Though, even if the skill does activate, it's still possible to push through and defeat it."

This was a negligible point, of course, but the main heroines could also acquire the Undress skill. However, in order to do so, you needed to get a special DLC patch that was released through a specific magazine, and the magazine had never been reprinted.

In short, it was difficult to obtain. This was actually a pretty common thing. Dear eroge developers: I can guess there are a variety of circumstances at play here, but please sell a complete set of all the bonus content patches. I wouldn't even mind if it came several years down the line, just please, help us out here! Though on second thought, it wasn't like I would be coming back to my original world anyway.

"Master is quite the pervert, it seems."

"Where'd that come from? This isn't my fault!"

"By the way, I did know this skill existed, but this is my first time seeing it."

"Well, I sure wish *you* explained it, then!!"

What the hell was with that *oh, me? I don't know anything* look she was making, then?

With all that settled…

"I-I'll face it."

Despite being rattled by the dryad's nonsensical skill, Claris stepped out front. Given the flooring, relying on Claris or long-range

attacks would be our best options.

She easily headed across the distorted flooring and approached the enemy. Using shield to repel one of the dryad's branches, she lifted her sword up high and brought it straight down.

Initially, I thought that this would be enough. However, I had forgotten that Claris had a habit of making careless mistakes.

She generally didn't mess up in combat, or at least I had never seen her do so. But since this erotic element of this dungeon had made her flustered…

"Kousuke, turn around."

"Yup, you got it."

I turned around at Ludie's behest. Claris had managed to get a hit in, but since the wound wasn't deep, it wasn't enough to fell the monster.

In short, it was now naked and powered up.

Though if we were splitting hairs here, the monster's tentacles covered up their most important parts like steam would do in a bathroom scene, so not *everything* was on display. With the CG stored in my memory, I could have easily replicated it all for myself, but I got the feeling that doing so would interfere with our dungeon clear, so…

As I listened to the sounds of Ludie and Nanami's long-rang attacks, a thought came to me.

The Undress skill raised *the enemy's* dodge and crit rates, too; perhaps that was because of the user's naked body being so distracting? I know, I know, it's a very childish conclusion.

Regardless, I had this strange feeling I was forgetting something very important…

The Undress skill, right? The Undress skill…

Now that I thought about it, after you got that patch, how did you actually *learn* the skill? Once a character obtained it, they had it forever, and you generally didn't use it for speedrunning purposes.

Why was that again?

Hmm… It was starting to come back to me. Needing a patch made the requirements steep to begin with, and actually getting the skill in-game was a real pain, since you only had a low chance of learning it whenever you defeated a monster with the ski…… Wait.

Okay, okay, just hang on a second. No need to freak out; I had to stay calm.

The chances of one of the girls learning Undress were so low, someone would have to have some unbelievably good luck, or I supposed in this case, *bad luck* for that to happen… Though, Yuika might have managed it.

Anyway, there was no way she would hit that small, tiny, miniscule percentage right here. I mean, that would have been ridiculous, right? For some reason, memories of Ivy flashed through my mind.

"All right, I took it down! Hold on, why is my body is glowing?"

Thinking about it a bit further, I remembered that after gaining the skill, an event triggers where the clothes of the person who learns it disappear without them taking any damage. *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*

Right, the event was supposed to teach you how to use the skill. A-ha-ha-ha!

I sort of felt like throwing up here. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

I glanced at Yuika. Her clothes were starting to disappear. Realizing how bad the situation was, I turned back to where I had been looking before, but that didn't change the fact that I'd still managed to lock eyes with Yuika as her clothes were essentially all gone.

I imagined what was going to happen after this.

Yup, time to run.

"*Eeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh*!"

◇

"Ah what an amazing battle it was. I can remember it all so clearly, as if it happened only moments ago," Nanami murmured profoundly as she examined the dungeon walls.

"Of course you can remember, it literally just happened. By the way, do me a favor and *forget it*. Preferably for the rest of your life," Yuika immediately quipped back at Nanami's silly comment. The slight red tinge to her cheeks was understandable.

Though, Nanami was right about the battle being amazing, in more ways than one. We had fought against a branch-tentacle monster with its Undress skill at max power. That would've never been fit for broadcast. On top of that, Yuika had accidentally gained the Undress skill herself, leading to pure pandemonium.

"If one of those jumps out again… It'll be, um, tough to tackle," Yukine chimed in.

Claris, walking next to her, agreed and nodded. Normally, this wouldn't be nearly enough to wear her down, but right now, she looked totally burnt out.

"Do you think more will show up?"

"Nah, those things are pretty rare, so I don't think we need to worry too much."

Save for the rare exceptions like the "Fap to Me Dungeon," which is filled with enemies possessing the Undress skill and other monsters desperate for attention, it's generally safe to assume these enemies wouldn't show up all. Though among esteemed eroge aficionados, myself included, there were those who would fight over and over again to fully fill out their database and CG collection.

There are also male monsters with the Undress skill, and after defeating these, an event triggers where all the woman in the party would share their very suggestive impressions with one another. Iori could also learn this skill. Normally, a guy getting totally naked wouldn't be okay to show, but well, it was an eroge after all.

While I was reminiscing about the game…

"Master, they're coming," Nanami said.

I had sensed the enemy's presence, too, and I immediately readied my stole.

We battled several times from there, but no other monsters with the Undress skill appeared. Around two hours into our expedition, we finally reached the item I was after.

"Hmm… Looks like there's treasure over there."

Nanami sprang into action at Yukine's comment. She was looking for traps.

"*Phew*. Besides Master's perverted proclivities, there doesn't seem to be any problem."

"Nanami, his case is terminal, so I would just give up on it."

"Ah-hah-hah…"

Yuika didn't really need to agree with Nanami's silly little joke. Also, Claris? In this situation, a lack of denial was basically agreement, okay?

"Kousuke, let's just open the treasure chest."

I nodded at Ludie's words. I knew that there weren't any traps, but just for practice, I used my stole to open it up.

Inside we saw…

"Is that a bangle?"

Yuika had correctly identified the item. Once I laid eyes on the jewel attached to the top of it, I became convinced it was the item I was looking for.

"A tree branch bangle. And it's got a green jewel attached to it."

Yukine described the item's appearance to us.

In this dungeon, you could obtain all sorts of elf-exclusive weapons, armor, accessories, and tools. However, if someone asked me what was the most useful out of all of them was, this bangle would have been my answer.

"What is this?"

"It's an item that increases the growth rate of elf abilities."

Yuika's eyes widened in pure disbelief.

"Uhhhh, what?! Does something like that actually exist?!"

It sure did. However, much like the Seed of Possibility, the effects weren't immediately apparent, and the wearer had to work hard to truly get the most out of it. However, this bangle would prove vital for taking the wearer's strength to the next level.

"Sure does. No mistaking it, this is what it looks like."

As I spoke, I turned to Ludie and stared at her meaningfully.

"…Really, are you sure I can have this?" she asked in surprise.

First of all, the only people I knew who could even equip this were Ludie, Anemone, and Claris.

"Well, Claris will probably…"

When I turned to her, Claris went bug-eyed and shook her head so forcefully, it seemed like it would fly off her shoulders. If I was in her position, I probably would have declined the offer, too.

Though, if I had enough of these, I would have liked to give a copy to Anemone and Claris each, but my true feelings on the matter were that since Ludie was more likely to be put in harm's way in the future, I wanted her to wear it.

If I could do a second or third run, I *could* get enough for everybody, though.

"…Look, even Claris is telling you to take it."

Ludie heaved a sigh.

"That's not what I'm saying. If we sold this, we'd all have a lot of money to go around, right?"

"Oh, is that all?" Yukine chimed in. "Don't worry about it, Ludie. Yuika, Nanami, and I have all gotten something like this already."

"Yukine's right. You're far more important than any money, Ludie. I agree that Takioto's got a few, or several, screws lose, but you should just take it."

"Listen, Ludie didn't say anything about me being screwy, okay? What's there to even 'agree with her' about?"

"With that, I believe the matter is settled—Nanami is the greatest maid of all time."

That didn't settle anything.

“Again with the absur-Nami, geez. Ah well, forget it, at any rate,” I said, before handing Ludie the bangle.

After she slid her arm through it and passed mana into the item while rubbing the jewel, the bangle began tightening around her until it fit her arm perfectly.

Ludie must have felt like something was different, since she quickly excused herself for a moment and cast a few spells.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hmm, how can I describe it? Something feels a bit off. Though, it’s not actually hindering my magic at all…?”

The item was supposed to raise her growth rate; it didn’t actually raise her stats directly. In other words, its purpose was to make the character who equipped it the strongest they could be.

Perhaps Ludie felt as though the bangle was getting in her way precisely because it affected her overall growth. Or maybe, this was fundamentally a different item?

Visually…to be honest, I didn’t really remember what it looks like in the game.

“Well, if you’re not feeling any effects right now, why don’t you try using it a bit more? If anything happens, Takioto here will take full responsibility. Isn’t that right, Takioto?” Yuika said, looking at me with the others.

“I suppose you’re right.”

I had basically given a non-answer, yet for some reason, it convinced Ludie. What sort of “responsibility” were we talking here, seriously?

“In fact, it appears Master is ready to take responsibility right this moment.”

“Right this moment? What are you even talking about?”

When I gave Nanami a retort, Ludie laughed.

“Hee-hee. I guess I don’t have to worry then. Shall we keep on going?”

We all moved deeper into the dungeon and looked for our next treasure.


CONFIG

Chapter 5 **The Church of the Malevolent Lord's Motives**

Magical★Explorer

It had been an absolutely glorious way to spend our time, clearing dungeons for a few days straight and gathering some of the items I wanted while we all leveled ourselves up. However, the good times would have to come to an end.

There was a far more important event on the horizon.

"Um, sorry for bothering you today," little Lilou said, fidgeting and nervous. She was so unbearably cute, I wanted to fidget right there with her. Except I'd probably get reported to the police for that.

"It's okay, you're always welcome to join us," Yukine replied. Yukine liked children and always looked out for others, so I figured she was the perfect fit for Lilou, but that description didn't apply to her alone.

"*Hmph*. Decided to show your face, have you…?!"

This came from Nanami. Yuika flashed her an utterly unamused look.

"…Why're you trying to act like some big shot?"

"Ah, Instructor Nanami! Yuika! Heh-heh-heh, here I am!"

Nanami and Yuika seemed to get along well with Lilou, too… Though what was this "instructor" stuff about? Had something happened without me knowing? I mean, Ludie was smiling, so it must be all right, but Lilou was still an imperial princess and all.

We all chatted among ourselves a bit before moving to the topic at hand. Today, we weren't going on a dungeon adventure…

"Well then, let's hurry over and get ourselves some ramen!"

…but a ramen adventure.

"Eh-heh, heh-heh-heh-heh."

Ludie must have seriously been looking forward to this. She was acting out-of-character on a level rarely seen in the modern age. Unlike in Wakoku, where you were always a stone's throw away from

one noodle place or another, ramen shops were few and far between in the empire.

While she had once frequently absconded away to get ramen for herself, Ludie hadn't been able to go out for any lately. Perhaps it was only inevitable she'd end up like this.

Except, I was pretty sure I'd seen her buy a mountain of instant ramen before we set out for the empire…?

"You're really excited, huh, Ludie? ♪" Lilou empathized with her slightly kooky sister.

Why was Lilou here to join us, you ask? Because Ludie had hammered home the virtues of ramen to her.

I hadn't been present for this at all, so I had no idea what sort of impassioned oration Ludie had given her younger sister. Apparently, Lilou had listened to her with mouth agape and eyes sparkling. Honestly, I wish I had gotten to see it.

As such, we were all going out together, but we did have a problem to surmount.

"Are you three really okay with not getting any ramen?"

Namely, the fact that ramen shops were tiny. Figuring that seven people would be way too many, Ludie, Lilou, Claris and I had decided we would go out for ramen, while Yuika, Nanami, and Yukine had offered to eat somewhere else.

"It's totally fine. There's other stuff I want to try anyway," Yuika said, waving the guidebook in her hand. The three of them had said they would visit the ramen shop another day instead. I bet if Ludie took a shine to the place we were going, she would tag along with them for the second trip. No, she was *definitely* going back with them.

"Master, I'm worried," Nanami said. Was it because we had two different itineraries?

"C'mon, it's no big deal."

"It certainly is. If anything happens, please call for me immediately. I will come over as soon as I finish my food."

"So you're not actually worried, are you?"

Either way, she was going to finish her meal.

"Look after those two for me, Yukine," I said.

Yukine forced a smile.

"I'm sure everyone'll be just fine…"

I mean, I got the feeling that if someone like Ms. Ruija, Ivy, or Anemone were around, then something could crop up, but I didn't think there would be any problems today. Also, since there would be trouble if anything were to befall us, apparently there were imperial guards secretly following after us as well.

We split up and each went to our respective restaurants.

Ludie had researched the place well ahead of time, and Claris said she'd scoped out the area herself, so we easily reached our destination.

The exterior didn't resemble the average ramen shop you'd find in Japan, but instead looked very much like an elven restaurant, with a liberal use of fine-looking stumps and trees. The interior design was extremely chic, while still making one feel close to nature, so I honestly didn't even feel like I was in a ramen place at all.

I was extremely excited to see what sort of ramen this establishment would serve.

"Lilou, you've never had ramen before, right?"

I asked Lilou, who was sitting across from me, after we took a moment to drink our water and relax at the only four-seat table in the restaurant. She replied by nodding.

"Prepare to be stunned," Ludie said from her seat next to Lilou, her eyes bulging out of her head.

So, look, I get that she was excited and all, but I really thought she should have worked a bit more to keep up her prim and proper façade.

"What's this place's specialty?"

Sitting beside me, Claris answered my question.

"*Tonkotsu* pork broth. Their *miso tonkotsu* broth and soy sauce *tonkotsu* broth are famous, but their seafood option is just as delicious."

"They all sound so good… What would you recommend for my first time?"

Lilou hit me with a surprisingly tricky question.

"Do you have any food preferences?"

"Um, not especially."

While she seemed to ponder the question for a minute, she delivered her answer quickly. Though, well, I had already known as much from the game.

"You're not great with spicy foods yet, though."

"L-Ludie!"

The two began to argue. "Why did you tell him?! It makes me look childish," "Oh, it's fine." They really got along well, and it warmed my heart just watching them.

Just then…

"…Lady Ludivine, Master Takioto."

…Claris addressed us with a very solemn look on her face. She had sent something to our devices.

I had been wondering when exactly *it* would kick off, but it looked like the time was now.

"Ludie…?"

"Lilou, it sounds like there was a big accident in town, so we need to head back to the castle after we're done eating."

Or so Ludie said, but in truth, this wasn't just an accident.

According to Claris's message, several places at once had just experienced magical terror attacks. There were explosions in one area, gangs indiscriminately attacking elven pedestrians in others, and some civilians had been forced to barricade themselves in a school.

Was it even realistic for that to coincide at once?

"Lady Ludivine, I believe getting away from this location is far more important than our meal," said Claris.

The two of them might have been recalling what had happened to them once before.

"…Good point. As loathe as I am to do so, we should pay our bill and leave."

A similar attack occurred when I had first met Ludie and Claris. A restaurant next to the building they were in had exploded, and as the area was thrown into chaos, a betrayal by one of their own landed them in a perilous situation.

Something very similar was happening this time, too.

I picked up on the mana approaching us and opened up my stole as I got out of my seat.

The surrounding area roared.

It was the sound of me blocking the flaming arrows that had flown toward Lilou.

"Huh?!"

Holding the girl's body close with one hand, I faced our enemies as they cast a follow-up spell.

"It'll be all right, Lilou."

This time, I blocked a blade of wind sent my way. I could defend magic of this level forever.

Ludie and Claris were quick to act. Ludie immediately used Storm Hammer, blowing the attackers at the entrance back outside.

Claris cautiously stepped into the street and drew her sword. Ludie had blown two people back with her spell, so at the very least, there were two or more people outside the shop. My best move was to go out and help.

It was then, I realized…

There were still assailants inside the restaurant, weren't there?

"Ludie, don't move."

Stopping her from charging out of the ramen shop into the fight, I used my other free hand to pull Ludie in close.

Then I glared at one of the customers eating ramen.

"*Tch*."

Clicking his tongue, the man activated an item in his hand.

"A sigiled stone, huh? Those puppies have served me real well, too."

From the sigiled stone appeared a large stone with a sharpened tip. Right as the stone was released, I punched it with my Third Hand. Then, with my Fourth Hand, I took the stone, now broken in half, and threw it straight at the attacker.

"Thanks. How'd you know, though?" Ludie asked me.

"Something wasn't adding up. Why was that guy calm looking over at us while magic was flying left and right in the middle of a ramen shop?"

Like Ludie and Claris, I had also been reflecting on that same attack. There had been another suspicious guy during that incident, too. Really similar MO.

"Well, I assume that has to be the last of them in here. I'm worried about Claris, so I'm going to go outside. Can I leave Lilou with you?"

I nodded. Protecting others was my specialty.

"Be careful."

"I will," Ludie replied before exiting the shop and beginning to cast a spell.

When I looked at Lilou, she was vacantly gazing at me while tightly hanging on to me.

"Are you okay, Lilou?"

When I asked her this, she jolted in surprise.

"I'm right here, so there's no need to worry. Believe it or not, I'm actually pretty strong."

She must have been really scared, as she buried her face in my stomach and hugged me tightly. I opened up my stole and stayed alert of our surroundings to ensure I could protect her from whatever came our way. However, this ultimately proved meaningless.

It didn't take Claris and Ludie very long to crush our assailants.

◇

We left the rest to the soldiers on guard and met up with Nanami and the others. Afterwards, Sophia summoned us to the castle where Ludie's family lived.

We parted ways with Lilou, and we ended up eating our missed meal at the palace instead.

"Oh my god, this is soooooo good," Yuika said, breaking out into a smile.

When we first messaged Yuika's group, they had barely managed to take a bite of their lunch, if that. I had said we had our own cleanup to deal with and told them they could finish eating before meeting up, but apparently, they had come here on empty stomachs. While she hadn't acted the way she claimed she would, I couldn't help thinking it was very like Nanami to react that way.

"I can't help but wonder why they would carry out an attack like that in broad daylight," Ludie said, voicing her suspicions.

"Maybe they thought security had gotten lax?" Claris replied.

Incidentally, while there had been a group of guards secretly following us, they had apparently gotten caught up in apprehending some dubious fellow of their own. The ones who had slipped through their grasp had launched the attack on us.

"But weren't they a bit *too* unprepared? If I were them, I would have dedicated waaaay more people to an attack like that," Yuika commented.

"Maybe they had a different goal in mind."

Yukine said this while watching the news on the TV. Several elves had taken hostages and barricaded themselves in a bank, but the hostages had escaped unharmed, and the news said it was only a matter of time before the criminals would be apprehended. Incidentally, they had not yet reported on the attack we had dealt with. However, I assumed it would only be a matter of time until that incident made it to the news, too.

"I don't knooow, I've got a bad feeling about this," Yuika murmured, also watching the news.

Just then, she hit me with a piercing stare.

"Whoa, whoa, why are you looking at me like that?"

"Seriously? Go ahead and think long and hard about that answer. Riddle me this: Who are the guys who always happen to be involved whenever some big incident pops up or some sex—er, some weird dungeon is revealed? It's always either my brother or you."

"Ha-ha, that's true."

Yukine had voiced her agreement. How rude. Well, at least we weren't going through as many twists and turns as there were in a mystery manga.

"It feels like I've exhausted a lifetime's worth of major events in just the past few months. At least be aware you're a walking troublemaker, okay?"

I did feel a little like I was sticking my head into trouble, so I supposed I might have come across like someone who enjoyed dancing into oncoming traffic.

"So what did you do this time, Kousuke?"

"Nothing!"

I seriously hadn't done anything. This was all the Church of the Malevolent Lord's fault.

We watched all the different news reports playing on the TV for a little while longer before there was a knock on the door to our room.

It was Sophia, looking solemn and serious.

"What's wrong, Mother?"

Her expression didn't appear to have originated from a burning desire to see her beloved daughter as soon as she could. Rather, Sophia looked a bit panicked.

She hesitated for a few moments but then decided to talk.

"To make a long story short… We found out that the Church of the Malevolent Lord made off with the elven treasure while all those attacks were being carried out."

The mood in the room instantly grew leaden.

"I can't go into any details here…but I will explain after, so I want you all to wait here. It's not clear what exactly the Church is scheming yet, so I'd like you to stay inside the castle, okay?"

"We understand."

We all nodded.

"I'll show you somewhere you can relax after finishing your meal, so once you're done, let the maid at the entrance know, okay? Ludie, Claris, come with me."

Sophia then left the room with her daughter and Claris in tow.

From there, we quickly finished our meal, and an elven maid and soldier led us to a spare room.

Once we entered, the maid told us to summon her if we should need anything, then departed.

While I pondered over what to do next, I caught a glimpse of Yuika deep in thought, her arms crossed and one hand resting under her chin.

"What's up, Yuika?"

"…Oh, sorry, Takioto."

Her response came after a moment's pause.

"Well, it's just, I have some questions."

"Questions?"

"If the elven treasure was stolen, you'd wonder why we were the ones summoned like this, right? Though, the first thing that comes to mind is the possibility they suspect we did it, I guess."

"True."

No matter how friendly we may have been with Ludie, to her family, we were outsiders.

"But with all this freedom they're giving us right now, I'm not feeling much suspicion from them, really."

"An astute observation, Miss Yuika. If they did suspect us at all and there was any chance we would try to flee, I doubt they would have purposefully requested we come to the castle. Were I in such a position, I would have immediately sent soldiers to secure us."

Nanami had a point. That and, they wouldn't have brought us into such a nice room. Heck, in the worst-case scenario, they might have locked us in jail.

"Then why did they summon us here?"

This was Yuika's question.

"The simplest explanation…has to be that if the Church is involved here, then we're in danger, too," Yukine said. Well, this was probably where your mind would normally go.

"The thing is, Yukine, I have this strange feeling that's not it," said Yuika.

She was right. Also, if the danger really was closing in on us, then normally, one would have thought to increase the number of guards with us until we had gotten to our rooms. While there had been a soldier among the group who had picked us up, that wasn't nearly enough people to provide protection.

"First, there's one assumption to keep in mind. Among the four of us, the only people the Church has anything to gain from targeting are Ludie and Takioto, right?"

While I wish she wouldn't have thrown my name in the mix, when I thought about my position, it made sense. At present, no one on the Church side knew about Yuika's true identity, either.

"Also, if I was going to go after Takioto or Ludie, I would have either attacked them *while* stealing the empire's national treasure, or beforehand, at least."

"I believe I would do the same. Our foe must understand that security would be tightened as soon as something occurred," Nanami agreed.

"There's no way a group as cunning as the Church of the Malevolent Lord doesn't understand that. Also, Ludie's family must know their daughter was at very little risk of danger."

"Hmm. Even then, there was still *some* possibility that we'd be targeted."

"I believe you're right, Yukine. That was why they summoned us here, but if that was all, couldn't they have sent several guards to

meet us before we went to the castle?”

Yukine nodded.

“Also, they basically stuffed us in here with zero explanation. What did the Empress even mean when she said she would explain everything later? It really sounds to me like they don’t want us involved at all.”

“Well, part of that’s gotta be because we’re students.”

“Obviously, I can understand that they did this to protect us, but if that was the case, they would’ve beefed up the security, right? They could’ve at least stationed a soldier here with us. Plus, I would assume they would keep Ludie and Takioto together if they both needed protecting.”

Hey, Yuika, you sure you wouldn’t make a good detective?

