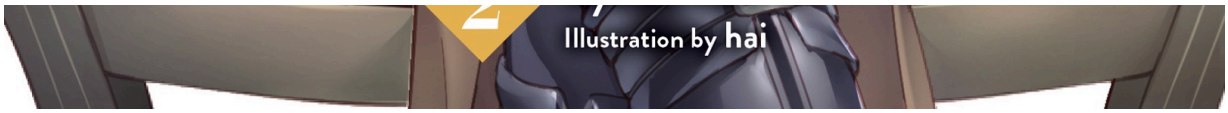

Ryo Hazakura
Illustration by hai
2
The Only Thing I'd Do in a No-Boys-Allowed Game World
Reincarnated as a Yuri Ship-Sinker


The Only Thing I'd Do in a
No-Boys-Allowed Game World
Reincarnated as a Yuri Ship-Sinker
2
Ryo Hazakura


Illustration by hai


NAME
Sakura Tsukiori
NAME
Ophelia von Margeline


NAME
Alsuhariya


NAME
Hiiro Sanjo

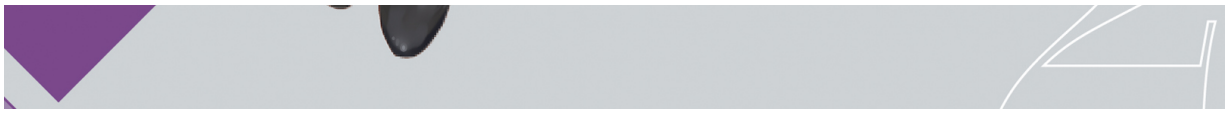


Everything for the Score

[Volume] Two

The Only Thing I'd Do in a No-Boys-Allowed Game World





The Only Thing I'd Do in a No-Boys-Allowed Game World

Reincarnated as a Yuri Ship-Sinker

2

Ryo Hazakura
Illustration by hai

YEN ON
NEW YORK



Copyright

The Only Thing I'd Do in a No-Boys-Allowed Game World 2

Reincarnated as a Yuri Ship-Sinker

Ryo Hazakura

Translation by Eriko Sugita
Frontispiece and Illustrations by hai

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

DANSHIKINSEIGAMESEKAI DE ORE GA YARUBEKI YUIITSU NO KOTO Vol. 2
YURI NO AIDA NI HASAMARUOTOKOTOSHITE TENSEISHITESHIMAIMASHITA ©Ryo Hazakura 2023
First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: June 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell
Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Hazakura, Ryo, author. | hai, illustrator. | Sugita, Eriko, translator.
Title: The only thing I'd do in a no-boys-allowed game world. Volume 1, Reincarnated as a yuri ship-sinker / Ryo Hazakura ; illustrations by hai ; translation by Eriko Sugita.
Other titles: Danshi kinsei game sekai de ore ga yarubeki yuiitsu no koto. English | Reincarnated as a yuri ship-sinker Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2025.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024054575 | ISBN 9798855400274 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9798855407532 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9798855407556 (v. 3; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Reincarnation—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H39719 On 2025 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024054575

ISBNs: 979-8-85540753-2 (paperback)
979-8-8554-0754-9 (ebook)

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Begin Reading

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

An explosion occurred.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Bursts of light, sound, and flames broke out one after another, and the chain of explosions blew away the desert area.

The location was the Nubian Desert—in northeastern Sudan, Africa.

In the heart of the ruins of the Kush civilization in the Nile River basin, golden dust billowed high, and a fierce sandstorm engulfed the pyramids.

The top of a golden tower spun as it soared through the air after being torn off and blown away.

It crashed into the dunes, sending up clouds of sand in every direction.

A plume of smoke and dust rose from the ground.

A gust of wind pushed it into a sandstorm—and a humanoid figure leaped out of the middle of the storm, followed by three sinister shadows.

The person had no left arm.

It was a woman in a black and gold military coat, wearing a crimson uniform underneath. The left sleeve hung loosely from her shoulder, fluttering in the gusts of wind as if her missing arm was struggling inside it. She was smiling faintly, and her right hand was tucked in a pocket.

The Greater Demon.

The Vampire Lord.

The Lich King.

These three were kin of the demon, faithfully serving their leader, with abilities befitting their titles. Making the best of their magic devices and their techniques, they struck with all their might at the one-armed hero before them—and a blue glow of mana twisted through the air—while her right hand remained tucked in her pocket.

Their fight was a clash of titans. The exchanging of blows amid advanced battle strategy was too much for the average eye to follow.

And this one-armed figure fought all her enemies alone.

Overwhelming the trio, her eyes glittered as she smashed the face of one, cracked the skull of another, and disemboweled the third.

Their bodies crashed lifelessly to the ground.

Floating victoriously within the eye of the storm, the woman descended to the surface of the sands.

A new adversary lay before her.

The demon produced a cigarette, lit it, and puffed coolly. Her name was Alsuhariya, and a sardonic smile appeared on her face.

"Braun Les Bracketlight," she called out to the human, known as *The One-Armed Hero*. She shrugged, shifted her body, and took a drag from the cigarette she had taken from the demon.

Alsuhariya's smile deepened when she saw that the cigarette she'd been holding had suddenly disappeared.

"Hey, don't tell me you've picked up smoking?"

"Nah… It's bad for my skin."

Flourishing her jet-black coat, she crushed the cigarette in her hand and made it disappear, reducing it to dust that vanished in the sandstorm.

Alsuhariya narrowed her eyes. "So you're just harassing me."

Braun shrugged.

"Alsuhariya, isn't it about time you let go of the grudge against me and my mightiness? This isn't some science-class polarity experiment where we can just keep drawing close together and then splitting up over and over again. Let's set the record straight once and for all."

"You read my mind."

The demon snapped her fingers, a flame appeared at the tip of her index, and she lit another cigarette. Her smile widened as she exhaled, and she whispered to the hero.

"Anyone who refers to themselves as *Ore-sama* sounds incredibly stupid. I hate brainless apes, particularly apes that relentlessly chase after others."

Braun smiled confidently. "Well, *Ore-sama* religiously studied Japanese manga! And all the characters who refer to themselves that way are…super strong…!"

"Wrong. Most characters who call themselves that only exist to make the main character look good."

That comment had clearly dealt Braun a considerable amount of psychic damage. Her eyes were wide open in disbelief as her body trembled.

"N-no… Did Hizumi l-lie to me…? But I believed her…for years! Even to this day…! I—I always felt like people were looking at me funny… M-my cool image… It's…it's crumbling into dust…!"

"Braun…you have to be getting tired of this by now."

Alsuhariya spread out her arms, and a massive cloud of fog formed behind Braun, mixing with sand and smoke to create a world of illusion.

"Let's settle this."

"Good idea."

Standing before the demon, Braun extended her right arm and beckoned Alsuhariya forward. "I love having clear objectives."

The human and the demon—disappeared.

Then came a bright-blue flash.

The brilliant streaks turned the sand, soil, and gravel of the Nubian Desert a pale blue.

An extraordinary amount of mana exploded between the duelists, causing every grain of sand around to fly into the sky and even warping the ruins of the bygone civilization. The sun overlooking the scene continued to stoke the fires of battle.

"You haven't changed at all!!!" Alsuhariya sneered as blood splashed from her body.

"You're ridiculously fast, Braun Les Bracketlight! You're just about the only being that my eyes can't keep up with! I'll grant you that

much!”

“You’re just slow, you dumb cow! Don’t try to make yourself feel better by saying I’m fast!!!”

The deadly duel continued.

Shattered pieces of a pyramid flew through the air and struck Braun’s body, which disappeared with a flash of light.

A bridge appeared in the sky.

It was a purple bridge the lone hero had materialized.

“Magic…railway…!!!”

Alsuhariya stared in shock as the hero’s body came flying at her.

Braun had turned herself into purple lightning and came flying straight at the demon. She pulled her right fist out of her pocket and struck the demon in the face.

That was the decisive blow.

Alsuhariya’s body gradually crumpled, her face full of despair and anguish.

Certain of her victory, Braun laughed—and noticed.

A child.

Braun spotted her dark-skinned young friend and saw her expression become clouded with terror. Then she recognized the evil spirit sneering in amusement.

“……!!!”

The meridians in her body twisted and turned.

Braun screamed. Due to the impact of forcing herself to achieve her objective, her body began to disintegrate as blood poured from her wounds.

She then demonstrated her magical power, which was known to be the fastest in the universe.

She hurried to the child and used her own body as a shield to protect the child from the blades coming from the mist.“……”

“……”

Braun’s body had been run through by the fog-blade, and she grinned despite suffering a wound that was clearly fatal.

“…Atiifa…I told you not to play here.”

Atiifa cried and shook her head.

"N-no… I know that… Our v-village… Demons are attacking…a-and…people said to find you…o-or everyone was going to die…"

Slowly, Braun's eyes widened as the demon scoffed.

"Hey, don't tell me you thought the girl came to save me."

Alsuhariya tapped the side of her head with her fingertips. "Goodness, what pitiful and adorable creatures you humans are. You never fail to put your emotions before reason, which is why you always lose. You could have taken me out with just one more blow, yet you made the foolish choice of protecting that little ant. What a joke."

The demon stretched out her arms and bowed with a sly smile.

"I think I'm actually starting to like you."

Braun pressed a hand against her wound, rose unsteadily, and gently patted Atiifa on the head.

"It's okay… Don't cry. Come, we're going back to the village…"

"Hey, are you going back to the village with that mortal wound? Ha-ha. How far will you go to amuse me? Maybe that's the role of a hero, but do you really think you can defeat a crowd of demons in your current state?"

"B-Braun… You're bleeding… You have to see a doctor…or y-you're going to die…"

Braun smiled, took the girl in her arms, and ran.

The sun set.

Dusk turned the golden desert a reddish brown.

"……"

Surrounded by a large number of demon corpses, the hero turned her dark eyes toward the void and retied her body—or what was left of it—to the rubble.

Atiifa wept as she clung to the hero, protected by her right arm.

"…This is a surprise," Alsuhariya said as she looked down at the center of the destroyed village.

"I never imagined that you'd kill the demons even while on the verge of death, free all the villagers, and continue to protect that piece of baggage… I certainly hadn't expected all this… How can you do this…? How, human…? What is it…that keeps you going…?"

Explosions began to ring out in the distance, and Alsuhariya clicked her tongue.

"This mana… It has to be *Estilpament*… That piece of trash always shows up for every little thing…"

Alsuhariya raised a hand to restrain a subordinate who was staring at Atiifa.

"Don't do anything in poor taste. Try a little tact. It isn't nice to break a toy in front of a crying child."

The demon smiled.

"Humans *are* interesting after all. I didn't think much of you before, but you've given me quite a bit of enjoyment. Still, everything ends when you die. Life is a privilege reserved only for the victors—only the strong can impose their will. Unfortunately, I doubt I'll remember you or any of your friends after today."

With those words, Alsuhariya walked away—and Braun's eyes lit up again as Atiifa continued to cling to her.

"…Izdihaar?"

"N-no, Braun, I'm not Mom… I'm Ati…Atiifa…"

"Oh…Ati… What…are you doing here…?"

Braun smiled at the weeping girl.

"Why are you crying…?"

That was when she finally realized the miserable state of her body.

Only her upper half remained, and she realized what was about to happen to her. She slipped her trembling hand into her pocket, pulled out a tusk wrapped in papyrus, and handed it to the girl.

"Atiifa… Can I ask you something…?"

"D-don't talk… I'll get a doctor… W-wait. Wait for me…here…!"

Braun grabbed the girl by the arm as she tried to run, then pushed the tusk into her hand.

"This is filled with my mana…and the mana of my friends…and your mother's, too… Take it… You'll definitely…definitely need it someday…when a hero comes to this land…"

Braun flashed the girl a big smile.

"I want you…to carry on…my legacy…"

"No… Don't die… Please, Braun, don't die…"

Braun stroked Atiifa's wet cheeks as the girl continued to sob and gazed into the beautiful face she had inherited from her mother.

"Ati… Take care of that beautiful skin you got from your mom… Don't neglect skincare… This area gets dry easily…giving you a bad complexion… Smile… Please, smile for me… I want to see you smile before I go…"

Tears streaming down her face, Atiifa smiled desperately. Braun nodded, the corners of her mouth trembling.

"Go… Estilpament is close… She's kind to children… Have her help you… Be…happy, Ati…for your mom's sake… Live a long…happy life… You…are my pride and joy…"

"Braun—"

"Go!"Braun exclaimed with her last ounce of strength.

Carrying the tusk Braun entrusted to her, called a *coffin*, Atiifa took off running.

"……"

Braun was now alone.

Left alone, Braun accepted that her body was growing cold and her vision was becoming hazy. With twitching fingertips, she pulled out a photograph.

She saw a shot of herself with Luri, the daughter her best friend had left behind.

"Hizumi… Sorry, I don't think you'll get to see Luri grow up… But I promise she'll be fine… She's a sweet girl…very kind… She'll grow up healthy and make many people smile…"

Braun could no longer maintain her strength, and her right hand, holding the photo, slumped.

"Aimia, you never married, did you…? It's your fault for being too quick to pick fights… Sophie, your sister-in-law is too violent to tame… Her last words were 'marry me'… That wasn't funny… Izdihaar…your daughter sure runs fast… She's already way out there… Ha-ha… She's super fast…"

Her vision darkened, and her consciousness began to fade.

Braun Les Bracketlight recalled that she had always been running.

Always.

Always running.

She was faster than anyone and knew no one could keep up.

Still, she hadn't stopped running…

Because she knew that if she didn't reach her goal, someone would end up crying.

She had always made a desperate effort to keep her feet moving so she could make someone smile.

She'd run barefoot since she had no money to buy shoes. She'd worn tattered shirts and pants and left muddy footprints behind.

Some people had made fun of her, but she continued to will her body forward, believing that she would one day reach her goal.

All alone since there was no one around to support her.

Things had rarely been easy for her, and she wanted to quit many times. But because someone was smiling, she could accept that she would have to run alone.

But before she knew it, she started hearing the footsteps of someone following behind her.

She realized people were making a tremendous effort to try and catch up with her.

She was overwhelmed with joy to find that she had friends—friends who wanted a happy ending with her.

She was so delighted that she ran even faster—faster for the ones who would come after her. For the ones who dreamed of following in her footsteps.

Running with loved ones brought her great joy.

But then she noticed that the sound of the footsteps behind her had faded away. She turned around and found that no one was there.

Yet she still kept running.

She ran because she could hear the voices of those who had been running with her.

That was why she ran.

Braun Les Bracketlight continued to run to make someone smile—and she regained consciousness.

"Oh…"

The friends who had run with her were looking at her, smiling gently as if to tell her everything was all right.

"You were all running with me after all… Gee, I…I thought I was alone… Ha-ha… I was wrong… Okay… You've been running with me all along…ever since we were kids… I'm amazed you kept up…with someone like me… Sorry… I'm sorry, guys… After all that running, I couldn't reach our goal… Sorry…"

Tears fell down Braun's cheeks, and her peers gently stood at her side.

"Oh, I get it…"

As tears continued to spill from the edges of her wide-open eyes, the hero trembled—understanding what her friends intended—and smiled.

"I…didn't have to stop…did I…?"

She had been running.

Running forever.

She could see herself running as a young girl, and as she watched her own back, it overlapped with that of another girl.

Her view opened up.

It was the few final moments of life that God had given her.

Once.

Twice. Over and over, Braun tried to reach out and touch Atiifa's back as she ran as fast as she could, nearly tripping and falling in the process.

Her trembling fingertips chased the girl's back.

"Run… Keep going… Go… As fast as you can… Go… Go…as far as you can…and I… I'll…follow you…keep watching your back…and we'll reach our goal…together… Right, guys…? Next time, it will be…"

The girl who had kept running with her friends throughout her life smiled happily and closed her eyes.

"Where…shall we go…?"

The hero passed away—and her will was passed on.



It was the start of orientation training camp, the main event for new students at Houjou Magic Academy.

Although it was called "orientation training," the scale was extraordinary, which was fitting for Houjou as a school that was considered the pinnacle of education for young ladies.

The two-night, three-day camp was to be held on a luxury cruise ship owned by the academy, the *Queen's Watch*.

Wondering about the level of luxury of a floating palace owned by a school for rich daughters, I—Hiiro Sanjo—rubbed shoulders with Snow and did some research. And we learned that the *Queen's Watch* was a crème de la crème ultra-luxury liner.

Cruise ships were broken down into four classes: mass-market, premium, entry-luxury, and ultra-luxury. As you can tell by these names, the ultra-luxury ships offered the best quality experience money could buy. (Though your mileage may vary…)

True to its class, the *Queen's Watch* had onboard facilities so luxurious that they would stun a commoner like me.

The cabins had private balconies and luxurious beds. Multiple restaurants offered Japanese, Western, and Chinese cuisine, and there was even a bar which served alcoholic beverages to faculty and soft drinks to students.

There was a swimming pool and surf simulator, a fitness club, a spa, a beauty salon, an array of shops, a game room, a dance floor,

and a doctor and nurse so passengers could go to the infirmary if they required treatment.

When I saw the details on the services offered aboard the *Queen's Watch*, which I got from my homeroom teacher, Marina, I said, "Wow, this floating fortress has all the bells and whistles, doesn't it?" Snow wasn't stingy with her praise, saying, "I just want to split it down the middle and get straight to the good stuff."

The *Queen's Watch* looked so opulent and luxurious to the average boy and his maid that they couldn't believe such a place was real.

However…

…It seemed to be a different story for the rich girls. They'd say, "Oh, we've sailed on boats like this so many times that's not really exciting anymore," eyeing me as I got excited, even going as far as to yawn out of boredom.

We were going to spend the majority of the trip at sea.

Since few people had the mental fortitude to continue watching the sea's surface without getting bored, we received advance notice of the ship's program of events and shows, which we would enjoy when we weren't disembarking at ports of call to go sightseeing.

The purpose of the orientation camp was for students to interact with one another. Students from Class A through Class E would be sailing together in the same boat to communicate regardless of which class they were in.

That said, each class would hold events for themselves, and the basic idea was to work in groups.

It was customary to move around in groups at ports, but there were no real restrictions, and whether students got off the ship at a port was entirely up to the individual.

However, a small console would be attached to all students' magic devices, and we would be under the constant supervision of our teachers, who would need to stare into their screens throughout the camp and rush to the scene if any idiots looked like they might cause trouble.

What a shame… Marina was likely to get an upset stomach because of the violence caused by the unions of spoiled rich girls.

Naturally, this camp has zero chance of ending without incident.

I've played the original game before, so I already know how this event is supposed to play out. I'm always braced for the possibility that I may die. Still, I don't think Tsukiori, the protagonist of the original story, would be able to handle an event of this magnitude, and my feeling is that I won't have to play a part in it on this occasion.

If things proceeded the way they did in the game's story, this event would bring Tsukiori and the heroines much closer together.

It could very well be the event that determines the direction of things for her.

So I'll have to do my best to stay out of the way.

I'm going to be a gentleman, rather than a weed sprouting up between the lilies. All I have to do is keep a low profile and enjoy the cruise.

Pretty much the only thing I need to worry about is buying souvenirs for the maids back at home.

I sit in the waiting area and close the screen that was displaying a floor plan of the ship.

We're now at Tokyo International Cruise Terminal.

In ten minutes, we would be boarding the luxury liner from this terminal…but to be honest, I was awfully sleepy.

That was because it was my first time sailing on a luxury cruise ship. I had been so thrilled that I couldn't sleep last night, and a kind maid noticed I was up all night and arrived at my bedside with a sledgehammer in her hands, offering to put me to sleep—forever.