“So that’s why I really get the feeling they have some other reason they’re doing this. Like, maybe this national treasure is actually a really big deal in all sorts of ways,” said Yuika.

“Surely, anything worthy of being labeled a national treasure must be quite the item.”

“Also, you know how strong Ludie’s sense of justice is, right? Plus, she fully understands her own position and her duties, and she has the strength of will to act on her own.”

“That’s true.”

While Ludie loved her ramen and tended to seem clumsy or unreliable in her day-to-day life, she was still part of a respected imperial family, with a noble mind worthy of her status.

“I was thinking maybe, just maybe, we were called here to stop Ludie instead. Though, it’s not like all this thinking will actually get us an answer anyway.”

“Right…if we want to learn the answer, we’ll just have to wait for an explanation.”

If things developed just like they do in the game, then we should be getting one soon.

Not from Ludie, but from Sophia.

—Ludie's Perspective—

I had almost never seen my mother look so serious as she led me into a living room where Father often spent his time.

Inside were Father and several guards. These were his most trusted soldiers, and they were powerful elites, some of the strongest fighters in the whole Empire.

Lilou wasn't here; it was just me, Mother, Father, Claris, and their guards. The situation left me with a feeling of terrible foreboding.

Naturally, my intuition was right on the mark.

"Ludie, I'm glad you're safe."

"Of course, an attack like that was nothing. But what's wrong, Father? You look so concerned."

Father let out a small sigh. He urged me to sit down for the time being, so I did. Claris stood beside me.

"There's a traitor," Father said, waiting until I had taken my seat.

"What?"

"After you were first attacked, I had thought we excised all the filth. However, it appears that some remained."

"It's the Church of the Malevolent Lord, isn't it?"

"That's right. The Church," Father said, looking pensive.

"What in the world happened?"

"We accidentally did exactly what our enemy expected us to do. I'll explain from the beginning, dear." Mother picked up where Father left off. "First, you know that a number of incidents happened all across the empire at once, right?"

"We were watching it on the news before we came here," Claris answered.

Moreover, we had been caught up in the attacks.

"I'm sure you've already heard about this, Father, but we were attacked, too. If not for Kousuke, Lilou would've been in danger."

Mother nodded at my words. "Lilou told us everything. We'll need to thank Kousuke later."

"*Ahem*, I suppose so. Lilou is unharmed, but she seemed a little tired. Must have been terrified. Right now, we're having her rest with

a guard nearby."

I needed to go and check how she was doing after this.

"Thanks for the update on Lilou. Can you keep going?"

"We got a bit off topic there, didn't we?" Mother replied before continuing. "With everything happening at once, it was too much for our regular forces to handle, so the castle soldiers were forced to help out as well."

"I see."

"But once the security slackened a bit, a thief got inside," Mother said, and then Father continued the explanation from there.

"If they just stole magic tools or paintings, we could write it all off as the empire and imperial family being played for fools. The problem is *what* they stole."

"And what would that be?"

"The key."

"What key?"

"The key to pass into the Sanctuary."

"!"

I was suddenly at a loss for words. The elven Sanctuary was a forbidden place that held dangerous items, along with a wicked and terrible presence that had been sealed away.

Everyone who lived in the elven nation knew about this presence. It was used to frighten young misbehaving children. However, there was an extremely strict condition to venture within the boundaries of the Sanctuary.

"I thought only the imperial family and a select few others were able to go inside?"

"The key is there for when the royal blood line is severed. The existence of the key should have been known only to me, Sophia, and a group of trusted elves."

Trusted. If there had been a traitor among them, it must have come as quite a shock to Father.

Regardless, why had the Church of the Malevolent Lord stolen it? The Sanctuary only held dangerous items and that wicked elf who

had been sealed… No.

"They can't be looking to revive the Arch Elf, can they?!"

"That has to be it, I'm afraid."

Mother nodded. If that seal was undone… The empire and Leggenze were in danger. Was the church trying to destroy both nations?

"We have to get that key back immediately!"

"Right. However, a considerable amount of time has already passed. The group who stole the key are a prudent bunch, so they must have already hastened to the Sanctuary."

"All those terror attacks only just happened, though. There should still be time to stop them, right?"

Only a couple hours had passed since we were attacked. Given they had stolen the key at the same time and likely needed to prepare to break into the Sanctuary, it didn't seem to me like we had lost much time at all.

"Apparently, they had several squads waiting on standby and handed the key over to them to immediately break into the Sanctuary. The remaining Church followers tried to attack us in an attempt to buy time."

"We only just put them all down when you and your friends arrived, dear," Mother added. After a small sigh, she continued. "Besides, you know just as well as I do that there are formidable monsters in the Sanctuary. You can't just waltz through there without significant preparation."

"…Were you able to gain any information from the followers you captured?"

Mother shook her head at Claris's question.

"Talking to them drove home how the Church of the Malevolent Lord treats their pawns as disposable. We asked for more details, but it wasn't that they *wouldn't* give them, they just didn't know anything. We decided it was pointless to try getting any more out of them."

"Though we did interrogate them," Father added.

"That's awful…"

"The Church has to know we'll get a squad of troops together on our end given enough time—and we're doing just that."

Father glanced at the bodyguard in front of him, who nodded gravely.

"Ludie, you know now the Church is targeting the Tréfle Empire. It seemed the main reason they were going after you was to use your corpse and blood as a means of entering the Sanctuary."

Now it all made sense.

"Then there's no longer any reason to come after me."

"While it's probably not a major goal of theirs, you're still an eyesore. That's not the concern, though. The problem is the sealed Arch Elf and the items there. The Arch Elf is especially problematic… If his seal is undone, only a High Elf with the power to oppose him will be able to seal him away again."

If using the power of the High Elf was our only way of stopping the Arch Elf…then we needed to defeat the Church followers before the seal could be undone.

But the only ones who could even go to the Sanctuary were…

"The elves of the imperial family."

"Besides me, of course," Mother repudiated. She had married into the imperial family, so she obviously didn't have any imperial blood in her. Which meant…

"Father, me, and Lilou, are the only ones capable."

There was also my older sister, though she had married into another family.

"We need to put a stop to the Church of the Malevolent Lord's plans at any cost."

In which case, someone would need to take a small squad along and go into the Sanctuary.

Lilou was still young, though. While she may have been able to get through the Sanctuary with a tight guard troop around her, who could possibly bring themselves to drag a terrified child in there?

Father, meanwhile, was someone who needed to remain in the castle. There was a chance it could take until tomorrow to gather the resources and get a squad together. However, it was possible that the Church would have plundered all sorts of items from the Sanctuary by then, unless we headed over there now.

"I'll go."

I was the one who needed to go. If the worst happened, and I lost my life, my death wouldn't have nearly the same impact as my father's.

"I just knew…you'd say that." Mother looked happy, yet slightly sorrowful at the same time. "Your mother is overjoyed to see how much you've grown, Ludie. I'm sure I have Tsukuyomi Magic Academy and your friends to thank for that."

Just then, I heard a voice come from behind me.

"If you'll excuse me, my lady."

I turned around, and one of the guards who had just been with Father grabbed me. I immediately put two and two together.

"What do you think you're doing? Stop this at once!"

I needed to free myself from their grip and flee from here immediately—that was what ran through my mind. It was plain as day, Mother was trying…

"Claris!"

…to stop me from going.

Despite my cries, Claris couldn't move—Mother was standing right in front of her. She couldn't raise a hand against her employer.

"Yet no matter how proud I am, what kind of parent would willingly expose her daughters to danger?"

"The elves' treasures may be sitting in the Sanctuary. But *my* treasure is my family. Lilou, Ludie, and my Sophia."

Father came up in front of me and stared into my eyes.

"I don't think I could go on living if I were to lose any one of you."

"Darling… I feel the same," Mother said before gripping Father's hand tightly.

"I can't expose my daughters to danger. I'm going."

Father gently let go of Mother's hands before turning his back to me.

"If anything happens, keep Sophia and Lilou safe. Take Ludie away."

Mother watched Father's resolute and magnificent figure depart, looking ready to burst into tears at any moment. Then at long last, she turned away.

From there, I was shuffled off by the guards into my room. Several guards were posted outside to keep me from escaping.

"Now what am I going to do?"

…First, I needed to calm down a bit and think things through. I sat down on my bed and took a deep breath.

There were several avenues I could take.

The easiest of them was to simply wait it all out here. Entrust everything to Father without getting involved and wait until the whole incident blew over.

But I thought this was a bad move.

First, there was the matter of Father. It would be terrible if anything happened to him right now. He was the person the empire needed the most at this moment. With this series of terrorist attacks striking fear in the hearts of his citizens, he needed to stand before them and lead the nation.

The empire could not afford to lose him. Father may have been skilled with magic, but that didn't necessarily translate into him being proficient at combat.

I could think of countless other reasons why Father was needed. We needed to keep him alive at all costs.

Time was another problem. The Church of the Malevolent Lord's objective was clear, and it was a race against the clock to stop them from achieving it. Action needed to be taken immediately.

At this rate, the Arch Elf would be revived.

"The Arch Elf has to bear a grudge against this country."

If he was revived, it was conceivable he would indiscriminately kill the population. Not just the citizenry, but even Lilou, Mother and Father, too…

I shook my head to dispel the awful imagery.

"We can't let that happen. Before any of that, I want to try doing something myself."

There was a problem, though: How was I supposed to get through to the Sanctuary?

The Church of the Malevolent Lord's followers weren't the only ones in the Sanctuary. The place was teeming with powerful monsters. Forget the showdown with the Church followers—it was dubious whether I could even manage to catch up to them.

I would require strong companions to fight with me. Several people I could trust at the very least, who were as strong as Claris or more.

Companions who would risk their lives for me. Did I even have any friends like that in the first place?

I simply didn't know what I should do. I limply sat down in my chair and deflated. The people that came to mind were those who I wished to protect. The citizens, Mother and Father, Lilou.

Suddenly, a single man came to mind. Someone who would never give up, no matter how disadvantaged he was, someone who overcame any unfavorable situation he found himself in.

Would he come along with me, saying that it was no big deal at all? Would he give his life for me?

"Kousuke…"

I thought of him and called out his name.

When the bodyguards I had trusted betrayed me, and when an ogre far more powerful than myself had attacked me, it was Kousuke who had come to my aid.

I could ask him. I knew he would come if I did.

Just then, I heard a loud rattling, and my door opened.

"Heya, Ludie."

He strolled in like it was nothing.

—Takioto's Perspective—

According to what Sophia's mother explained to us after Ludie had been led away…

"So there's an item related to the Malevolent Lord in the Sanctuary? And the thing the Church made off with is the key to enter the Sanctuary. Also, it's impossible to enter the Sanctuary without either the key or without someone of imperial blood."

"That's right."

The more time went by, the higher the likelihood the Church would get their hands on the item they were looking for. There was a chance the lives of the citizens could be at risk, too. However, since there were formidable monsters in the Sanctuary, His Majesty needed to prepare accordingly before heading there.

"…What happened to Ludie?"

"Well, I expected her to say she would go instead, so…"

Sophia evasively trailed off. I supposed she couldn't come out and say she confined Ludie to her room. For now, however, I decided to side with Sophia.

"Right, that would be really concerning, wouldn't it? You have my sympathies."

"Thank you. And allow me to apologize for getting you all wrapped up in this."

"Please, don't lower your head; it's not your fault," Yukine said to Sophia as the latter bowed to us.

We had been summoned here because there was a chance Ludie would go out of control and head into the Sanctuary. She had been confined to her room for the time being. Also, since there was some chance that the Church would try to harm us, the imperial family had decided to protect us here in the castle as well.

"I'm sure this really inconvenient for you, but I'd like you to stay here in the castle a bit longer."

Sophia looked genuinely apologetic.

"Not at all. I couldn't think of anywhere more comfortable than here. Especially with such delicious food around," Yuika said.

"Thank you. It's a relief to hear that."

"Is Ludie in her room?"

"That's right."

"I hope she's not too dispirited by all this. I'm sure she'd feel better if we could give her some support, though." I tried asking in a roundabout way if we could see Ludie and talk with her.

"Oh, she'll be just fine. I'm here, and she has Claris and the other bodyguards with her, too."

However, Sophia gently rejected me.

"I see. I'm worried, but if you're there with her, Mrs. Tréfle, I'm sure she'll be fine."

Sophia nodded, then left the room to attend to other matters as soon as we finished talking.

A few moments after the door closed behind her, Yuika looked at me.

"How exactly do you manage to get wrapped up in trouble so often?" she asked before she drained the rest of her cup of tea.

"I think it's nice that I know I'll never be bored when I'm with Takioto," Yukine said, standing up and lightly stretching her shoulders.

"I knew you'd see it that way, Yukine. Hey, Yuika, you heard that, right? You've got a childish way of looking at things, okay?"

"Indeed, I have never been bored while with Master. From offering up my panties to having my clothes become see-through, there's always something."

"Please forgive me."

I really didn't want to remember all that stuff, thank you.

"Joking aside, what are we going to do?"

C'mon, Yuika, we didn't need to talk about that—just one look at me should've made it clear. Hell, same went for her, too.

"You're literally getting ready to move as you ask that, you know."

"Hmm, I suppose so. I didn't even need to ask, did I? What do you think, Yukine?"

"Hmmmm…" Yukine let out a troubled grunt with a wincing smile. "To be perfectly honest, I don't really want you all to do anything dangerous."

After saying this, she took out her *naginata* and began to check its condition. At the same time, Nanami started looking through the foodstuffs she had taken out of her item bag.

"You know, Yukine, that's a bit rich coming from you."

That was big talk from someone who would fly into whatever hell necessary to help her friends. Though I loved that part about her, too! Bwa-ha-ha!

"You're the last person I want to hear that from," she said with a smile.

Yuika nodded several times in agreement.

"That's a good point. No matter who's in trouble, you jump headlong into danger."

"Now, now, everyone, I think that's enough teasing Master for now. He's an incorrigible pervert—can we simply leave it at that? More importantly, I think it prudent we move fast."

"Y'know, I think you're the one who's teasing me the most, Nanami."

Though to be honest, none of that was really important. The Church followers should've already infiltrated the Sanctuary by now, so we needed to get moving.

"First of all, we need to meet up with Ludie. Then we gotta ask what she wants to do."

"That's true. This does all depend on her."

"If Ludie still insists on going into the Sanctuary, then obviously, I'm planning on going with her, but what about you all?" I asked.

"I mean, you don't really need to ask, do you?" said Yuika.

"Ludie's pretty much family," added Yukine.

"If anything were to befall Miss Ludie, my whole plan would fall apart."

Right, we were all thinking the same thing. Not that I had a clue about this plan of Nanami's or whatever.

"For now, let's make for where Ludie is. Sophia said she was in her room, right?"

Yukine nodded.

"Hmm, the security will be a big problem."

The castle guards were on watch, protecting Ludie. We would need to evade their detection to go meet her.

"Right, so what should we do? Knock them all out?"

Yuika proposed a solution that anyone would find disturbing. Though, to be fair, the player does just that in the game.

"A minor point it may be, but we are still guests here. While I am sure we could get away with just a warning, I believe that would be taking things too far. Let us have them kiss the floor."

"Nanami, you basically just used different words to say the same thing as Yuika," I pointed out.

"Better save that as a last resort. Remember, our main goal is to get to Ludie's room," Yukine said, to which Yuika nodded.

"We need to think about what to do after we actually meet up with Ludie. Do you think she knows about a secret escape route out of the castle or something?" Yuika said with a sigh.

In truth, Ludie really did know of such an escape route. Incidentally, so did I. However, I was only going to bring it up myself as a last resort.

"Hmm, I think it would be better to ask Ludie about that after we meet up with her. We barely know anything about this castle," said Yukine.

"Yeah, I figured. In that case, the problem is how we're gonna reach her, right?" said Yuika.

At the end of the day, knocking the guards out seemed like the safest choice. You actually have to fight them in the game, too. When I went to suggest this, Nanami spoke up.

"That reminds me. Master, Yuika: what about Fart Magic?"

"Please don't dig up memories I worked so hard to repress!"

Fart Magic was an energy revolutio— Hey, Yuika, knock it off. Don't choke me! Take your anger out on the dungeon behind that stuff instead!

"Miss Yuika, I am not bringing this up as a joke. I believe it would be extremely effective at distracting others," Nanami said before holding me down.

Uh, Nanami, hold Yuika back, not me! Why are you pinning me down? Seriously, I'm feeling some very large assets brushing up against me right now! But wait…if I fall unconscious here, that might be what I've always wanted.

"Yuika, c'mon. Calm down," Yukine said, tearing the two off me. Phew.

"Sure, that might be able to attract their attention, but I can't agree to using all that mana. Saving it as a last resort could be a good idea."

"Distracting them, hm," Yukine murmured, looking at all of us. "As long as one of us reaches Ludie in the end, it should work out somehow. So, how's this sound?"

Yukine then began to explain her idea.

◇

"Y'know, I can't say why, but I'm kinda starting to enjoy myself."

We hastened down the luxurious carpet covering the hallway.

I could get where Yuika was coming from. Sneaking around to free an elven princess from being locked away? Anyone would find that thrilling. Still, this was no time for fooling around.

"You do realize the Church of the Malevolent Lord is involved with all this, right?"

"I know, I know."

"Master, someone's coming."

"All right, I'll handle it."

Yuika stood out in front of the person approaching. It appeared to be a castle maid.

"I was trying to find the bathroom, but I got a bit lost on the way."

While Yuika was distracting the maid, we continued forward.

Yukine's plan was to feign ignorance to keep the guards and others occupied while we sent one of us along to sneak into Ludie's room. She had already distracted several guards and was now separated from us.

And the surprise thing about it was…

"I wonder why this is working so well."

Honestly, I figured it was going to be impossible. I had been convinced we wouldn't get anywhere without throwing hands, but for some reason, things were working out.

Thanks to Yukine's plan, we had gotten close to Ludie's room.

"While I can imagine several reasons why this is going so smoothly…I cannot deny that a simple stroke of lucky might be at play."

"Then maybe this was the best option, in a sense."

Given this was real life and not some game or manga, I figured that a strategy like this would've been totally out of the question.

"Although we are almost at our destination, it appears I need to go. Please cling to the ceiling."

Now it was Nanami's turn to step forward. She'd delivered her parting words as though "clinging to the ceiling" was an easy feat, but I wasn't some arachnid boy wonder here. Though to be fair, my stole could probably pull it off.

I stretched out my stole and stuck myself fast against the ceiling.

After watching and waiting for Nanami to lead the soldiers away, I went back down to the floor and continued on.

This whole thing really was going *too* smoothly, almost.

In the game, you meet up with Ludie, escape the castle, and immediately head for the Sanctuary. During this sequence, there are several unavoidable fights against elven knights along the way.

Of course, I had been fully prepared for this to happen, but so far, we hadn't run into a single fight. However…

"Claris has the last door covered, huh."

I unconsciously let out a sigh when I saw the woman up ahead. I had figured that *someone* would be stationed in front of Ludie's door. But Claris?

She doesn't appear in the game at all. That point alone made her an irregular character.

While I couldn't estimate exactly how she would act, when I thought of who her employer was, I knew her thinking wouldn't come down on Ludie's side of things.

"What do you think you're doing, Master Takioto?"

Claris called out my name.

"And here I thought I had totally masked my presence," I said as I moved out in front of Claris. When I did, however, she appeared unexpectedly shocked to see me.

She apologized to me; maybe she thought she'd startled me?

"Oh no, um. I thought you would be here eventually, so I was calling out your name to practice."

Huh? She was just…calling out my name?

"I think this is first time I've ever seen you make a face like that, Master Takioto."

I had to look seriously befuddled right now.

"…Isn't that going to make you seem like a weirdo, Claris?"

"You're right, it might. But anyway," Claris said, looking behind her at Ludie's room, then stepping a few paces away from the door to make it easier for me to enter.

"Uhhh, this isn't a trap, right?"

"Unfortunately not. If we were doing our combat training right now, I would have gladly led you into any number of traps, but alas."

She urged me along inside.

I assumed Ludie must have been feeling depressed inside her room.

At least, that's how she is during this part of the game. Without anyone to talk to about the dilemma, she tearfully worries over the

things she wants to do, the things she's capable of, and the practical issues getting in her way.

"Heya, Ludie."

But the girl sitting inside was dignified and elegant.

Now that I thought about it, Ludie had always been strong.

"I came here as soon as I could when I heard you were confined to your room, but you seem to be doing well."

"Hey, Kousuke?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you heard about the state my country is in right now?"

"Your mom told us everything. She was pretty forthcoming about it all, too."

"…I see."

Ludie let out a big sigh, as if expelling all the air in her stomach at once. Then— "I want to go to the Sanctuary," she declared. "I know it may be stupid, and I know I'll be stopped. Even then, I can't sit here and do nothing."

"Yeah?"

Ludie looked me in the eye and began to speak resolutely.

"Kousuke? I have a favor to ask."

"Sure, I'm game."

She let out a small sigh at my reply. Then a conflicted look came to her face; she looked happy, yet a bit regretful, all while seeming on the verge of tears.

"I swear, it's always like this with you…"

"'Course it is. No matter what happens, I'm on your side, Ludie."

We all are, I added.

"Thanks."

◇

Slipping out of the castle was not a difficult proposition. I came to this conclusion based on my conversation with Ludie. Though there were many different paths to the Sanctuary, there was a road near the castle that would take us straight there. However, the only ones

who could use this route were the imperial family; regular soldiers couldn't go inside.

Once we decided to meet back up with everyone and head there, we were faced with an obstacle in our path.

"Claris, out of the way."

The elf woman was blocking the exit to the room, keeping completely silent.

"Can you hear me?"

We didn't know when another soldier would come by. This situation had to be putting Ludie on edge. After a short pause, Claris opened her mouth.

"What do you plan on doing, Lady Ludivine?" she asked.

"You know, don't you? At this rate, the whole Empire will be in danger."

There was no way Claris didn't understand the current situation.

However, she wasn't simply Ludie's maid; she was also a knight. Could someone in her position honestly allow her charge to disregard the danger she was in?

"Are you going to go there yourself?"

"That's right. No matter what anyone says otherwise."

"There is a very real chance you could die. Do you remember how many times you've fallen into grave peril before?"

"Of course I do."

"The followers of the Church of the Malevolent Lord will be there—the same people who endangered your life the last time. On top of that, it is said the Sanctuary is home to some of the strongest monsters in the empire. Even then, do you still insist on going, Lady Ludivine?" Claris asked.

"I do."

"Have you thought over how much Emperor Marc and Empress Sophia love and care about you?"

"I know full well how much they care for me."

"And you still insist on going?"

Ludie’s eyes never once moved away from Claris.

The two elves locked gazes. They stared hard without exchanging a word. I felt a strange tension between the two.

They weren’t sending out mana or a hostile aura. They were slamming their solemn, earnest feelings at one another.

Thinking that, should the worst happen, this would end in a fight, I filled my stole with mana. However, this proved unnecessary.

“It’s okay, Master Takioto. Please, calm your mana,” Claris told me.

“Lady Ludivine, if I am being perfectly honest, I do not want you to go. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“…I know that.”

“At the same time, however, I also wish to respect your thinking.”

“Huh?”

“You really have grown strong,” Claris said, softening her expression a bit.

“Claris…”

Ludie tried to approach Claris, but the maid put her hand out in front of her and stopped her.

“I will allow you to go, Lady Ludivine. But I do have a condition.”

“What condition?”

“That you take me along with you. I will risk my life to keep you safe.”

Ludie dashed forward and threw her arms around Claris.

“Thank you, Claris.”

Yup. Wonderful. A happy ending.

Or at least, I wished that could have been the end of it, but was this really going to go so smoothly? Obviously, I was grateful to have

Claris along with us. Grateful, but…

"Are you sure, Claris? Ludie's parents *definitely* didn't give you any orders like that, right? You're technically employed by the empire, aren't you?"

While she may have accompanied Ludie as her bodyguard, Ludie's parents were the ones paying her salary. It seemed to me like their orders would take priority over Ludie's.

"He's right…," Ludie sorrowfully murmured after stepping back from Claris.

"When you came this way, did you perhaps think that there was an unusually small number of guards?"

"…I did."

"I worked out a plan. There are important officials within the empire who do not feel it is a good idea for His Majesty to go to the Sanctuary. I conspired with them."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up," I reflexively murmured. "Is that gonna work out all right?"

She was totally violating her orders here.

Claris feebly flashed a slightly self-deprecating smile. "Probably not, I would say. I'm prepared to be fired."

"…I won't let that happen."

Claris shook her head at Ludie's comment. "Lady Ludivine, please understand that is just how grave this matter is. But remember that I am doing this fully prepared for what may come."

Ludie nodded solemnly.





"However," Claris continued, flashing a gentle smile. "The thought occurred to me that perhaps, if I am fired, I could be employed as a maid of the Hanamura House. How does that sound?"

I mean, c'mon, a valuable talent like her?

"That would be more than I could ever hope for," I said.

"Better yet, Master, what do you think of taking her in right now?"

I let out a small yelp in surprise. I turned to find Nanami was standing beside me. When exactly did she get here?

"Nanami will always be at your side, Master, no matter what."

What horror movie did she fall out of? That sounded terrifying!

"We're here, too."

Next came Yuika and Yukine.

"Huh, why?"

"Apparently, Empress Sophia, of all people, told the soldiers nearby that Ludie was feeling anxious and it would be a good idea to let her friends talk with her."

Oh, if that was what was going on, then it made sense why we had been able to reach Ludie. So Sophia had really said that. I glanced at Claris.

"Oh…," she murmured in response to Yukine. "Forgive me, Miss Yukine. Though they may have said they heard that from Empress Sophia, the truth is, they were repeating a lie I spread myself. Lady Sophia would never say something like that, and she had absolutely no intention of letting Ludie out of here either."

Yukine was downright stunned by the boldness of Claris's actions. Y'know, it was a pretty rare sight to see her with her mouth hanging open.

"Lady Ludie, your mother and father truly love you from the bottom of their hearts and are very concerned for you. Do you understand that?"

With a solemn look on her face, Ludie nodded.

"Then promise me you'll make it back here no matter what, for your family's sake."

"Obviously, I'll come back home. Why…" She looked at all of us as she spoke. "…when I have such dependable friends, how couldn't I?"


CONFIG

Chapter 6 **The Sanctuary**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim "Figured it would be wilder and more overgrown, since there's no chance to do any upkeep in here."

Listening to Yukine as we all moved forward, Yuika nodded. "When I heard 'Sanctuary' I imagined something kinda intense, but this place is pretty."

Yuika was looking at a large white mushroom growing to the side. They were glowing slightly as if loudly announcing, *Hey, I'm poisonous!!* Looking at it was all well and good, but I really didn't want her to take a bite out of it or anything.

"This is my first time coming here, so I didn't really know what to expect," Ludie murmured.

It was difficult to come up with a comparison, but it was a sort of mysterious forest I could imagine mythical beasts living in. There were places where the canopy was large enough to block out the sun, but these areas were illuminated by the bioluminescence of firefly-like insects, glowing mushrooms like the one we had just passed, and pumpkin-looking plants, so there wasn't any need for an external light source.

In other sections of the forest, sunlight streamed through the trees, and in others still, there wasn't much overhead vegetation at all.

"Didn't expect we'd get here so easily, to be honest…"

With Claris's help, we had managed to get inside the Sanctuary without any trouble whatsoever.

In-game, there are several fights with imperial soldiers trying to stop Ludie along the way to the Sanctuary. This time, however, there weren't any signs of them.

The only ones who could enter the Sanctuary were the imperial family, Ludie included, as well as whoever held the key. Anyone with access could bring a small group to accompany them.

Part of why we'd had such an easy time getting inside was because Claris had been so quick to act.

"Did you anticipate everything would play out this way, Miss Claris?" Nanami asked.

"I suppose so… With how Lady Ludie has been lately, I was sure she would try to come here." Claris turned to me. "In that regard, I also assumed Emperor Marc and Empress Sophia would anticipate Lady Ludivine would attempt to come here herself."

"Knowing what I do about His and Her Majesty, that makes sense."

"I wasn't convinced Emperor Marc and Empress Sophia would anticipate Lady Ludie's friends escaping and meeting up with her. But *I* could easily imagine you all trying to come here together."

So that was why Claris had sprung into action.

"Thank you for all you did."

"Not at all. I was unsure how best to act, so I simply chose the option I would regret the least. However…if something bad does come up, I truly might have to impose on the Hanamura family, so should that happen…"

"We'll be waiting with open arms, of course."

"Kousuke, I'm not letting you have Claris, okay? I'll personally employ her if I have to."

"Please, Miss Ludie, there is no need to worry. Should the Hanamuras hire Claris, her job would be that of a Hanamura House maid. Considering Miss Hatsumi already trusts her, I imagine the fundamental aspects of her work won't change…outside of her nighttime duties."

"Nothing will change at all, whether it's morning, afternoon or night, okay? Don't add in suggestive stuff like that."

What exactly was she going to do at night, hmm?

"Well, I'm sure she'll be just fine with Kousuke… Actually, you might even employ her under even better conditions than we do."

The only "better conditions" I could really imagine offering was an increased salary. Thanks to Marino and Nanami, I had an unbelievable amount of money in my bank account. I didn't really understand it fully, but my passive income was kinda outrageous.

“At the very least, thanks to Nanami, money’s not an issue. I’d gladly pay you however much you wanted, Claris. Might not actually be a bad idea.”

The elf woman smiled awkwardly when she heard this. “I couldn’t accept any money from you. You’ve given me something that would take multiple lifetimes to properly pay back.”

Just then, Nanami’s mood changed.

“Forgive me for interrupting right as you declared that you would serve Master for life…but I must request you all be careful. I sense something approaching.”

Nanami, advancing onward beside Yukine, appeared to have picked up something, as she glared at a slightly open area and began to cast her enhance magic.

Yuika strained her eyes to look at what Nanami pointed out. “Uhhh, what is with that moving flower thing…? Wait, it’s not a flower!”

The thing Yuika had spotted was moving far too strangely to be swaying in the breeze. It wasn’t a flower, though. I knew what it was. This was a female-shaped monster that had flowers sprouting from its body.

“A person?” Claris squinted, looking at the monster.

It wasn’t a person, either. If it was, there wouldn’t be flowers blooming out of the tips of its hair.

“I see. While it may not hold a candle to my own, it has quite the voluptuous figure. It earns high marks for being covered in that sticky liquid, too.”

Nanami had a wonderful eye. Of course, this enemy was quite popular with eroge players, but at the same time, it severely punished those who took it lightly. That dubious sticky liquid it was covered in would melt our bodies, and it gave off a smell that made us hallucinate.

“I’ve seen that thing in some documents before. It’s an Aluloona, if I remember correctly,” I said.

Though by "documents," I meant the game, of course. The worldbuilding describes them as a sort of subspecies of Alraune. There are also versions called Aluloon that resemble cute little boys. Obviously, they drip the same dubious liquid, with an even more, well, *aggressive* design than even the Aluloona here—something, something, throwing a bone to the female audience or what have you.

"Takioto, look. What would you say those things on the ground over there are?" Yuika said, staring at the area where the Aluloona stood.

"Those would be bones, right?" Claris remarked, staring hard at them.

"Be careful, the Aluloona's slime will melt your body. Ludie, you ready to go?"

"Quite vicious for something so cute," Ludie said, gathering mana in her staff. "May I?"

We all nodded.

Right as Ludie launched her spell, Yukine and I stepped out in front. Yuika followed behind us.

Yukine and Yuika appeared ready to face it head on, so I stretched out my stole thinking I may as well hit its flank instead. Once I wrapped the fabric around a nearby tree branch, I pulled back forcefully on it to send myself flying. Next, I wrapped my stole around the tree at the end of my trajectory, advancing forward like a swinging pendulum.

"Seems like someone's upped his monkey swinging game, hasn't he?" Yuika commented.

The Sanctuary wasn't a dungeon with a singular corridor or a maze, but a small, forested grove of sorts. There was no reason not to use the terrain to my advantage.

If there was one problem though, it was that if I strayed too far from the path, I'd end up getting lost.

"If Ivy or Hanzo were here, I probably could've looked a lot cooler while moving, but— Ah, crap, you can't hear me if I'm this far away

anyway…”

When I watched Ivy move, I couldn’t help remembering a world-famous ninja anime named after the fishcake you find in ramen. Also, this might be my own bias here, but I bet Nanami and Yukine could pull off those same moves. They just didn’t need to right now.

The Aluloona held its hands up in front of itself right before the spell hit it. The next moment, flowers bloomed from its hands in a stunning display. It looked almost like a…

“Guess that’s some sort of shield. Careful, the enemy’s unharmed.”

Just when Yukine had closed in on the monster, several creatures resembling humans covered in moss abruptly appeared from the forest. One look was all it took for me to identify it.

“There’s a Matango here, too?!”

Though, to be precise, these things weren’t the Matango’s true form. The creatures were its summoned companions, matango funginoids.

With a flash of the *naginata* in Yukine’s hands, the matango funginoids were cleanly split in half. However, these were fungi, so unless something was done about the main body…

“…Looks like they regenerated.”

Ludie launched her spell. As though struck by a giant hammer, matango funginoids were sent flying and collided with a tree deeper in the forest.

For the time being, I focused on taking down the Aluloona, flying in from its side and trying to crush it with my Third Hand. However, several matango funginoids suddenly appeared in front of me.

Left with no choice, I smashed them to a pulp with my Third Hand. Then I moved to Yukine’s side as she backed off slightly to dodge the Aluloona’s slime.

Noticing me, Yukine attacked a nearby matango funginoid to make it easy for us to come together.

“Yukine, killing them the normal way won’t do anything. Everyone else, stay on guard!” I shouted some instructions to everyone.

“What are we supposed to do, then?”

I could hear Ludie's response from farther back.

"Burning them will eradicate all the fungi, but the main body can make as many replacements as it wants… The main body controlling those things has to be here somewhere, so if we can defeat it…"

"What's it look like, Takioto?"

"A mushroom. A real big mushroom. It might be mimicking something else as camouflage, though."

Yukine pulled back for a moment and looked around the area. She was searching for the Matango.

I pulverized the matango funginoid that appeared before me with a punch. I could grind away and defeat these guys like this until they were all gone, but if I did, even more would be just summoned to take their place.

We needed to kill the main body at its roots or our efforts would be wasted.

However, we couldn't just focus on the Matango. The Aluloona wasn't going to sit there doing nothing, after all. It arched its back and screamed, mouth agape as if spitting out breath.

"U-ugh, can you pipe down?!" Yuika shouted while covering her ears.

It sounded like a shrill, high-pitched shriek. Loud enough to make you stop in place and cover your ears on reflex.

And then, for anyone who had stopped…

"Yuika, watch out!"

…it flung the liquid covering its body at them. Yuika immediately leaped back and hid behind a nearby tree, but the trunk melted away with an awful sizzling sound, until the whole thing eventually tumbled over.

"This monster's a real pain."

Finding the camouflaged Matango would be difficult without focusing on the search. However, the Aluloona was preventing that from happening, and the matango funginoids were protecting the Aluloona. The two plant monsters made for a pretty good team.

But there was one place the pair didn't have control over—the air. And I had companions whom I could count on.

"I'm going in from above, Nanami."

I wrapped my stole around a tree branch and jumped upward. The matango funginoids couldn't fly, so I decided to head straight for the Aluloona from above.

"Understood, Master. Allow me to provide support."

Nanami was adept at every element of magic, including fire magic. While there were a fair number of the matango funginoids, they moved slowly, making it easy to target their weakness.

One of Nanami's arrows made the matango funginoid in front of her go up in flames. From there, Ludie and Claris took charge of the funginoids that were trying to chase after me.

Once my momentum carried me right to the Aluloona, I used my Third Hand to smash apart its flower shield. Then I released the mana I had accumulated in my sheath and slashed the monster with my katana.

In RPGs, if two opponents posed a problem as a unit, all you had to do was take care of one of them first. At that point, your foe's fighting strength would drop significantly.

With the Aluloona finally gone, Yukine was able to focus, and it wasn't long before she had located the Matango.

While I figured the Matango had been making us hallucinate, it was powerless in the face of Yukine's Mind's Eye. She went up to a moss-covered rock and swung her *naginata*. When she did, the rock released white smoke as it began to change shape.

The smoke cleared, revealing a mushroom sliced clean in two.

"Takioooto, looks like it dropped something!"

Yuika approached me from behind. If I had to guess, she had probably stayed behind me in case I wasn't able to fully defeat the Aluloona.

"What do you think this vial is for…? *Bleraugh*!"

Apparently, the Aluloona had left an item behind. Yuika had picked it up, only to immediately drop it and let out a cry unbefitting of an

upstanding young lady like herself.

"A-are you okay?"

She picked up the item—a vial filled with a mysterious liquid—like she was handling sludge. Then she pinched her nose with one hand while handing it to me with the other.

"This reeeeeeeks!"

This was the fault of the smell the Aluloona gave off. To men, it was a nice fragrance, if not somewhat overly sweet. To women, it smelled completely different—utterly repulsive. This was completely in line with the game's worldbuilding. Conversely, the Aluloon smelled nice for women and awful for men.

Actually, now that I thought about it, Yuika wasn't trying to pawn off this smelly crap on me here, was she? Though it smelled good to me, so I didn't especially mind.

"Please, Miss Yuika, calm yourself. At times like this, I recommend recalling a different smell. I know, why not imagine the scent of Master's socks instead?"

"That'd be just as stinky! And I've never even smelled them before!"

"Why are you so sure they're stinky when you've never actually sniffed them before, hmm?"

I was just asking the simple questions here. Smelly feet, huh…? I thought back to the events at Amaterasu Girls' Academy.

"It's fine, Takioto's socks aren't smelly."

"Kousuke, Yuika, Nanami. And you, too, Yuika. Enough with the comedy routine; let's be on our way."

Urged on by Ludie, we tightened up and continued forward.

This wasn't necessarily important or anything, but why had Yukine frozen up for a moment when the topic of my socks was brought up?

From there, we continued through the forest, battling several times along the way. After what must have been a few hours, we arrived at our destination.

"This time, it's…ruins?"

We had come before a colossal tree growing atop some ruins. Or maybe it was the other way around, and we had stopped before some ruins that had been constructed around the base of a tree. Not that it really mattered.

"We basically just followed the road the whole way. Are we sure this is the right place?"

No need to worry, this was the right area. Though to be honest, there was one other place I wanted to go, too. If we had used a specific, more systematic progression route, we would've been able to find rare items and weapons.

Nevertheless, we didn't have any time to spare on detours.

"This is probably fine. I'm not super well informed about the Sanctuary forest or anything, but I've heard there's an entrance to some ruins wrapped up in giant tree roots."

"Master, there's traces of a campsite around here."

At Nanami's words, the mood instantly changed.

We went over to the spot she had pointed out and saw the remnants of a campfire and some scattered trash. I wanted to chew these people out for not picking up after themselves, but it wasn't like the Church of the Malevolent Lord were the types to take littering seriously.

"It doesn't appear much time has passed," Nanami said, looking around the extinguished fire.

Judging by the footprints leading away from the fire, the followers had gone inside the ruins.

I took a moment to think. We hadn't slept since we had gone out for ramen. We were definitely in a hurry, sure, but moving around nonstop was a ticket to mental and physical exhaustion.

"…Why don't we talk about how we're going to proceed first and use it as a bit of a break?"

Everyone nodded.

◇

"Huh, it looks like any other dungeon inside," Yuika remarked.

As one could imagine from looking at the entrance of a structure built around a massive tree, countless branches had penetrated the brick-lined walls of the ruins.

There were fewer obstacles in the dungeon as there had been in the forest, so it would probably be easier to fight here.

"Different monsters are gonna show up here, that's why. Be careful."

In the Sanctuary forest, the monsters tended to have a weakness to fire. Once you went into the ruins, however, there was a dramatic change in monster type.

"What's that thing? A big squirrel?"

"Looks like it has a gemstone on its forehead, doesn't it? I've seen one of those before. It's a carbuncle, I believe."

Claris was right; it was a carbuncle.

A monster with a red gemstone on its forehead. However, the color of the gemstone and the monster's typing changed depending on the location. Visually, they looked downright adorable, but they were surprisingly strong, so underestimating them would get you knocked off your feet.

However, since one of their rare item drops was absolutely fantastic, they were also a monster worth farming, even over making progress with other events.

This time, for better or for worse, there was only one of them.

When the carbuncle noticed us, it retreated backward while summoning a magic circle. The moment the red gemstone on its forehead shined brightly and red particles enveloped its body, it released its magic.

"—!"

A flame shaped like a human hand. Perhaps because of the intense heat, the air around the hand seemed to shimmer.

As the spell hurtled toward us, Ludie met it with an Air Hammer.

A loud roar echoed across the area—the sound of the hand stopping her Air Hammer. Actually, it didn't just stop it. The hand crushed the Air Hammer in its grip and even tossed it aside.

At the same time, a hot gust of wind blew right past my body.

"I don't believe it…"

Ludie had been left dumbfounded by her spell being dismantled.

"Its attacks aren't cute *at all*, are they? Takioto, what are we supposed to do about that thing?" Yuika asked.

"It does have a weakness to water."

I could enchant my stole with the water element and punch it to a pulp, but before I could do so…

"I'll go after it, then."

…Yukine stepped out in front.

Water elemental magic was Yukine's specialty, so she was the perfect for the job. She ran toward the flame hand, with Claris following after her.

Meanwhile…

"We should go over there. Yuika, let's move in a pincer formation. Nanami, back us up."

We sprang into action.

Nanami fired at the creature with her bow to prevent it from moving any further, while Yuika and I pressed in from the right and left.

I glanced over at Yukine and saw her swinging her *naginata* at the flame hand.

"Cascade."

This certainly wasn't a slashing technique of any sort. Her move slammed the opponent with sheer volume and terrifying force, like a colossal waterfall pelting the earth.

The attack, so unlike the usual slashes of her blade, struck the flame hand, constricting and crushing it with overwhelming power and presence. Her target vanished with an explosive sound.

"Even during our training sessions, I hope to never get hit with that," Yuika murmured.

"Yuika, forget that, watch the carbuncle!"

I turned Yuika's focus back toward the monster.

While carbuncle weren't very skilled at melee combat, they were shrewd, nimble, and great with magic. Their natural temperament was to fire off spells from long range while retreating, making them a headache to fight, and there were some occasions when they would fire off a single attack before fleeing from battle altogether. Their escape chance wasn't especially high, and compared to some other egregious examples like the Liquid Metal Sl**e, they basically never fled at all. Though boy was it irritating when they *did*.

Regardless, their regular tactic was to keep their distance while firing off long-range magic, so there was a chance slow characters who were weak to magic would get trounced before they could do their thing. That meant the characters who had a hard time with them had a *really* hard time with them.

"Takioto, it's heading your way!"

The pincer attack seemed to be the right call, as our foe was charging at me without anywhere left to run. Jumping up high in front of me, it wreathed its tail in flames and swung it down with a vertical spin.

I blocked the blow with my water-empowered Third Hand and punched the carbuncle with my Fourth Hand. Then the monster disappeared, as though there had been nothing there in the first place.

"Takioto, watch out!" Yuika yelled.

She didn't need to worry, though. I wasn't sure if it was thanks to all my experience up until now or my Mind's Eye skill, but I had known from the very beginning where it had gone. If anything, I had been waiting for my enemy to make its move.

The carbuncle swung down its flaming tail at me, and I launched my katana from its sheath.

No items dropped from the carbuncle as it dissolved into magic particles. If we had been in the game, the current event wouldn't have progressed any further from this point, so I could've farmed

them as much as I wanted, but I didn't have much of a choice this time.

"Let's keep going."

To be honest, I would've liked to collect one of the items in this dungeon, too, but I'd have to save that for later. I could always give up on it if obtaining it truly proved impossible. If push came to shove, there was another item elsewhere that could act as a substitute.

More importantly, we needed to pursue the Church of the Malevolent Lord.


CONFIG

Chapter 7 **The Diamond Cross Knights and the Arch Elf**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim Continuing onward and dispatching several monsters along the way, we finally managed to catch up with the followers of the Church of the Malevolent Lord.

Looking ahead at them, I unconsciously muttered to myself, "What?"

First of all, their clothing was strange. Normally, they should have been grunts, with the clothes to match. But the people here…

"These guys look like some tough customers, don't they?" Yuika commented.

The group were cloaked in the type of robes that would make anyone with even the littlest hint of edgelord in their heart feel giddy.

They seemed to be discussing something, as I saw them move their heads to look at one another before sending their gazes back our way.

Claris gulped loudly when her eyes fell on their getup. "I've heard about those guys. They're the Diamond Cross Knights."

Claris's evaluation was right on the mark. The Diamond Cross Knights were a group within the Church of the Malevolent Lord who were especially gifted in combat. They generally don't show up until the end of the main story, and they definitely weren't supposed appear this early.

Still, we could figure out how to deal with them.

While they may have been strong, I didn't think they were tough enough to take us down at this point. Even though they show up near the end of the story, they were basically cannon fodder. If their captain made an appearance, or the shadowy figure whose role was to condemn traitors, then we would actually have a problem on our hands.

As such, the regular rank and file didn't bother me whatsoever. There were two *other* problems, though.

“Master, I feel like I’ve seen that woman before. Is that just my imagination?”

Among the group was a woman wearing a unique outfit. While it was still of a style that would send an edgelord into a fit, her appearance differed from that of the Diamond Cross Knights.

“No, you’re right.”

She was one of the heroines who was part of the Church of the Malevolent Lord.

I had met her previously inside the Amaterasu Dungeon at Amaterasu Girls’ Academy. She had obtained one of the items needed to revive the Malevolent Lord.

“What’s she doing here?”

I couldn’t help but ask this aloud. I mean, Bishop Hortensia is a character who is never supposed to appear in the Sanctuary, no matter which route you follow to get to this point. This was our first problem and a big one at that.

There was another. Right here at this spot was supposed to be a boss that protected the Sanctuary ruins, to ensure the seal on the Arch Elf up ahead couldn’t be lifted.

In-game, Iori’s group encounter the Church as they are temporarily withdrawing from the ruins, unable to best the ruins’ boss. There, the followers are defeated. However, the guardian boss then recognizes the player’s party as an enemy and fights them, too. It results in back-to-back fights without any time to heal, and afterwards the seal on the Arch Elf is kept safe. That was the original way the story progressed.

If the boss wasn’t here, that meant they must have defeated it. With Hortensia and the Diamond Cross Knights here instead of the regular followers, they would’ve had no trouble bringing it down.

“Takioto, ready to go?” Yukine called out to me as she reapplied all her enhancement magic.

“Yukine… Yeah, let’s go.”

Now that it had come to this, our only choice was to meet this new development head on. I would have liked to have been a bit

stronger now that Hortensia was here, but unfortunately, the current lineup we had was the only option.

While we spoke among ourselves, our opponents appeared to discuss something as well, not budging.

"Do you think it might be a trap?"

Nanami shook her head at Ludie.

"This may simply be wishful thinking on my part, but I do not believe our opponents expected us to catch up to them so quickly."