But what if I got seasick? I was starting to get worried. I heard our servants could board the ship if they wanted, but someone said we would have to pay all the expenses… Perhaps I should have brought Snow, who was waiting at home, even if it cost me. When all was said and done, she was a maid who had a keen eye for details. She noticed things most other people didn't.

Amid such musings, I yawned and glanced around.

A spacious waiting area lay at the top of the stairs leading from the main entryway.

It was a spectacular sight. Many rich girls were gathered there. The sea of bodies seemed to span forever.

And of course, there was no one around me, the only guy—

"Hiiro."

Tsukiori, clad in her school uniform, crossed her legs and smiled at me.

"Are you not feeling well? Would you like a piece of gum?"

For some reason, the protagonist was ignoring the heroines and came to sit next to me.

"……"

I guess it couldn't be helped since we were in the same group, but…I wished she'd follow Ophelia's lead and say something like, "I get goose bumps being near a boy!" and go away.

"Brother dearest, you look a little pale. Maybe you should have something to eat," said Rei, the daughter of the Sanjo family. She looked very much at home and offered me a cup of tea that had been poured by an accompanying servant, then glanced at her lap as if hinting at its appeal. "Or perhaps you'd like to rest your head on my lap? Here, this is just tea, but drink up."

"……"

Rei wasn't even in my group. Why did she have to follow me around and try to take care of me? She spoke super fast, asked me which events I was participating in, and sent a servant to the store to get me medicine to settle my seasickness.

"Hey, Hiiro? Did you know they have a pool on the deck? Here, check this out! I'll let you borrow this pool float I bought! It's not that big, but feel free!"

Geez, Lapis. Was *this* what you meant when you swore the other day that you'd be my backup?

"……"

I stared at Lapis. She gasped, then nodded.

"Don't worry about it! I circled all the events I want to do in red!"

Oh, Yuri God… Can you hear me? Your humble servant is in need of aid… Sheesh…

Feeling hopeless, I turned away from her and stared at the floor.

There was nothing I could do about the lone princess. In her excitement to go on this cruise, she completely forgot her mission. All the time she'd spent by herself since coming to Japan must have done a number on her. The thought of missing out on a luxury cruise with her friends was probably more than her heart could bear.





I decided to get her back on track.

"…I'm gonna be straight with you." I stood up without a word, unfolded the screen, and called Snow. "I need help."

"It's much too soon for you to be making an SOS call. What are you, a Formula One car that got homesick? Zero-zero-nine-zero, we at headquarters have received your request for aid and would like to inform you that we are denying it. Over."

"Headquarters, this is the guy constantly caught between yuri girls. Due to the inhalation of an atomized hallucinogen by a hostile party, I can only see beautiful girls around me. I'm unable to confirm yuri girls. My surroundings are cloudy, and I'm hallucinating being surrounded by gorgeous girls. Over."

"It's your eyes and your brain that are cloudy. Over."

"Shut up. Over."

Snow sighed.

"You have a lovey-dovey picture of the two of us as your phone's home screen, right? What happened to your plan to casually show that off?"

"People totally ignored it. My record stands at zero wins and three losses. Over!"

"Don't *over* me."

Standing away from Tsukiori and the others, I glanced out at the sea and pressed the palm of my hand against the window.

"I want to move on to phase two of our plan and get a few more jabs in. Show them how fast your left jab is. I can't move my fist anymore. Yet somehow, it's still trembling."

"Okay, I get it. Your stupidity is so severe it's genuinely beginning to concern me. Switch to speaker mode, and the world's most adorable maid will provide the world's most adorable backup."

Snow coughed sweetly to adjust the state of her throat.

"We'll show the others that we're in a league of our own. I'll make sure that the Cerebral Academy gives me the Best Actress award this year, too."

"S-Snow…!"

"Step aside. The world-class acting by your beautiful maid is about to begin."

I switched to speaker mode.

"Hi, hun. I'm here at the terminal now—"

"Miss Rei's calling, so I'm hanging up now. Don't ever call me again. Goodbye, darling."

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

She suddenly hung up, and I stared at the screen, mouth agape.

"Well, well."

I felt a shiver up my spine.

I turned around and saw Rei standing tall and smiling at me, her hands clasped together.

"You and your fiancée are very close, aren't you? Like those ridiculous love songs…with lyrics that go on about how you may be apart, but your hearts will always be together."

"W-we *are* engaged…"

"Is this fiancée so important to you that you would cruelly neglect your precious sister—who sincerely cares about you—to engage in silly lovey-dovey talk?"

Still smiling, Rei forced the seasickness pills toward me.

"Brother dearest, you've fallen ill before we've even set sail. A politician once told me that lovesickness is worse than seasickness."

"Ha-ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha."

"We're finally acting like real siblings."

Rei's cheeks were red as she hugged herself and turned away like she was sulking.

"It wouldn't hurt…for you to think of me a little more. A fiancée is someone you may break up with in the future, but you'll always have your precious sister."

"Hey! You learned something weird from a women's manga again, didn't you?!"

"I did not! I thought of that myself!!!"

Rei glared at me, her face bright red, and I raised my hands in surrender.

"You may have a point there, Rei, but we're in different groups. I'm not rejecting the idea of enjoying various events together, but the rule for this camp is that we have to stay in our groups when we take part in activities. Think of the poor princess who'll be left all alone if you ignore your group and do whatever you want. Isn't that, Lapis?"

Twitch.

Lapis, who had been watching us from the shadows, quietly appeared.

"Guys, go back to your groups for once. Take advantage of this opportunity to expand your circle of friends and send me photos of you having fun on this trip. I'll pay you ten thousand yen per photo."

"Dear brother, I'm just keeping an eye on you in case you try something funny again. That's all."

"Hiiro," the smiling princess whispered to me with a wink. "It's okay. Leave everything to me. I'll always watch over you."

Correct me if I'm wrong, but all she's done so far is exhibit how much of an excited idiot she is and show off her swimming float, right?

My perverted little sister and the hyper, guard-dog princess left to join their assigned group. Tsukiori watched them with amusement, chewed her gum, blew a bubble, and grinned.

"How does it feel to have a naive rich girl who knows nothing about relationships *and* a princess both coming on to you?"

"It would be great if no foreign objects came between us. But hey, what's up with Ophelia? I'm impressed that she actually rejected me, but things are gonna get complicated if she doesn't go to your group since we'll have roll call when we board the cruiser."

"She's over there enjoying an event."

"Huh? An event?"

I looked in the direction Tsukiori pointed.

Ophelia and some girls from another class were arguing, and I wouldn't have been surprised if it started getting physical.

"This is why I hate the lower class! I, Ophelia von Margeline, have always been careful about zoning so I don't end up mingling with the dregs of society!"

"Huh?! You should watch that big mouth of yours! There are three of us here. Can't you see that?!"

Full of confidence, the rich girl unfolded her fan and held up her necklace-slash-magic-device.

"Ohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Do you honestly believe that the three of you can take on me, Ophelia von Margeline, a girl worth a thousand fighters, world peace, and the industrial revolution?"

"You have nothing to do with the industrial revolution! Stop taking credit for something that has nothing to do with you!"

"I, a prodigy in troubled times, simply nullify such nonsense. I am invincible! Therefore, I am! I am Ophelia von Margeline! Now, dear, enough of your fooling around. Be aware of your worth, commoners!"

She was already playing her part as a foil!

"Tsukiori, don't just stand there and stop her! Look at that face brimming with confidence! Wait three seconds, and she'll start crying!"

"It won't take three seconds, and it happens all the time."

"Don't you feel sorry for her?! She's so arrogant, yet she falls apart and cries!!!"

I pulled my trigger with all my might and ran to gain momentum.

"I'm sorry, ladies at Houjou Magic Academy!!! I'll get down on my knees and apologize as soon as possible, so please have mercy on us! Hey, knees, groan!" I said to my knees.

Sliding to my knees, I glided on my kneecaps between Ophelia and the other girls.

It appeared that a difficult journey had gotten underway.



The luxury liner departed with a total of 152 students on board.

Sailing across the ocean at about fifteen knots (a little over seventeen miles per hour), the sailing was smooth, thanks to the ship's size. Cruise ships had fin stabilizers to prevent rolling so we wouldn't sway unless a storm hit us.

Once we boarded, we were divided up by class from A through E, gathered in our groups, and waited for Marina to give us instructions.

"A-all right. *Sob! Cough! Hiccup! Sob!* Anyway…have a pleasant trip!"

She has to stop forgetting her job and choosing to break down into tears at odd intervals.

But, of course, it was too much to ask Marina, a newbie teacher, to stop getting nervous and relax when she was here taking us on her first overnight field trip.

Her face was pale, her body trembled and she was swaying on the ship, which was mostly stable. Students supported her as she looked like she was about to faint, and I thought she might fly off into space when the ship swayed.

Then an unfamiliar woman appeared in front of her.

"May I have your attention, please?"

She was a member of the staff—clad in a white shirt, a chic vest, and black pants. Her short, blond hair swayed as she smiled.

"My name is *A*, and I will be your dedicated support staff during your three-day cruise. You can call me *A*. Feel free to let me know if you need anything, as casually as you might pick up a card at a casino."

She bowed deeply, then indicated a direction with her white-gloved hand.

"As your teacher, Miss Marina, explained earlier, I will first give you a tour of the *Queen's Watch*. Next, I'll hand out mini consoles for you to attach to your magic devices. Be careful not to lose them since they will also serve as keys to your cabins."

It appeared that each class was going to take turns touring the huge ship. We passed by the people in Class E and made our way down inside.

"The *Queen's Watch* has decks four to fourteen. I'll hand out diagrams later through your mini consoles where you can also check our event plans and find other information."

Tsukiori and I quietly moved in toward each other.

"…Hiiro. What's a deck?"

"…I think she's probably talking about some trading card game and drawing cards from decks. I got that much."

"That's the problem with commoners!"

Ophelia hid her mouth with her flamboyant fan and snorted.

"Decks can only refer to the decks on a ship! It's the stable floor on the hull, which means that most of the facilities for us to use are on the deck. That's why we need to see their diagrams…or, to put it simply, a guided tour around the ship!"

"I see! Leave it to the rich girl to tell us what's what!"

The rich daughter put her hands on her hips and arched her back as far as it would go, her cheeks flushing with triumph.

"Ohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! This is nothing for a person of my caliber!"

"…I get the feeling you have a soft spot for this girl."

I'm a guy who roots for the underdog. I'd rather cradle a darling child than send them out into the world.

Anyway, we took a tour of the deck with *A*. We referred to the deck diagram she had open and paraded around the spacious ship.

Each deck was named after a gemstone to make them easy to remember.

For example, the bar and nightclub were on the Diamond Deck.

The Tanzanite Deck was where they had an outdoor hot tub and mini-golf facility. The Benitoite Deck had a pool, changing area, sauna, a large bathhouse, theater room, and fitness center.

The Sapphire Deck, in the middle of the ship, had a balcony, pool, and hot tub. It also had an open-air restaurant called Light

Attendant, Sweet Rendezvous, where they offered different breads and light meals, an ice cream bar, and a café.

Oh my god! I was getting dizzy!

I didn't think I could enjoy everything in just three days.

Decks eight through twelve consisted of cabins, which were all suites. Naturally, they were of different grades.

There were names like *The Grand Family Suite*, and the meanings were beyond me.

I checked the brochure for details on each room, and they were so extensive that I wondered if this was really a ship. They even had a maid service exclusive to the rooms.

Normally, the school was supposed to decide which grade rooms and facilities we could use depending on our scores…but on this occasion, it didn't matter since we were moving around in groups.

A cabin was assigned to each group.

In a yuri game…the more activities that involved girls sleeping in the same beds, snuggling up together, and waking up enveloped in the morning sun, the better…

Of course I wasn't planning to sleep in the same room as Tsukiori and the other girls. There seemed to be cabins for the exclusive use of boys, who were usually kicked out of the cabins.

Our ship tour was mostly finished as I continued to think absently about the cabins, and we were taken to the bottom of the vessel.

They had a rugged engine room there, filled with equipment I had no idea of the purposes.

As I wondered why we were brought all the way to a place like this, *A* smiled…and pointed to the big door.

"This is the heart of the *Queen's Watch*. It's a specially installed magic device called *the Queen's Pillar*."

Then, from out of nowhere, women armed with magic devices appeared before us.

Tsukiori and I instinctively drew our devices as we were bathed in a powerful ray of magic. Ophelia, who had been relaxed as usual, saw our reaction and held up her necklace in a panic.

“Don’t worry. That’s just a vortex of magical power. Our various devices fully control it, and it won’t explode unless the safety that exists outside the engine room is disengaged.”

“…It won’t…explode?”

Ignoring Tsukiori’s murmur, *A* led us through the large door.

It was a vast area.

It was bizarre. No matter how you thought about it, it was way bigger than the size of the cramped bottom of the ship.

In the center of a pure-white open area was a huge cylinder that rotated slowly and glowed a bluish white. The column had a complicated and bizarre conductor wire, with a console that looked like a gigantic pupil attached to it.

The cylinder pushed through the space from the ceiling to the floor. It was unusually large and thick.

Overwhelmed, all we could do was look up at the huge pillar.

“This Queen’s Pillar is our pride and joy, the heart of the *Queen’s Watch*. It’s the energy source that fuels the ship, and it’s also the center of the magical power that is the key to the anti-magic barrier that has never once been breached… It’s the nerve center of our interception system.”

As *A* spoke, her voice echoed off the ceiling, walls, and even the floor.

“The door here is usually locked tightly, but there was once an incident in which bandits belonging to a demonic cult broke in. The bandit was killed in an explosion in here.”

A bowed politely as the students started sounding agitated.

“I ask all of you students to please stay clear of this engine room area. If you should accidentally approach it, please be sure that you don’t pour your magic power into it.”

“Wh-what will happen if we do?” Ophelia asked as she hid behind Tsukiori and me.

A chuckled.

“The magic power will cause a chain reaction and result in an explosion. However, as the inside of this room is covered with

multiple layers of anti-demonic barriers, the explosion won't sink the ship or destroy the Queen's Pillar. The only thing that will happen is that the person who poured their magic power into the room and the objects in the surrounding area will be blown to smithereens."

She sounds like she's scaring us, but (spoilers) it doesn't explode.

This exchange occurs in the original game, but it's a scam, and it doesn't actually explode.

Maybe they wanted to give players of the game a sense of danger, but if the protagonist sees an explosion, it would mean they'd be blown away. So, of course, that wouldn't happen.

Seeing was believing.

This threat apparently worked quite well. The girls' classmates turned pale and returned to the upper level, wishing to avoid the engine room.

And finally, we were back under the sun.

Marina was too freaked out to walk after hearing about the engine room, and *A* lifted her and gave her a bridal carry back upstairs. (*A* and Marina might make it as a couple…)

"O-okay, then I'm handing out the keys to your cabins! Please come and get your mini consoles starting with Group One!"

Soon, our group was called. With Ophelia leading the way, we went and picked up our mini consoles.

It seemed our bulky luggage had already been taken to our rooms.

We were told we had some time to kill before our next appointment, so we headed to our cabin and—

"Get out!!!"

I was kicked out of the cabin in a matter of seconds.

Just as I'd planned (hehe).

I was thrilled as I packed my bags in the hallway and decided to go to the room for males.

And I took a few steps forward.

The door to another cabin opened, and Rei appeared. She cleared her throat and straightened her posture.

"Brother dear, may I ask if you've been kicked out of your room?"

Sister dear, may I ask if you've been waiting for me to be kicked out of my room…?

"I don't think there were any other options."

Rei pulled her hair behind her ears and said, "You can come to our room if you want. The members of my group are easy to talk to, and it shouldn't be a problem if you explain the situation logically."

"But you only have three beds, right?"

"They're semi-double beds."

With rosy cheeks, Rei glanced at me.

"I—I don't think we have any other choice than to sleep in the same bed. It's an emergency measure, so my group mates will understand."

"It isn't right for a male and a female to sleep in the same bed—"

"It's okay, we're siblings. What in the world are you thinking?"

Wasn't she the one who'd been going on and on about how we were distantly related?! What a sly magician, manipulating information to suit her needs!!!

Rei continued, coughing all the while.

"Don't tell me you look at me as something other than a sibling. Th-that isn't what I want."

I gave up trying to persuade her and quietly backed away—and bumped into something.

I don't know how long she'd been standing there, but there she was—Tsukiori—giving my shoulder a hard squeeze.

"I'm sorry, Rei, but Hiiro's in my group. If he moves to another cabin, then I'll be moving with him."

Rei looked at Tsukiori, smiled sweetly, and casually took my hand.

"This is our first trip together as siblings, so I'd appreciate it if outsiders could kindly back off. You should give up my brother in the name of charity. I went to the trouble of having Snow teach me certain maneuvers just for this."

Certain maneuvers? What kind of punishment has she thought up this time…?

Rei and Tsukiori were bickering, but for some reason, there was no sense of uneasiness between them.

It seemed as if they were subtly getting closer…which I was happy about, but why was this happening…?

"Do you want to bunk together as a threesome then?"

"I suppose it can't be helped."

Rather than arguing as they usually did, the two girls took deep breaths, then got on either side of me and sandwiched me between them.

"Okay, then shall we explain to the teacher what's what and have her prepare a cabin for us?"

"Agreed."

They grabbed me tightly and literally abducted me, and I realized something.

These two had joined forces to go up against my fiancée!!!

It was a shocking fact, but it was too late.

I was dragged away in despair, but I whispered in a weak voice, "Help… Help me…" and it seemed to reach the god of yuri.

"H-huh?! Hiiro? What are you doing?!"

Lapis came from the front and twisted her body between us.

Space was created, and I was able to move away at once.

"Ophelia was looking for you! I think she meant it was okay for you to come back to our cabin!!!"

"That's okay! Thanks very much!!!"

I ran at a furious pace, clung to the door to Group Five's cabin, and started knocking.

"What's with the commotion? You—Hiiro?!"

Having given up on going to the room for males, I got down on my knees and bowed to Ophelia.

"Please let me stay here. If you don't, I'll have to keep moving around, kneeling, and sliding on the floor during this camp."

"Do you have wheels on your knees?!"

Stunned, the rich girl raised her voice, her mind blank and unable to judge things as she normally would. "A-all right, all right! Oh,

enough of that bowing!”

I managed to pressure the rich girl into letting me stay in the cabin. And—

An announcement echoed through the ship.

“We are now holding a joint recreational event for Class A through Class E at our first port call. Please leave your baggage in your cabins and gather on the Diamond Deck.”

✳

Our first stop was on Houou Island.

It’s a fictional, uninhabited island that doesn’t actually exist in Japan.

In the world of ESCO, another realm exists called *the Otherworld*. It’s a place resembling a fantasy world, inhabited by dragons, elves, and the like.

This Otherworld and our real world overlapped as precariously as if they were both standing on a single leg atop a balance table. In this unstable state, the Otherworld interacted with our real world in various ways.

For example, dungeons in our world were always connected to the Otherworld, and demons there rushed toward us.

Another example was Alfheim, the Land of the Elves, which could connect from the Otherworld to our world through rituals.

Then again, there was the example of Houou Island, where land and materials from the Otherworld appeared in our world.

Design-wise, magicells were particles that flew in from the Otherworld. The magic device was the name for the technology that systematized the technology that used these particles, and magic was the object that combined it with the imagination. Hence, it was easy for humans to use.

Houou Island, which manifested near Tokyo, had been under the control of the Houou Family (the dukes who govern Houjou Magic Academy). The family skillfully manipulated its influence and dominated the economy since the days when our present world and

the Otherworld became connected. The family treated it as a vacation home for excursions, like a summer villa.