"Yeah. Otherwise, they'd never take a break around the fire back there." Yuika sided with Nanami.

"Master, this is the time to step up and show off your manliness. How does *'Traps? Like I give a shit. Just means we gotta break through 'em all'* sound for your opening line?"

"Nanami, I feel like Takioto's shown off how manly he is plenty of times now. Mostly without even realizing it."

"Master Takioto does have that side to him…"

Wait, really? You're making me blush!

"In any case, let's keep our guard up," I said before we all started moving, prompting the Diamond Cross Knights to move, too.

As far as I could see, there were five of them. A sword and shield user, a staff user, a bow user, a great hammer user, and Hortensia. The sword and shield user joined with the great hammer user in the front of the group to protect the staff and bow in the back line. Hortensia stood slightly removed from the rest of them.

Yukine was first to make her move. The swiftest member of our party, she kicked heavily against the ground as if she was about to do a long jump and closed in on the bow and staff users, looking to attack from long-range.

However, the person with the great hammer moved to block her. They used themselves as an axis to swing their great hammer while dashing in front of the bow and staff users, sweeping sideways at Yukine as she approached.

Dodging the looming strike, Yukine grimaced slightly. "A straight on clash with that thing would break my weapon in half. Might even

be stronger than me.”

“Seriously? It’s that strong…?”

Yuika was at a loss for words. She was one of the characters in *Magical★Explorer* depicted as being physically strong. Yet even Yuika had yet to beat Yukine in terms of sheer strength alone.

“If I don’t fully enchant my shield, it’d probably get smashed apart, too,” Claris said before running forward. As she did, a sparkling arrow flew diagonally upward from behind her. Once it was right above the enemy, a large magic circle formed from the arrow.

“Lightning Arrow!”

Right as the words left Nanami’s lips, several arrows of light rained down from the magic circle.

This spell was targeting the bow and staff users in the back line. However, the staff-wielding Church follower blocked it by summoning a fire shield. Then the bow-wielder released an arrow up at the magic circle, and it exploded right as it connected.

“They’re using bomb arrows, are they?”

The bow-user immediately shifted their gaze to Yukine and fired an arrow at her. However, Ludie quickly knocked away the projectile with Air Hammer.

Claris, catching up to Yukine’s position, confronted the Church follower with the sword.

Which meant…

“Guess I’m fighting you then, huh.” I confronted the one woman who still hadn’t joined the fight.

I couldn’t tell if she was watching how the battle was going, if she just couldn’t be bothered to fight, or if this was all part of their strategy. Hortensia simply observed me, without attacking or saying a word.

“Not running away this time?”

Despite my cheeky taunt, she still didn’t say anything. When I went to punch her with my Third Hand, she finally did something.

Hortensia removed something from her item box.

“Well, well, that’s quite the flashy weapon.”

It was a scythe, the blade of which was about as long as my arm. In the game, Hortensia is adept at wielding somewhat peculiar weapons, and while she's with the Church of the Malevolent Lord, she uses a scythe.

She aimed her weapon at my Third Hand and swung it down.

There was a loud metallic clang of the blade hitting something hard. My stole didn't break at all thanks to the serious amount of mana I had poured into it. Hortensia continued to put strength behind her scythe and jumped off the ground.

"That'd earn you a lot of artistry points for sure."

She, of all things, used the point of her scythe as an axis, jumping while doing a backflip to land behind me.

It was only for a moment, but I locked eyes with her. Her red irises, beautiful enough to entrance me if I wasn't careful, stared down at me. I also caught a glimpse of what she was wearing beneath the robe, and it was *very* racy.

If this was somewhere like a *tsundere* café that served the customer as poorly as they could get away with, I might have been overjoyed here, but regrettably, I was not far gone enough to enjoy a woman swinging a scythe at me.

Right as she landed back on the ground, she whirled around while swinging her scythe.

Spurred by the centrifugal force, her weapon came barreling toward me, but I met it with my stole.

I successfully defended against her strike, but since she had opened up space between us, I was unable to counterattack.

Again Hortensia used her attack to shift her position. Her movements were very rational, being able to attack and reposition herself at the same time.

And the scythe wasn't her only specialty. She also excelled at casting dark magic at high speeds.

In fact, she had just materialized a magic circle in mere seconds and cast her spell. To make matters worse, it was the most irritating dark magic spell of all, at least in my estimation.

"M-my body's so heavy."

Hortensia's forte was using debuff spells to weaken opponents, along with curse and poison type spells. If I was going to counteract this…items were really my only option.

"Takiooooto? Are you okay?!"

Thankfully, I had Yuika and her powerful healing magic on my side. I hadn't anticipated Hortensia would be here, so I hadn't properly prepared the items needed to defend against her. In some cases, this could have turned into a serious struggle for me.

That being said, though, status affliction recovery items are unbelievably rare in the game and can only be obtained in the second half of the main story or in secret dungeons.

Next, Hortensia materialized several shields made of dark magic. While they were able to block the attacks from my Third Hand and Fourth Hand, the shields were brittle, and each one only lasted for one attack.

However, defending just once gave her plenty of time to make a counterattack.

The scythe pressed in toward me. I attempted to back up, then suddenly noticed something.

There was a dark shield floating behind me. Hortensia had purposefully summoned a shield behind my position to prevent me from dodging.

I couldn't evade the attack. I took aim at the blade looming in front of me and drew my katana.

"…Can't cut it, huh?"

While the speed of my blade was several times faster than Hortensia's, she had made sure to fill her weapon with mana, preventing me from cutting through it. If I built up a crazy amount of mana and concentrated to my absolute limit, it was possible I could cut through it. The question was if she would actually give me the time to make that possible.

My opponent appeared unable to smother all the power behind my blade, and her scythe was repelled far backwards. Yet she

immediately changed her stance and flew back to dodge my follow-up attack.

I considered closing the gap between us, but she cast some sort of spell and pointed her off-hand at me, so I abandoned the idea. Inside, I returned my katana to its sheath and gathered mana in it.

Simply being cautious of her debuff magic would be enough to handle an opponent of her caliber. She could utilize long range and melee range magic equally, with her shield magic from before being one such example. However, her long-range abilities weren't as good as Shion's, and her close-range abilities couldn't best Katorina's. The best way to put it was that support was her specialty.

Just as I had expected, she cast a spell. After she enveloped her scythe in dark magic, she swung it at me full force.

The scythe rocketed toward me, spinning all the while.

For a second, I thought she had thrown her scythe at me, but it was still firm in her hands. What she had really done was summoned another scythe with her magic and fired it at me.

*What is this, Ghost n' G**lins?* I inwardly quipped as I recalled a classic game.

I took a breath before cutting through the magic scythe approaching me. If I had dodged, it would have continued onward to hit Yuika, who was providing support at my back.

During our next several exchanges of blows, I came to understand something about Hortensia—she felt sort of like a cross between Yukine and Ivy, having a superb physical core and sense of balance while being light and nimble.

With that in mind, how would she handle this?

I blocked her sweeping sideways slash by slamming it down to the ground.

Hortensia used not only her own strength, but also the centrifugal force created from swinging her heavy scythe to move and connect her attacks. As such, I tried to smother her centrifugal force by smacking the scythe down to the ground, then deliver an attack from above while her arms were down low.

However, this plan of mine didn't work out well.

Hortensia lost her balance for a minute. Unfortunately, in a drastic feat of strength, she purposefully rolled along the ground to open up space between us. As she rolled, she created a dark magic shield, defending against any follow-up attacks as she regained her footing.

In the face of her maneuver, my attack failed to hit its mark.

She was truly a pain in the ass. Her combat sense was *too* keen. Honestly, she was *super* hard to fight. The impression I got from her in-game was that she had pretty high evasion, but if this was how she was able to move, then obviously her evasion chances would be through the roof.

"What a nuisance."

She finally let out the first words since our paths had crossed. I had been convinced she was going to go through all this without saying a word, but evidently, I was wrong. Now how was I going to follow up? I hoped I could keep our conversation going a while and draw some information out of her, but…

"This is the first time you've graced me with your voice, and it's just as cute as you are."

Yeah, I couldn't think of anything. Instead, I just ended up hitting on her. I felt a twinge of regret at screwing up my opening line so badly.

"…What's your deal anyway?" she asked, adjusting her hood. She didn't pull it down very far, perhaps because I had already gotten a clear look at her face.

While it wasn't exactly a reply to the drivel I had spat out, for now, I was just relieved we were holding a conversation at all.

"Whoever I am, it's got something to do with the Hanamuras, apparently. Hell if I know, though."

I only knew the same stuff everyone else could look up. I seriously had no clue. Obviously, I was aware that this wasn't what she was really getting at, but for now, this was my reply.

"I know you're involved with the Hanamura family, Kousuke Takioto. I've also heard about that freakish nature of yours."

So she was calling me a freak, eh? What a rude thing to say.

"While I would love to explain things, it's extremely difficult to really lay out. If I go into everything, you'll probably think I'm kinda kooky, too."

"I already think that."

…Well, that answer bugged me a bit, but whatever. There was something more important I wanted to ask.

"Why are you here? And why are you keeping your distance from the Diamond Cross Knights?"

I glanced at Yukine and the others. Claris and Yukine appeared to be safely battling against the two frontliners. Yukine had said something about her opponent's raw power giving her trouble, but her stats leaned less toward power and more toward speed and technique. She would never lose to an enemy who was all brute strength and nothing else. Claris also trained regularly with Yukine. No way she was going to be bested by a foe weaker than her sparring partner.

Of course, the enemy's back line was providing enough support to turn the tides if things kept up this way. However, Ludia and Nanami were providing their own backup fire. All things told, we had an overwhelming advantage, more or less.

Though our foe may have been strong, we were even stronger—simple as that.

Yuika must have figured I didn't need much help either and had turned her attention to Yukine and the others.

With all that in mind…

…we were busily engaged in this team battle, yet Hortensia had no back up at all. No one was coming to her. She was all alone.

"Why do I need to tell you that?" she asked.

I mean, this basically shut down the whole conversation, but…

"You don't, but can't a guy be curious?"

"…I was part of a different squad originally. Just happened to be grouped up with them today."

She gave what seemed to be a genuine answer. Judging from the vibe of our conversation, I believed she was telling the truth.

I still had questions, though. She hadn't talked about why she was here, and even as her comrades were getting pushed to the brink, she didn't show any signs of panic.

Did her real objective lie elsewhere?

Right as I pondered the question…I felt powerful mana coming from deeper in the ruins.

"Actually, it looks like we'll achieve our goal here soon."

I unconsciously scratched my head. If there was anyone who could be giving off such powerful mana up ahead…

"…So you undid the seal, then."

… realistically, it had to be the Arch Elf.

"Did you think we were the only ones who snuck in here? Everyone else went on ahead to get the job done. We figured they'd handle it somehow, so we were just here buying time."

Based on her statement, the Church of the Malevolent Lord must have been planning on reviving the Arch Elf from the beginning.

Clearly, Hortensia and her group were here instead of the boss guarding the Sanctuary because they had already defeated it.

Thus…

"Ah right, I get it. You came with at least two squads. While your group here defeated the boss, the other squad moved to focus on your original goal of reviving the Arch Elf. Then you encountered us while you were taking a short break following the boss battle. Sound about right?"

Hortensia didn't deny anything.

I couldn't hold back my sigh.

"Well, this sucks. Why the heck did you have to undo the seal on that insane necromancer asshole anyway? Ugh, I already feel the headache coming on."

I sighed. Then I looked around and saw that the Diamond Cross Knights had gathered in one area, save for Hortensia. No longer fighting against them, Yukine, Ludie, Claris, Yuika, and Nanami had

now come right over to the knights, and the two groups appeared to be discussing something.

They must have said something to provoke Yukine and the others. They all looked with shock in the direction where the Arch Elf had been sealed away.

After exchanging another word or two, the Diamond Cross Knights actually turned their back on Yukine and the others and fled in the Arch Elf's direction. They were probably trying to meet up with their comrades who had been focused on the unsealing.

When Yukine took a step forward to pursue them, I shouted at her.

"Yukine, I don't think we should chase them! No, actually, you *definitely* shouldn't!!"

She stopped. Charging on ahead would be real bad news. If she did end up encountering the Arch Elf farther in, she would clearly be bested.

To pull off a win in our current state, we would need to rely on a slightly unique combat strategy.

After calling out to stop Yukine, I turned back to Hortensia.

I'd had a bad feeling about this from the start. After all, none of the people here right now were supposed to be a part of this event. Normally, the fight against the Arch Elf up ahead is supposed to happen later on. We were now in a situation where fighting him was our only option.

"I doubt we'll see each other again," Hortensia said, going to follow the other Diamond Cross Knights deeper in, but I snapped my stole like a spring and jumped out in front of Hortensia, blocking her path ahead.

"Okay, hold up a sec. If you go back there, you're definitely gonna wind up dead," I said, gesturing to Yukine and the others to not come over to my position yet. There was something I wanted to talk to Hortensia about alone.

"…Assuming you're telling the truth, why would you tell your enemy that?" she asked, looking at me with suspicion.

"Feel free to presume I know absolutely everything. That's why I stopped you. I know all about you too, by the way."

"Do you, now?"

"That's right. So let me ask you something: Do you really not care what happens to anyone else so long as you manage to achieve what you're after?"

Like what she had done just now, for example.

A sad expression came to her face. And then…

"I'm bound to go to hell, aren't I?" she said with a hint of self-deprecation.

As someone who knew Hortensia's position and goals and how the Church was organized, I could tell her words signaled she didn't want to get regular people involved.

So…

"Nah. You're not going to hell."

This was my reply.

"…And why's that?"

"I'm gonna save you."

She scowled and stared hard at me. I stared back at her without looking away, and she let out a small sigh.

"Don't just say whatever comes to mind…as if you know anything about me."

I mean, if I was in her shoes, I probably would've punched myself in the face, too. I would've used that scythe of hers to decapitate whatever guy was spouting this crap. Except, seeing she still wasn't attacking me after everything I said, I couldn't help but think about how she really was the Hortensia I knew so well.

"I wasn't just bullshitting, okay? I'm serious. I'm always serious. I've managed to defeat every opponent that's come my way, and as of right now, everyone's been able to lead a normal life, too."

"You're making less and less sense."

"Look, you don't have to know what any of that means, okay?"

She looked like she was going say something, but I spoke over her, throwing out words as if to drown her out completely.

"You best be prepared, 'cause I'm gonna make sure you end up happy, got it?"

This was my declaration to her. At the same time, it was also a warning to myself that there was no turning back from here.

"…What's with you? You're pushy, you won't listen to anything I say, and you don't have a shred of tact. Keep it up, and everyone's going to detest you."

Well, sure, that may be true and all, but I was in the Ceremonial Committee.

"Unfortunately, everyone on campus already hates me. Not that I really care if I'm liked or not."





As long as Hortensia ended up happy, I couldn't care less what happened to me.

"…You seriously don't make any sense."

"I can live with that for now. Let me give you a word of warning, though."

"Like I need any warnings from you."

"You may be trying to use that guy to try and kill him, but you're just getting manipulated yourself. Nothing will change, even if you do kill him. Depending on how things play out, you might end up witnessing an even worse kind of hell."

"Again, as if you know anything."

"I'm saying this *because* I know, Hortensia."

She simply stood in place, her eyes bulging wide. She must have been questioning why I would know her name at all.

Well, I had said what I wanted to say. Nanami and the others looked worried, and we needed to handle something else right now, so staying here any longer would be a waste of time.

I filled a return magic stone with mana and threw it at her. Hortensia had to be shaken up. She caught the stone on reflex, then dissolved into particles of light with a bit of a dumb look on her face.

"Are you okay, Master?" Nanami approached me right as Hortensia disappeared.

"Hm? I'm totally unharmed."

"I'm referring to the look on your face. We can all sense it, no matter how hard you try to put up a strong front. You look like you finally summoned the courage to message the girl you like, only for her to respond three days later."

"Oh, there's no spark there, so you might as well give up."

"I don't know, Takioto. You seem like the type to keep coming on strong, even when she's not interested at all. You're pretty assertive, and you swing into action if there's the slightest possibility of success. Seemed like you were only a push or two away from breaking her down, too," Yuika said, joining in on the conversation.

I mean, sure, brute forcing my way through things was all well and good, but there were a lot of complex factors at play with Hortensia. Also the story here was so different from my expectations, I sorta felt like I didn't have a clue what to do anymore.

"For starters, though, that girl is with the Church, right?"

"Yeah, she's got some stuff going on, and she infiltrated it pretending to be a member."

"You sure you're not trying to go after too many ladies at once here?" Yuika shot me a look of exasperation.

"He truly is. I wish he would spare a thought to me and my managerial responsibilities." Nanami also chimed in with some weird nonsense.

What sort of "management" was she even talking about? Putting that aside, though…

"…You sure seem laid-back, even when we've got someone really dangerous coming straight for us."

"For one, I've already fought against enemies who were way stronger, and you don't seem very worried either, Takioto," said Yuika.

"That's because I know I can use you as a shield to escape when things go south."

"Yeah, yeah, I *doubt* that one! If we do have to run away, you're *definitely* going to be staying behind until the very end, don't lie. I'll totally flee right away, though."

Okay, c'mon, she may say this stuff, but if such a moment really did come, I knew for sure she would stay behind without running.

"…What's that suggestive smile for? Not you too, Nanami."

"I can see it now. Allow me to paint the scene for you. *Phew*… '*Excuse* me?! Seriously, Takioto, what do you think you're doing? I knew it, you're a mess without me, whether in battle or in your private lif—' Oh, Miss Yuika, what is the matter?"

"Yup, fine, I get it, Nanami, I get it. Enough of the impression, thanks. You don't have to fabricate a scenario either."

While we were talking, the remaining three—Ludie, Yukine and Claris—came over.

Once we all started talking about what we were doing from here, a grave look came over everyone's faces. Yukine was the only one who looked out at all our expressions and seemed slightly relieved.

"…We chatted with those Church guys a little bit, and if what they said is true, then this whole situation's gotten a lot trickier."

"They were probably right. I can't really come up with any other explanation for that nasty presence I felt a few moments ago."

When I said this, Claris gave me an exasperated look.

"I've wondered about this before, but how exactly do you have such a comprehensive grasp of the current situation, Master Takioto?"

Well, that's 'cause I'd fought against him so many times in the game before. Though, if I had to give the best answer to convince her, then I would say…

"Marino just told me some stuff about the Sanctuary."

She really hadn't, but for now, this is what I was going with.

"Then you're saying you know who's sealed away here?"

I nodded at Claris's question.

"Oh yeah, I know, all right. I know all sorts of stuff," I said, looking at Ludie.

Like how we would need her power to defeat the Arch Elf, for example.

"Takioto, let me get right to the point: Do we have a chance?" Yukine asked.

A difficult question.

"One hundred percent, if we can prepare."

"And what of those preparations?"

"Safe to say they haven't even been started yet."

I mean, normally he isn't supposed to be revived at this point, okay? In the game, the Church followers who come here are ultimately sent packing by the floor boss protecting the ruins. Then they try to flee and run into Iori's party and fight. While Iori and the

others win that battle, the boss recognizes them as a threat and another fight commences.

In other words, the Arch Elf sealed deeper within isn't revived, and the event ends. The player does end up defeating him in a separate incident, though.

"I think it'll be easier to get through this than it was with the Book of Raziel, despite us not having the luxury of preparing a bunch beforehand like we had with her."

Yuika put a hand to her mouth at my words and went bug eyed, as if scandalized.

"Wait, hold on a second. You called us to help during the Book of Raziel incident when it was *that* dangerous?!"

She wasn't wrong. If it hadn't worked out, Ms. Sakura would have committed suicide or have died at our hands. But hang on—I had insisted over and over again it was risky, hadn't I? If memory served, that had been enough to convince Yuika.

On the other hand, none of that really seemed to matter to Yuika. In fact…

"What do we need to do to win?"

…she seemed to take this situation far more seriously. I could understand why, though.

"In order to win…" I glanced at Ludie.

"You need me?"

"Do you know already, Ludie? And Claris for that matter…? Judging by your reaction, it seems you do."

"Personally, I want to know why *you* know about this, if anything."

Ludie had a very good point.

"I said something similar before, but let's just say I have this knowledge because I'm a Hanamura and leave it at that. Right now, we've got bigger things to worry about, everyone. That guy is definitely going to come this way, so we need to prepare. We need to talk about who we're dealing with, too."

"Fair enough." Ludie heaved a big sigh. Then she began to explain. "I imagine we'll need to go over our tactics, too, but first I want to

preface things by talking about who's sealed away here."

"Please do," Nanami replied.

"It's the Arch Elf."

"The Arch Elf?"

"Yes, a superior type of elf who learned forbidden magic. Also, we're pretty far removed, but we're technically related. He's a distant ancestor of mine."

Yukine and Yuika were both surprised at the word "ancestor."

"Why is one of your ancestors sealed up here?"

"Well, the Arch Elf…is a necromancer, someone who wields magic that controls the dead, also known as necromancy. He used his powers to wage war on Leggenze, who was kidnapping elves and turning them into slaves."

"Elves are prized for our looks, so there was apparently no end to people looking to abduct us," Claris added.

"Leggenze is still a human supremacist state now, but apparently, it was even worse in the past. The Arch Elf's Necromancy was so powerful, he humiliated them when he challenged them to war. Leggenze was utterly helpless and overwhelmed against him."

Without some sort of countermeasure, it seemed impossible to win against someone who could turn the dead into his allies over and over again.

"Leggenze decided they couldn't keep the war going. They had lost countless citizens in the conflict. So Leggenze sued for peace with the empire. They also promised to release all the elves within their borders. There was a problem though."

"A problem?"

"The Arch Elf wasn't satisfied with just taking back the elves who had been captured. His way of thinking had gotten too extreme. He declared the empire needed to continue the war against Leggenze and slaughter every last one of its citizens," Ludie said, sighing.

"The elven people didn't approve of this. And so, the Arch Elf took to killing anyone who got in his way or insisted he was going too far,

whether they were friend or foe. Then he would turn them into his pawns with his magic."

Yukine unconsciously cast her eyes downward. "That's… unspeakable."

"Around that time, the Arch Elf began to unravel. He only ever expressed negative emotions like hatred and rage, and he lost whatever kindness and self-control he had left. I suppose you could say he was a bit like a runaway train."

"How did that come to happen?" Nanami asked.

"There are several possible explanations, but his downfall is primarily attributed to the method he used to attain his Arch Elf status and his overuse of necromancy. By the end, he was no longer capable of speech, and he would attack at random anyone who laid eyes on him."

"I see… So what happened after that?" Nanami asked, and Ludie continued.

"The emperor at the time—me and my father's ancestor—thought this was a dangerous development. He also happened to be the Arch Elf's older brother."

"Huh?!" Yuika exclaimed in surprise.

"With his younger brother as dangerous as he was, the emperor attained the legendary power of the High Elf, passed down through the imperial family, in order to protect his people and the rest of his family. It is said he tried to kill the Arch Elf with his High Elven powers, but the task proved too difficult. The emperor was unable to defeat him once and for all."

Pretty much everything Ludie had said was true. If I had to add anything else, it was the extra detail about how High Elf king's attempt to kill him caused the Arch Elf's mind and soul to completely break down for good.

He now held a grudge not only against Leggenze, but against the Tréfle Empire as well. If the Arch Elf were to be revived…

"If the Arch Elf is revived, he'll kill every person, elf or otherwise, he can get his hands on. On top of that, the more time is spent

trying to kill him, the more numbers he will add to his side, until he's truly too much to handle. In other words, our only hope is to defeat him now. Otherwise, the empire will suffer incalculable losses."

Simply resealing him would work, too, but in the game, you can only barely make this happen by using a unique tool passed down through the empire, and since the tool wasn't in our possession right now, this would be impossible.

The Arch Elf could control dead monsters, too, not just humans and elves, and when all else failed, he could summon zombies from nothing. Though, the zombies he summoned this way were weak.

If he manipulated the monsters around him in the Sanctuary, there was a chance the reigning Emperor Marc would be unable to deal with him. If things got that bad, he might prove more than we could handle, too.

This seemed to be why His Majesty hadn't immediately gone off to fight, and why he had deployed his forces in front of the Sanctuary, in case anything happened.

It was then Claris began to speak with a sour look on her face.

"There's something I think best to inform you all about. The High Elf who created the seal was Lady Ludivine's ancestor. Now, as for the descendant of the Arch Elf, well…how should I put this?"

She was being evasive. While I understood why it was difficult to bring up, after coming this far, it was better to just come out and say it. We didn't have much time to spare either.

"That'd be Anemone."

When I said this, everyone besides Ludie and Claris looked shocked. They probably all believed she was just a perverted inventor and nothing else. Hell, before I played her route in the game, I hadn't known any of this stuff, either.

Anemone had a difficult past, and her ancestry was the source of it all.

Be that as it may, if I had known things would play out this way, it might have been better to bring Anemone along with us. Having her here would have made the fight a bit easier. She was well informed about the Arch Elf, being his descendent and all. Not that there was any point in wishing for what could have been.

"How about we leave the Arch Elf backstory at that? We generally covered the broad strokes, and we can look into him all we want after we wrap all this up and go back home."

Nanami nodded in agreement. "Indeed, while Miss Ludivine and Miss Claris's explanation was quite engaging, I believe it would be more constructive to think about how best to take down the newly revived Arch Elf. At this rate, the empire will be in danger."

"Good point. It's time to switch gears."

Everyone nodded at Yukine's comment.

"Hmm. With all these developments, we better summarize everything for a sec. The person sealed up ahead of us is the Arch Elf, a necromancer who controls the dead. After using his power too much, he eventually went out of control, attacking everyone at random, not just his enemies from Leggenze. And we need to do something to stop him," Yukine said, cleanly summarizing the present situation.

"So, this may just be me, but I sorta don't get what this whole Arch Elf is in the first place?"

"Strictly speaking, this isn't quite right, but for now, just think him as a superior type of elf who possesses far greater power than other elves."

Claris grimaced at my words. She probably had some thoughts about all the different things I knew about. I just wanted her not to prod me about it. Though, considering I was going to go into greater detail from here, she might feel an even greater urge to call me out.

"Okay, let me give a simple explanation."

I told everyone the following: The Arch Elf could use his power to construct what was essentially a very strong barrier.

While it was possible to break the barrier by hitting it with a tremendous amount of force, the strength required to do so was unrealistic for us to achieve at present.

Another way to easily break this barrier was to hit it with the same power used to create it. Something similar had been done back when he was first sealed away.

"Wait, but by the 'same power,' you mean the Arch Elf's, right? Legendary powers like that just don't grow on… Oh, I see, there's also the High Elf you mentioned."

Everything clicked for Yuika as she spoke aloud. She then turned to Ludie. Yukine also seemed to pick up on the implication, and her eyes fell on Ludie, too.

"Sure, I technically have their blood in me. But Father hasn't managed to tap into the High Elf's power, so I seriously doubt I'll be able to, either. But…"

"But?"

"I have to do *something*. I know that if I don't figure something out, the empire, Lilou, Mother, and Father will all be in grave danger."

"Lady Ludivine…," Claris murmured, a pained look on her face. I figured she was the one here who felt the most conflicted inside.

"Claris, this is a direct order. Fight alongside me."

"Of course, Lady Ludie."

"I also have a favor to ask you all, too. I want you to fight together with us."

She had to already know the answer without asking. If we weren't going to fight, we would've probably fled by now anyway.

"Of course."

"An Arch Elf necromancer. Hee-hee, can't wait to get a crack at him," Yukine said with a smile.

"Are you sure? You're really, really okay with this?" Ludie persisted.

"Master, I have heard that in moments such as these, the best course of action is to say 'Time to shut up' and kiss her."

“Where the hell did you get that little nugget of knowledge from, huh?”

If a kiss really was enough to cheer her up, I’d kiss her however much she wanted, and to be honest, I’d never want to let go again once we latched lips. I always wondered, though, where the hell was she getting this weird information of hers from anyway?

“Putting the absur-Nami aside… Ludie.”

“What is it?”

“It’s time to protect the empire.”

“…Yeah, thanks.”

Now that everyone was on the same page…

“Okay then, with all that sorted, we need to come up with a strategy first.”

From there, we discussed how we were going to proceed.

The barrier meant we couldn’t directly inflict any damage to the Arch Elf. In order to defeat him, we would need to destroy the barrier with the power of the High Elf.

Ludie was the only one capable of that. As such, we would have Ludie focus all her efforts on the Arch Elf. Meanwhile, we would fend off the Arch-Elf’s minions.

“So then, the general strategy is for us to protect Ludie. Meanwhile, Ludie will concentrate on attaining the High Elf power and destroying the barrier.”

“Sounds acceptable to me.”

Yukine sounded satisfied. The problem was that alone wasn’t going to be enough.

“Generally speaking, I think this plan is workable, but there’s still one problem.”

“What would that be?”

Yuika cocked her head. I outlined the problem to them, prefacing my explanation by asking them to save the incredulous prodding about why I even knew this for afterward.

“When the battle starts, the Arch Elf will summon his zombie minions, but if possible, I’d like us to leave at least four or five

around.”

“Why would that be?” Nanami asked.

“The Arch Elf has to expend a fair amount of his own resources on controlling his minions. As a result, keep in mind that he usually can’t do anything besides keeping his barrier up.”

He was the type of enemy that often popped up in RPGs, the kind that could only get going under certain conditions. As the Arch Elf lost his minions, he would gain more resources to expend and gain the ability to move and attack.

“The Arch Elf is super strong. If we’re going to attack him with such few numbers, he’ll be a lot stronger without any minions at his side. So I want to restrict his available resources as much as possible.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but what you’re saying is this: We’ll reduce the enemy’s numbers down to five total, and then shift over to holding out against their attacks…” Yukine got this far before turning to Ludie. “…while we wait for Ludie to destroy the barrier. After that, we take the Arch Elf down.”

“That’s right.”

In truth leaving just four enemies was fine, but if by some chance one was defeated, the Arch Elf would gain the ability to move, so I went with five for some leeway. That said, this strategy was only based on how things go in the game, so there was the chance that he might join the fray while controlling several minions at once. If things panned out like that, we would need to defeat the minions first and then shift to enduring the Arch Elf’s onslaught.

Yukine made sure everyone was on the same page. “Got it then, that’ll be our strategy.”

Then right as we had wrapped everything up…

“Sorry to bring this up after we’ve settled on a plan, but I have a favor to ask all of you.”

…Ludie chimed in.

“What sort of favor?”

"If I can't awaken my High Elf power, even if we're still in battle, I want you to leave me behind and escape."

"Ludie…," Yuika murmured.

I patted Ludie on the shoulder.

"What is it, Kousuke?"

"You'll make it happen. I guarantee it."

"But Father tried all sorts of things to awaken it in himself, and even then, he couldn't do it. So there's a really high chance that I won't be able to eith—"

Was her anxiety making her overly talkative? I calmed her down as she hastily continued. And then…

"Your dad's your dad, and you're you," I said. "I don't know anyone more capable of pulling this off than you, Ludie."

"But—"

"No buts. Believe me, I know you. Besides, you've eaten something His Majesty hasn't, right?"

"Eaten? Eaten what? Ramen?"

Okay seriously, just how much did she like ramen? C'mon, that wasn't it.

"The Seed of Possibility, duh. You're overflowing with potential. So I know you can do it."

Though, even if she hadn't eaten it, she would have been able to awaken just fine. I figured framing it like this would make her a bit more relieved and give her the confidence to pull it off. The placebo effect was a real thing and all.

"I'll block every attack that's sent your way. So just focus on yourself, Ludie."

She nodded, still wearing an uneasy look on her face.

◇

Shortly after that, the Arch Elf appeared. We didn't need to go to him; he came to us.

"Here he is."

I felt an ominous power unlike what I had been feeling until now. When I looked at him, the first thought to come to mind was…

"Hmmm. A handsome dark elf guy, huh."

Elves really didn't play fair. I wanted to be born beautiful, too, y'know.

"He's hot, but I don't want to get anywhere near him. If I had to choose, I'd say you're the tiiiiiny bit better option, Takioto."

Yuika was absolutely right. The Arch Elf's aura was frightening stuff. If you mixed together enmity, anger, and an all-consuming grudge, this was probably what would come out. Though, I didn't really like hearing I was only *slightly* better than a guy like that.

"His mana feels like it's gone berserk. Also, you were right, Takioto. I can tell there's a faint barrier around him."

Yukine sternly sized him up, *naginata* in hand.

As he walked toward us, the Arch Elf placed his hand out in front of his chest and built up mana. The instant he swung it downward, something resembling a swirling black whirlpool appeared on the ground. That was summoning magic, all right. He was going to attack us with his zombie underlings. The same zombies as alwa— Um?

"Huh?"

A confused sound escaped my lips.

"This is a bit different from what you told us, Takioto. That, and, how can I put it? Those things he's bringing along? They look *reeeeeeeeally* familiar, don't you think?"

"Oh yes, I've seen them before," said Ludie.

"Yup, same here. Look pretty familiar all right," I said.

Of course they looked familiar. We had been fighting against them just a few moments ago.

"What do you think the Church of the Malevolent Lord, and the Diamond Cross Knights at that, are doing here?"

Yuika brought up a damn good point. In the game, the Arch Elf summons some random zombies for you to fight, but no one ever mentions anything about him controlling the Church followers, too.

If I thought about it realistically…

The squad of followers who had revived the Arch Elf must have been killed.

And then, Diamond Cross Knights we'd fought must have encountered the Arch Elf and been defeated, too.

Now, they were all the Arch Elf's servants.

That sounded about right. I couldn't really think of any other explanation, and the logic was sound. It made me want to ask what the hell those idiots were even thinking in the first place.

"Well, I get that the Diamond Cross Knights must've provoked the Arch Elf and gotten themselves here, but they left us with a real big headache to deal with."

I mean, these guys were clearly waaaaay stronger than any old zombies.

"So, should we change up our strategy? Leave Takioto behind while we all high tail it out of here?" Yuika joked.

"If I know you, Miss Yuika, I am sure that despite what you may say, you'll fight together with Master right until the end."

Nanami had voiced what Yuika would actually do. Yeah, that sounded like the girl I was familiar with.

"Thanks. I knew I could count on you, pal," I said.

The look of profound disgust she gave me was very like her as well. If things didn't end up working out, we were going to hell together. As long as Yuika was there, anywhere seemed like a fun time.

"That said, this isn't really a fight we can run from. We flee now, and this enemy's just gonna get stronger and stronger, right?" Yukine said as she cast enhance magic on herself.

A necromancer's basic tactic was to use the dead to rapidly grow stronger and stronger. If they had a powerful corpse to manipulate, then their overall fighting power would significantly increase, and even if the corpses it controlled were individually weaker, they could just command more and more of them to attack with the brute force of sheer numbers.

Without a doubt, the easiest time to fight the Arch Elf was now, while he still had relatively few allies with him. Should we flee, we'd lose any hope of besting him.

"They're almost like totally different people, huh," Yukine said, looking at the church followers near the Arch Elf.

Exhibiting none of the refined, polished movements they had displayed before, the followers shambled along like listless zombies, or as if they were dragging something along with them.

The Arch Elf put his hand up over his head, and the Church followers attacked us all at once.

Coming for Yukine was the long sword and shield wielding follower she and Claris had just battled against. She barely managed to dodge her opponent's slash. She didn't attack, though, and limited herself to parrying their blade. She seemed to be taking stock of her foe's skills.

"Gotten faster and stronger, it looks like."

"Hm, but aren't they being controlled right now?" Claris asked. The "why" was actually pretty simple.

"It's because the Arch Elf has removed their mental inhibitions," I said, outlining the reason. The Arch Elf kept the follower's combat instincts intact while removing all the limits their brain put on their body. The ogre I had fought a long time ago to save Ludie had been in a similar state. That ogre had possessed self-healing abilities, but these guys were already dead to begin with, so it didn't matter what happened to their bodies.

"His minions are gonna attack with suicidal abandon. Like with the Matango, they may not be totally invincible, but they're stubborn as all hell, so be careful when you're reducing their numbers," I loudly informed everyone.

"Pesky bunch," Yukine said before pushing back the longsword-wielding follower. She could have immediately delivered a follow-up attack, but she didn't, as another one of the followers was coming for her.

"Easy to guess the sort of tremendous power this guy's packing."

He was one of the followers we hadn't fought against earlier, from the squad who had revived the necromancer. There was a specific reason Yukine had used the word "tremendous"; the weapon he wielded was plain madness. The man was already a giant as it was, but the large one-sided ax in his hand had a blade the size of a fifty-inch TV.

"If you told me he was a dungeon boss, I'd probably believe you," Ludie murmured, looking at him.

He must have originally been a bear beastfolk or something, since he was very tall, and the amount of muscle on his body made me look puny in comparison. He was dragging the ax along behind him right now, but there was no doubt…

"Yup, sure can lift that ax up like it's nothing, can't he?"

The ax-wielding follower slammed his weapon down on Yukine.

Fortunately, she dodged the attack with ease. However…

A roaring explosion. A blustering gust of wind. Small rock debris scattered everywhere, even reaching Ludie, who was farther back.

"…You gotta be kidding me."

I couldn't restrain my shock. The area where the man's ax landed had actually exploded.

Having been right beside the blast, Yukine got caught up in the burst of pebbles and wind, and was very literally blown away.

The next instant, she regained her balance and landed on the ground, gazing at the ax-wielder while heaving a big sigh. Still, she couldn't afford to stand there observing him for long. There were still other followers to worry about.

This time, the longsword-wielder closed in. She managed to dodge his attack as well and opened up even more space between her and her foes. That very moment, Claris ran in to support Yukine, drawing the sword and shield user to herself.

In an impressive feat, she also managed to entice another follower at the same time, a dagger wielder who hadn't been part of the squad we'd fought initially. If Claris put all her focus into blocking, her defensive capabilities were probably the same as mine.

Yukine, meanwhile, didn't just stand there and take it either.

Moving with amazing speed, far faster than the ax-wielding beastfolk, she launched at him one of the rare power-focused techniques in her repertoire, Cascade.

I heard the loud clang of steel meeting steel. The sound was so ridiculously shrill and loud, being next to it probably would've ruptured my eardrums.

"Even with this move, it's still just a draw, eh?" Yukine murmured.

Personally, I thought Yukine's opponent had to be captivated by seeing such a slender, exquisite, beautiful cutie pull off that feat of sheer strength. As president of the Yukine Mizumori fan club, I would've gladly welcomed him into our ranks.

Except her foe remained expressionless. His breathing was ragged, as if he was aroused. Though, I figured that excitement came from his zombie instincts and not any interest in Yukine's striking figure.

"Ugh, seriously?"

"Yuika, this is no time to stand there looking surprised. There are still other followers to worry about."

The ones who'd have the easiest time confronting the ax-wielder were either Yukine or me. I hesitated over what to do, but Yukine turned to me and signaled to leave it all to her with a glance and nod of her head.

From there, a dual-sword wielding follower moved forward to attack, but Yuika took them on for me.

Meanwhile, Nanami fired arrows at the long-range attackers farther back to keep them pinned down.

"As of right now, it looks like we're managing."

After seeing that each of us was going up against one of the followers, I moved over to get closer to Ludie. Then I used my Third Hand to deflect the enemy spells coming at me.

Once I got in front of Ludie, I slammed the incoming hammer-wielder with my Third Hand. I wasn't going to let a single person past this point.

"From here on out, it's all up to you, Ludie."

The stage was set.

—Ludie's Perspective—

Only ten minutes or so had gone by since the fight started, but I was already panicking. I hadn't been able to reach the High Elf state.

I tried casting several spells at the Arch Elf, that perhaps I had attained by tapping into my ancestral powers without really feeling it, but none of them broke his barrier.

"Wind, lightning, and light. Not a single one's working."

Of course, even as I cast my magic, I understood it was all basically meaningless.

"Ludie, keep cool."

Kousuke came up to me to tell me this, but that wasn't happening. How could I possibly keep cool right now?

I mean, he had to see it, too, right?

Claris, Yuika, Nanami, Yukine—everyone was holding out. Kousuke, too, of course. If they defeated any more of the pawns, there was a chance the Arch Elf might begin to move, so they simply endured the onslaught, unable to take down their foes.

They held on as wounds began to line their bodies, to the point where I saw several red lines form on Yukine and Yuika's beautiful skin.

Through it all, I was the only one who hadn't done anything. Just me.

Right now, they were all barely holding out, but there was no telling when one of them might fall. Although we had taken a break in front of the ruins, everyone was exhausted from fighting nonstop. Their mana reserves were draining away as well.

Yet still, everyone desperately battled on.

Telling me to keep cool was ridiculous! How could I?!

"Ludie!"

Kousuke's voice brought me back to my senses. I suddenly noticed some magic flying straight for me. It was a spell from the staff-wielding follower.

Kousuke wedged himself in front of me, then spread out his stole to block the attack.

Normally, I would have easily been able to dodge an attack like that, but I was in such a daze… There were wounds on Kousuke's cheeks and arms.

"I'm sorry…"

"C'mon, you've got nothing to apologize about. Don't let it bug you."

Kousuke stared hard into my eyes. Then he began to speak, appearing to remember something.

"Oh, right. Ludie? You did all that explaining about the Arch Elf just now, so I'm guessing you know this, too, but are you aware of how the Arch Elf and High Elf attained their power?"

Well, sure.

"More or less, yes."

I heard Nanami's voice reach us. "Master, my apologies. I let one through."

It was the dagger-wielder. Kousuke stepped forward before blocking the attack with his Third Hand and used his Fourth Hand to punch him away. Then he pressed forward to deliver a follow-up attack.

"How is bringing that up supposed to help?"

The method of attaining High Elf status was passed down through the imperial family.

"It is attained when those with the lineage and talent truly thirst for power."

Whether I had the gift was a mystery, but I was certainly connected to the imperial family by blood. The fact that I had been able to enter the Sanctuary was proof of that. I simply didn't know if I had the talent for it or not, but…

"What about the Arch Elf…?"

How had the man before me become the Arch Elf? I hadn't brought it up when speaking to everyone about the Arch Elf earlier, but Father had told me that it was because the necromancer's loved ones and friends had been taken away by Leggenze.

The Arch Elf had been part of the imperial family, and he wielded power and authority, which had allowed him to spend the money to find his beloved, and only his beloved, and get her back. But by then, she was already dead.

That was when he had wished for power. When he could no longer abide Leggenze's heinous deeds. When he wanted to protect the other elves who had been abducted. And when he came to believe it no longer mattered what foul power he used to achieve those ends.

And then, he attained his powers.

"The Arch Elf's goal was to protect and save. But at some point, he was inundated by people whose loved ones had been abducted and who wished for vengeance. As he interacted with these people more and more, the whole of Leggenze became wicked in his eyes. On top of that, his powers of necromancy ultimately cast a shadow over his heart."

As a result, his heart and mind shattered. His actions became twisted and extreme, and he began to kill anyone—even the elves he was meant to protect—who claimed he was going too far, turning them into part of his army. To stop this, my ancestors decided to seal him away.

When I thought of it that way…

"The thing that triggered the Arch Elf's awakening was his wish to protect and save everyone. Similarly, the High Elf only awakened out of a desire to protect everyone from the Arch Elf."

If a desire to protect everyone was required to attain the power of the High Elf, then shouldn't I be able to awaken it, too?

After all, I had people I wanted to save. People I wanted to protect at any cost.

Claris, Yukine, Nanami, Yuika. Mother, Lilou, Father, and everyone living in the empire. And finally…

"Kousuke."

My eyes fell on him.

Even now, he was shielding me from the attacks coming my way, from the long-range magic to the hammer-wielder's strikes, and arrows flying toward me.

I drew slightly closer to him and cast healing magic.

"Thanks, Ludie… Wait, what's up? C'mon, now, don't look at me like that. I'm fine," he said.

Then he once again blocked more attacks flying in my direction, along with blows directed at him from the hammer wielder.

He was always putting others above himself. Even at this moment, I imagined he was more worried about me than himself.

I wanted to protect him. But in reality, I only ever managed to *be* protected by him instead. There he was, knocking away an arrow on a collision course with me.

Why couldn't I protect him? Why was I so powerless…? Even when I had someone I so desperately wanted to keep safe. Looking at his back, this feeling of frustration inside me grew stronger and stronger.

I wanted power. I wanted to protect him so much, it was driving me crazy.

At that very moment…

"Huh?!"

…I felt as if a lid had popped off somewhere inside me.

"…Ludie?" he murmured, looking at me in astonishment. But I felt almost the same way he did—I had no idea what was happening to me.

The only thing I understood was there was a mysterious power spilling out from inside me. It felt almost cozy, like a gentle breeze blowing under the shade of a tree. Yet at the same time, it almost

seemed like a structural part of me at my core—a truly mysterious power indeed.

"What are those green particles enveloping Lady Ludivine's body…?"

"How pretty…"

Somehow, I realized this was the High Elf's power. And though I had never wielded it before, I somehow understood what I needed to do.

I began collecting this power in both my hands.

Little by little.

The power gradually grew into a large torrent, but my instincts were telling me this still wasn't enough. More, far more power. More mana…

"Kousuke."

"Ludie."

He understood without me having to say a word.

Kousuke placed his hands on me. From them came a great…no, a truly massive amount of mana. It was converted inside me, before it finally pooled in my hands.

"Thank you, Kousuke."

He took his palms off me and started amassing mana in his own katana sheath. Then he folded his stole into a spring, placed it down on the ground, and squatted against it.

I could tell exactly what he was trying to do. He planned on instantly closing in on the Arch Elf to defeat him as soon as he could. However, there was something I had to accomplish before he could do so: destroying the Arch Elf's barrier.

Right at that moment, the church followers all came charging at me. However…

"Uh ohhh! You suuuure you want to show me your back like that?"

"Lady Ludivine!"

"Target practice is a specialty of mine."

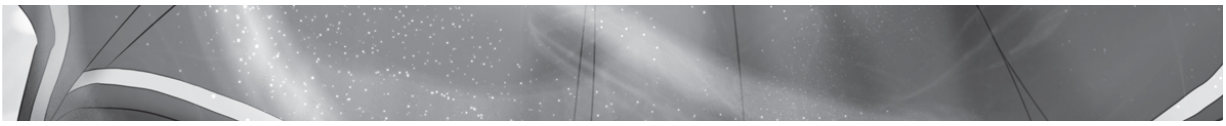
Yuika, Claris, Nanami. Finally…

“You’re not laying a single finger on Ludie.” Yukine got out in front of me to protect me.

“Thanks, everyone.”

Now they were all defending me. I needed to settle things. I raised the power gathered in my hands up over me, brought it all together, and then…





"Pierce through!"

I fired it off. The whirlwind, compressed and powered up to its absolute limit, slammed into the Arch Elf's barrier.

But the barrier didn't show any sign of breaking.

Nevertheless, the look on the Arch Elf's face changed for the first time. His expression suggested he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

I continued my attack, wringing out my mana.

I recalled the faces of the people I wanted to protect.

"*Haaa*…"

Father, Mother, Lilou, Big Sis, Claris, the people of the empire.