That was why Houou Island, with its gigantic beach house, was off-limits to anyone other than the academy's students and became a private beach.

The students weren't required to wear their school uniforms during the orientation camp. The rich daughters shirked the school's dress code and changed into personal clothes they had brought for the trip.

"Mmmmm!!! The sea breeze feels so nice!"

Ophelia squinted. She was wearing a straw hat that covered her head completely, a white dress with a low neckline, and braided flip-flops.

"…I'm pooped."

Tsukiori showed little interest in dressing up. Her chestnut-colored hair was pulled back with an elastic band, and she wore a casual shirt and jeans.

But because of her fantastic figure, she stood out when she stepped next to Ophelia, who was dressed like a Hollywood actress. Tsukiori looked like a student going to a local convenience store, but still, the students around her watched her with awe.

…I mean, did Tsukiori have a stunning face or what?

She was squinting lazily, her hands in her pockets. Combined with her outfit, she was indeed an example of an androgynous beauty.

"…U-um, Tsukiori?"

Fidgeting, I pointed to Ophelia.

"Would you mind putting your arm around Ophelia's shoulder, just for a minute?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Just for a minute. Please?"

Tsukiori sighed, scratched her hair as she approached Ophelia, and gently put an arm around her shoulder.

"Huh?! Wh-what is this all of a sudden?!"

Tsukiori stared at her without a word. As she did, the rich daughter's face turned bright red.

"Wh-what has gotten into you…?"

Tsukiori put some force into her arm. Ophelia hid her face with her fan and looked away.

"…Don't you want me to do this?"

"I-it isn't that I mind it…but…u-um…"

"Don't you?"

"Huh?! I—I…I don't mind it!"

Oh yeah… This is great… I…I'm glad…I'm alive…to see this… It's…fantastic…!!!

Watching them huddle up together, my yuri meter went over the limit with joy, and my eyes bulged.

Well done, Tsukiori! I knew I could count on you! You're the type of individual who could get every easy girl you laid your eyes on! Unleash your potential… Go, Tsukiori, go! Go for it…!!!

"Ophelia."

"Oh, um… Hff…"

Tsukiori smiled at Ophelia.

Then she turned on her heel and started heading back my way. Ophelia was left behind, looking stunned, and I received Tsukiori with a look of doom on my face.

"I'm bored."

"Tsu-Tsukiori… What a thing to say when you look so refreshed… How could you stop right there? I don't think I'll be able to go into sleep mode tonight."

"Hmm? Then I'll sleep with you until you fall asleep."

Smiling, Tsukiori stroked my cheek.

"I'll sing you a lullaby if you want."

"Sing to Ophelia, not me, and I'll (pretend to) fall asleep in seconds."

"Are you in sync with that girl…? Do you guys use products from the same manufacturer or something…?"

“Saaaaaaaaaaakura Tsu-Tsukiori! You’ve made a fool out of me yet agaaaaaaaaaaain!”

Ophelia ran toward us, tripped, and fell face-first onto the beach. A cloud of sand rose, and her face contorted as she held her scraped knee.

“…Ngh.”

Oh no. She’s going to cry! That’s the last thing I wanted to see my yuri girls do!

Tsukiori was totally focused on fixing my messed-up hair, and she seemed to have no intention of going to Ophelia’s rescue. So I ran to her since she was on the verge of crying, and I couldn’t leave her like that.

“Here, Ophelia, grab this.”

“You’re extending a tree branch to me? You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?!”

“No. I can’t touch those gorgeous hands of yours with my filthy paws.”

“That’s a commendable attitude for a commoner, but I am not about to allow a boy to take care of me… Ow…”

I turned around and glanced at Tsukiori pleadingly. She curved the corners of her mouth and laughed.

“Do you think I can hold a rich daughter who weighs approximately twenty thousand tons with these slender arms?”

“Her butt would cave in if she weighed that much.”

“It isn’t my butt that would cave in. It’s the ground! Will you stop deforming my noble buttocks, even if it’s only in your imagination?!”

“Come on, Tsukiori, don’t be mean. Carry those noble, caved-in buttocks for her, will you? We’re in the same group, and I promise to attend your wedding when you guys get married in the future—”

Ophelia tugged on my sleeve, and I moved my ear close to the teary-eyed rich girl.

“I…don’t want Sakura Tsukiori…to c-carry me… She makes fun of me…”

“Would you prefer another girl?”

“N-no… I’m a Margeline… I don’t want anyone…to see me looking…so pathetic…”

Mmmmm. I can’t get enough of this spoiled-brat selfishness!

I glanced at Tsukiori, who was smiling as she continued to watch our reaction, and made up my mind after seeing Ophelia start to sob.

I held her with my arms and lifted her at once.

“Oh!!!”

Carrying her bridal style, I quickly made my way back to the *Queen’s Watch*, avoiding other people’s eyes.

“Wh-what are you doing?! S-stop it! Let go of me, you rude fool!!!”

She punched me feebly with her arms.

What a foil. She didn’t hurt me in the least bit. She looked cute—beet red and desperate. The rich-daughter component seeped into me, body and soul.

I don’t know if she gave up on resisting or if she ran out of strength, but I felt her full weight in my arms as she slumped and looked up at me with moist eyes.

“Y-you idiot…!”

I guess embarrassment prevailed over disgust.

She squeezed the shirt of the guy she was supposed to hate and buried her face in my shirt.

“Oh…geez…”

“Tsukiori is the one holding Ophelia. Tsukiori is the one holding Ophelia. Tsukiori is the one holding Ophelia. Tsukiori is the one holding Ophelia. Tsukiori is the one holding Ophelia…”

“Hey, you’re going fast—too fast!!! I’m going to fall! I’m jerking up and down, and my ear canal will start sending out reverse signals!”

With a self-imposed sense of urgency, I returned to the ship at full speed and kicked open the door to the infirmary.

By the time I lowered Ophelia onto the bed, the redness in her face had spread down her neck. She was crouched, trembling with

shame, and clammed up without a word.

"Thanks for bringing Ophelia here, Tsukiori!"

"Stop talking to the wall and tell me what happened to the lady here, will you?"

Having recovered my mental faculties by avoiding reality, I turned my vacant eyes to the doctor and told her that Ophelia had fallen with a bang and scraped her knees.

Ophelia glared at me, looking as if she was about to cry.

"Hiiro Sanjo… I will always carry a grudge against you for this… though I will…thank you… You fool…!!!"

"Don't thank me. Thank Tsukiori."

"Why should I do that?!"

I went back to the beach, and our briefing was about to begin.

Tsukiori greeted me with a smile.

"Welcome back, prince."

"Hey, seriously, you're the one who should have done what I did. We're getting into the nitty-gritty now, okay? Things are going to change during this field trip, so brace yourself. That's the last time I'm going to butt in."

I mean, geez, I shouldn't be doing stuff like that.

I turned away from Tsukiori, looked around the groups from Class A to E, and spotted the threesome I was looking for.

At a glance, they appeared to be model students, no different from the others. But their gazes remained fixed on one particular girl, with a somewhat deadly atmosphere around them that didn't fit in with the rest of the girls, who seemed a little fidgety.

Class B. It was the same as the original story.

Now if things go as they did in the original, those three are going to cause a commotion… But Tsukiori should casually resolve the issue, so I wasn't going to interfere. Of course, although I think it's highly unlikely, I would offer support if she got backed into a corner.

If something unexpected happened and Tsukiori died, all chances of happy endings would disappear. For the sake of yuri girls of the

future, I had to make sure I didn't take away opportunities for the protagonist to show what she was made of.

"Can I have your attention, please," came an announcement from a tour staff member. "We will be spread around the island to assist you with the various activities. Please ask our staff for assistance when you participate in any of them."

The students dispersed, and the Class B trio proceeded as a group.

"Tsukiori, over here. Let's invite the threesome over there to a challenge—Tsukiori?"

She was gone.

"Tsukiori? Hey, Tsukiori?! Where are you?!"

I looked around frantically, but Sakura Tsukiori, who had been standing next to me until a moment ago, had disappeared without a trace.

I grabbed Masamune Kuki, which I had hidden in the sand, and stood still on the beach.

I heard echoes of cheering from somewhere far away.

The rich girls had spread out to take part in various activities and had apparently begun interacting.

Oh man… Wh-why did she have to go missing at a time like this…?! A lot could go wrong if she weren't around…!

Dismayed, I envisioned a worst-case scenario and pulled the trigger.

Damn, damn, damn! What if Tsukiori hasn't met up with *them*?!

I dove into the dense forest, brushed away the bushes with an arm, and dashed through the center of the island.

Reacting to the internal mana emanating from the soles of my feet, the external magic in the air emitted pale-blue streaks of light. I took a shortcut without slowing down or easing the reaction of the magic power flashing in broad daylight, causing the trees I used as footholds to crack and shatter vigorously.

I leaped to get a better view and looked down at the worst-case scenario I had guessed.

I saw the three female students from Class B.

Behind the girls with the sharp eyes, reddish-black arms extended from a warped dimension. The deformed arms held a girl against a tree and were strangling her.

"You should be honored, Princess of the Temple of Light. You can be a cornerstone for that lady. As a pre-event for Astemir, your life ends here."

"Oh… Ngh…!"

Lapis had been caught off guard without her magic device since she'd been participating in an activity.

Reddish-black bruises spread across her neck, and her face contorted in pain.

Thoughts of looking for Tsukiori were blown away when I saw that.

"Huh?!"

I slashed the reddish-black appendages and pulled a limp Lapis into my arms.

I turned to the trio with a cold stare as they stepped back, stunned by the unexpected intruder, and I slowly whispered, "… Prepare yourself."

"Huh?"

"I said 'prepare yourself'."

I generated an invisible arrow on my right arm.

"You won't be likely to avoid this…but I'll give you a chance."

I straightened my index and middle fingers—and the water arrow stretched out taut.

"If you don't want to die, brace yourself."

My gaze and my fingertips shot through the three girls.

"You have no excuse to lay hands this heroine. Why would girls strangle other girls…? I mean, maybe it would be a different story if it were consensual choking, but don't you dare think you'll be forgiven if your intent was to kill her."

The three twitched in reaction and prepared several weapons they had concealed behind their backs.

“I usually don’t prefer to insert myself between yuri girls… But this time, I’ll make an exception.”

Hiiro was essentially a pest, and any effort he made to challenge the girls would be rebuffed. Nonetheless, he beckoned them with his fingers.

“You’re about to go toe to toe with a guy at the bottom of the social hierarchy…so what’re you waiting for? Come and get it.”

And they did. All at once.

The reddish-black arms undulated as they stretched, contracted, and flew through the air, tearing through space. Holding Lapis in my arms, I kicked the branches at my feet and flung away the arms, which extended ridiculously. I dodged them all and slid into the shadows of the trees, eyeing the army of arms that kept reaching for me.

With an eerie sound, a large tree behind me corroded, snapped, and crumbled.

“H-how could you miss him?! He’s a Zero!!! We have to finish off that piece of trash and get on with killing Lapis Clouet la Lumet!” shouted a girl who was apparently the leader shouted. I gently laid Lapis against the big tree.

“Why the rush? He’s only a male,” one of the other two said as they both grinned, reacting to their leader’s shouting.

“He doesn’t count—he’s just a small fry. A zero score. Zero. It’s proof he’s a good-for-nothing jerk with no real combat experience,” they said, laughing as they pointed at me.

“Look at that, a water arrow! How cheap! It doesn’t have magic power to speak of, and we can kill him in a matter of seconds—”

Boom!!!

A high-pitched pop sounded, and the girl who had been speaking was knocked on her side. The muffled sound of a human body hitting the ground echoed in my ears, and the girl stopped chattering.

There was silence all around.

The girl was instantly knocked into a stupor and lay face down with no idea what had happened.

A moment later, the two remaining girls jumped back.

"H-huh?! Wh-what did he do?!"

"Th-the arrow wasn't fired! It's still on his arm! D-did Lapis Clouet la Lumet regain consciousness?! Don't tell me Sakura Tsukiori came to help them?! Huh?!"

"Never mind that. Take cover—urk!!!"

An invisible arrow grazed their cheeks. Shivering with fear, the girls hid behind a tree.

Now for the trigger.

I took advantage of the confusion and hid at the top of a tree. I repeated a process I'd been repeating thousands of times—using my arm as a bow and forming an arrow with water.

In both the East and the West, bows and arrows have been used to kill living creatures.

A bow was a mass of mechanics.

To make an arrow fly in your desired direction, the Japanese bow pursued techniques, while the Western bow focused on the tools (the bow and arrow).

The bow required three movements: *draw*, *aim*, and *shoot*.

In contrast, the crossbow attaches the arrow to an arc installed in the barrel, and an individual aims and shoots from a state where the arrow is already drawn.

Whether you used a bow or a crossbow, the basic principle of drawing an arrow with the bow and making it fly with its vital force was the same. The *Operation: Burst* console provided the power to pull and send the arrow flying…which was handled with magic, so there was no need to be aware of it.

The important thing was to know which was more powerful.

Some crossbows had an initial velocity of almost 250 miles per hour, and they were superior, both in terms of flying distance, penetrating power, and accuracy, compared to bows. However, because they required high tensile strength at around 150 pounds,

their performance was inferior to that of bows when it came to continuous firing, and they had poor stability in the air after ejection.

However, these disadvantages disappeared when invisible arrows were used.

You didn't need high tension since they flew using the *Operation: Burst* console, and invisible arrows were stable in the air because they flew along a tubular path formed by magic forces.

Cylindrical path lines were made with the index and middle fingers as reference points.

To stabilize the right arm you've stretched out, you use the left arm you've bent as a base and aim with both arms crossed.

As for the path I generated, my magic power formed a path line with a gentle curve that led to a girl hiding behind a tree.

And generate.

The arrow was long and lightweight, and the arrowheads were rounded to reduce their lethality. The scraper was eliminated since it didn't need to be mounted on the bow, and feathers were attached to maintain flight direction.

It was a magic arrow—with three projectiles to be shot.

An azure arrow shone as it extended behind my arm.

It stuck between my index and middle finger, then stretched backward, taut.

The magic projectile surrounding my right arm was shaped like an arrow, and the magicell, which was the source of the magic power, memorized the shape.

After I released it, the projectile became invisible and lost in the air, but it flew along the tubular path I'd formed.

The invisible arrow flew, scraping its path with bluish sparks of magic.

I'd already pulled the trigger.

The magic bullet reached the girl's jaw—and I put my magical power into it.

"Bam."

"Huh?"

The girl had been bent over. Her body was pushed away by a tremendous water jet, slammed into a thick tree trunk next to her, and knocked her to the ground.

She didn't even have time to scream.

The result was a girl on the ground, twitching and convulsing before falling unconscious.

The remaining girl, apparently the leader of the trio, gasped at the sight. Her face had turned pale as she trembled and screamed.

"Aaahhh… Aaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

She jumped out from behind a tree she'd been hiding behind and thrust out her arms. The reddish-black arms floating in the air responded to her movement, pushing their way through the trees and branches, and lunged forward.

I put my hand on my sheath, keeping my posture low, and started running.

Whoosh! I maneuvered my way between the four arms stretching out at me and flicked the scabbard up with my thumb.

"I—I wasn't told about you! Sakura Tsukiori was supposed to be the only one I had to watch out for! I—I can't believe someone like you can exist—"

I got closer to her, and as we passed each other, I pulled the trigger—a flash of the sword—and sheathed the blade.

"I—I wasn't…told…"

Her slashed bangs floated in the wind, and she slumped to the ground.

I removed my fingers from the trigger, relaxed all the muscles in my body that I'd tightened, stepped out of my trancelike state, and turned around.

Hey, haven't I gotten super strong…?

I couldn't help chuckling to myself.

To tell you the truth, I didn't think anything could kill me anymore. With that strike, I slashed away the death flag that had been raised after leaving my (fake) fiancée back at the dorm.

I got ahold of myself after feeling like euphoria left me with my head in the clouds, and I captured the leader of the three girls.

She was certainly dispirited as she stared blankly at the sky.

I gently lifted her collar. I let go of the material after seeing that her pale neck was branded, which was proof of her clan member identity.

It was just as I thought: an attack event by a demonic cult… The branding belonged to Alsuhariya, and I did not doubt that things were going according to the original scenario.

These demonic dark gods were monsters that had once misrepresented themselves as real gods in their attempt to rule the world.

One of those monsters had created six demons, imitating human beings:

The First: Alsuhariya of the Temple of Death.
The Second: Lizelute of Wreckage.
The Third: *Q* of Destruction.
The Fourth: Nanatsubaki of Ten Thousand Mirrors.
The Fifth: The Fair Lady, a branded puppet.
The Sixth: A spirit of the sun and the moon.

These monsters moved about for the purpose of ruling the Otherworld and our present world.

They appeared at key moments in the story to confront the protagonists. They were all quirky, almost always killing their first-time encounters, and I feared they'd easily lead to an ending where Tsukiori died.

Demons will stop at nothing to kill, obliterate, or turn over any target that doesn't suit their purposes. They act to eliminate obstacles they deem inconvenient to the demonic gods' cults, and we'd end up having a bad ending if they killed our heroines.

The six demons were skilled at manipulating humans. Their followers, known as the *Demonic Gods' Clan Members*, were spread

out throughout the world.

They were divided into six branches, and each branch had a brand, depending on the demons it supported, which was a sign of its allegiance. These women were called *clan members*, and they were subjected to life-or-death-level hardships.

The game introduces these demons as the six pillars, but a seventh and eighth demon actually existed.

Who are they, you ask…? Why, they're Hiiro and Tsukiori.

The Lapis Route of the original story had a hilarious scene in which Hiiro was killed and then revived by necromancy. In this scene, Alsuhariya of the Temple of Death takes a liking to Hiiro, who continues to die and be resurrected after becoming an evil spirit.

Alsuhariya has another title, *the woman who will definitely crush yuri girls*, and it's the brightest shining star among the scum of the scum-filled evil spirits.

I mean, she even gets along with that pest, Hiiro, and tries to help him sink yuri ships.

Alsuhariya can even resurrect the dead. There's a scene in the last part of *The Lapis Route* where Lapis is enraged on seeing a certain individual that Alsuhariya has brought back to life.

Seeing that scene made me hate Alsuhariya after Hiiro.

Meanwhile, it's at the start of the *Fall to the Dark Side Route* that Tsukiori becomes an evil spirit.

It's a route where the demon's power enchants her. She turns into a monster and buries the heroines, leaving you with a terribly bitter aftertaste.

The attack on Lapis was our first contact with the demons.

Alsuhariya was behind it.

Humans who became members of her clan developed the ability to use a magic called *Invitation of the Dead*, the reddish-black arms we saw earlier.

It's a type of technology summoned from the Otherworld. To be precise, it's different from magic using a magic device…but its power

was infallible, so even that no-good Hiiro in the original game would rot and die if it grabbed him.

Although this was the first contact with Alsuhariya's forces, the demon herself appeared only at the end of the story.

Despite her strength, even Tsukiori would die if she fought Alsuhariya at this point, so they don't go to battle until the last phase of the game.

Anyway, how should I handle this situation?

If things went as they did in the game, Lapis had the goal of *making friends at this orientation camp*. That's why she didn't allow any of her intimidating escorts, the *alfr*—her elves—or her master to come with her.

And the attackers had taken advantage of that.

If I'd ignored this attack and didn't save Lapis, *The Lapis Route* would have disappeared completely. The course of events in the game is that Tsukiori saves Lapis when she is cornered, and a friendship develops between the two, who always fight.