"…*Hrnnnggg*…"

Yuika, Yukine, Nanami…and Kousuke.

"…*Uuuaaaaaaaaagh*!"

There was a loud crack, like glass shattering. However, that was as far as my magic went.

Just breaking the barrier took everything I had. I just needed a bit more. The end was in sight. If I had only been able to extend my spell a bit more, I could have reached the Arch Elf.

Still. It was okay. After all, even if I couldn't get all the way there…

"That was awesome, Ludie. Leave the rest to me."

Kousuke would. He would make it the rest of the way.

He jumped off the ground with his stole and flew straight for the Arch Elf. It almost looked as if a spring had sent him flying up into the air.

"Finish this, Kousuke! Please!"

Since the Arch Elf wasn't maintaining his barrier any longer, he should have now gained the resources to attack.

He launched several spells at Kousuke, but Kousuke landed on the ground for a moment, evaded them, deflected whatever he couldn't dodge with his stole, and rapidly closed the distance between him and the necromancer.

Kousuke was so deftly and cleanly countering the Arch Elf's attacks, it was almost as though he could see the future.

No matter where the Arch Elf fired his magic, he would never hit him. Kousuke's movements were incredible enough to convince me as much. This was how Kousuke was when he got really serious. No one would be able to stop him when he was in the zone.

The Arch Elf let loose another spell at his opponent now that Kousuke was right in front of him. A jet-black blade shaped like a guillotine appeared before Kousuke.

Still, he didn't stop. A spell like this wouldn't stop him at all.

"He'll finish it in the blink of an eye."

His bladework was too fast for me to keep up with.

The moment his sheath flashed with light, his sword had already been swung. The Arch Elf had been cleaved in two, spell and all.

I went up to the Arch Elf as he began to transform into magic particles.

He had certainly been wrong for rampaging through the empire and for controlling the bodies of friend and foe alike. And yet, at one time, he may have been more concerned for the elven people than anyone else.

The same way I now felt the urge to protect everyone.

Without him, Leggenze likely would have continued abducting elves.

"Thanks to you, the empire and the elves you wished to protect are safe."

My words may not have gotten through to him. Even then, there was something else I wanted to be sure to tell him.

"Thank you. Leave the future in the hands of the elves of today, and rest in peace."


CONFIG

Chapter 8 **Livestream Battle**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim I flopped down to the ground. I was exhausted.

"Are you okay, Kousuke?"

I saw Ludie come over to me.

"Y'know, it feels like you're even prettier than usual today."

"I've got dirt all over me, dummy. Thanks, though," she said with a smile. From there, everyone rushed over to us.

"Master, are you all right? Wait, is this…?" Nanami said, placing a hand to my forehead. Then she gave it a sniff.

"…Translucent, yet viscous droplets of moisture. This optical permeability, the sensation that it will melt anything it touches, and this odor, pungent enough to make even an orc choke with tears; could this be…sweat?"

"It's not some chemical weapon, okay?"

None of that applied to sweat, y'know. The hell was that bit about an orc "choking with tears," anyway? You could probably take over the world with something that powerful.

"We must dispose of this dangerous substance quickly. Miss Yuika, please lick it all up."

"Why would try to make me lick it after a description like that? If anything, you should do it."

"What sort of thing has to be disposed of by licking, anyway? I'm a bit curious."

Yukine wasn't tired, was she? I mean, she had definitely worked the hardest out of everyone. Well, if she truly insisted on licking me, I suppose I didn't have a choice. By all means, please.

At that very moment…

A large magic circle appeared directly above all of us.

Seeing this, I suddenly remembered something.

Oh, crap.

Yukine, Ludie and Claris were all surprised and went on guard, but Nanami and Yuika looked at me and seemed to guess what was

going on.

"Isn't this exciting, Miss Yuika?"

"Please tell me this isn't happening."

Just as Nanami and Yuika had surmised, this was an erotic event. Not only that, but a hardcore one, in many senses of the phrase.

"*Hngh*! Ludie's in danger!"

I immediately made for where Ludie was standing. While I did, a magic circle appeared at her feet.

"Ludie!"

I rushed for her and used my Third Hand to pull her toward me. But I wasn't able to completely stop my momentum, and I just barely slipped inside the magic circle.

A thick hand emerged. It grabbed me and pulled me down into the magic circle.

Fortunately, I'd ended up getting *that* role, thereby avoiding the worst outcome of all. Grimly smiling, I glanced at Ludie, who looked surprised. Then my vision immediately went white.

I was going to be taken to *that room*, wasn't I?

But there was something I had failed to notice—there was also a magic circle on the very spot I had pulled Ludie back to.

◇

Something smelled wonderful.

It seemed vaguely familiar, almost sickly sweet, but still comforting and pleasant. What was this fragrance again…?

I returned to consciousness and opened my eyes.

"*Hwaaaaaaaaaaah*?!"

I thought I was going to have heart attack. There was an orc right in front of me. He was practically pressing his face up against me and oinking gleefully at that!

I tried to move my body, sensing I had to get away, but there was a loud clang. Something appeared to be pressing down on my arms and legs, making it impossible for me to move. These things often popped up in porn videos and adult comics… Restraints? And what

was up with my outfit? A pair of boxers and a weird belt? I was basically wearing nothing but a belt here!

"*Ngh*, what's going on?"

I looked around the area.

If I had to describe the room, I would say it was based on the color red. Next to me was a table with roller wheels, and on it lay a bird feather, candles, a whip, a ball gag, and a tool that—while touted as a massager—I had literally never seen used *as* a massager in my life, plus a string of connected balls seemingly meant to be put up the ass and some more *direct* type of rods that one would associate with a man.

Next to this was a bed where you could restrain someone with their legs opened up in an M-shape, and what looked to be an S&M wooden horse.

Additionally, there was a camera on a tripod right in front of me, with an expensive looking microphone right beside it. There was also a set of lights shining on me.

Then there was the orc, gleefully oinking as he looked at me. He wasn't the only one, either. There were four. One wearing rimless round glasses, one who was super fat, another who was really muscular, and one who was the definition of cringe, leaning up against the wall with a cool look on his face, wearing an eyepatch, and bandages around his left hand. A real diverse (?) group of four.

For some reason, the orcs were all dressed in black enameled leather with spikes, as if they were about to tell me, "You're already dead." They also had ropes and candles in their hands.

My head was still a bit fuzzy, but I finally got a grip on the situation.

This was one of the game's erotic scenes.

Generally, how it works in eroge is the most active characters or the characters who just experienced an event are most likely to get caught up in sexy dungeons or lewd traps. This was, after all, something the players of the eroge wanted in the first place.

In other words, since Ludie had awakened to her power, it was only natural she would awaken in other areas as well.

Ludie had been targeted for this sexy dungeon event at the brilliant direction of the game's writers, but I felt relieved I had managed to save her. Anyway…

"Orcs, huh?"

What things came to mind when one heard the word "elf"? I figured, beautiful, tall, and long ears would be common answers. However, the erogesphere was a bit unique, and I surmised there were a large class of people for whom the word would also bring to mind orcs. Of course, I'm sure there were others still who would imagine the eroge company named after elves, too.

To put it simply, just as *shounen* battle manga have friendship, struggle, and victory, in eroge there are the traditional pillars of orcs, elves, and "j-just kill me!" (opinions varied on this point).

As such, it made perfect sense for orcs to be here. Originally, Ludie is supposed to be the one who gets captured, so the fact that I was here instead must have altered the event.

Gotta stay calm. For the time being, I thought back to the game and tried to predict how this would play out.

In the game, there are two possible variants of this erotic event.

① Ludie is captured, and the orcs threaten to violate her. In order to save her, you and your companions go through a hot-and-heavy gauntlet.

② Ludie is captured along with Iori. Then Iori is manipulated into putting Ludie through some S&M play while they both wait for their friends to save them.

These were the two patterns. Since I had been captured this time, I imagined the event would involve the orcs turning me into their

bottom… Now then, would help actually come though?

Hm, wait a second. In that case… *Sniff sniff!* Did that mean the smell during this event was what I thought it was?!

"Oh, picked up on it, did you? Enjoying this Aluloona nectar-based aphrodisiac fragrance?"

The question had come from the orc in round glasses that made him look like a nerdy pencil-pusher. An aphrodisiac—I was right. In the game, it's made from the Aluloon, not Aluloona, but they must have changed it to match up with me.

The orc approached me and lifted my chin with his rough hand. A horrible visual.

This was just a guess on my part, but this orc had probably had the Aluloona nectar sprinkled over himself, too. As he approached, an even stronger smell wafted into my nostrils.

"Do you understand what's about to happen to you?" The nerdy orc smirked as he spoke.

"Heh-heh."

I heard a cheesy evil laugh come from behind him. Every last orc, without exception, had a large bulge at their crotch.

Seeing this, I felt sweat drip down my brow. Of course, I knew damn well what was coming here.

"J-just kill me."

Incidentally, while all the orcs were raring to go, the one with the hardest bulging flagpole was the cool eyepatch one leaning against the wall. From now on, your name is "horny edgelord orc," okay?

"Skweeh-hee-hee, believe me, we're fine doing it ourselves, but why don't we make you feel even more hopeless? We've prepared someone extra horrible for you."

Huh?! I looked over at the wall. Someone even worse than that horny orc over there?!

Just who the hell was coming here then? Whoever it was, there was one thing I could say for certain. No matter what, I… I…!

"I won't give in! Y-you won't get me to beg for death!"

"Skweeh-hee-hee-hee!"

The orcs around me burst into laughter, the horny edgelord one chuckling with a dark "heh-heh-heh-heh" that made him sound much more depraved. The horrible secondhand embarrassment was too painful for me to watch.

"I wonder how long that brave front will last…? Please, if the master could show us a demonstration."

After the nerdy orc said this, a single elf stepped into the room with loud clacking footsteps.

"Huh?"

I recognized her. However, her outfit and expression were totally out of character.

She had on sexy black high leg cut bondage gear, and she looked down at me with a cold glare, as if I was garbage. Taking the whip from the nerdy orc, she loudly slapped it against the floor.

"L-Ludie?"

"Not Ludie."

Appearing before me was Ludie indeed, but…

"That's *Queen* Ludie, to you," she said with a sneer.

—Yuika's Perspective—

Normally, I'd immediately think we needed to go save them right away.

After all, when I'd realized a magic circle had appeared at Ludie's feet, Takioto protected her and was teleported away.

At the same time, however, part of me thought he'd be fine, so we could just leave him, right?

"Lady Ludivine!"

Unfortunately, however, I lost the ability to say anything like that. Takioto had saved Ludie, but she was teleported away by a second magic circle an instant later.

The two magic circles that whisked them away instantly disappeared. A new spatial magic circle materialized right after, like a

substitute. Seeing this, I felt the inside of my heart immediately go cold.

However, in complete contrast to my own inner mental state, Claris was frantic. That came as no surprise. She didn't know what we knew—about the sheer number of truly bizarre dungeons out there.

"We need to follow after them!"

Claris looked ready to jump right into the magic circle at a moment's notice.

I, on the other hand, really didn't want to go. Takioto's face had that *oh, crap* look he always wore before we ended up in some god-awful embarrassing dungeon. Nanami seemed pretty convinced of this herself. Ah, well.

"If Ludie's in there, we really don't have any choice, do we…?"

It looked like I would just have to steel myself.

"Oh, boy, I can't wait."

Observing our reactions and surmising what was going to happen, Yukine said…

"…Come on, then."

…and stepped onto the magic circle with a wincing smile.

We emerged into what appeared to be a broadcast room.

"Wh-what is this place…?!"

"A broadcast room, by the looks of it."

Several big monitors. Many different cameras. Microphones set up all over, and a bunch of set lights, too. It was all so awful, I felt bile rising up in my throat.

Claris was deeply unsettled, though it made sense given this was a first for her. I could understand it, though. She must've thought that circle was going to lead to another dungeon, only to end up in this dumbass room instead.

Moving as if she was intimately familiar with the place, Nanami walked over and began to manipulate a magic tool of some kind.

I decided to check out our surroundings with Yukine and Claris. Yup, the more we looked, the more it seemed like this was just some

random studio somewhere.

"Everyone, there's a room over here," Claris said, opening a door and moving into a different room. Yukine and I followed inside after her.

"Clothing and dressers… Is this a warehouse? No wait, there's a vanity here, too. And a refrigerator?" Yukine commented as she looked over the whole space.

I looked at the outfits hung up in the room and couldn't hold back my sigh. Just the usual bullshit, I suppose.

Claris hadn't seemed to notice yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"Why are there all these clothes… Wait, what?"

Claris squinted and took one of the outfits from the clothes rack. She had picked out what appeared to be a school swimsuit. The room had everything from school uniforms, cheerleader outfits, and police uniforms, to succubus and angel costumes, along with regular bathing suits, and almost anything else you could come up with. To top it all off, every last costume was skimpy and sexy.

I pulled out a drawer of a nearby dresser. Inside were sunglasses, wigs, fake glasses with red frames, an octopus tentacle, a split-tipped whip, and animal ears. Now what exactly was all *this* for, then?

"Oh no, everyone come here quick!!"

Hearing Nanami's voice, we all quickly headed over to where she was.

She appeared to have successfully activated everything. There was an image displayed on one of the monitors. On it, we saw Takioto and several orcs.

"J-just kill me!"

He was in what was obviously an S&M playroom. Takioto was in the center, bound so that his limbs formed an "X," while a group of orcs in very creepy outfits all surrounded him.

"Master Takioto!" Claris yelled in panic. "*Hngh*, let go of him at once! If anything happens, the elf armies of the empire will take

your lives!”

“Please calm down, Miss Claris. It seems they cannot hear us on their end. Alas, poor Master! *Gah!* Those dastardly cowards…!”

Nanami’s words only made Claris panic further. I just knew she was doing this on purpose to screw with Claris.

“Oh, Master Takioto… What are we to do?”

Claris was clearly inexperienced. Uh, actually, it sounded weird when I phrased it like that. She wasn’t accustomed to pervy dungeons. Yeah, actually, no matter how I put it, it was never going to come out great.

Brushing all that aside, I went up to Yukine.

“This looks like a total farce to me. What do you think?” I asked.

“…Takioto does seem to really hate what’s going on, though.”

Yukine didn’t refute that it was a farce.

“I mean, it *does* seem like a terrible situation to be in. I’m guessing he’ll be subjected to some pretty weird stuff.”

“That said, I’m curious why Ludie isn’t there.”

“Good point. If Ludie had been here on our side of things, I would’ve immediately booked it out of here, but— Wait, the door is opening, and someone’s coming into their room… Is that Ludie?”

The woman on the screen was, without a doubt, Ludie. As for *why* I had found myself questioning if it really was her or not, that would be because of the S&M dominatrix outfit she had on.

“Lady Ludivine! Lady Ludivine! What a horrible outfit! Lady Ludivine! Can you hear me?!”

“It’s useless, Miss Claris. They cannot hear our voices on their end. Also, having been turned into a bratty bitch once before, I can attest to Miss Ludie likely being under some form of mind control.”

“B-bratty…bitch?”

Claris was all mixed up.

“For the time being, please just think of Miss Ludie as being manipulated. That being said, *nrgh*, what a cruel fate indeed, to be forced into such dire straits.”

That very moment, the nerdy-looking orc with glasses drew in closer to the display. Though, from Takioto's side of things, he was coming closer to the camera, actually.

"*Well now, I didn't think we had anyone watching our little broadcast. The connection doesn't seem good, though. You, patch us through*," the glasses orc said, and the muscular orc began working controls of some kind. Then a green light came on one of the cameras in our room. He must have turned something on over here.

"Yuika?! Everybody?!"

It appeared a video feed of us was being displayed in their room.

"Are you all right, Master?!"

"Still holding out for now."

Claris stepped forward.

"You damn orcs! Do you have any idea what you're doing here?!"

One of us was clearly more impassioned than the rest. It made sense, given she was in the dark.

"Heh-heh. Oh, we know all right."

"*Ngh*, I don't know what you're trying to do, but I can say one thing for certain: Master Takioto will never yield to you! Unlike you foul orcs, he has a noble heart!"

Uh oh, Takioto's eyes were going every which way. The words "noble heart" had triggered that reaction. I bet he had a loooong list of reasons why the compliment made him feel awkward.

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that. Do it."

At the nerdy orc's words, Ludie swung her whip at Takioto.

"Nhaugh!"

A strange gasp escaped Takioto's lips.

Claris ground her teeth and glared at the screen.

"*Mrgh*, you cowards! Come over here and fight fair and square!"

"Yeah, come and get us!" Nanami joined in.

"Skweeh-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

Yikes, the orc's spittle flew all over Takioto. Oh, and now he was retching. It looked like it reeked, too. Though, I was a bit surprised

this was what an orc's chortle sounded like.

"You ladies wanna save this guy, do you?"

"Of course we do!"

Personally, I was all set… There was a wide gulf between the level of enthusiasm among our team.

"*Then I suppose I'll give you a chance to do so. Get to it,*" the nerdy orc said, signaling the muscular orc, who began touching a nearby panel.

"Bwe-hee! Alright then, ladies, look at the other monitor."

"What other monitor…? Wh-what is this?!"

Claris sounded flabbergasted after looking over to the screen. Displayed there was…

"It looks like all of us on some sort of video-sharing website? There's something a little odd about it, though."

Visually, it resembled a video-sharing website, except the video didn't have a view count. Instead, there was an area that seemed meant for live user comments, along with a weird point display labeled OVERALL RATING POINTS.

"What's all of this for?! What're you playing at?!"

Hearing this, the fat orc let out a piggish laugh.

"As you can clearly tell, we are a group of orcs skilled at video broadcasting."

"Nope, didn't pick up on that at all."

Yukine cleanly shut them down. I had assumed they were a comedy group or something. I mean, they all had their characters on lock and everything. "Nerdy glasses orc," "muscular orc," "fat orc," and then there was "horny orc with the cringey eyepatch bandage combo sending the scariest looks at Takioto."

"If you're able to stream something more entertaining than what we're doing, I'll save your man here."

The orcs all let out a roaring "*skwee-hee-hee-hee*." These guys were dastardly all right.

"Hold on, what about Miss Ludie?"

"*This chick? Putting the boy here aside, she's basically just set dressing. We'll release her as soon as we're done,*" said the fat orc.

"*'Cept, it's not right if we're the only ones risking something here. Don't ya think? I do anyway,*" the cringey and horny orc continued.

"*So if you all lose, you'll have your own punishment to go through,*" the nerdy orc said.

"What kind of punishment?" Yukine asked.

The fat orc laughed.

"Sure you want to know? We're gonna have you put on a reeeeally embarrassing stream for us! Skwee-hee-hee-hee!"

"*Bwee-bwee! Go ahead and run away; don't worry, we won't stop you! We'll let you out of there and everything. This boy though… Bweeeehee-hee-hee!*" the muscular orc said.

Well, then. So they *would* be willing to let us go after all. It was just that Takioto and Ludie… Hm? Ludie?

"Um, if we do run away, what happens to Ludie?"

"*Yuika, don't even think about it!*" shouted Kousuke.

"*You keep quiet! Hit him!*" the fat orc said, prompting Ludie to hit Kousuke with the whip.

"Silence!"

"Awwngh!"

"Master! Curses, if only I was the one being controlled instead of Miss Ludie, I could have put far more effort into that whipping!"

"Uhh, Nanamiii? That's when you're supposed to say you wish you could trade places with your Master! Whether you mean it or not, dammit! Why the hell are you trying to take Ludie's place instead?! Gimme a break!"

"*Shut your mouth*," Ludie said, whipping him. Another hard-to-describe mixture of emotions crossed Takioto's face.

The nerdy orc smiled as he watched it all unfold. And then…

"Believe me, we could easily just do this ourselves, so we can let this elf go even if you don't take us up on our offer, bwee-hee-hee. For the boy…we won't kill him, but you better make peace with all that's coming to him."

Okay, okay, I got it now. For the time being…

"Time out, let's discuss our strategy," I said, turning around and gathering everyone together. My conclusion was…

"Let's ignore their challenge and just bring Ludie back home with us, sound good?"

The answer was obvious. The risk was too great. Right now, we could come out of this with Takioto being the only sacrifice. Besides, it did in fact seem like he wouldn't die. If it truly was a matter of life or death, though, I would've obviously worked hard to save him, okay?

Running away was clearly the only correct option here.

"Miss Yuika, that feels a bit harsh…"

"I do slightly get where you're coming from, but I'm still worried about Takioto."

"I am fine with anything. So long as it proves entertaining."

"Hey idiot, y'know I can hear you over there?! How heartless can you get, Yuika?!"

I anticipated as much, but it appeared the majority of the group wanted to save him.

"C'mon, we're going up against streaming specialists here, right? We'll just cause more pain for everyone this way."

I tried to convince them. We couldn't hope to win like this, and if the alternative meant we would all get embarrassed, I wanted to contain the damage to a single person. I was sure Takioto would ultimately understand where we were com— *"Then how about we give you a handicap, eh?"*

Are you kiiiiiiiidding meeeeee?! What the hell? Why were the orcs suddenly so willing to compromise with us here?!

"What?!"

Before I could say anything, Claris reacted.

"What sort of handicap?" Nanami asked.

"*See, we've earned five hundred and thirty thousand points in a single day before.* Shhhlurp."

Ugh, the licking the lips thing was seriously gross. When I considered the possibility they might do something to all of us, *clearly* the best option was to sacrifice Takioto and get out of here! Who the hell would fall for this stupid provocation?

"*Since we're just too good at all this, I'll do you a favor and make these two the only ones who show up on the broadcast,*" the orc said, looking at Takioto and Ludie.

"How dare you disrespect us. Come on, everyone, let's do this."

Nanami *immediately* bit, hook, line, and sinker. Oh, I got it, she must have figured this would be much more entertaining. Next to her, Claris nodded.

"You're right, Miss Nanami. After that, we have no choice but to take on their challenge!"

Dammit, it was no use. No matter what I did, I couldn't bring anyone over to my side.

"Forget it, just do whatever you want."

"*Heh-heh, I wonder how long you'll be able to keep that composure. We've got a Queen on our side, after all,*" the nerdy orc replied.

In the S&M sense of the word, yeah, sure.

Actually, now that I thought about it, Ludie was an imperial princess, so she was in some respects pretty close to a queen. Anyway, I could keep using these meaningless thoughts to run from reality all I wanted, but it wouldn't change anything. Still, I really did want to escape reality in any way I could right now.

"Indeed, while it may be different for Master, Miss Ludie is very powerful. However, we have a true-blue little sister character on our side."

"*A true-blue little sister?!*" the horny edgelord orc shouted, astonished.

"Yes, a true little sister. Go ahead, Miss Yuika, tell him what for!"

"Whatever, I don't care anymore."

"Oh what, you saying that we're not even a consideration to you? Tch*! What a bummer."*

Y’know, this horny edgelord sure was getting real talkative all of a sudden.

“A true little sister and a Queen. Things are gonna get interesting, bwee-hee.”

◇

With this depressing turn of events, our livestreaming battle was now set in stone.

We got a simple explanation of the rules and how to use the equipment, but Nanami had been immediately able to get the equipment working, so we were likely fine on that front.

The problem was the rules.

Although we were ostensibly broadcasting, there weren’t any normal viewers. Instead, they said something about there being a “whatchamacallit AI” that would immediately analyze our stream and assign us points. I couldn’t be bothered to learn what its actual name was. This whatchamacallit AI was also able to write viewer comments, apparently, and it was capable of making many thousands of people’s worth of comments at once. Nanami had been astounded when she heard that.

As for what determined the winner, we just had to earn more points with our stream than Ludie and Takioto did with theirs.

Ultimately…

“No one will actually see us, and we can broadcast whatever we believe will generate the most buzz without worrying about anything else. That’s it.”

Nanami gave a summary. The sole bit of salvation around this streaming battle was the fact that we didn’t have to worry about anyone else besides ourselves seeing it.

Ultimately, the quirky orc brigade wasn’t going to participate, with Ludie and Takioto doing it all on their own. The orcs didn’t seem like they even mattered here, so couldn’t they just go home and leave us alone?

Except, they did appear to be interested in Takioto, while Ludie and our group were, in their words, "not even a consideration."

I noticed Takioto would get a pained look on his face every time that horny edgelord orc spoke. Was it out of secondhand embarrassment? No, no, there was no way, right?

For now, I needed to think about our stream first.

"What do you think we should do? I'm a total amateur with all of this, so I don't expect I can help come up with that much," Yukine said.

Heck, the same was true for me, and Claris looked concerned, too. But we didn't have much time to prepare for our stream, so I wanted us to quickly come up with what we were going to do.

Nanami was first to raise her hand.

"As the administrator of 'Channel Nanami,' perhaps I should take the lead?"

Oh boy, I had a bad feeling about this. Though, she *did* have actual experience with this stuff. Honestly, she seemed like she'd be the best we had.

"While I have never participated in a battle like this, for now, I believe it is important for us to confirm our audience demographics."

"The demographics?" Claris asked.

"Yes. Demographics are an important factor we cannot take lightly. Do you think an audience of primarily men sixty or older would enjoy a makeup tutorial video? A video titled, 'CHANGE YOUR LIFE! Foreign Exchange Investing with Your Pension' would gain far better traction."

"Not sure I really want to meet any sixty-or-older people watching videos like that."

Yukine was right. Sounded like a recipe for bankruptcy.

"I believe we should try a one-off gag or a special skill of ours and see how that affects our point total."

Claris nodded at Nanami's suggestion.

"That should give us an idea of how the system determines what's best to do."

"Right. Incidentally, what sort of videos or livestreams do you all normally watch?"

"I don't generally watch them, but… I do check out combat related ones and anything Takioto recommends to me, I suppose," Yukine replied.

"I usually watch makeup and nail stuff…and I guess game and anime related stuff, too."

Ludie watched the makeup and nail videos together with me, but really Ludie was super pretty even without any makeup. Though I guess that applied to Yukine, Claris, and Nanami, too.

"I-I, er, well…" Claris hesitated.

"Miss Claris, if it is too difficult to mention, then we won't prod you."

"Oh no, it's not that, it's just…a little embarrassing, I guess," Claris said, her cheeks flushing. "I-I watch a lot of animal videos. C-cats and bunnies and stuff…"

"Oh, that's totally normal, don't worry about it," I said to support her. I mean, that was pretty common, right?

"Thank you all very much, now I understand. I dare say this all sounds like it will be quite useful!" Nanami said as she checked the time. Unfortunately for us, the battle would be starting soon.

"For the time being, let us first confirm our viewer demographics. Those orcs called this rating system 'SEAI'. If we were only able to understand what exactly this system is…I am quite confident that 'AI,' at the very least, is short for artificial intelligence."

So what, was SE short for "systems engineer"? Sound effects, maybe?

"Thinking won't get us anywhere, so for now, let's just give it a shot. You said we should try one-off gags or some special skill, right?"

Nanami nodded to me.

"Guess I'll go first?" I said before locking eyes with everyone.

"I would like to go last, if possible," Nanami began. "I wish to see how everyone performs, and experiment with what I predicate will

work best."

So Nanami would bring up the rear. Hmm, I felt like getting this over with as quick as possible was the best idea. This way, I got the sense that cutely sticking out my tongue and apologizing would be enough to cover any failure on my part.

"My turn, then," I said, turning and walking over to the camera. From that moment—the livestream battle had begun.

The chat comments also appeared to be working too, with messages like *excited*; *when's dinner?*; and *damn, she's fine, what a cutie lol* scrolling by.

"I'm going to show off some healing magic for you!" I said before casting a healing spell. Hrmm, it didn't seem to earn many points.

"Oopsie, guess I messed up."

When I headed back, Nanami heaved a heavy, exaggerated sigh.

"Miss Yuika, that woeful display was unbearable. If you were an old man instead of a cute high school girl, you wouldn't have scored any points at all. Can you take this a bit more seriously?"

"The high school girl factor rakes in a lot of points just on its own, huh?"

It did appear there were a lot of people in the chat praising me. That said, Nanami was being a *little* too harsh to older guys here, wasn't she?

"Given how unacceptable that was, I will have to ask you do exactly as I say next time."

"Wh-whoa hold on, why's that?!"

Whatever Nanami wants? That was basically guaranteed to be absolutely *awful*. Nooooo thanks!

"Okay, okay, just calm down Yuika. Let me give it a try."

"Please, Miss Yukine," Nanami said, and Yukine picked up a metal pipe in the room and walked toward the camera.

…Uh, a metal pipe?

"Miss Yuika, look! Poor Master!"

At Nanami's shout, I tucked the iron pipe into the back of my mind. Then I glanced at the monitor displaying our opponents' side

of things.

There I saw a glassy-eyed Ludie holding a red candle in her hands, letting it drip down onto Takioto. Each drop of wax did make Takioto thrash about, sure, but…

"How dare they manipulate Lady Ludie to do such a thing! Takioto looks like he's in agony," Claris said, wincing.

He did indeed have an agonized expression on his face, but I sort felt like some part of him seemed to be enjoying this. Also, while I know it was all because she was under someone else's control right now, Ludie's expression was getting more and more seductive.

"She's breaking out the big guns right out of the gate…!"

As usual, I had no clue what Nanami was trying to say. Honestly, everything in that S&M playroom over there seemed like "big guns" to me.

"Huh, wait, they already have two hundred thousand points? And they're still gaining even more?!"

I looked at how many points I had scored. Yup, just a measly three thousand.

I continued to watch Takioto get teased by Ludie, but Yukine had finished her preparations, so we started on our end.

"Tsukuyomi Magical Academy second year and Morals Committee Lieutenant, Yukine Mizumori, ready for battle," she said before flying in front of the camera.

"Bravo! Wonderful! Bravo!" Nanami began showering Yukine with praise.

What the heck?

Why exactly was she praising her so much here? It made no sense. All Yukine had done did introduce herself.

"Miss Nanami, if I may be so bold, what exactly was so great about that?" Claris asked the exact question on my mind.

"A beautiful young girl should *absolutely* never announce where they go to school on a livestream, as it can encourage stalking and harassment. I imagine this will send our stream viewer numbers through the roof."

Nanami did have a point; it was a real dangerous move. This was something that *definitely* shouldn't be tried at home. Seriously, it was no joke.

Sure enough, the chat lit up with comments like, *yikes*; *found the internet's main character for today*; and *someone, anyone, teach her how the internet works.*

"Miss Yukine truly is special. Even I couldn't have done that, yet she gave out all that info without batting an eyelash. I am sure the AI will award her high points as well… Oh, time to quiet down. She's starting."

Our gazes all fell on Yukine.

"I'm going to perform a sleight of hand for you. Here in my hands, I have a normal, everyday metal pipe," Yukine said, showing off the metal pipe. Then she smacked it lightly against the floor. "I'm going to turn this one pipe into two."

She brought the metal pipe behind her back, gripped down on it with both hands, then twisted her hands like she was wringing out a wash…cloth…?

Wait, was she going to twist a metal pipe with her bare hands?! What sort of impossible spectacle was this?!

I watched in sheer astonishment as the metal pipe let out the sort of creaking and tearing noises that an object like it would never conceivably make.

Yukine had the pipe behind her during all of this, so all the camera picked up was the awful noise, without any hints to what was actually happening. I was watching a miracle in real time.

Then she showed the two halves of the twisted apart pipe to the camera.

"Now there are two. Thank you very much."

She showed off two distinctly deformed, and much shorter, pipes. I caught a glimpse of one of the orcs over on Takioto's side, and he seemed seriously disturbed by the feat.

This wasn't really a sleight of hand, but more like a freakshow feat of strength, right? The chat comments were flying in.

Oh, Yukine's performance received a tremendous number of points. Thirty thousand. Ten times what I had gotten us.

"That was wonderful, Miss Yukine. Good job."

"Glad there happened to be a metal pipe that was easy to tear apart lying around."

I don't think I had ever heard someone describe a metal pipe as "easy to tear apart" in my life. This wasn't *mochi* we were talking about, okay?!

"I'll give it a try next."

This time, Claris stepped forward.

She must have been nervous, this being her first livestream. Her eyes were darting left and right as she walked in front of the camera.

"Ah!"

Then she stepped on what I guess would be a piece of debris from the torn metal pipe and fell over.

The cameras caught Claris saying "Ah!" with her eyes going every which way, before she fell over while flashing what was underneath her skirt, then finally crawled away, utterly mortified.

"I apologize for my horrible failure!" Claris said, returning to us. But for Nanami…

"No, that was fantastic. Our highest yield yet. Thank you, Miss Claris!"

It was a roaring success. Claris received *more* than ten times the points I had. The chat was a flurry of joyful comments like *I saw them!* or *White! They're white!*

"Now then, allow me to take the stage."

With this, Nanami accentuated her breasts even more and raised her skirt up slightly. Then she picked up a carton of milk and stepped in front of the camera.

"Good day to all of our viewers. I am Nanami, angel and maid. I will now demonstrate my morning routine."

Was she doing a skit here or something?

"N-no, please don't! Master! I am but a delicate and tender maid."

And the farce was underway. This was supposed to be her morning routine, right? Why was she already awake? I mean, her acting was great, but there was still plenty of weird aspects to the performance.

"Eek!"

She then poured the milk over herself and posed like a delicate young girl collapsed on the ground. From there, she looked into the camera with teary eyes.

"Sheesh, how could you let out so much all over me…?"

Now *what* in the *world* was she talking about, I wonder?

From there, Nanami opened her legs just wide enough to ever so slightly hide what was underneath her skirt and put both her hands up into peace signs.

"I admit defeat…!"

After doing all that, I'd say it was a mental health defeat, too. A defeat that came looooong before this little contest, that's for sure. Her very existence was a defeat.

The chat was surprisingly quick to play along, commenting, *I'm defeated, too!; utter defeat!; lol @ all these defeats;* and more.

"Hey, Nanami! Morning routine, my ass! I've never done anything like that before, and you know it! Don't lie about that stuff… Hraaaaaugh!"

"Silence! Who gave you permission to speak? Also, you're livestock, so I want to hear you oink like it!"

"L-Ludie, please wait, it hurts, ow!"

"*That's* Queen *Ludie to you. What are you again?"*

This time, Ludie whipped Takioto with loud cracks. It might've been better to end up in Ludie's shoes here, honestly. She was being controlled anyway.





"O-ow, please it hurts. Um… I'm sorry. Oh, uh, o-oink oink."

Nanami's performance was incredible, but Ludie and Takioto were racking up points with incredible speed.

"They're a formidable foe."

Nanami returned, wiping down her body.

"I was almost able to earn quite a fair number of points. If only Yuika's performance hadn't been so disappointing."

"Yeah, yeah, sorry."

To be honest, both friend and foe alike were way too formidable.

"You should listen to my advice and redeem yourself."

Yeah, and I was absolutely positive whatever she suggested would be awful.

She must have looked at my expression and realized how against it all I was. I mean, I had *purposefully* given her the ugliest look possible.

"It appears you may have forgotten, Miss Yuika, but Channel Nanami has over three million subscribers."

"I know, I know. Fine, I'll do it. Happy now?"

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Yukine.

"As a matter of fact, thanks to everyone's efforts, I have been able to determine our viewer demographic."

"Really?!" Claris asked, surprised.

I sorta had a vague idea myself at this point.

"It's the hentai sicko demographic."

"?"

Claris was baffled. Yukine wore a sour smile. She must have surmised as much for herself. I mean, the fact that our opponents were rapidly gaining points with their S&M fetish play made it obvious, didn't it?

"That's right. This AI is a pervert. I am guessing that SEAI likely stands for 'Super Erotic AI.' In other words the HENT-AI demographic."

Claris looked shell-shocked. I could sympathize. Her brain was outright refusing to process all the information, wasn't it? I figured

everyone who experienced one of these weird dungeons for the first time felt something similar.

She finally appeared to fully comprehend what was happening, and her face turned beet red.

"Now then. At the moment, it appears the most important factors for our view count are…an element of the unexpected, and overall sexiness," Nanami said, seeing that Claris had calmed down.

"I sort of get the sexiness stuff, but what's the 'unexpected' part about?" Claris asked.

Now that I thought about it, Claris's performance earlier had incorporated both of those.

"Consider for a moment, if you will: Miss Yuika lifts up her skirt for all to see with a totally blank look on her face, right?"

"Can you not phrase it to sound like it's something I do all the time? This is just an *example*, to be clear. I've never done anything like it before, okay?"

Like I'd ever do something as indecent as that.

"I am sure that would pull in a fair number of views, but I cannot say that would truly grab ahold of their hearts."

She wasn't listening to me. Whatever, what else was new.

"So you're saying it'll still pull in views anyway! 'Grab ahold of their hearts'? What does that even mean?"

"There are many ways to truly grab viewers, but one option is randomness, in other words, the unexpected."

"Okaaay."

"It being an accidental slip up makes it that much more compelling. Falling over and giving a glimpse underneath one's skirt. You know what I mean, yes? If a trick of the wind flips up the skirt of a TV announcer with a pure and innocent persona, showing off the woman's panties for all to see, the pervy nerds of the world are going to spread it like mad."

"Not sure I like the idea of that…"

Yukine looked a bit put off. I mean, who wouldn't be? Though, I sort of felt like I had actually seen this sort of problem get spread

around in real life before?

"Miss Yuika, I am sure you understand. Now then, time to take off your thigh highs and panties."

"There's no 'cute slip up' aspect to that—you're just going to get us kicked off the air!"

What, so I was supposed to stride into view with my butt hanging out?!

"Only joking, Miss Yuika. Here, I have a pair of panties I picked out for you."

I took the underwear Nanami handed me.

"This is just two strings sewn together!"

I immediately threw them down to the ground. I was still putting my butt on full display either way here!

"Our viewers are perverts, Miss Yuika. If we don't utilize racy tactics, we will never catch up to our opponents."

"…Do I really have to do this?"

"If we lose, you could end up suffering the same fate anyway."

The orcs had said something about a penalty. I didn't want to do this one bit, but…

"Miss Yuika, if I remember correctly, we had a bit of contest once before, and you were handily trounced, yes? Do you remember what you promised me back then?"

"*Hrngh*!"

"Furthermore, did you see what happened on our opponent's livestream just now?"

"…No, why?"

"Miss Ludie sliced up the orcs looking to further develop Master's body. We will need to be victorious here in order to escape."

"Huh?!"

We all looked over at the screen. Now that she mentioned it, the orcs weren't anywhere?!

"Ludie?! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Lady Ludivine is, erm… Even though there's a chance she might not be able to escape…she looks so happy, doesn't she?" Claris said

with a conflicted look on her face.

I agreed she seemed *very* happy, and that she was *very* pretty and cute, but with the atmosphere in the room over there, it all seemed like *very* bad news.

"With all that in mind, Miss Yuika. Please, prepare yourself…!"

"Fine, I'll do it. I'll do it, okay?!"

Now that it came to this, I just had to go for it. I quickly changed and slung the school bag Nanami handed me over my shoulder. After that, Nanami adjusted everything for me.

T-time for me to charge straight into the fires of hell!

"I have finished setting everything up. Break a leg!"

"E-erm, Nanami? Don't you think that's, um, a bit much?!" Yukine spoke up. Thank you so much, Yukine. Please, let her have it.

"Have you not done something similar or even more extreme before?"

"…Good point."

Couldn't she have put up a *bit* more of a fight?

Urged on by Nanami, I walked on-screen exactly as instructed. What I was supposed to do was actually very simple.

"Big brooo, wait for meee!"

After saying this, I simply approached the camera and turned my back to it.

However, on my back side…

"Pffft! W-wait, what?"

I heard Takioto burst into laughter. I didn't blame him. After all, my skirt was caught behind my back and flipped up, showing off my panties to the whole world. The scanty string kind of panties, incidentally.

"Hold up, you can see everything like this!"

I only just now noticed, but I wasn't just giving "a peek" at all. Almost my whole ass was on display here!

Gaaaaaaaah, I was so embarrassed I wanted to die! Noooooooo!

Comments came flooding in such as, *is she going commando? hm?* and *wooohoooooo!* or *dayyyyymn!*

This was all just an AI, so no one was actually watching me, but it still felt that way. If I had to compare the feeling to anything, it was a bit like I was exposing myself outdoors or… Anyway, it was absolutely awful! I hated this!

"Where do you think you're *looking?!"*

I heard Ludie, along with the crack of a whip.

"That was wonderful, Miss Yuika. However, while you scored quite a lot of points, our opponent is simply too strong."

The chat seemed to be pretty fired up, too. Even then, our opponent's point total remained high.

"Next…I have request of everyone. Claris, you will be the key to all of this."

"Huh, what do you mean?"

"You said earlier you watch a lot of videos, yes? I ask you to serve as our director and main star."

"Yes, but I only ever watch soothing pet videos."

"Yes, yes, that is perfect."

"U-um, there aren't any pets here, though?"

"Whatever do you mean? There are three pets right in this very room."

Three? Discounting Claris…that left Yukine, Nanami, and me, didn't it?

Wait, did Nanami mean what I think she meant?

She explained everything to us from there, and I passionately rejected the idea. However, when she reminded us we might never be able to get out of here otherwise, I was left with no choice but to give in.

After we went into the dressing room to change, Nanami began to speak, ominously saying that were this plan of hers to fail…

"While it will have to be our final gambit, there is one more thing I would like to try. I'll need your help when the time comes, Miss Yuika."

I hated the idea, but I assumed Nanami would force me to do it, anyway.

—Takioto's Perspective—

"O-ow, ow, Ludie! It's hot, it's too hot!"

"That's *Queen* Ludie, to you!!"

"Yes, yes, my apologies! Queen Ludie!"

It seemed like Ludie was getting more and more into this. Her face was flushed red. She was breathing pretty hard, too.

In the chat, I saw comments like, *this is wild; looks like it hurts real nice, lol*; and *god, I wish that were me*, flowing by. Sorry, but I wasn't about to let anyone take my place.

All that aside, however, why had things ended up like this?

Originally, the protagonist Iori is supposed to become the dom in this S&M situation. He is teleported here separate from Ludie, and the orcs hypnotize him into performing all sorts of sexy stuff on her. Then the rest of his party starts up the livestream battle to save their two companions.

While there was indeed a livestream battle going on here, I was on the receiving end of what was supposed to be happening to Ludie.

"Hee-hee, hee-hee-hee-hee-hee, hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

Ludie giggled, seemingly lost to madness.

If Ludie had gotten the same hypnosis treatment that Iori gets in the game, then she would grow more aroused the more she tormented me. That, and she would be stricken with an insane possessive streak.

"Hey, fatty, muscleman—carry the livestock," Ludie ordered, using words very unbecoming of the imperial family.

Wait, who was the "livestock" supposed to be? That one was fatty, and this one was the muscular orc. Then there were nerdy glasses and horny edgelord. Huh?

This had to be a sick joke, but as I frantically hoped this was all a mistake, some comments popped up reading, *the livestock's looking all around, omg;* and *you idiot, she means you*.

"Hey, pigs." Ludie called out to the orcs, but they were slow to react.

Apparently, they were all watching Nanami's stream. They must have gotten scared stiff watching Yukine's so-called sleight of hand trick. By the way, Yukine truly was amazing. She was beautiful even when twisting a pipe apart. Though, I didn't really think "sleight of hand" was the right thing to call it.

"Hurry up and get to it, pigs! You want me to spit roast you all?!"

Ludie snapped at the orcs, who scrambled to release the shackles on me.

Welp. I thought there must have been some mistake here, but apparently "livestock" meant me.

They carried me over to the bed that locked my legs in an opened M shape. The orcs worked single-mindedly on latching me down to the bed.

The chat was really popping off, saying things like *that's sooo sexy* ♡; *incredible*; and *I wanna shove my face in there.* Now *where*, pray tell, were they talking about?

"Out of my way! Scram!" Ludie said, kicking the orcs away as soon as she saw I was strapped down. The orcs scampered away to the far corner of the wall. Hrmmm.

The orcs had a clear physical advantage here, and it felt strange watching a slender girl boss them around.

"What's that look for, livestock? Want to get kicked, too?" she said before pulling a nearby chair toward her. Then, spreading her legs open wide, she sat down on the chair to show off her crotch and stared at me.

My sights, of course, were focused right in the center of that sexy crotch of hers. The comments were probably saying something about it, but I didn't have any desire to check them. I gazed at this

zone of hers with my eyes practically bulging out of their sockets. It was far too divine to peel my gaze away.

"Where do you think you're looking, you degenerate pervert?!" she asked, standing up from the chair and stepping on top of my bed. Then she stamped down on my body and face with her red high heel.

It was a first for me. I couldn't believe a gorgeous elf dressed in such a sexy outfit was stepping on me with her heels.

In what was likely the work of the aphrodisiac, I felt an extremely strong rush of pleasure. The sort of unbelievable pleasure that felt like all the filth in my body was being released from my every pore.

"Ah, ah, ah!"

"Silence!"

Ludie put more strength into her foot.

The heel of her boot was practically eating into my skin, and yet it only stung slightly. Everything else was intense and powerful pleasure.

"Getting off on this? Quite a depraved piece of livestock, aren't we?" Ludie berated me, but there was a look of almost bliss on her face. It was still all because she was being manipulated, but tormenting me was clearly supercharging her arousal and possessiveness.

Ludie then got down from me and glanced over at the monitor. I followed her gaze. There, I watched as Claris gave a glimpse of her panties. Next, Nanami came out in front and began showing something of her own.

She claimed it was her "morning routine," but first and foremost, this wasn't a morning routine at all. Not only that, but she was lying through her teeth like it was nothing. "I admit defeat…" Give me a damn break! The chat was going wild, too. I wasn't some super sadist or anything, okay?!

"Hey, Nanami! Morning Routine, my ass! I've never done anything like that before and you know it! Don't lie about that stuff… Hraaaaaugh!"

As I spoke, I was hit with the whip. It hurt so good.

"Silence! Who gave you permission to speak? Also, you're livestock, so I want to hear you oink like it!"

H-hold on a second here. She hadn't powered up her whip with mana, had she? Was it just me, or was my sensitivity even higher, and the pain even worse…?

"L-Ludie, please wait! It hurts! Ow!"

"That's *Queen* Ludie to you. What are you again?"

"O-ow, please, it hurts. Um…I'm sorry."

The whip laid into me without end. I couldn't handle much more of this. Time to cast my pride out the window.

"Oh, uh, o-oink oink."

What sort of terrible comments was I going to get now? I didn't want to see, yet I was too curious not to look.

dude's gone full pig lolololol; *does this guy have no pride at all?! lol*; *I wish that were me…* Hmmm. Better than I thought, honestly.

"See, you can oink after all! Here's your reward!" Ludie said, swinging her whip.

"*Hrnk!* Oink! Oink!"

Hey, why the hell was she still whipping me?! So I was getting the whip for everything then, rewards and punishment alike?! That wasn't fair!

After watching all this happen, the fat orc noisily came over to me.

"I-I'll do it, too! *Bweehee!*"

He picked up a link of round balls, sort of like a big rosary, and tried to get close to me. Anal beads? Oh boy, this was the end for me. Right as the despair hit me, however, the whip came in to stop the orc.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"*Bweehee?* No, I'm an ally. *Bweehee.*"

Despite the orc's protests, Ludie smacked her whip against the floor once more.