The Lapis Route showed the elf princess's gradual attraction toward Tsukiori, the first friend she made in this world, and her confusion over the shift from feelings of friendship to love.

That important event would be ruined if they learned that I was the one who saved Lapis. To prompt Tsukiori to *The Lapis Route*, I had to make her believe that Tsukiori had saved her.

I checked her breathing as she lay unconscious and thought long and hard.

"……"

A brilliant idea came to mind!

I smiled at the girl with the chopped bangs, who still looked dazed.

"Punch me."

"…Huh?"

"Hit me with Invitation of the Dead, and don't go easy on me. Give it everything you've got. You *will* cooperate since it's to protect the yuri girls, won't you?"

"Oh, um, yeah. Uh…?"

I stood with my arms crossed.

"Okay, do it!!!"

The girl-turned-into-clan-member ignored me and sat dumbfounded as I waited for her to strike.

"……"

An uncomfortable silence fell between us, and I drew my sword in a fluid motion. With a twitching smile on my face, I breathed heavily and thrust the trembling tip of my blade at her.

"A-are you going to avenge the yuri girls…?!"

"Eeep! Y-yes! I'll punch you!!!"

"Make it a serious punch!"

Hit with the force of the dead, my feet left the ground, and I slammed into a large tree.

I stood up and checked myself. The scrapes weren't quite what I wanted.

"U-um…?"

"This isn't enough, is it?! Is that the extent of your enthusiasm for yuri girls?! Go and reread that masterpiece, *Two Lips for White Lilies*, a million times! You don't have enough spirit! Get with it!"

"Eeeeep! Sorry!"

"Read a few more works while you're at it, huuuuuh?!"

A barrage of blows struck me, and I took them all, feeling like I was taking a shower. Finally, bloodied and bruised, I gave the girl a thumbs-up.

"Hey, that wasn't bad…!"

"I don't want to do this anymore… I quit being a clan member…!"

The evil spirits give clan members perks for being followers, and their ability values are also adjusted upward.

The two other girls who had been blown away so hard they could have died also came to, thanks to their adjusted magical strength, and the three quickly took off running.

I figured I'd let them go since they were sure to have learned a lesson, and it stopped at being an attempt at killing Lapis.

With scrapes and wounds all over my body, I acted like I had lost our battle without being able to fight back and collapsed. With a wheezing voice, I called Tsukiori.

The preparations were complete, and I giggled as I lay on the ground.

This was a devilishly brilliant plan without a hitch. The minute Tsukiori was caught in my yuri trap, I'd put on a fantastic acting performance and make it look like she was the one who defeated the three clan members. I'd say I was useless and beaten to a pulp and went crying to Tsukiori, and Lapis would then fall in love with her for heroically saving her life.

My yuri IQ of 180 was really the best…!

"…Mmm."

Lapis uttered a muffled voice, and I panicked when I saw that she was about to regain consciousness.

"Hey! Wait. Tsukiori isn't here yet—ugh, I've been beaten so badly."

"Mmm… I was attacked… But what happened…? Hiiro…?"

Lapis blinked, and still flat on the ground, I froze.

I-it's okay. Calm down, Hiiro Sanjo. Act like a jerk and stall until Tsukiori gets here. I'll do my best to play the part of a weak, unreliable fool.

Come on, spirits of famous actors of yesteryear! Descend upon me, Academy Award winners! Come to me!!!

"N-ngh… I feel like an idiot, having he beat me up like this…!"

"Huh?! Hiiro?!"

Lapis got on her knees and made a frantic effort to come to me.

"You're scarred all over… Wh-what happened…? Huh, Hiiro…?!"

"I'm sorry, Lapis, but I was beaten up miserably. Seriously, I couldn't get a single shot with my sword, and then Tsukiori saved me. I'm nothing compared to her, and she's the one who saved you. You really should thank Tsukiori because she's super."

"Oh no… You actually got defeated…?!"

She looked down at me and whispered like she was about to cry.

"You fool…!!! You covered for me, didn't you…?!"

"Wait a minute. That doesn't make sense."

I couldn't stop her pulling of my bloody body.

She guided my head to her lap and wiped the blood from my cheeks—a male's cheeks—with her hands. Her warm palm gently traced my face and turned red.

"You would never lose to girls like them…! Because you fought while you protected me… And now you're cut all over… Were you going to die protecting me if Sakura Tsukiori didn't come and help…?!"

"Um, sorry, but that's an odd way to see what happened. Do you have data or something that says I fought while I protected you? I wish you'd stop making up a beautiful story of self-sacrifice—"

Drops of liquid started falling on my face. I was startled to realize tears were falling down Lapis's cheeks as she pressed a hand against her mouth and sobbed.

"You idiot…! What if you died…because of me…?!"

Lapis cried as she hugged my head.

The soft bulge and her fragrant scent made me realize that even princesses wore antiperspirants. Question marks flew around in my head as I thought of dumb things like whether she was going to get blood on her nice clothes.

Why? Why was this happening?

According to my perfect calculations, Tsukiori was supposed to appear dashingly as Lapis called out to me.

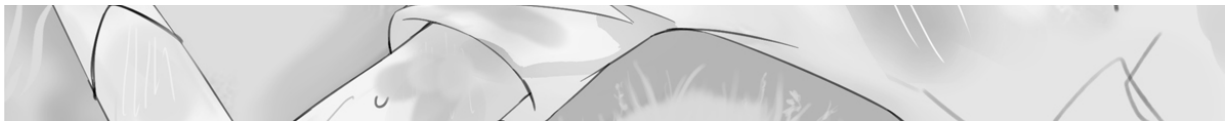
I would then get on my feet and say Tsukiori saved us. Lapis would fall in love with her for saving her life, and I would immediately leave, pretending that my wounds had healed.

And they'd live happily ever after!

That was what was supposed to happen. S-so why was Lapis shedding tears for a damaged rock on the road…? Wh-where did my perfect yuri plan go wrong…? Had my yuri calculations gone berserk? After all the money I'd been paying to see yuri pictures…?!

"L-Lapis, wait a sec and th-think…"


elf
YR
YR



My teeth clattered as I frantically looked for a way to get out of this mess.

"Look, Lapis, I couldn't protect you, and they defeated me… Do you get that? I'm a dumb loser who's taken stupidity to a whole new level… A miserable, pathetic weakling…!"

"Because you covered for me. Right…?"

Lapis sobbed as she continued to hold me tight.

"I wasn't protecting you! It was more like I used you as a shield!!!"

"That's not true! I remember the moment you jumped at those girls! You're the one who shielded me!"

"Huh? Then I tried to shield you, but they beat me to a pulp…"

"Because you were protecting me…"

I didn't get it… Why was she seeing me in a positive light when those girls beat me up…?

"……?"

Was there possibly…a bug in this world…?

"So."

My head was filled with questions when Tsukiori appeared, knocking on a large tree.

"Why are you flirting, covered in blood?"

Here she is! Tsukiori! Finally! Now we'll win! I mean, we've already won! God, I love her!

"Sakura Tsukiori…"

Lapis's eyes were on fire as she looked at Tsukiori.

My chest heaved as I watched the two girls.

Now Lapis would fall in love with Tsukiori, and their love would blossom— "Why did you leave Hiiro here knowing he was hurt?!"

"Huh?"

Tsukiori and I looked at each other, and then Lapis hugged my head to her chest again.

"I thank you for helping me! But this is a different story! Where did you go without taking care of Hiiro when he was hurt?!"

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

The blood drained from my face, and I quickly began explaining.

“N-no, Lapis, you’ve got it wrong! I asked her to go! The people who attacked you ran, and I asked Tsukiori to go after them! She’s done nothing wrong! She’s a really good person! She’s strong, she’s beautiful, and she’s the best! The best!”

“Why are you suddenly lavishing me with praise?”

Tsukiori ruffled her hair, smiled, and gestured with her index finger for me to come to her. I moved away from Lapis and followed her into the shade behind a large tree—and bowed.

“Help me…!”

“Okay, spill.”

Tsukiori leaned against the tree and chuckled.

“A demonic god’s followers attacked Lapis…and I fought them without thinking…but I want her to think you were the one who defeated them…”

“Why?”

“I—I want the two of you to become friends…”

Tsukiori slowly deepened her smile and touched my cheek with a fingertip.

“You’re so sweet, Hiiro.”

…Huh?

“Did you want me to make friends with her because I’m isolated? I know I’m not good at being sociable, and the only thing I can be proud of is my strength. Did you think Lapis and I couldn’t start to get along without an opportunity like this?”

…What the heck was she saying?

“I don’t mean it like that—”

“How many of them did you fight?”

“Huh…? Th-three.”

“You fought them alone?”

“Oh, well, it’s more thanks to my mentor…”

She switched positions with me and pushed my shoulder, pressing me against the tree.

With a beautiful smile on her face, she gently leaned in close. Her soft body was in close contact with mine, and the sound of her heartbeat made me stiffen.

"I fought three, too."

"Huh? Were you in combat somewhere?"

"Your precious sister was being attacked, so I helped her. That brand I saw must belong to Alsuhariya… I didn't show myself, so Rei might have assumed it was you."

"What a terrible joke to tell with a straight face. What are you, a Japanese politician?"

Never mind Tsukiori, sure to go to jail for pretending to be Hiiro Sanjo. Never mind that, but Rei was attacked by the demonic cult, too? There was nothing in the original game about Lapis and Rei being assaulted at the same time.

Alsuhariya shouldn't have awakened yet, so her clan members who could act openly should be limited. Something's wrong. A strange feeling swirled around in my brain, alerting me that I shouldn't leave this unattended.

"Okay, you've thanked me enough."

Tsukiori moved away from me and tilted her head, looking confused. Her hands were still holding onto my shoulders.

"So you want me to get along with Lapis and the others, correct?"

"Huh…?! Yeah!!!!"

"Okay. Who knows what a certain softie will come up with next to make me make friends with her if I don't."

Perhaps for the first time, a genuine smile appeared on Sakura Tsukiori's face.

"Thanks."

"Huh…? I'm the one…to thank you…I think…?"

After exchanging words of gratitude, the reason for which I had no idea, we walked back to where Lapis sat.

She looked unhappy and stared at Tsukiori with open hostility. Tsukiori raised the corners of her mouth in her usual breezy tone.

"Maybe you're a princess, but I don't think that's the way to look at someone who saved your life."

"B-but you didn't see to Hiiro…!"

"Lapis, like I said before, I asked her to go after those people. You would have been in danger if she hadn't."

"Yeah, right. So—"

Tsukiori smiled angelically and held out a hand to Lapis.

"Let's be friends."

Had I finally convinced her with my many explanations?

With her body still turned away from Tsukiori, Lapis blushed and took the hand she offered.

"I'm not saying…I don't want to be friends with you…and I'm… grateful to you…after Hiiro, that is…"

Tears streamed down my face as I watched them bridge their differences.

God, I love yuri…!

All's well that ends well. I was worried about what would happen with these unexpected events, but with my 180 yuri IQ, I was able to witness a yuri relationship budding.

A loving relationship was sure to develop between Lapis and Tsukiori, and Hiiro Sanjo wouldn't be getting in the way now.

Everyone, please join me in my chant! Males who get stuck between yuri girls can go ahead and die!

I walked away, smiling, waving to the girls with my back turned to them.

Be happy… The guy who gets in your way will be cool and leave now…

The lone interloper set out to return to the ship unnoticed by the girls—when Lapis caught up with me.

"Take it easy, Hiiro!"

I looked down at her as she supported my weight with her body, astonished.

Why was she supporting me and not Tsukiori?!

"Your feet are a little shaky. Come on. Let's go."

Tsukiori stuck to me from the opposite side and gently put her arm under my armpit.

I contorted my face in despair.

Why was she supporting me and not Lapis?!

Stuck between the two beautiful girls, I finally came to my senses and returned from my world of escapism.

Oh no! My popularity rating's going up!

"L-Lapis… Tsu-Tsukiori… Leave me… Please leave me here…!"

"What are you talking about? We aren't going to abandon you."

The wind blew, and Lapis's golden hair fluttered.

"You have to come with us."

"No… Noooooo…! That isn't how the ESCO world should be…! It's nothing like a yuri story… It's a genre scam…! This is wrong… It's all wrong…!"

"Did you hit your head? Is it okay? Huh?"

"I… I'm not going to give up… I…!"

Dragged by the two of them, I strained my voice.

"I will never give up…"

My heartfelt plea echoed in vain, and the two girls carried me to the infirmary, sandwiched between them…

"They're broken."

It was an unexpected diagnosis.

"…The pens you're holding?"

"No, I'm talking about your bones."

The lady doctor, with her long legs crossed, pointed with one of her pens to an X-ray shot of my chest.

"See? Right here. Broken."

"…That pen you're holding?"

"No, I mean your bones."

Ophelia had already returned to her room after being treated in the infirmary, and we were the only ones left in the room.

Activities for the day had ended, and a red sky was invading the world.

The rich daughters participating in the camp were taking advantage of their free time before dinner, elegantly watching the sunset that was dyeing the calm sea crimson red.

And here I was, with broken ribs and a fractured forearm.

"With magical treatment, you'll barely notice the broken bones tomorrow morning. But you will have a certain amount of pain. The effects of the medication will also make you dizzy, so you should have your homeroom teacher stay with you tonight—"

"I'll be with him," Lapis said with a serious look on her face as she sat with me, her hand patting my right shoulder.

"He was hurt because of me, so I'll support him."

"I'm in the same cabin," Tsukiori said, smiling as she placed her hand on my left shoulder.

Blocked from escaping, I whispered to the doctor so they couldn't hear me. "…Would you like…some golden candy?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You may have noticed from our elegant atmosphere that I am the son of the Sanjo family. I promise to compensate you handsomely if you say it wasn't my bones that were broken but your ballpoint pens."

I grinned.

"It's…not such a bad deal for you, is it?"

"He's male. I don't recommend a young lady from Houjou Magic Academy to spend a night with him. If this were between two young ladies, people would think the two of you are in that kind of relationship…but it's different with a male."

The doctor ignored me completely. I was so shocked that my mouth hung open.

"I-it's…okay," Lapis whispered, blushing as she looked down. "H-Hiiro saved my life… He got hurt because of me…"

"Lapis, I'll be straight with you. I made this happen. I wanted you and Tsukiori to get along, and I had that cult member girl beat me up. I got the broken bones intentionally according to a plan I came up with, so in no way did I get hurt for your sake."

"What kind of fool would be so stupid as to intentionally have someone beat them up until their right arm and ribs were broken? If you're going to lie, you should come up with something a little more realistic. You aren't an idiot, for goodness' sake."

Did she just call me a fool?

Lapis's passionate explanation seemed to have convinced the doctor. Sighing, she said, "All right, I understand, but please report this to your homeroom teacher. Please call me right away if he has trouble breathing or experiences any other type of discomfort."

"Yes, doctor. I'll keep an eye on him."

"Likewise."

"Don't *likewise*…me!!!" I exclaimed as I stood up.

I blurted everything that was on my mind and said, "That goes for both of you!"

Then the doctor gently but firmly pressed a hand against my ribs. I sat down again and held my chest.

"Okay, then I'll begin treatment. Ladies, please step out in the hallway. Mr. Sanjo, will you take all your clothes off from the waist up and turn this way to face me?"

"Doctor! You're a great doctor, right?! Please heal me right here and now, not tomorrow! I'll pay you anything (by threatening the Sanjo family)! Please!"

I clung to the doctor, wailing, eyeing the two girls as they left the infirmary.

"I can't let this be the end of me…in a place like this…!"

Silently, the doctor moved her chin, and two nurses grabbed hold of me from both sides.

"Okay, let's take everything off!!!"

"Noooooooooo! This is a violation of human rights! Stop it!!! I'm the son of the Sanjo family!"

The nurses held me in place, and I was quickly undressed.

They smiled as they held me down in the chair with the force of mountain gorillas. Maybe they used some kind of magic to boost their body strength.

The force was such that it didn’t actually cause me pain.

The doctor brushed her fingers along my chest and checked the swollen area.

“Doctor…what is it that you want…? Status? Honor? A woman…? It won’t do you any good to act cool… Human desire knows no bounds…and only I can sate your desire… Think about it… I’ll give you ten seconds…just ten seconds…to give in…”

Ten seconds later, the doctor was still checking my chest with a serious look on her face.

“I’ll give you another thirty seconds or so…!”

The doctor glanced at me as my voice trembled and tears fell from my eyes.

“Mr. Sanjo, a doctor’s job is to save her patients. It doesn’t matter if you’re male or female. Naturally, it doesn’t matter if you’re a Sanjo. Everything is equal. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I’m very sorry…!”

I shut up so as not to disturb the doctor.

Suddenly, the doctor stopped moving her finger at a point on my chest, probably on my ribs.

She squinted, took out the ballpoint pen in her breast pocket—her magic device—and spun it around. Then she knocked on the trigger— at the head—and a pale, bluish light gushed from the pen.

Since endogenous magicells exist in the human body, a magic device can be used to approach an illness or an injury from outside the body.

However, the activation of magic requires imagination.

Even when making a blade or an arrow, one must imagine everything down to the smallest elements, and more detailed creativity and knowledge are essential when working with the human body.

Therefore, a person can’t become a doctor in the ESCO world—as in our world—without passing a national exam, and such a qualification can’t be obtained simply through hard work. While

individuals could probably handle first aid, you needed treatment at a specialist institution if you wanted more advanced therapy.

Ever so slowly, the pain began to disappear.

The doctor repeated the magic activation, replacing her console several times.

More than ten minutes later, the procedure was over.

The doctor smiled as she applied a splint to my right arm and secured it.

"Okay, we're done. You have no restrictions on eating or bathing, but you should refrain from strenuous exercise. You aren't in pain now because of painkillers, but it will start to hurt at bedtime. You'll become dizzy once the medication takes effect. Please let your friends know if anything happens and come back here."

"Thank you. I'm terribly sorry about the inconvenience I caused you."

After getting down on my knees and bowing in apology, I walked out of the infirmary and found Lapis and Tsukiori waiting for me.

"How was it…? Are you okay…?"

"As good as new."

"You're lying."

Tsukiori instantly saw through my lie and smiled as she leaned against a handrail. She came around behind me and started messing with me, and I cried out, "Okay, it's broken! I admit it, so stop that!" I pushed her back with my good arm.

"Hiiro, they're saying dinner's ready," Lapis said, placing her soft body next to mine. "You can't walk by yourself, right? I'll support you."

"It was my right arm and ribs that were broken, and my heart that was shattered just now, so I can walk normally."

"You just want to be in physical contact with Hiiro," Tsukiori said.

"I—," Lapis said as she turned red in the face and moved away from me.

"No! You're wrong!!! Lapis isn't like that! I have a fiancée, and Lapis doesn't look at me in that way!!!"

"Hiiro, why are you blushing and denying it? Do you want to come up to me, panting, and get me horizontal?"

"No!!!"

"Now you're both denying it… Hey, did you say you have a fiancée?"

With her index finger on her lips, Tsukiori looked up at me and grinned.

"I don't remember you having a fiancée. Did you go to the Himalayas and find her footprints there?"

"Will you please stop talking about my fiancée like she's an unidentified creature…?"

"Hiiro!"

I was stuck between Lapis and Tsukiori as we checked where the dinner venue was when my sister came charging at me. Her long black hair was flying wildly, and she clutched me tightly as she cried.

"Thank goodness you're okay… I heard you got hurt… I was so worried I thought I'd go mad…after you so recklessly protected me again…"

"Rei Sanjo. Don't ruin yourself as a character with malicious misinformation. Go back to your self-preserving duties. You're violating the Cool Character Standards Act. The eyewitness report of me risking my life to protect you is as unreliable as my six-foot-tall, seven-hundred-seventy-pound fiancée being found in the Himalayas."