"This space is reserved for me and my livestock here. I don't want you pigs disturbing it."

"N-no, that's too cruel. *Bweehee.*"

"Ugh, enough with the 'bwee-hees' already! Shut up!"

Ludie sent out an Air Hammer to slam the orc into the wall, before firing several wind blades in front of the others.

This was the first time since the Arch Elf battle that Ludie had used her High Elf power. A day to be remembered, for sure.

I never thought she would use it on the streamer orcs, who were supposed to be her allies. Incidentally, Ludie's spell proved to be overwhelming powerful, and the orcs were completely wiped out, though this was partly because they had all let down their guard around her.

All the orcs had been cut up into pieces.

Cut up into pieces, indeed… Hm? Uh?

"Uh, *whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat*?!"

Hold up a second. The orcs in charge were all gone, right? Huh? What were we going to do now? The livestream battle…was still going on. The chat was still active, and they seemed to be having a grand old time. On top of that, we had earned a tremendous one million points?! I had never seen numbers like that. Even the orcs themselves claimed they'd only reached five-hundred thousand before, right? Wait, so if Yuika and the others had just fought the orcs, couldn't they have won?

Argh, Ludie being the one under control and cracking the whip was already strange enough, but no, now everything had gone completely sideways. I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do!

As I was starting to panic a bit, I suddenly heard something like a loud alarm. Then I saw a yellow card pop up on the stream monitor.

"Oh?"

The murmur of surprise came from Nanami. She had just happened to be looking over when the yellow card popped up. If I had to guess, gory scenes like this were not safe for the stream. Comments saying *gore warning*, and *no gore* were scrolling through the chat.

Though mosaics were applied to the video automatically, we had still been admonished for it. I wondered if earning another yellow card would turn it into a red card? As I considered this, the orcs' corpses gradually changed into magic particles.

Right at that moment…

"Big brooo, wait for meee!"

…Yuika approached the monitor.

I could do nothing but praise Yuika for her genius. Just calling out "big bro" while walking up to the camera like this earned her a big star for perfect marks. I felt an urge to give her some allowance money.

She turned away from the camera, revealing what looked like a school bag slung over her back, but…huh?

"U-uh?"

Her skirt was caught in her bag, leaving her big, jiggly, smooth, absolutely perfect, firm as hell, unbelievably well-shaped butt on display.

That wasn't all, though! What was going on here?! I couldn't see any panties at all! And she had lost her normal last line of defense (her leggings), too!

"Hold up, you can see everything like this!"

As she seemed to realize she was exposed to the cameras, Yuika's face went crimson. I assumed she was wearing a thong of some kind, but she basically had her whole ass hanging out!

"Where do you think you're looking?!"

Ludie's whip flew.

F-forgive me, Ludie. But I simply had to look. I mean, how could I *not* look at such a specimen? To avert my eyes would be missing out on one of the best things life had to offer—no, on a true wonder of the world!

The whip hit me with loud cracks. At this point, the feeling of pleasure was stronger than the pain. It was all because of this fragrance and the aphrodisiac. I couldn't fight it.

I saw a comment scroll by reading, *lol this guy is such a pervert*, but whoever said that wouldn't have been able to resist this either. Give me a break.

Just then, as Ludie grew a bit tired and let up on her torment…

Claris appeared on the screen, her face beet red, dressed in nothing but an apron?

Huh? Confused, I took a closer look at the monitor. She did appear to be wearing underwear at least, but what the hell kinda getup was that, Claris?! I mean, sure, I assumed it was to get viewers, but still!

"Come on everyone, over here."

Claris beckoned, and three animals appeared with a "woof," a "meow," and a "yip." No wait, these weren't animals, they were…

"Yukine?! Nanami?! Yuika?!"

Three sexy girls wearing animal ears.

Yukine was supposed to be a dog. She walked out on all fours, wearing a bathing suit with a tail sprouting out of the back and dog ears on her head. Showing off her beautiful contours more than she ever had before, she restlessly wandered around the screen. Hot diggity dog, what a sight! Awooga!

The chat was going wild at the incredible development, but the comments flew so fast that I couldn't really catch any of them. Though to be honest, any second I could spend looking at the chat, I would have rather spent taking an even longer look at Yukine.

Yukine was shaking her butt on screen for some reason… She wasn't trying to seduce me, was she? Or so I first thought, but it was actually so she could wag her tail. She was furiously shaking her butt back and forth, but her movements were a bit stiff. And yet, there was an artless innocence to her awkward performance that was just as lovely in its own way. Oh yes, indeed.





Yukine sheepishly crawled over to Claris and sat like a dog in front of her. Then Claris, essentially naked save for the apron, held out her hand, telling Yukine "paw."

I unconsciously gulped. No way. She wasn't going to do it, was she?!

Yukine raised her arm up and placed her hand on top of Claris's. The other woman then rubbed Yukine on the head. This wasn't fair, I wanted to do that, too! I wanted to pat Yukine on the head, I wanted to call her a good girl, I wanted to snuggle her close!

I wanted to trace my hand across her beautiful nape and give her chin scritchy-scratchies!

Nanami, dressed as a cat, came to interrupt Claris as she petted Yukine. She also crawled up to Claris on all fours. What was really incredible about Nanami was how she turned her ass toward the camera at the absolutely perfect angle. She could make a living out of pretending to be a cat. Her movements were simply that spot-on. Also, she was almost *too* good at swishing her butt back and forth. Her tail cleanly swung side-to-side, and her thighs naturally jiggled along with it. If I were in the same room as her, I might accidentally pet that butt of hers like it was her head.

Feline Nanami rubbed her cheek against Claris's butt before rolling on the ground and showing her stomach. Cats made this pose when they wanted attention. If she showed off that display to me, I'd give her all the pets her heart desired. Whoa, by rubbing her face like that, she was showing off her armpits for all the world to see! It was real sexy. How dare she be so amazing? That settled it—from now on, I was calling her "Angel Cat."

Claris kneeled down and began rubbing the area around Angel Cat's stomach. She knew what she was doing; cats loved it when you rubbed around their stomach like this. Well, some of them.

Just then, Angel Cat seemed to notice something, as she suddenly got up and scampered off on all fours. She stopped in front of…Yuika wearing a bikini, with a fox tail and ears.

"Y-yip, yip."

Yuika said this while looking into the monitor, before awkwardly moving her hands. While she may have committed herself to this performance, her stiff movements made it clear she still found it embarrassing. Not that this stiltedness wasn't charming in its own right.

Nanami pressed against Yuika with her head, and Yuika crawled on all fours up close to the camera. She wasn't as good at it as Nanami, but I did think she was better at wagging her tail than Yukine. Also, perhaps due to how embarrassed she felt, Yuika looked pretty sweaty, with droplets visible running down her face and body.

Nanami licked Yuika's body and hands.

"Eeep!"

A maidenly voice escaped from Yuika's lips.

"No, it can't be… Th-they're going to groom each other?!"

I couldn't contain my shout. Cats habitually groomed themselves, but they would do the same thing to humans and other animals, too. It was proof of their trust. Nanami had heartfelt trust in Yuika. And so here she was, grooming Yuika.

That wasn't all. This cat wasn't just going for her hands, but the sweaty sides of Yuika's stomach, too. From there, she steadily went further and further up until… No! Whoa, whoa, she had to be screwing with me here! She was doing this all while I was here desperately fighting the desire to run my tongue all over Yukine, Nanami, Yuika, and Ludie that very instant!

"Y-yip, yip yip yip!"

Despite Yuika's vulpine protests, Cat Nanami didn't seem to understand and, if anything, further entangled herself with Yuika. With her whole body.

It was pure art. The ultimate union of cat and fox. The sight of Nanami and Yuika tangled together was divine, their presence making it seem like any intrusion by another would be pure blasphemy.

Yuika, struggling to get herself free and with her bikini top slightly shifted out of place, used Claris as a shield. Nanami took this as an

opportunity to tangle herself up with Claris.

Having sacrificed Claris, Yuika managed to escape with her life.

Survival of the fittest. This was the savannah. Only the strong and smart survive. Yuika's movements made me feel the laws of nature at work.

"M-Miss Nanami, angh! That tickles!"

Nanami didn't stop. I couldn't tear my eyes away as Claris, ostensibly the one controlling the pets, was gradually turned into a pet herself. Dammit, this sexy elf was just too freaking beautiful…

It was at that moment, I realized.

Ludie was looking at me, the flames of jealousy burning in her eyes.

"O-okay, just calm down… Ludie."

In her hands, she held what appeared to be clothespins. She clamped them down on my nipples.

"Yeow!"

Then, taking the string attached to the pin in her hand, she looked toward me.

"W-wait, Ludie, sorry, I'm sorry. S-see, look at the comments, there's people telling you to sto—"

do itttttt! *lettem have it! gogogogo! oh ho ho*…

"C'mon, not a single one?! Throw me a bone!"

"Well, aren't you noisy! You're livestock, aren't you?!"

Yikes, I really couldn't afford to make Ludie any angrier. O-okay, for now, I just had to go along with her.

"Oink, oink, oi-oink, oiiiiiink!"

"Sorry, I don't speak piggy, so I have noooo idea what you mean ♥," she said before tensing herself up in preparation to pull the string. She was the one who'd told me to squeal like a damn pig! How could she be so cruel?!

With a stoney look on her face, Ludie yanked back on the string.

"Mnaaauh!"

It was as if pleasure burst forth from me. The lingering afterglow was incredible, too.

From there, she used an advanced technique, tantalizing me with the threat of clamping and pulling on the pins again and again, repeating this several times until she picked up the whip again and began to whack it against my body.

As I continued to feel better and better, something suddenly occurred to me.

Each time Ludie hit me with her whip, a misty spray of my sweat would fly into the air, but…she looked happier than I had ever seen her each time she was showered in it all.

Seeming to notice the way I looked at her, she came up close to my side. She lifted up her bangs, stuck fast to her forehead with sweat, and scooped up some of the sweat before extending her hand to me.

A slender, fair, and beautiful hand. She touched it to my face, as if trying to tickle me. Her hand rubbed my cheek, passed by my chin, wandered around my upper lip, and finally arrived at my nose.

My head was so filled with Ludie's pungent scent, I thought I was going to choke.

Her hand movements were so sexy and firm, yet gentle.

She luxuriated in tracing my face with her hand before jerking my chin upward.

"Tell me, how does it feel to have my sweat smeared all over you, hm?"

Refined and sweet, yet still seductive and comfortable. I might have actually been okay with living out the rest of my life here as her livestock.

"Go ahead, lick it if you want."

I stuck out my tongue and prepared to announce my slobbering defeat, but at that exact moment…

"Ludie, Takioto, look over here!"

…we heard a voice from the monitor.

I hadn't really been paying attention to the score, so I hadn't noticed, but there was now a hopeless gulf in our point totals. While it had earned us a warning, Ludie killing her orc allies must have

proved too much. That said, the others' little show just now had been truly wonderful.

Nevertheless, even with the point difference, Nanami, Yuika, and company showed no signs of giving up. While I was getting ready to declare utter defeat on multiple axes, they still held strong.

Yuika must have been planning to do something. Bright red from ear to ear, she walked with determination toward the camera. Then she showed off what appeared to be a pen in her hands.

No—it was a pregnancy test showing a positive result.

"Takioto, y-you better take responsibility for this!"

"Hwaaaah?! What in the—? Yuika, hold on a minute!"

Why, or better yet, how?! I hadn't actually done anything, right? Just then, I looked behind Yuika to see Nanami holding a red felt-tipped pen. Wait, so she just tacked on the extra line?! Also, now that I had a better look at the pregnancy test, it looked an awful lot like a toy. So it was a fake? Though, hold on, why did a toy like that even exist in the first place?!

"O-ow, Queen Ludie! Um, um, your whipping's getting stronger!"

It still hurt so good though, *hmmmnh*! Apparently, Ludie hadn't noticed the test was fake.

"Miss Yuika, I say this with perfectly pure intentions, but can you let me suck on them?"

"Whatever are you talking about? Also, there's literally nothing but impure intentions behind a question like that!"

"Ah, I see, they're reserved for the new life you made with Master…"

"Grrrrrrrrngh!"

Ludie had blown her lid. Her possessiveness over her livestock (that'd be me) must have been incredibly strong. She got angry and hit me with her whip.

But this wasn't enough to satisfy her. Ludie turned around, picked up a big emerald-green syringe and… Uh-oh.

"Hold your horses, Ludie! That's going way too far, okay? Seriously, *way* too far!"

With her eyes sparkling, she briskly walked over to me. Then she pulled down my underwear. I desperately tried wriggling my body around to escape from her, but since I was affixed to the table, there was no possibility of escape.

She had easily broken through my last, thin line of defense.

It was all over now. The moment that thought crossed my mind, a loud warning alarm rang around us.

I looked at the screen and saw that our account had been suspended, whether because she was trying to do something far too dangerous, or because we had flashed body parts that couldn't be shown on stream. It said that we had lost.

Incredible—we got the account banned. I didn't know this type of victory was even possible…!

"I was real worried for a bit there, but it looks like Yuika and the others managed to win!"

As I heaved a big sigh, I looked at Ludie… Um, what?

Ludie wasn't stopping. The chat and the streaming points had all disappeared, but she just kept going, continuing to bring that pointy thing toward my butt.

"Ludie, stop, you can't. Please stop, stop, stooooooooop! I'm begging you don't do it!"

I screamed. God, Buddha, I didn't care who it was, but I needed someone to save me!

But right before she thrust it into my ass, her hand stopped.

"Kou…suke?"

Ludie gazed at me with a flurried, baffled expression on her face.

I looked at my own body, too. Yup, whip bruises all over with candle wax drops everywhere. Even worse than that were my wide-open legs. No matter how you looked at it, I was clearly a massive pervert! Whether she had stuck that thing into me or not, the situation was awful.

Still, I wanted her to look down at herself right now, too. It wasn't just me…!

Ludie must have noticed my gaze on her. She hugged her own body tight and…

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!"

…screamed.

A few minutes later, Yuika and the others came over to help us.


CONFIG

Chapter 9 **Epilogue**

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim We went back to the castle from there, but timing wise, we had really cut it close in a lot of ways. Since Ludie hadn't contacted Sophia after leaving the dungeon, Emperor Marc had brought soldiers with him and entered the Sanctuary.

Though it almost went without saying, Ludie's parents were angry at their daughter, as well as us, for leaving without their permission, and they had been horribly worried. However, after they heard about Ludie awakening her High Elf power, and about us defeating the Arch Elf, they celebrated the achievement with happy and, likely due to how worried they had been, conflicted looks.

After taking time to relax, the next thing on our agenda was to give Lilou her first ramen experience, to make up for our missed opportunity. The long and short of it was…

"Big Sis Ludie, we should hire a ramen chef at the castle!"

"What a wonderful idea, Lilou. I'm sure Mother and Father will be thrilled, too."

The birth of the Imperial Ramen Sisters.

When they told Sophia their plan, she told them she would "consider it," with a strained smile, but I suspected it wouldn't ever be more than a consideration. Though if she had a taste of ramen for herself, she might've changed her mind.

Just as I was about to start playing with Lilou, it happened—Sophia told me "I want us talk, just to the two of us," and called me away.

Sophia led me to a room used to meet with guests. She had a maid bring us some tea and then immediately told the servant to leave.

"Marino was right after all."

"Hm? About what?"

"You *are* a devilish man."

"That was supposed to be a joke, right…?"

Sophia giggled at my reply.

"You carried yourself brilliantly both here in the castle and against the Church. And in the process of saving the empire, you helped Ludie grow, too."

I hadn't been trying to pull off some grand achievement, but I had to admit, hearing someone else list off my exploits made it sound like I had done a lot.

"In light of your heroic deeds, there's something I'd like to ask of you."

"Of me?"

"That's right. I've wanted to do something about it myself for a long time, but I don't really think Leggenze or I can do anything more to help the situation."

"…Seems like something pretty large scale, then. Are you sure you want to ask me to handle something so big?"

"At this point, there's nothing else I can do."

No other choice, huh?

"Marino told me you've solved all sorts of problems that have come up. In fact, she even emphasized to me that I should come to you for help if I ever found myself desperate and grasping at straws."

"Marino's grasping at straws? Is that going to be all right?"

"It very well might not be, to be honest."

She winced. I really wish Marino wouldn't throw these sorts of problems at me. *Hng*, Ms. Ruija.

"This is a difficult issue, so you can give it as much time as it needs. You could wait until you're done with school to address it. But I want you to save her."

There could only be one person Sophia was talking about.

"Is it Anemone?"

Sophia hung her head.

"I tried to help her myself, but…"

"Being asked this kinda puts me in a rough spot."

"You're right, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put all this on you," Sophia apologized. But I hadn't been trying to reject her plea.

"That's not what I meant. I had already planned on doing something about her problem on my own, anyway."

I had so many things to do that her situation would have to be saved for later, though.

"This isn't related to Anemone, but may I also make some requests of you?"

"What would those be?"

"I have two. I'd like permission to explore the Sanctuary, provided that's even possible, of course.

Sophia took a long inward breath of air.

"I'll talk it over with Marc. We should be able to work something out."

"Thank you very much. As for the second…there's a chance you might not know about it."

"Know about what?"

"I think Ludie can reach even greater heights. When the time is right, and her High Elf power has grown stronger…I want you to have her undergo a trial."

Sophia dropped the cup in her hands, and it went crashing to the floor. I immediately reached out with my stole to pick up the pieces. Then, I used a stain-removal spell Nanami taught me to get rid of the mess it had left behind.

Sophia looked at me as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Almost scared and fearful, even.

"Just who *are* you?"

"The guy who saved Ms. Sakura, er, the angel Raziel. I know about the first elf queen, too."

She took a deep breath. She looked at the broken cup and apologized for dropping it.

"I understand what you want to do. Except, I can't say a thing beyond 'Go right ahead.' Only the High Elf and their companions are allowed in there."

I mean, I knew as much, but I figured it'd be good to at least bring it up beforehand. A parent's obviously gonna be worried about

their child, right?

Sophia stared blankly at me.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking that the dragon's grandson is just as much a dragon himself."

The dragon's grandson? If I was the grandson, then the dragon had to be… Marino's father, Ryuuen Hanamura.

"Not that I've ever met him before or anything."

"I know all about it. You've really struggled to get where you are, haven't you? Actually, putting it like that might be a bit rude. Sorry."

"No need to apologize."

It didn't feel real to me or anything anyway.

"How about this? Feel free to consider me family from here on out, too. Calling me 'Mother' will do."

"Now you just sound like Marino," I said, prompting a laugh from us both.

"Still, gaining another mother or two happens all the time. Don't let it bother you."

Uhhh. I didn't think it happened 'all the time'…

—Ludie's Perspective—

After Mother summoned Kousuke, Father called for me—by myself, to his personal chambers.

Father had just finished brewing tea when I arrived. Normally, he had someone else do it, but he did enjoy making it for himself every now and then. My mother loved tea, so I had seen her enjoying the tea Father had brewed for her on many an occasion.

"Take a seat."

I sat down on the nearby sofa, and Father placed a cup of tea in front of me. I took a sip.

"It tastes lovely."

"Does it?"

Something appeared to come to Father's mind, and he stared hard at me. Then he let out a small sigh.

"Not even a year has passed, and you've grown so much. You've gotten so much bigger."

I immediately realized he wasn't speaking about my height.

"…Maybe because of how much has happened."

Father agreed before taking a sip of his tea. "Did the Arch Elf say anything?"

"…Not a word."

Father sighed slightly and looked out the window.

"I always thought he was a problem that needed to be dealt with. It was as though a massive bomb had been strapped to our chests this whole time."

"True…"

Since he had gone completely out of control.

"Even the human supremacist Leggenze came with their heads bowed, asking for help. If someone like him was allowed to go berserk in our country…"

I could only imagine the absolute worst. There was no doubt the damage would have been catastrophic.

"Thank you, Ludie."

"Please, it just sort of worked out that way," I replied, and Father took another sip of tea. Then, closing his eyes and thinking something over, he nodded slightly.

"I never would have thought you'd be the one to attain it."

He had to be speaking about the power of the legendary High Elf.

"Neither did I."

I had basically just tapped into it because I'd felt an urgent need for it. Apparently, Father had gone through trials and undergone special training to do the same.

Yet, he never obtained the power. In all likelihood, that wasn't because he lacked the skill or capacity for it. If there was one thing he may have been missing…

"I have my friends to thank."

"Is that right…? We owe them a large debt of gratitude."

He was correct. They had helped save the empire from danger. However…

"None of them really think they did anything special, though. We've all been through much worse, for one."

"And what would that be?"

"When we confronted the Book of Raziel, definitely."

"The Book of Raziel. Hmmm."

Father began to ponder something. According to what Ms. Sakura had told me, the elven queen had been involved with sealing away the Book of Raziel. This was why I'd mentioned it to my father, since I wondered if he knew something about it. Sure enough, it seemed like he did.

"I'm surprised you made it out of that."

"I've never experienced anything like the fear I felt then."

"Maybe that's why I never awoke to the power—I haven't gone through nearly as much as you have."

"You think so?"

"I do. Now, this is slightly off topic, but…I have something I'm worried about."

"Well, I don't."

"But *I* do. You may not plan on disclosing you've become a High Elf, but you do understand there's a chance that word had gotten out somewhere, right?"

"I do."

Well, though we had no intention of telling everyone, there was always the chance this information would spread.

"Do you not have any plans of coming home for good?"

Father was trying to say he would protect me. But I had found someone I could rely on even more than him. First and foremost, though…

"Do you truly think I'd come back home?"

At this, Father smiled self-deprecatingly.

"No. But depending on how things shake out, someone might set their eyes on that power of yours."

"I'll be fine, Father. I'm not alone. I have all of my friends at my side."

"You mean *him*, huh?"

I had *clearly* said "friends," but even then… Father was still focusing on only one of them. Not that he was wrong, though.

"He's already protected you several times now, so I'm sure it'll be fine, but I still can't help but worry."

When it was all said and done, he did acknowledge Kousuke after all. But he didn't need to worry.

"That's not going to happen again. This time, *I'm* going to protect him."

"Oh, I…I see." Father forced a smile.

"But even then, I don't know if I can catch up to him…"

"Even as a High Elf?"

"That's right."

There was something Kousuke was working his hardest to achieve, something he often boasted about.

I imagined almost everyone had taken his words as a joke at first, but I figured there wasn't anyone who did anymore. His accomplishments simply made his claims impossible to dismiss.

This time, it was my turn to say the phrase he used so often.

"After all, Kousuke's going to become the strongest in the world."





Afterword

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim Good day everyone. I'm still alive.

—Acknowledgments—

Noboru Kannatuki, thank you again for yet more wonderful illustrations. Your designs for the new characters are similarly superb. Hortensia, and Ludie's parents look far more wonderful than I had even imagined they would. Lilou is especially fantastic; my imagination was so stimulated by the design, it made me feel like I could bang out several hundred pages, no problem.

Yukari Higa, thank you for Volume 2 of the manga adaptation. I said as much in the volume afterword, but it truly was a fantastic volume!

To my god, my editor: You have my apologies, as always. Next volume, I guarantee…uh, actually, I'll work my hardest…to meet my deadlines…as best I can. The feeling is strong, I assure you. (This is called foreshadowing.) Finally, to everyone who has bought this book, I deeply thank you. Your support has brought this story to the major double-digit milestone.

Finally, the anime adaptation is quietly making progress behind the scenes, so I hope all of you are excited to see it.

Iris

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