"Hey, Hiiro's ribs are broken, so you don't want to get all over him," Lapis said as she pushed Rei away from me. "Besides, he has a fiancée." That was a great follow-up. "Besides, I'm the one he protected with his life. Someone else must have helped you."

"Um, I didn't protect either of you. I even have a theory that I may have attacked you."

"Her Imperial Highness of Alfheim is naive and unfamiliar with the ways of the world," Rei said, pushing Lapis back as hard as she could. "On what grounds are you talking about such wild delusions? It's only natural that my brother—*my brother*—would immediately

come to my aid, as I'm his beloved sister. I apologize if I sound like I'm boasting, but this isn't the first time my brother has done something reckless for me, whom he cares for dearly."

"You're the profoundly ignorant daughter of House Sanjo."

Lapis smiled as she pushed her shoulder against Rei's, applying a significant amount of force.

"You may not know this, but Hiiro has been quite reckless for me, too. It's a grand pile of one type of recklessness over another, topped off with a bridal carry. Besides, Rei, you went off on your own to come back to this ship after one of your group members got sick, didn't you? That was when Hiiro was fighting for me."

"I don't know when you were attacked, but I, too, was attacked on my way back here. I kept trying to escape…and when I realized what was what, the bandits had been defeated, and I definitely saw his shadow."

"You were mistaken. Hiiro was scarred and wounded, lying right in front of me."

"I heard that you fainted once. It would make sense if my brother came to save me then, became deeply wounded, and ran out of power the moment he returned to you."

"That isn't possible—"

"It doesn't have to be one or the other," Tsukiori mumbled, looking bored. "Why don't you both just say Hiiro saved you both and stop there?"

Lapis and Rei exchanged glances and turned away at the same moment.

"…No objection."

"I object!"

The argument was about to settle, and I let out a roar that pierced the heavens.

"I dispute that conclusion!"

"What's the matter, defendant? You shouldn't shout in your condition."

"Tsukiori, you were the one who saved Rei!!! How dare you give me credit for the work that you did?! That's the worst thing a human being can do!"

"But Rei said she saw your shadow."

"Of course she was mistaken! Does she have proof?! If she does, then let's see it! Hiiro's innocent! Admit it, Your Honor, that you're presuming I'm guilty!"

"That was definitely your shadow, Hiiro. I know my brother. I'm willing to bet my antique calculator over it."

"Okay, court is adjourned."

"Don't try to run, you coward! That isn't fair!"

"Never mind that. What are we going to do about tonight?"

Lapis and Rei patted my head and exchanged glances as I wailed.

"Marina won't let us stay with you if we say we're all going to watch over you… We'll have to narrow it down to one person."

We explained what happened, and Rei calmly and elegantly stepped forward.

"The answer is obvious. Me. I'm Hiiro's sister, and I'll stay with him. It's because of my inadequacy that he was seriously hurt in the first place, and it's only natural for a member of the Sanjo family to atone for her sins. I'm the only person who can take care of my brother."

"Hiiro got hurt because of me, so I'm the one who should be with him. There's no other choice, is there?"

"I'm in the same cabin as him, so it should be easy for me to get Marina's permission to be with him. It's possible to consider that he got hurt because I couldn't show up to help him, and it's no exaggeration to say I'm the one at fault."

I shot up my hand after both Lapis and Tsukiori volunteered to be my caregiver.

"No! What's wrong with me taking care of myself?! No one knows Hiiro Sanjo better than I do! That's what he wants! He wants to heal himself! He wants you girls to sleep with each other! The feeble

concept of receiving care doesn't exist in my book!!! Every one of you has it wrong! I'm going to correct the distortion of this world!"

"We're never going to get anywhere at this rate."

Tsukiori smiled and gently held out the palm of her hand.

"Let's make it simple and do rock-paper-scissors to decide."

The air buzzed, and we silently looked at each other.

The wind blew, and a student who had nothing to do with this walked between us.

We spread out in four directions, and Tsukiori, Lapis, Rei, and I thrust out our fists.

Silence. Determination. Each of us contemplated our thoughts for a few seconds.

It was as if sparks were flying as our intentions clashed.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, moaning in pain from my injury of honor.

I couldn't lose. If I were defeated here, I would end up being a fool who lost my yuri girl fantasy and broke my bones for nothing. I was standing here with the thoughts of all ESCO fans behind me. I had to sharpen my senses and have faith in myself.

Oh, Yuri God, watch over me, and I—I'll open my eyes wide.

I shall win! Here and now!!!

"Rock, paper, scissors!" We all shouted.

A whirlwind of frenzy swirled between us and pierced the heavens.

The pulsating passion soared high in the sky and drew out a gust of wind. It made everyone's hair flutter, and our cries soared high and away.

I'm putting everything—my everything—into this!!!

My *scissors* slashed through the airflow.

"Theeeeeeeere!!!"

We held out our hands—at the same time.

Silence.

The result was out.

My *scissors* were broken by three *rocks*.

"……"

I gingerly changed my *scissors* to *paper*.

"Rock, paper, scissors!" we chanted.

Naturally, the others ignored me. My vision distorted, and I fell to my knees and sobbed.

I…I…I'm terrible at this game…!!!

"Oh!"

There was a shout of joy, and Lapis laughed, her face flushed with excitement.

"I did it! I won!"

It appeared that she had won the rock-paper-scissors game among the threesome.

Lapis glanced at me, and our eyes met. She flashed a tiny victory sign and grinned.

"……"

Oh, well, I guess it isn't that bad.

Rei would have been the worst, with Tsukiori second-worst.

Lapis knew that Snow wasn't really my fiancée, but I'd convinced her that I had a reason for not being able to date women. I could trust her more than Rei, who warned me that she would continue to have a crush on me, or Tsukiori since I had no idea what she might do.

We lived under the same roof at the Sanjo family villa where we maintained a clean and honest rivalry. At this point, I had to believe that no problems would occur if we spent a night together.

Rei had been stomping her feet with her arms crossed, and she made a show of clicking her tongue and left. Tsukiori sighed, then returned to her cabin with a bored look on her face.

Lapis grinned and pulled on my sleeve to make her presence known.

"Aren't you glad that I, your rival, am going to be taking care of you?"

"Hey, uh, you don't have to go out of your way for me, okay? There was a time when we were living in the villa, and I almost sent

out a note that my life was ending because of Your Highness's thoughtfulness."

"D-don't make a big deal out of that. All I did was go to the wrong room."

"I almost got my neck chopped off because you got the wrong room wearing your see-through lascivious nightgown, and I was suspected of sneaking into your quarters."

"Th-that's normal in the Land of the Elves!"

I let out a breath of relief as she poked me in the side.

Huh. Was she acting more normal than I'd expected? Maybe I was reading too much into this.

I'd been worried since my super-bad mistakes so far had made it look like I was protecting Lapis with my life…but Lapis was Lapis, the same way she always was.

"Okay, then let's go to our fancy dinner. Where were we supposed to meet? Do we eat in groups?"

"Uh-uh. I heard we can eat wherever we want since we've probably made friends during our activities regardless of which class we're in. Let's take a look at the camp program and see our options."

Still holding my sleeve, Lapis unfolded the screen.

I stared at it—and felt a soft touch on my shoulder.

"Look at this place, Light Attendant. It's on the Sapphire Deck, and their seafood dishes are supposed to be good. I read in the program that the chef carefully selects the ingredients and—"

"…Um, Lapis?"

"Hmm? Yeah?"

I pointed to our shoulder area, where we'd been in contact.

"A-aren't we awfully close…?"

"You think so? Isn't this normal?"

Lapis smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear.

The smell of shampoo tickled my nose as I saw the pure-white nape of her neck being exposed.

Her golden hair cascaded down her neck, and down below were her defenseless breasts. I smashed my fist into my face.

“Whoa!!! Hey, Hiiro, what are you doing?!”

“Shh! Shh!!!”

“How can you put such a clean left jab and a straight right in your own face without hesitating at all?! A high level of proficiency that makes your fist invisible to you?! That was world-class!!! Hey, your nose is bleeding…!”

Lapis gently wiped the blood with a handkerchief.

“Oh geez, Hiiro.”

She giggled.

“You’re impossible.”

My yuri destruction alarm screeched in my head, and I immediately moved on to deal with it.

“L-Lapis. Sorry, I’m going to go and make a quick phone call.”

“Yeah? Okay, I’ll wait for you.”

Glancing at Lapis as she leaned her elbows on the handrail and looked out at the sea, I called a number with my trembling hand.

“Snoooow…!”

“Will you stop begging me to help you, treating me like a convenient woman at your beck and call?”

Despite the words, I could count on her to answer my calls, and I explained what was going on.

She listened, then gave me her answer.

“Just take her to bed.”

“Do you have no sense of ethics, you rotten maid of the future?”

“You’re one to talk, far off the track from moral conduct, you hopeless blondie. A guy like you, who squeezes out morality from the back of your throat, goes for the type of girl who smiles and gives you money to gamble. There’s only one woman in the world like that—me. Aren’t you glad?”

“This is the first time I’ve heard such moralless self-promotion.”

“And it excites you.”

“With anger.”

People at Fraum seemed to be having tea. Through our connection, I could hear the dorm head showing off to the others

and Lily agreeing with her.

"Lapis is a pure and righteous princess. As long as Master doesn't touch her, she will not overstep the bounds of *friendship*. If you want to maintain that relationship, then please do not do anything that will boost your likability."

"I know. I won't do anything more."

"……"

"Why the silence? A person doesn't usually feel distrust for someone while they talk on the phone. That was an exquisite pause. Explain it. Are you studying how to sow discord with your pauses or something?"

After a few seconds of silence, Snow said, "Shall we give a warning to your rival?"

"Yeah! Way to go, Snow! That's the type of advice I've been waiting for! Go ahead and give her a huge warning!"

"You are irritatingly good at acting like an underling. Do you have Academy Awards for Best Supporting Underling you won three years in a row put up on your wall? You can approach Lapis while whispering your love for me, your fiancée."

Without a pause, I switched to lovey-dovey mode and whispered, "Snow… I love you, Snow… My darling Snow…sweetheart…honey, I'm so crazy about you…"





"…Add a dash of how cute I am."

"You're so cute, Snow… Adorable…and I love you… Yes, I do…"

"…Be more specific and add some heat to what you say."

"I love how you bad-mouth me, Snow. Thanks for making me delicious meals every day. I love you. Hang in there and wait for me, and I'll come home with souvenirs."

"……"

"I wuv you, wuv you, wuv you, Snow—"

"H-Hiiro? Who are you talking to? You wuv someone? Are you trying to say you love the person?"

I was already standing in front of Lapis, and I desperately whispered into my phone, "I'm already here with Lapis…! She's correcting my super-crappy vocabulary for words of love right in front of my eyes…!!!"

"……"

"Snow…?! Snow? Hey, Snow…?! You aren't going to abandon me like some tyrannical maid, like Melos getting off on a crouching start, are you…?!"

After I heard the echo of a tongue clicking, a wise voice spoke as if nothing had happened.

"Please switch to speaker mode now."

I maneuvered the screen with blinding speed and switched to speaker mode, and in that instant, a sweet, mushy voice could be heard.

"I love you, darling! Come home soon!"

A kissing sound echoed about, and Lapis froze. I hung up, and she lowered her eyes awkwardly.

"Oh…! Th-that was Snow, wasn't it…?"

"Yep. My fiancée. A robotic maid, thrilling, creator of no-good losers, giving them gambling money with a smile on her face."

Gripping her left wrist with her other hand, Lapis whispered, staring down to her right, "Hiiro, you, um… You and Snow have a deal to fake an engagement, right…?"

"That's right. We always have to put on an act so people won't realize it. I can't have a relationship with a woman. Despite her appearance, Snow is extremely honorable, and you can count on her to stick to a deal. People have been talking about sightings of her as my unconfirmed fiancée."

Lapis slowly opened her mouth… And without saying anything, she smiled.

"Let's go. You're okay with going to Light Attendant, huh?"

I nodded and started walking alongside Lapis, applauding Snow's skillful acting in my mind.

Leave it to Snow, known for her wiles and cunning. Her strategies are as steady as the quality offered by a favorite restaurant. I took advantage of how serious Lapis always was and rubbed it in.

Having done this much, I knew she wouldn't be interested in me—or so I was thinking when she suddenly stopped in her tracks.

She spun around in front of me and said, "I'm sorry, Hiiro."

She blushed as she squeezed her arm and turned away from me.

"I'm sorry, but…I don't want you to call Snow while I'm taking care of you."

"Huh?! What?! Heh?! N-no, wh-wh-why not?"

"B-because I don't want you to," she said, looking up at me with puppy eyes.

"I don't want you to… So please…stop calling her…"

Understanding everything, I smiled, looking out at the cobalt-blue ocean that the setting sun tinted red.

I'll die.

Lapis grabbed my index finger and shook it gently.

"…Let's go."

I felt shock—the sensation of my cerebrospinal fluid leaking.

The mental agitation caused by the slight swaying, which was intensity level seven on my yuri scale, stirred my brain into a mess, and Lapis pulled me all the way to Light Attendant.

We were now at Light Attendant on the Sapphire Deck.

It was a restaurant that embraced the evening darkness with elegant decor, where students had changed out of their uniforms into their everyday clothes to enjoy seafood cuisine.

The relaxing ladies were sitting on the terrace surrounded by the night air, dressed casually, free from the excessive dress code. Their hair swayed in the sea breeze, sprinkled with the slightest hint of the ocean as they exposed their skin to the cool and pleasant evening.

Lapis and I sat face-to-face at one of the tables.

Her face was bright red as she trembled, and she held out her spoon.

"S-say ahhh…"

My jaw was slack, and my mouth hung open, looking like the depths of the sea. She poured soup into the void. The tasty concoction was packed with the delicious flavors of seafood, their oils dripping into my rusty heart, stimulating my broken lachrymal gland and causing tears to flow.

"S-sorry. I've never done anything like this before."

Lapis covered her face with her hands as she blushed all the way down to her neck.

"This is…embarrassing… S-sorry. I don't want to act like this when you can't manage to eat on your own…"

I stared into the void, drooling.

"O-okay, Hiiro, here goes… Say ahhh…"

The time of day was shifting from day to night, a contrast between orange and black, the vivid horizon becoming dyed at the meeting point.

Lights swayed around us, tickled by the cool breeze, twirling on the candlelit stage. The lights decorating the terrace danced about, blinking, winking teasingly at us. They were like chandeliers on the sea lit by mischievous water nymphs.

But to my eyes at this point, they also looked like a votive offering at a graveside.

With eyes that had lost their light, I turned my attention to the table next to ours.

“Wow! This huge prawn is plump, juicy, and delicious!” a girl was saying.

“That’s a lobster, not a prawn.”

Chuckling, the girl sitting across from her adjusted the glasses that made her look intellectual and stared at the bubbly girl.

“Hey! You’re making fun of me again!”

“Never mind. Just eat.”

The girl in the glasses shoved lobster meat into Bubbly’s mouth and licked the sauce off her fingers.

“Mmmmm.”

Tears of joy fell down my cheeks as I watched these beauties. The sight of yuri is always a feast for the eyes. I wanted to sit in front of the police department and tell everyone that this was how the word *ahhh* was supposed to be used. They had to issue a restraining order against a filthy rat like me from going anywhere near the fingers of chaste maidens.

The shy but happy princess—Bubbly—played with her spoon.

I watched the maiden’s fingers as I continued to be fed—and heard a voice.

“How are the arrangements?”

“All set, naturally. This will be the end of Lapis Clouet la Lumet, Rei Sanjo, Sakura Tsukiori…and anyone else who gets in our way.”

I jumped out of my chair and looked around.

“Oh, s-sorry!!! Oh, geez, was it too embarrassing for you that I was blowing on your food to cool it down? B-but you see, it’s piping hot like a couple who have just started dating, and—”

“Stay in your seat and don’t move.”

Pushing Lapis back, I buried my consciousness in the whirlwind of buzzing. My ears were alert, and I kept scanning the area. In a few seconds, I spotted a duo who had gotten up from their seats, and I smiled at Lapis.

“Lapis. Stay here and eat your dinner while it’s hot. I’ll eat mine when I come back.”

“Huh?! Where are you going? Your dinner will get cold, like a wife’s feelings toward her retired husband, if you go away now.”

“It won’t get that cold. Reheat it for me. I’ll have retirement pay coming in.”

“You can’t reheat a heart that’s gotten cold…”

Shut up, Lapis. What fine princess uses a quote from a third-rate love song to express her feelings?

“Here you go. See you later.”

“Huh?! What’s this? Hiiro?!”

I scribbled on a serviette, tossed it to her, and ran after the two girls. I checked the camp program, called up the screen with my left hand, and started typing in a chat as I ran down the stairs from the glamorous deck to the unpopular area below.

In a corridor lined with guest rooms, six girls appeared without a sound.

“Hee-hee-hee, we really caught him when we weren’t supposed to go after someone on the run, even in real-time strategy (RTS) or first-person shooter (FPS) games unless we’re sure we can kill them.”

“Ritsu, this is the one time your knowledge of games has come in handy.”

After “catching” me, the two girls started talking in a relaxed way, maybe because they felt comfortable after meeting up with their friends. But the leader of the group knocked on a cabin door to get their attention.

“You’re as stupid as you look. One would never talk about secrets over dinner in a place like that. You are going to die here. Curse your foolishness for trying to act cool in front of a girl when you can’t even use your arm.”

Even a monkey could see that they had me outnumbered.

They had me trapped, and they thrust their magic devices at me. Finding myself in a tight spot, I leaned against the door with a smirk on my face.

“What’s this? A trapped rat is giving up because there are too many cats to bite?”

The girl was full of confidence. I shrugged dramatically and put the back of my hand against the door behind me.

“Ladies, ladies. I realize the curtains have just opened, but let’s confirm the people on duty tonight on a count of one, two, three, shall we?”

I knocked three times on the door, and the door opened with a creak.

Tsukiori and Rei, who had been hiding in the cabin, appeared, and Lapis, who had followed me, aimed her bow.

The unexpected appearance of their adversaries caused the dismayed clan members to inch back. They stared as the table turned, and they paled.

“Now.”

I laughed and removed the cast from my right arm.

“Who do you think is the cat and the mouse?”

The clan members slumped their shoulders in dejection and put down their magic devices.

I left the body checks to Tsukiori and Rei. Once they were disarmed, I checked their branding.

The Alsuhariya brand was carved into their skin.

“……”

It wasn’t right. There were way too many clan members. According to the original story, Alsuhariya’s subjects were short-staffed, and they shouldn’t make a move until a certain event occurred on the third day.

I fell silent and let my thoughts wander.

I hoped it was just me thinking too much…but I figured I should be alert to the discrepancies from the original. I couldn’t ruin an event that would promote Tsukiori’s development, and I figured we’d continue with the camp and keep watching the situation closely.

“Hiiro. Here’s the note…you left on the table.”

Lapis showed me the serviette that I scribbled on with my left hand.

"Were you aware of these girls' presence?"

"No, it was just a hunch. I thought there were too many clan members around when I heard that you and Rei were attacked at the same time. So all I did was retrieve the milestone I planted, just in case."

"Would that be when you—?"

I nodded.

"When we went to see the doctor. I asked her to go along with the story that my right arm and ribs were broken. That doctor…was a very compassionate woman. She immediately agreed when I mentioned how difficult it was for a guy to participate in the camp, knowing that I would get bullied just for being there. I asked her to help me leave the camp."

"Then your arm…"

I rotated my shoulder and wiggled my arm around.

"It's a cover, Rei. It isn't broken. I couldn't go to bed knowing that clan members might still be on the ship, so I pretended I was wounded so I could lure them out."

Lapis, standing next to me, turned red in the face.

She must have recalled how many times we did "say ahhh" like a naive young couple and felt embarrassed, realizing it hadn't been necessary.

"Then what about the fact that you covered for me?"

"Of course it was intentional. I was attacked so I could set this up."

"And my attack?"

"I keep telling you that was Tsukiori."

One by one, I answered Lapis and Rei's questions.

Tsukiori sighed and looked disappointed.

"Ever heard of communication? You could have told us in advance."

“Sun Tzu said to fool your enemy, you must first deceive your allies, and I believe that to nurture yuri, you should start in your neighborhood.”

“Dear brother, please put the unimportant information in the last part of what you just said in your oral shredder and shut up.”

“Still, it’s too hasty for you to go after them while telling Rei and me to get out here. It’s a good thing we were nearby, but what were you going to do if we couldn’t get here on time?”

“I would have somehow managed since my right arm’s good.”

Leaving Tsukiori sulking, I thrust the tip of my blade at the clan members.

“Now for the fun part! The spur-of-the-moment questioning,” I said, turning a sharp eye at them.

“Are you dating any girls…?”

“Brother dear, that oral shredder.”

Rei grabbed me by the head and chin, and with my teeth chattering, I was forced to start over.

“Who told you about me?”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

I drew the trigger and gradually extended the blade, making the outstretched tip of the blade come close to one of the girls’ eyeballs as she stood bound and helpless.

“Eek…,” she howled and flapped her legs.

“The people I fought during the day didn’t know anything about me. They only knew about Lapis and Rei, who were their targets, and Tsukiori, who they mentioned. I already confirmed that the three girls I let go aren’t on board the ship, and there wasn’t enough time for them to give you any information. Come on now. Tell me who the lovely person is that told you to kill me.”

“I—I can’t! I really can’t! As long as this Alsuhariya brand is engraved on me, I can’t say anything that would put her at a disadvantage!”

“Ah, I see. I didn’t think it was possible, but there’s someone who gives you these orders, huh? Thanks for letting me know.”

The girl blanched.

"Who are your friends? How many are there?"

"I—I can't say! I honestly can't!"

"You aren't denying it, so that means there are others. Thanks."

The girl's complexion changed from blue to white.

I tilted my head and looked into her binoculars.

"I'm a healthy guy who admires yuri girls day in and day out. I know them inside out, so I can tell. You don't have that lovely yuri scent. That's because you're influenced by a demon who branded you, which controls your emotions. In short, your existence is worth zero to me."

My blade gradually became longer, the distance between the tip of the blade and the girl's eyeball shortened, and she let out a high-pitched scream.

"Are you enemies of yuri girls…? Or are you comrades who will grow to become beautiful lilies…? Huh…?"

Breathing heavily, I looked at each of the six girls, who started sobbing. They were broken, and when I undid the restraints, they held each other and cried.

I watched them go back to being ordinary girls their age and let out a sigh, having finished punishing them.

"Tsukiori. Sleep with Lapis and Rei tonight. If anything happens, I want you to protect them. I'll stand guard."

"What about telling the teachers about this?"

"Don't. Who knows which of them might be connected to the demonic cult? Unexpected things might happen as a result, so it's better to go with the flow. Don't worry. Should an emergency arise, I'll protect you guys if it costs me my life."

If things go according to the original story, a magic handler is working behind the scenes, posing as the homeroom teacher for Class B. Since these girls had blended in at Houjou, pretending to be students… No, I wasn't going to do anything about it since no one would believe me if I told them.

I turned my attention to the clan girls, who were worried about what was going to happen to them.

"You're free to go. I'll let you guys use a small boat, so hurry up and go to a specialist who can remove that brand for you. There are many pretty girls in town, so enjoy yourselves. Don't let your life go to waste."

Stunned, the girls looked at each other. I turned around to face my gang.

"Tsukiori. Rei. Lapis. Don't use the cabin we were in just now. There are plenty of unused rooms. Think up some excuse and ask *A* to get you different cabins."

"I'll explain to the others in our group—"

"Don't."

Rei rolled her eyes in surprise, and I whispered, "Rei, Lapis. Don't say anything to the other member of your group. Confirm that she's fallen asleep, and then move to the room that Tsukiori has secured for you and go back to your cabin early in the morning."

Rei and Lapis looked questioningly at me, and I continued, "Eight…or nine out of ten, I'm reading too much into this. But when you cross a dangerous bridge, no amount of precautions can be too much. But Lapis, act normal since this is strictly a precaution."

I smiled at Lapis, who was fidgeting with anxiety.

"Don't worry. You'll be fine. You were looking forward to this camp, right? No matter what happens, I won't let them lay a finger on you, so relax. The three of you can stay up late and enjoy some girls talk, talk about love."

"Wh-what? Are you propo—?"

"Yeah, it's a proposal, as in a suggestion."

After leaving Lapis and the others, I took the clan girls to a small boat attached to the cruise ship. Making sure the staff didn't notice, I unfastened it from the mini console it was tied to and loaded the girls on board.

"Okay, take care. I've set the boat on autopilot to the mainland, but if anything goes wrong, check the manual. Worst case, you'll

have a signal, so call nine-one-one and ask for help."

I was about to head back—when one of the clan girls yanked me by my shirt.

"…What?"

With a desperate look on her face, she tried to pull me into the boat. The other five stopped her, and she let go, looking as if she was about to cry.

The flow of events came to mind then—and I intuitively understood.

"Sorry," I said with a smile. "I'm a protector of the yuri girls."

The girl stopped moving, her face dazed. Her arms were still stretched out toward me…as the engine sounded and the boat took off into the distance.

"Mr. Sanjo?"

A came to me without a sound. She must have heard the boat leaving.

"Excuse me, but unauthorized cruising is not permitted at this hour."

"Oh no! I cut the rope by mistake. It took off somewhere, so please bill the Sanjo family for that boat."

She nodded, bowed, and looked up at me.

"I love people."

"…Huh?"

With a smile on her face and her hands folded in front of her, she stood erect and murmured, "The good, the bad, the ordinary, the superhuman, the foolish, and the wise… There are various kinds of *Homo sapiens*, and they all weave tales called life. Others trample some of those lives, while some are saved. You could even say the lives of others determine life."

Her calm monotone echoed throughout the ship.

"Perhaps our lives, our stories, and our paths…are cul-de-sacs that others dictate. Maybe none of us can decide our life path, and we are all just maggots clinging miserably to our present lives, sipping from the lives of others."

A smiled and pressed a hand against her chest.

"Aren't human beings interesting?"

She bowed her head in a natural motion and walked away before I could answer.

I was stunned to realize that a person with an unusual way of thinking had just let me off the hook for stealing a boat. Feeling uneasy, I looked for a place where I could be alone.

I went up to the deck, carefully checked that no one else was there, and conducted a test to make sure that sounds made here couldn't be heard inside the cabin.

"How was that, huuuuuuuuuuh?! I've lowered my likability back to where it was before! This is what a yuri IQ of 180 can do!!!"

Shedding tears of joy, I shouted to the sea.

"My right arm is broken, dammit! Fools! No one could teeeeeeeeeeeell that!!!"

I groaned from the pain in my broken ribs and right arm. But it didn't stop my chest from trembling with triumph.

Grinning, I refitted the cast on my right arm.

Everything was going as I'd planned (hehe!)

How much of this was false, and how much of it was true?

It was true that I was wary of too many clan members being around.

I noticed they were setting me up for a trap when I saw them talking about their plans in a showy manner while I sat down to have dinner with Lapis. I considered the possibility of hostile cultists lurking in the ship, and it was out of an unclouded sense of caution that made me call Tsukiori and Rei over to meet me in case something happened.

Other than that, everything else I said was a lie that I came up with on the spot.

In that predicament, my yuri-tinted brain cells came up with the solution (a pack of lies) that my injuries were all a cover to lure those girls into a trap.

None of it would have been possible if Ophelia hadn't fallen.

Tsukiori saw me taking her to the infirmary. Based on that premise, the little white lie about the doctor agreeing to help me sounded convincing, drowning out the illusion that I had fought to protect Lapis and Rei.

The boat was my show of appreciation to those cult girls.

It was nothing. Not nearly enough actually. They could spend all they wanted since I was going to collect the money from the Sanjo hags.

I stood at the bow of the ship, spread my arms out horizontally, closed my eyes, and felt the sea breeze.

I won…

Basking in the afterglow of my victory, I bit down on the pain in my broken arm.

I—no, the yuri girls won… Who was it that said my yuri IQ of 180 was a lie…? They had to apologize… When I was out here playing that "I'm flying" scene from that romantic disaster film…? They had to apologize…put their arms around me from behind, hold me tight, and whisper in my ear that they were sorry…

"My right arm—"

As a declaration of victory, I opened my eyes wide and shouted, "—is truly, utterly, no-questions-asked broken!"

Satisfied, I spun around—and my eyes met those of Tsukiori, Lapis, and Rei, who were staring at me.

"……"

"……"

"……"

I tried to throw myself into the sea, but they caught me.

"You guys weren't on deck! I checked over and over again!!! I wasn't careless or anything, was I?!"

"That crew member, *A*, left the hatch open. We just happened to be beneath it."

Tsukiori grinned.

"I guess we heard you loud and clear."

I was deflated. I let out a voice that didn't quite sound like a voice, and I stared at the circular hatch, which was reminiscent of the fable "The King with Donkey Ears."

"So your arm was broken after all. I checked with the doctor, and she said she would never give a misdiagnosis, no matter how hard you pleaded."

"You did look like you were in pain when we were eating dinner. It didn't look like an act."

"Did you lie to us so you could reassure us?"

The three girls forced me to get on my feet.

"Hiiro. You were protecting me after all."

"You were thinking of me and gave me an opportunity to make friends with Lapis."

"You protected me with your life as well. Not only did you refrain from flaunting your handiwork, but on the contrary, you tried to push it under the rug with lies."

Surrounded, I slowly removed the cast from my arm.

"It isn't broken."

The girls pushed me in the chest from three directions, and I fell to my knees without a word.

They grabbed me from both sides and slowly started dragging me away.

"This world is crazy…! This is wrong…! I—I have a yuri IQ of 180…! Yet why…?! Why…?"

Sandwiched between the three of them, I was taken away into the darkness.

✳

I awakened.

I let my eyes crawl into the darkness.

What happened to me yesterday after that? My arm hurt badly, and I was starting to feel dazed… Hey, I feel awfully warm. It seems soft for a bed. But isn't it too dark in here?

I was starting to get a very bad feeling.

Dripping cold sweat, I carefully moved my hand a bit.

My wiggling fingertips conveyed to my brain the texture of a smooth silk fabric. The fine filament, carefully constructed of an ample supply of silkworm yarn, sank against the pressure of my hand to express the soft flesh underneath it.

"…Mmm."

A muffled voice leaked from my right.

I looked up and saw Rei asleep, tucking me to her chest.

I smiled like an idiot.

I was finished…

Grinning, I turned around.

"Huh…? Mmm…"

Lapis had been hugging my back. She leaned in and pulled me closer to her.

I was finished… (Yet again.)

I laughed. Then I slowly pulled up the covers.

"…Mmm…ngh…"

There she was, Tsukiori—her body wrapped around my stomach. She rubbed her face against me as she slept the day away.

I was finished… (That's three times in a row.)

"Hee-hee…hee-hee-hee… Hee-hee-hee…! Hoh-hoh-hoh…!!!"

Like a young child witnessing a murder scene, I put a hand against my mouth and wept helplessly.

Crying, I gritted my teeth and suppressed my sobs.

We had to move, and we had to get moving right away. We had to destroy the evidence, and we had to do something about this scene immediately!

I pulled Lapis and Tsukiori off me and escaped from Rei's chest.

Grabbing Tsukiori's hand, I pulled her up and adjusted Lapis and Rei's positions, putting them in a three-person embrace.

I was so glad I studied yuri puzzles!

I stood there with a smile on my face—and slammed my left fist into the wall.

You couldn’t call these girls yuri!!! They didn’t have feelings!!! They didn’t have the heart and soul that made yuri girls special!!!

After taking a series of photos of the three sleeping together, I left the cabin.

It was early in the morning—four thirty AM—and I set my device on the standby screen and was grinning at it, but I began to feel empty at the emotionless image.

My great master had never missed my daily training, whether I was on land or at sea, or if the lily girls in front of me were more than a seven out of ten.

Even though it was sound advice from my teacher, who hadn’t been eating with the tips of her chopsticks until recently, there were variables. I decided to follow her instructions and train since I’d awakened early without the need to set my blade alarm clock (my master’s work that made wake-up calls using a sharp blade).

I went up to the Tanzanite Deck on the top level, stretched in front of the ocean, tinted with the dawn light, and then opened my screen.

“I ate shrimp.”

My master had sent me a chat message.

It had a photo that was so out of focus that I wondered if she’d clicked the shutter button after throwing her magic device somewhere.

Naturally, I couldn’t make out the shrimp. I could distinguish the red line that looked marginally like a shrimp and a brown curve that must have been the soy sauce, and they combined miraculously to form a cubist work that the layman couldn’t understand.

“It’s great that you can send a chat message on your own.”

":)”

At the age of 420, the mechanically illiterate elf hadn’t even been able to open a screen decently until recently.

Through the tremendous effort that Lapis and I made, she finally learned how to use the chat app and frequently sent me messages about what she ate.

I figured the weird things she sometimes wrote must have resulted from her fumbling around with autocorrect. She'd eaten *grass*, *shampoo*, and even *Lapis*, and I expected to be next.

"Souvenir," she wrote.

"Something to eat? An ornament? Or the kind of thing that would ensure that you will never want to ask me for a souvenir again?"

"Up to you."

"Okay, I'll find something that will make you regret asking me for a souvenir. I'm going to start working out now, so go eat some shampoo and wait for me to come home."

"Angry :)"

Why did she use a smiley for that…? Was it some miracle that that was the only keyboard symbol she could use…?

It was tough to type with my left hand since I was right-handed.

I wrapped up my messaging lessons for the 420-year-old and pulled the trigger of Masamune Kuki, which I'd sheathed on my left side instead of my usual right.

Instantly, three imaginary bullets appeared.

I guess three was my limit now. Training with my master had increased my magic power so much that it was nothing like what little I could do before…but it still wasn't enough.

Three invisible arrows clung to my left arm. I erased the bullets and created water arrows.

You couldn't tell them apart since both types of arrows looked exactly the same.

I gave myself plenty of room and then shot at the gap between the fences.

The water arrow shimmered in the morning sun and flew through the air, grazing the back of my hand.

The magic power I put into it made the arrow rotate and shoot through the fence as I held the next arrow between my fingers and loaded it.

Thud! Thud!

The two arrows passed through the gap in the fence as I had aimed—*rustle!*—touching it lightly and peeling off the paint.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

I generated another water arrow and released my third shot in a row.

This time, it passed through the gap without grazing the fence as the previous shots had.

My shooting wasn't stable enough. I needed at least two shots to make my corrections. I wanted to be able to shoot with my left arm, so I decided to give myself a little more time to practice.

Using my good arm as a base, I fired a series of arrows with my left hand, stretching out my two fingers. Two out of three arrows hit the fence, and the arrows flew the other way.

This wasn't good. I kept hitting the fence, and the direction of the arrow changed—then I thought of something.

Maybe I could apply the way the arrow bounced to make it useful. With the principles of the invisible arrow…it was worth a try.

But not now. Worst-case scenario, I'd try it in a real battle.

Taking care not to break my form, I slowly began doing dry swings with my left arm.

Over and over, I repeated the form my master hammered into me.

Wiping the sweat that threatened to get into my eyes, I continued swinging my sword, using my right arm with the cast as support. The sun was gradually rising, rushing me along my routine.

After getting all sweaty, I sat down to meditate—zen—on the spot.

I focused on the flow of magic power.

I harnessed the energy flowing from inside to outside my body, capturing its magic.

I wanted to click my tongue at my lack of magic power, which was a major issue. At this rate, I would eventually reach my limit. I would never catch up to Sakura Tsukiori.

However, of course, it might become meaningless to catch up to her or resolve the issue of my lack of magic power if I died on this ship.

After finishing my daily training, I was squeezing the sweat from my clothes when I heard a sound and turned around.

"S-Sanjo… (*Cough!*) You're up early…," Marina said as she looked around restlessly, hugging her arms.

"You're up early yourself, ma'am. You and I are so far the only suspicious people coming up on the deck this early."

"O-oh no. I was only enjoying creaming people while playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games for free all night, and God deprived me of my sleep… I-I'm a night person."

God also seemed to have deprived her of her common sense as a teacher.

"Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you something."

"R-right. My feeling is that I'd like game resellers to suffer and die."

"Oh, I'm not asking about the extent of your intent to kill resellers. It's about the girl in the same group as Lapis Clouet la Lumet and Rei Sanjo… What was her name again?"

"O-oh, you mean Luri Hizumi?"

I nodded and smiled good-naturedly.

"I heard she got sick during her activities and that Rei went to the infirmary with her."

"I-is that right? I didn't know that. Th-the doctor didn't mention it… B-but I'm not surprised that she'd get sick."

"Why is that?"

With her gaze turned to the right, the petite teacher twirled her index finger around in circles.

"Y-you know, Hizumi can't overexert herself. Wh-when she was young, she attended a school set up at her hospital… (*Cough!*) Sh-she had chimera disease, a genetic disorder, for which there is currently no cure, but her symptoms improved miraculously."

"…Miraculously."

"Y-yes, just like a miracle. Her present condition is excellent, and she was the one who insisted on taking part in our camp. That's why she's here."

Luri Hizumi's illness led to splitting up Lapis and Rei and having them attacked at the same time. In addition, Hizumi's condition improved miraculously, and she was able to come to the camp. That definitely sounded suspicious.

I made up a reason off the top of my head and told the teacher not to mention that I'd asked her about Luri Hizumi.

I gave her an energy drink to keep her mouth shut, and Marina's eyes shone brightly as she went back to her imaginary battlefield that existed online. Left to myself again, I called out to various people and prepared.

After finishing my daily workout, which I resumed, I felt sweaty and uncomfortable.

The big bath was only for girls, as was the hot tub. A shower was my only option, but I didn't feel like going back to that female hell.

Silently pondering my situation, I returned inside and knocked on a cabin door.

"…What is it?"

She had messy bed hair.

Dragging the hem of her nightgown, Ophelia yawned and rubbed her sleepy eyes.

"Good morning. This is your wake-up call. Can I use your shower while I'm at it?"

I smiled. The rich daughter suddenly stopped moving.

Her eyes slowly opened…and her face turned bright red.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

The door slammed shut with blinding speed, and—

"Ugh!!!"

It slammed into the bridge of my nose, and I writhed in agony.

A noisy, crushing sound rang out, and the sound of clothes scraping and someone using a hair iron leaked through the gap in

the door…then it opened all the way.





Ophelia appeared, dressed gorgeously in a pure-white dress, her golden hair coiffed perfectly in vertical rolls.

"What is all the commotion about so early in the day? It's ruining my morning tea as I was listening to the birds singing."

"Ophelia. The shoulders on that dress are slipping, and I can see your bra strap."

"What an indecent thing to notice!!!"

"Anytime!!!"

She gave me a snappy flap in the face, and I yelled out thanks since I was a fan of hers.

I was dripping with a nosebleed from the first blow (slamming into the door) and giggled when she stuck rolled-up tissues up my nostrils.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your lovely morning, but let me use your shower, huh? Shower me with the charity of the upper class as I, a humble commoner with no common sense, swelter in sweat."

"You left me behind."

Instead of responding to me trying to butter her up with praise, the rich daughter crossed her arms and turned away with a *hmph*!

"Before you plead miserably, try to use that measly brain and think!"

"…You're wearing pink undies."

"How vulgar, unsavory, and shameless of you!!!"

"I'm moved. Full of gratitude for the immense delight!"

I bowed my head after she slapped me left and right with the palm, then the back of her hand.

Ophelia's skin was tinted red in shame as she put her hands on her hips and pointed at me.

"Who told you to recall the color of my underwear?! Just yesterday, you rubbed your forehead against the floor and begged me to have mercy and allow you to stay in my cabin!"

I smiled.

"Despite my gracious acceptance of your plea, you vanished last night, and now you're back. As for Sakura Tsukiori, she laughed at me coldly and walked away! What about me?! Did you ever think about how I'd feel, being left behind like that?! It's an unbelievable folly to leave a Margeline daughter in a dark room! Do you realize the loneliness that spread in my heart?!"

I looked at her with eyes as gentle as the spring sun.

"Why are you looking at me like that?! Huh?!"

Mmmmm…I can't get enough of Ophelia, and it's only morning yet!

After admiring the young lady as she stomped her feet in frustration, I apologized with a smile.

"I'm terribly sorry… So can I use your shower? I'm all sweaty, and I don't want to make the Margeline daughter uncomfortable. Here, smell me. I stink, don't I?"

"*Sniff*, *sniff*… Not particularly… I mean, you're a male, and you dare intend to take a shower in my cabin?!"

"Then move out."

"Now you're suddenly acting bossy! That is terribly cocky! Don't get carried away!!!"

Ophelia squeezed her hands together and groaned. Then she glanced at me and sighed, "Ugh…"

"I-it's bad for the Margeline family's prestige to have a commoner in the same group wander around smelling sweaty… All right, I have no choice. You can use my shower."

"Thanks."

"Oh, w-wait!"

I went past her and entered her cabin.

Perhaps because she'd been in a hurry to get changed, her nightgown and casual clothes were scattered on the floor. Spotting a pink piece of fabric, I stretched out my left leg, pointed to the item with my index finger, and raised my voice as the person in charge of the site.

"All clear!"

"Hey, what do you think you're doing, studying my cabin—aaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

Ophelia dove to the floor and started gathering the pieces of fabric.

"Th-there's nothing there! Nothing! M-my underwear was never here! You didn't see anything!"

"Do you like pink?"

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Ophelia turned beet red and chased me around the cabin, and I dashed to the bathroom, still barking, "All clear!"

I leaned against the door after closing it to protect myself and chuckled.

I couldn't help humiliating her. It was just like when I played the original game. ESCO fans enjoyed making Ophelia blush as they played.

I quickly took a shower, hung a towel over my shoulder, and stepped out.

"Sorry about that. I thought about it while I was taking a shower, and I realized there's no such thing in this world as pink panties. Maybe it was a peach-colored rat or something."

"Die!"

She threw a light stand at me, and I caught it with one hand. She gritted her teeth and stared at me, then turned her attention to the cast on my broken arm.

"I haven't had a chance to ask you. What happened to your arm?"

"I broke it myself."

"You sound as proud as a schoolboy who has folded an origami crane for the first time—"

As Ophelia moved her gaze upward, she froze and turned a vermilion color from the neck up. She moved her mouth but was unable to form words. Then she covered her eyes with her hands.

"H-h-how vulgar! We have an emergency lasciviousness alert! P-put your clothes on, you ape! Now!!! Don't blame me if anything happens!!"

"Oh, excuse me. Please wait a moment, and I'll evolve into a *Homo sapien*."

I was half naked, so I quickly pulled on a shirt.

Glancing up, I saw Ophelia exhale in relief. A look of disgust appeared on her face, and she waved me away.

"You're done here, aren't you? Now go, you rude monkey. A first-class lady must take her time getting ready in the morning."

"Okaaay. Thanks," I said and was about to take off.

"Oh, by the way, there was a message from Sakura Tsukiori in our group chat. She said to go to the pool after breakfast… Hey, where are you going?"

I opened the door, turned around, and smiled at her as I was backlit by the sun.

"I'm disappearing!"

To escape from the romantic comedy-type swimsuit event that I anticipated, I ran into the warm light of day—

—into the sparkling light of hope.

A few minutes after dashing away, shining as the sun shone on me, I was rolling my eyes back by the pool.

It's a fine day today.

With students from Houjou Magic Academy on board, the *Queen's Watch* had set its course for its second port call and was anchored in front of a dimension gate.

An artificial float and a black half wheel appeared at sea.

A watercraft was parked there, strapped to the float with a rope. A tollbooth was set up beside it, and an attendant with a magic device was issuing permission for passing.

The black half wheel leisurely rotated clockwise. It was big enough to easily swallow up the *Queen's Watch*, which measured just over one thousand feet in length and was almost two hundred

feet tall. A ridiculously large console was fitted into it, making a motor-like sound while it emitted a bluish-white afterglow.

There was only one purpose for the dimension door—to come and go between the present world and the Otherworld.

It was a ritual of the Otherworld that became a foundation for that theory.

Inhabitants of other worlds, including but not limited to Alfheim, performed special rituals and opened doors to come to Japan. Those rituals were incorporated as a theory and a technology that succeeded 99.92% of the time and were adopted as this dimension door.

The chances of a person having an accident during a transfer between different dimensions were extremely small. Even if an accident did occur, rescue workers would immediately come to pick them up. (Although the background material mentioned that several deaths had happened in the past.)

However, the dimension door was not an Anywhere Door that opened anywhere and allowed you to go anyplace you wanted.

The Otherworld and the present world were closely interconnected, and it was clearly established that an individual would fly from Point A in the present world to Point B in the Otherworld.

And since the two worlds were unstable and overlapping, the dimension door could only be activated in very stable locations.

Although there were exceptions, individuals generally went back and forth between the two worlds through the dimension door.

The only way to travel was through this method, which had a complicated permit application process. However, passport checks took some time, as there was a mandatory check at the second port of call in the Otherworld. Unfortunately, the waiting time for the check couldn’t be avoided.

And once you were told to wait, a healthy young person was bound to do something to kill the time.

It was natural for an elf princess to suggest taking advantage of her free time and going for a dip in the pool.

"……"

I sat on the floor, hugging my knees with expressionless eyes.

I erased my presence next to the huge pool on the Sapphire Deck of the *Queen's Watch*.

It was a large pool next to a circular hot tub, and groups of rich girls frolicked and played as they played tag.

"Oh! Where do you think you're touching me?! You have naughty hands!"

"Ha-ha-ha! You ain't seen nothin' yet, so brace yourself!"

I very quietly pulled my trigger.

I connected—*Attribute: Light*, *Generation: Metamaterial*, *Operation: Transparent*.

Still sitting on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest, I pulled a smooth distortion field around my body and became invisible.

"……"

The distortion field was an original work of magic, and it worked.

I covered myself with metamaterial optical camouflage, allowing light to pass through and diffract from my body, making me invisible. I thought this up by chance when I was studying the principles of the invisible arrow at our great archive.

I had never succeeded in doing this before, despite the blood and tears I'd shed to fulfill humanity's dream of becoming an invisible wall and watching over the yuri girls.

So why was I suddenly successful? The answer was obvious.

At the moment, I wanted to become nothing.

I was bad. I shouldn't exist in this world. So I wanted to become nothing and then reign in this world as an observer. I wanted to be like a plant that had roots in the earth, that just happened to exist where it grew, like it was perfectly natural.

I would be too greedy to wish to be a houseplant that a yuri couple would take care of.

All I wanted was to be a plant that had a bird's eye view to watch the daily lives of yuri couples.

Then I lost my concentration, and I appeared again, sitting on the floor, hugging my knees, by the pool.

"……"

And I disappeared again.

"……"

Then I once again showed myself.

"Hey!!! Hasn't that guy over there been disappearing and appearing for a while?!"

"It's a psychic phenomenon. A psychic phenomenon at sea! Bring a container of salt to purify the ship! Or splash him with seawater!"

"He's like a dying light bulb! I can sense the fragility of life before it ends!"

A great commotion ensued, and many gazes fell upon me—then the bustle faded away, and a drop of liquid fell on my cheek.

I saw someone's shadow.

It was Rei, cradling me with her arms to hide me, smiling politely to the onlookers.

"No one among the Sanjos' relatives has ever been employed at a freak show. Now, ladies, please return to your merry games."

Having focused on the bizarre human light bulb appearing and disappearing before them, the other girls quickly looked away from me and resumed their fun games.

"Brother dear, please don't trouble me with your quirks. This is the type of thing I was afraid would happen, which is why I asked you to always stick with me. Twice. This is the third time. If you want to avoid being told a fourth time, then please take a precautionary measure, such as holding my hand so you won't get lost. Are you listening? Are your ears and brain registering my advice? I'm telling you that you may hold my hand."

She was wearing a white shirt that stuck snugly to her body.

Perhaps because she'd gone for a quick swim, I could make out the shape of the black bikini under her wet T-shirt. I smelled chlorine

from her heated skin, and the tips of her damp hair clung to her shoulders as her eyes, which reminded me of the stars in the night sky, gazed into mine.

Had she been wandering around the pool looking for me?

The dark hair that flowed over her fine skin was full of moisture. Droplets of water dripped from the tips, running down her collarbone and falling onto her ample bosom.

The shirt she wore couldn't possibly cover the lower half of her body.

Her lush thighs were exposed, and they came into contact with my fingertips with her every move.

Trembling, I bit my thumb.

I'm nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing… Thighs… Those thighs were addressing the air in front of her. Come on, Hiiro, don't pay attention to the wild thighs that had gone astray from their pack. Sooner or later, they were destined to be exterminated by thigh hunters.





A shadow fell, and Rei crouched in place and reddened her cheeks.

"Why aren't you looking at me? Why? *Pourquoi*?"

She was on all fours and slowly coming at me. The rising and falling of her chest entered my field of vision, and I looked up at her and made the sign of the cross.

"For religious reasons, I can't have a conversation with an autonomous pair of thighs…"

Rei slowly curved the corners of her lips upward.

"Dear brother, I don't mean to be presumptuous, but…are you entertaining dirty thoughts upon seeing my thighs?"

"I—I—I haven't seen them!! Y-your thighs?! They're just masses of fat!!! Lactic acid?! You're just protein. A cell nucleus. A chromosome! Why would I get excited over something like that?!"

Rei fell back on her buttocks with a plop.

I couldn't help looking at her—and saw a victorious smile on her face.

"You saw them. You single-mindedly, without a sideways glance, focused on attacking my thighs visually."

"Th-th-that's not true! My naked-eye microscope has a magnification of two thousand! I was observing the nesting of a couple of mitochondria living in your thighs! That's all! I was only gawking at the divine microworld of the yuri!"

She sat flat on the floor with her legs bent backward and observed me with a sideways glance.

"Y-you wouldn't happen to remember…what happened…last night, would you…?"

"I know nothing of it! I was sleeping alone!!! Sleeping soundly and peacefully, which is trending, and I even dreamed about all princess manga becoming anime!!!"

I couldn't take this anymore. I was going to die! This was bad! Poison for the eyes! I had to find a way to deal with it!

"Oh…"

As I abruptly got on my feet, Rei looked at me and shivered as if thinking she'd gone too far.

She looked sad, turned her gaze downward—and I put a towel over her head.

"Stop joking around and cover yourself with that towel. It's cold out here. Dry yourself if you have time to make fun of your brother."

"…Ngh."

Still looking down, Rei blushed and pulled the towel to her face.

"Um… Thank…you…"

Seeing her look up at me, I grinned.

I'd gotten rid of the image of that fascinating body in a swimsuit. This was the same as destroying a swimsuit event. Oh, God of Romantic Comedies, come prepared with more intelligence if you're going to take on an outstanding guy like me, jerk. Don't ever come before me again. I beg you.

I felt a little tap on my back.

I turned around and saw Lapis standing there, wearing a frilly bathing suit the color of the sky. Her mere presence was attracting envious glances.

Her figure was a condensed image of people's desires and ideals, and it was hard to believe that she was human. Besides the bust that would embarrass the sex goddesses of all time, her tight waistline was the kind you read about in stories and myths, and her gently curving hips were divine.

Her whole body was tinted a cherry-red color, reminding me of a solitary flower blooming on a peak too high for humans to reach.

A student who glanced at her as she passed by appeared unable to believe her beauty and splashed into the pool.

With her hands clasped behind her back, Lapis looked up at me, swaying from side to side.

The extent of her exposed skin! It was way too big! At least the size of seventy-two ballparks!

I removed the cast from my right arm, pulled off my shirt, and put it over her.

"Huh…?! U-um, Hiiro…?"

"Keep that on. It's still cold. You should at least put on a shirt. I'll lend it to you."

"Oh… U-um, okay…"

I grinned as I watched Lapis, wearing my much-too-oversized shirt, look away from me.

Now I've gotten rid of another fascinating body in a swimsuit.

"B-by the way, Hiiro. About last night?"

"Hiiro," came a clear voice.

I turned around and saw Tsukiori, clad in a shirt, shorts, and flip-flops, raising her hand.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well last night?"

"Tsukiori!"

Half naked, I was so moved that I took Tsukiori's hands.

"I knew I could count on you."

"What do you mean? Did you want to see me in a bathing suit by any chance?" she said, squeezing my hands as she grinned. "After seeing me so much last night, you should be fed up with my body by now."

Time stopped at that moment.

Rei and Lapis were red to their ears as they concentrated on their feet while Tsukiori, still smiling, leaned toward me.

"How did it feel to have three girls wash your body in the bath?"

My vision became distorted. That one question jolted my brain, and my body wobbled.

Unable to remain standing, I sank to my knees.

"Hff… Hff… Hff. Hff. Hff…!"

Sweat dripped down my body, and I fell to the floor.

I—I must have misheard her… I-it's impossible… Me… An elite in the yuri world…taking a bath with three girls…?!

"You were something else when we slept with you, too. I don't know what you were dreaming about, but when I whispered, 'Hiiro, Lapis is in danger,' you got on top of her. You were grinning, then started screaming…"

"Aaaaaaaaaahhh! You promised not to mention that! You promised. Sakura, I can't believe you!"

"Whatever. You were defenseless. Rei got up in the middle of the night, and she kept snuggling up to you and hogged that space in your arms until morning—"

"Why are you telling him this?! That does it, Sakura. I'm not going to be your friend anymore! You can give me back the box of sweets I gave you yesterday!"

The light went out of my eyes, and everything went black.

I felt like a radio-controlled car an infant was trying to play with.

It seemed that last night, I'd been at the height of the horny me. I probably wouldn't have continued to exist in this world if I had a recollection of it. I could never live in shame like that, and schools of fish would have pecked me away at the bottom of the sea.

"I feel the onset of a cold, a headache, and my time of death approaching at once, so I'm going to take a strategic retreat."

"Are you okay? It's a bargain sale of critical hits. Do you want to sleep together again?"

"You fool!!!" (Stop that. Pushing me like that isn't going to damage me any worse since I'm an elite yuri-lover.) I staggered back inside the ship.

I walked around looking for a place to rest, and at the far end of an unpopular corridor stood a girl.

"You're Hiiro Sanjo, aren't you?"

It was dark.

Hiding her face in the darkness, the girl whispered, "I'd like to talk to you… Can I have a moment of your time?"

So they were coming to me. I grinned, knowing what I was dealing with, even without seeing her face.

"Huh?! My time is so filled up today that resellers are all over the place trying to secure a slot! But, hey, I'm a nice guy, and I can't refuse an invitation from a pretty girl."

I approached her lazily and hugged her by the shoulders. I heard someone clicking their tongue and grinned.

“My, you’re cute! You’re certainly my type of gal. Do you have a girlfriend? If you do, why don’t the three of us go out somewhere, huh? Come on! Let’s do it. I’ll entertain you both with my clever storytelling skills.”

“…Prick.”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing. Shall we go someplace quiet where we can talk?”

Feeling the heat from the person next to me, I cuddled up to the girl, and we went to the Diamond Deck and took a seat at the bar counter.

Sitting on the edge of my stool, I looked around.

The bar counter was lined with stools with backrests. Warm floor lights generated a drunken mood while a piano played contemporary jazz.

Behind the counter, where a bartender polished glasses, were bottles of liqueurs like Chambord and Disaronno, premium scotches like Royal Salute, and dessert wines for the masses.

The bartender lady smiled at us, clad in our rash guards for protection against the cold.

“What can I get you?”

“You.”

“Unfortunately, that order is reserved. What about you, ma’am?”

“I’ll have mineral water.”

Still smiling, the bartender got to work.

With a grin still on my face, I looked at the girl sitting next to me.

Her discomfort was evident in her expression. Her almond eyes stared at her hands as she nervously stroked her fingernails.

“So what do you want from me? Do you want to be my mistress? Marry up and have a happy wedding?”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Nope, and I’m not interested, though I could play with you, depending on how you behave.”

I stroked her shoulder with the tip of my finger, and she blatantly pushed it away.

"I'm Luri Hizumi. I'm in Class A, the same class as you—"

"You're in the same group as Lapis and Rei. Excuse me, I'll have a whiskey and coke! Along with your number, please!"

The smiling bartender set a glass of mineral water in front of Hizumi. She pantomimed that she hadn't heard my order and went back to polishing her glasses.

"So you know me."

"You've had it tough being sick since you were young, right?"

Suddenly, she paled. Seeing her reaction, I instantly took action.

I thought *I've overstepped my bounds. I'll have to hold back. I told Marina to be quiet, so Hizumi shouldn't be able to find out how I got information on her, but… I'll say I got it through the Sanjo family.*

I laughed like a fool.

"Well, of course I'd dig up information on you. Lapis and Rei are my girls. They're candidates to be my mistresses, so I figured I might as well bring in the other girl in their group. The Sanjo family can seriously do anything it wants."

"…You rotten rich son," she muttered under her breath, then put on a fake smile. "I heard from Rei that you're an excellent swordsman, that you continue to train hard without sitting on your bottom, despite the Sanjo family name. I think that's wonderful."

"Huh? Is that all Rei told you? There has to be more. Didn't she tell you about you-know-what?"

"Oh, of course. You can shoot a special arrow, can't you? It looks like a water arrow, but it's actually something else entirely. That's amazing."

"Right. Amazing is what I am!"

Not that I had ever shown or told Rei about my water arrow.

"What's the principle behind it? I'd love to know!" she purred, smiling sweetly though her smile didn't reach her eyes.

I looked deep into her eyes and saw a whirlwind of obsession, characteristic of a beast stalking its prey. The disgust that I was male and the arrogance from being a female with the upper hand

were both there, and she couldn't control her emotions, which was necessary for someone who wanted to negotiate.

"I might tell you if we go someplace quieter where we can be alone—"

"……!"

Her face twitched when I rubbed the back of her hand.

"Hey, what do you say? Do you want to take a midday rendezvous with me? Huh? What do you s—pardon me."

I stood up briskly, left her looking at me suspiciously, and went straight to the bathroom.

"Uuuuuugh!!!"

I plunged my face into a urinal and threw up my lunch in a grand manner.

Turning blue, I gasped as I wiped my mouth.

Oh man. Trying to act like the original Hiiro in the game was tougher than I'd imagined. It was a trinity of being disgusting, irritating, and weak-minded, like a triple combo campaign in hell. The expert doctor in my mind was saying I'd be risking my life if I kept this up. Eight or nine out of ten, Hizumi was bad, so I guess I didn't have to keep up this charade of acting like the original Hiiro.

I stared at my image in the mirror.

Then I raised my middle finger, and to destroy the evil Hiiro that appeared over my image, I shouted, "Die! Die! Die, Hiiro, die!"

Feeling refreshed, I returned to the bar counter with a smile.

"W-were you yelling back there…?"

"Oh, no."

I gave Hizumi a sunny smile and raised my hand to get the bartender's attention.

"Excuse me, can I have a glass of milk? Also, her glass is empty, so please give her a refill. Is there anything you might recommend?"

"How about sparkling white grape juice? It's refreshing, not too sweet, and very smooth, suitable for everyone."

"Okay, we'll have that, too. Thank you for your cooperation, and give my best to your girlfriend."

Chuckling, the bartender stepped back. I turned to Hizumi, who was gaping, probably confused out of her mind.

"So what were we talking about?"

"Y-your right arm."

Her eyes widened, but she somehow managed to pull herself together and smile.

"It's broken, isn't it? Doesn't it hurt?"

"Huh? How do you know that?"

"You were wearing a cast—"

"A cast doesn't necessarily mean a broken bone. Ligament injuries also require immobilization and protection of the affected area."

"Y-you were shouting on the deck. I could hear you inside the ship."

"No, you couldn't."

"…Huh?"

The bartender came back and placed the two items we ordered on the counter. I slid the glass containing juice in front of her.

"Screams can't be heard inside the ship. The interior of a luxury liner is basically soundproofed to block out the noise of the ship's operation. With the thick door leading to the cabin area closed, my ridiculous screams could never be heard unless, by some miracle, I just happened to be standing beneath an open hatch—unless you followed me up to the deck."

The smile disappeared from Hizumi's face.

"What's the matter? Drink your juice," I said, smiling as she trembled. "It's the bartender's recommendation."

"Y-you acted like an idiot and tricked me. I—I should have known you'd do something like that."

"That's insulting."

With shaking hands, I brought the milk to my mouth and spilled it all over my chest.

"O-of course I did it on purpose. No way would my yuri information circuitry make such stupid mistakes…"

Not noticing the hatch on the deck was one mistake, and the second was the frustration leaking from my eroding heart, but luckily, being able to use these to bluff my way now wasn't a mistake.

I have to take the lead.

Hizumi stood up when I looked away—*whoosh!*—and the tip of the light sword touched her neck.

Still seated, I drew my sword with my left hand and smiled.

"Hey, are you already getting up to leave without finishing the drink I got you? It's rude to leave without even taking a sip. Certainly not how a young lady who goes to Houjou should behave."

"E-everyone will turn against you if I scream. Your happy days at school will be over."

"That's a lovely idea. But unfortunately, I don't care what happens to me—Hiiro. I'm happy as long as I can protect my yuri girls. I resolve to make mincemeat out of any obstacle that gets in their way. Now, sit down, and let's talk."

The bartender turned around, and I fit the blade into the sheath I'd stuck to the bottom of the counter.

Having seen the magic device I'd set up in advance, Hizumi wiped the cold sweat off her face and sat back down beside me.

"So you're saying I thought I lured you to me, but it was actually the other way around. How long have you been doing that…?"

"I had my suspicions after the attack by the threesome during student activities. You pretended to be sick and separated Lapis from Rei. I asked the doctor at the infirmary, and she said a girl named Luri Hizumi had never gone to see her before. My suspicions grew, so I set up a trap, screaming at the head of the ship."

"Y-you did all that because you were suspicious?"

"A mistake can lead to the death of someone important to me."

I leaned my elbows on the counter and looked directly at her.

"If that's the case, you should eliminate that possibility, even if it's only one percent. As long as I'm alive, and no matter what

happens, I'm not going to let anyone die. I want to see a field of pure white lilies in my yuri world."

"Okay, I get your spirit, but… What's with this *yuri*—and *lilies*—you've been talking about?"

I snapped my fingers.

The bartender came over and placed a book in front of me. With a gentle move, I pushed the comic book toward Hizumi.

"This is a work about yuri girls by a famous manga artist. Some circles call it the bible of the yuri world… Read it, and you'll understand everything."

"Wh-why did that bartender bring this to you?"

"I was planning to lure you in here from the start. The whole thing, from start to finish, has been like a skit that she and I put on for you. Hey, thanks for your cooperation!"

The bartender placed a hand on her chest and bowed gracefully.

"Huh?! Are you saying you've taken all this time diddling with stuff that has nothing to do with what's going on to recommend this comic book to me?"

"What are you talking about…? This *is* what's going on…"

"Wh-what…are you…?"

She stared at me with a look of horror on her face.

"Why do you have so much power? Hiiro Sanjo is supposed to be a womanizing scum who doesn't have any genuine ability to fight. Have you been putting on an act?"

"Asking me a question like that means you're the one who's been giving orders to the clan members who are hiding on this ship. Am I right?"

Having me see right through her, Hizumi groaned—and I kept at it without a moment's pause.

"What kind of deal do you have going with Alsuhariya?"

With the question coming out of nowhere, Hizumi froze.

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

"You're supposed to be lying on a bed in the sick bay. It's an incurable disease. Normally, you wouldn't get better—unless some

demon created a miracle for you."

According to the original story, Luri Hizumi didn't appear in this camp. She was a girl who was down on her luck, and it was much later that she came up in the game.

Alsuhariya was supposed to be deeply involved in the treatment of her incurable illness.

"Alsuhariya shouldn't have awakened yet. Did her cronies talk you into something? Come on. Come clean and tell me everything—"

Poof.

All the floor lights went out.

Had the magic power in the area increased? It was as if we had shifted from the present world to the Otherworld. A deadly atmosphere ensued amid the silence, and I pulled Masamune Kuki out from under the counter as I stared at the space that was trapped in darkness.

"Huh…?! Wh-what is this…?"

Hizumi didn't try to hide her fright, and her voice trembled as she looked around. I got on my feet, grabbed her arms, and hid her behind my back.

"Don't try to move. Stay still."

A mass of magical energy fluctuated dimly.

I looked into the darkness and—*flash*—knocked down the knife that came flying at me and stepped back with my left hand set on my sword.

That wasn't for me. I was sure of that, catching the trajectory of the knife.

Was whoever it was targeting Hizumi?

"Hizumi, can you run? We have to go up. We're going to run to the Tanzanite Deck."

We'd been caught by surprise, and there was no reason to go out of our way to fight. No one in their right mind would go to battle in a state like this.

I figured we should retreat for the time being—and saw the knife that had been thrown stuck in the comic book.

"……"

I rubbed my eyes, unsure if I was seeing right.

Squinting my eyes, I stared at my bible on the bar counter.

"……"

The knife that had flown through the air had slashed into and was stuck neatly in the yuri comic book.

Ha-ha-ha. No way! How could anyone in this world harm this wonderful book?

"It *is* stuck in the book, dammit!!!"

Swinging Masamune Kuki, I charged head-on.

With a metallic clang, I flicked away the flying blades with my rage-inspired sword. I didn't even check who my opponent was. Blood was rushing to my head, and I kicked whoever it was with all my might.

"Write a letter of apology to the teacher while you vomit your guts out of your mouth!!! Make sure it's at least three million characters!!!"

I felt a dull sensation in my toes, and a soft, warm mass blasted off. It hit the wall and bounced back, and the four-legged beast was smashed to the floor.

The moment I kicked it, its raw, beastly breath was on my face. As if in response to the intense pain I inflicted, the stench gradually filled the area.

Slowly, like ink dripping on a blank sheet of paper, the beast's true nature began to emerge from the darkness.

It was a black dog with a massive number of blades on its back.

It was a Jaggy Dog—a demon that lived in the Otherworld. It was a small-fry monster Hiiro encountered in the lower levels of the dungeon.

Hey, is this for real?! It wasn't human. It was a demon!!!

My eyes darted in all directions, and I shuddered when I caught sight of my enemy.

One, two, three, four…five?! Even in the dungeon, you didn't encounter this many foes at once!

This was unexpected.

The moment I turned right, the dog shook off a blade, and it came flying at me.

"Oops."

I commanded my trigger. Activate and enhance projection—*Generation: Magic Surface*. *Change: Optic Nerves*. *Change: Musculoskeletal*.

I slipped on top of the bar counter and lifted the bartender, who had gone shock-still.

At that moment, a cavity opened in the back of her head.

A series of shattering noises ensued. The bartender in my arms screamed, and shards of whiskey bottles sparkled.

Something oozed out of the hole that appeared. A sickening smell of alcohol filled the place, and I bent down to avoid the narrow blades that came flying one after the other.

I read the prices on the broken bottles as I ran. "Nineteen thousand, thirty-two thousand, sixty thousand three hundred and twenty! I hope you can pay all that back, you evil hound!!!"

I glimpsed a light from the corner of my eye and ducked, kicked the wall, and did a triple jump, then knocked the blade with its magic power enhanced with my cast.

I lowered the bartender I was carrying behind the counter. Hearing the echoing sounds of blades ringing, I gained a grasp of where the Jaggy Dog was.

"Don't move. Stay here behind the counter and keep your head down," I told the bartender and gave her a thumbs-up.

"Be happy with your beautiful lover! We, the guardians of yuri girls, sincerely wish you a happy life! Hizumi, over here!!!"

Hizumi was crouching with her head in her hands. The moment I shouted at her, she jerked.

"Sorry to interrupt when you're busy defending yourself, but I need your help defending yuri! I dedicated my right arm to them, and I can't change my console! Get behind me! We, guardians of yuri girls, shall protect the future of that bartender!"

"Wh-what are you talking about? You go! I'm their target! I-I'm your enemy, remember?! I don't recall ever joining some cult organization called the Guardians of Yuri Girls!!!"

"It doesn't matter whether you're a friend or foe or if you're a yuri!"

"How?! What the heck?!"

Hizumi was confused, and I grinned.

"Luri Hizumi, I see potential in you. I see the budding of a fragrant yuri. I now award you with the National Honor Yuri Award and pledge to protect your life with everything I've got. Now hurry up. You and I are going to kick some ass."

"H-huh…? Are you really Hiiro Sanjo…?"

Kicking the Jaggy Dog as it jumped at me, I grabbed Hizumi by the waist and pulled her to me.

"H-hey, hey, hey!!! Wh-wh-where do you think you're touching me?!"

"Man, you have a narrow waist! You should eat more."

"G-get lost… Who are you, my mom…? G-go to hell…!!!"

She turned red in the face and pushed my face with her hands.

"Owwwww.S-stop it. You've shoved your fingers in my nostrils, and it hurts. I—I have to hold you like this so I can protect you while I fight. Now listen, okay? There's a console pocket in the back of the breast pocket of my rash guard. Reach for it and pull out my console the way I tell you!"

"B-behind your rash guard?! You're asking me to stick my hand in your chest area?!"

"It shouldn't matter since I'm a guy."

Hizumi kept pushing me as she blushed all the way to her ears.

"Wh-what are you, a moron?! It *does* matter because you're a guy!!! I-I've never even dated a girl, and you expect me to put my hand that close to your chest…? I could never do anything so abnormal!"

"Well, don't think about it—here it comes."

Without a sound, it came from the darkness.

They came from the darkness.

Dogs painted pitch-black made black ripples around them.

Jaggy Dogs created packs when they hunted. Hunting for daily sustenance required communication with each other. These demons didn't have vocal cords, and they communicated through the sounds they made by snapping the blades on their backs.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch!!!

Making distorted sounds, three of the dogs jumped at me.

"The one in front is a decoy, and the blade coming from the right is the real deal. Hizumi, *Operation: Water*, *Generation: Arrows*, *Generation: Blade*!"

"Oh geez!!!"

Hizumi focused her magic power and pulled the console from Masamune Kuki at once. Rather sluggishly, she generated a guiding line of magical energy and fit the console into its slot.

I let go of her and pushed her head down as low as I could.

"Ngh!"

A blade flew above her head, and I pulled out my Masamune Kuki.

> Connect console: *Attribute: Water*. *Generation: Arrows*. *Generation: Blade*.
> Continue generation: No sword. Invisible arrow.

"…Take that!!!"

Putting blade to blade, I slashed at the Jaggy Dog as it came at me.

The corpse was sliced in two. Hizumi, who was slumped to the floor, screamed. Another Jaggy Dog, this time, the one in front of me, feigned an attack, which I ignored, and I struck at a blade that came flying at me from the darkness.

Crunch, crunch, crunch! Crunch, crunch, crunch!

"A pincer attack, huh?"

"H-how can you…? Do you understand their language?!"

These are things you start picking up naturally when you're always playing games. I've heard them so much my ears have to be sick of it, and there are more and more yuri voice dramas and other voice works available… Hey, I train my ears, girl.

I pulled Hizumi to my chest.

"Eeep! B-be careful! You're strong, and you scare me!"

"Oh, sorry. Like this?"

I repeated the move with less force. Hizumi turned her face away from me and put her hand over her mouth.

"…Ngh!"

"Huh…?! H-hey, why did you make that sexy sound just now…?"

"Y-you're the one who grabbed my waist as hard as you could! I was straining my stomach, and then you suddenly relaxed your hold! Y-you lack sensitivity!!! Are all males like this?! Why don't you just die?!"

"Oops."

"Whoa!!!"

I pressed Hizumi's face to my chest and ducked the mass of killing intent that had been aiming for my heart.

"H-hey! D-don't push my face into your chest! Th-the smell! I inhaled your smell!!!"

"Sorry. I'll end it with my next strike. *Attribute: Light*. *Generation: Ball*. *Operation: Fire*. Here goes."

"Oh geez…!"

Hizumi shoved her hand into my shirt.

The Jaggy Dogs kicked at the floor tiles and deployed left and right. Bouncing on the floor as a pack of black balls of fur, drooling, and eyes blazing, they shook their heads and chased after us, matching their blades to their pace.

"Hey, Hizumi. Don't just stand there admiring my pectoral muscles. Hurry up and change my console. If you don't, those hungry dogs will manage to have us for lunch!"

"I-I'm not admiring any part of you! Don't say it like I want to be in this position! Why don't you train those dogs? Have them sit or

beg or give you their paw—”

“Wait a sec! Do you guys train male dogs in this world?!”

“Shut up! Be quiet, or I’ll twist these nipples off your chest one by one!!!”

Meanwhile, the Jaggy Dogs were getting closer and closer.

I kept hold of Hizumi, letting her go as needed. I dodged the blades that were coming at her, swinging Masamune Kuki now and then while Hizumi continued to panic.

“Ngh…! Mmm! Ugh…! Ngh…!”

“Hey, Hizumi, don’t start getting horny.”

“Y-you’re the one who keeps—ngh! P-pulling—me in and out of your arms! Think about how much force—ngh! You’re—applying!”

She managed to change my console after a few tries.

“Duck.”

She crouched down, holding her head in her hands—and four Jaggy Dogs simultaneously jumped at us.

I stood in the middle and held out my palm.

And I focused the maximum amount of magic I could muster there.

“You guys have to behave on the ship…and…sit.”

I crooked the edge of my mouth.

“Ball of light.”

Light exploded in all directions from the ball of light I created on my palm.

With a high-pitched scream, the Jaggy Dogs leaped in the air, and I aimed at every one of them.

Generate route.

Struggling, I extended the route to the black dogs as they fell, took aim, and fired three arrows.

Thud. Thud. Thud!

The three arrows shot through the Jaggy Dogs at the same time.

The black dogs were now dead. As they fell to the ground, I pulled out my water arrow from one of the corpses.

“Aaaaahhh!”

The surviving dog attacked Hizumi—and the water arrow that I threw with my left arm bounced off the magic wall I'd created and hit the dog—bull's-eye—between its eyebrows.

It dropped with a loud thud.

Satisfied, I examined the results.

I came up with this application after seeing an arrow bounce off a fence. By bouncing an arrow off a wall, I could change its direction without extending its path.

It might be less stable, but this was better if I didn't have time to stretch out the path. It would also help conserve my magic power.

"Hizumi. We're safe now."

Hizumi, who had been crouching with her hands crossed in front of her face to protect it, slowly opened an eye.

"Eeep!!!"

She saw the black dog lying in front of her and backed away. Slowly putting a little distance from it, she jumped and grabbed hold of me.

"…Is it dead?"

"Yeah. Look, it's going to disappear now."

Demons that have lost their magical power are unable to retain their forms in the present world. The pack of Jaggy Dogs turned into pale particles and disappeared into the air.

I watched the transition and pulled my discomfort into my awareness.

Something was wrong. Demons were initially limited to appearing in the dungeon. Our second port call was a tourist resort that claimed to be safe, and there shouldn't have been room for a single demon to appear.

Even though we had entered the Otherworld, there was zero chance of demons coming on to our ship through layer after layer of security.

Besides, those monsters were after Hizumi. No demon could have a purpose to target a single individual persistently. That meant those

dogs had been told to attack her, and they'd simply been following orders.

Basically, demons didn't listen to human commands. If there was an exception, it was the summoning of a monster by a high-ranking clan member who had a deal going with a demon.

Demons that could be summoned like that were like subordinates under a demon, and out of loyalty to their master, they would accept orders, even from a human being.

There was one more possibility.

But that was… No, it couldn't be. It wasn't possible…but if it *had* happened, then I…I'd…

"H-hey."

Hizumi's voice made me regain my composure.

"Hey, thanks for saving my life. You really are super strong. I don't know why I was targeted when all I am is an Alsuhariya follower. I guess maybe I offended one of the higher-ups or something."

"Are there any other followers on board?"

"No. No, but…"

But. Right.

I sighed and looked over Hizumi to make sure she wasn't harmed.

"It's a good thing you aren't hurt, but I can't just let you go. They're after you. I know it will be inconvenient for you, but I'm going to keep you under my watch."

"I—I know. I screwed up. I'll consider myself lucky they didn't kill me."

"Building a consensus is a first step… So how long are you going to stay cuddled up to me?"

The strength had left her, and Hizumi smiled weakly at me as I continued to support her.

"S-sorry… I think…I'm paralyzed with fright…and…I may not be able to walk…"

After debating it for a few minutes, I made up my mind and lifted her in my arms.

"Eeep!"

"Rescue act ongoing! I'm an autonomous humanoid yuri rescue device… Here we go!!! Wee-woo, wee-woo! Everyone, please clear the way! A fresh yuri is about to pass! Wee-woo!!!"

Often forced to carry someone in a bridal carry, I set out to take Hizumi to the infirmary—and bumped into Tsukiori, Lapis, and Rei.

"……"

"……"

"…Wee-woo, wee-woo."

"……"

"……"

I tried to walk by them—when Tsukiori whispered, "Hiiro's gotten a girl drunk, and he's trying to take her home with him."

"Right. I'm going to indulge in the young girl's body."

"Th-that's not true! Hiiro Sanjo saved me, and—hmph!!!"

I covered Hizumi's mouth and grinned.

"Shhh…! Luri Hizumi, you have a naughty mouth that opens itself and blabs away. Hee-hee-hee! What a stroke of luck, huh? You can keep that pretty mouth shut and watch the person who saved your life destroy himself socially."

"Hmph! Ngh! Ngh! Ngh!!!"

Feeling harried, I looked for a reaction from my three friends.

Back off, people! Now. Move back. Enough of that likability!!! See this criminal who picks up girls for what he is, watch his no-good streaming, hit the *BAD GUY* button, and go home!

Lapis covered her mouth with her hands. "H-Hiiro…"

Rei's voice trembled as she said, "Brother, dear…"

Oh, no, no!!! This is bad!!! Aaahhh! My likability has dropped so low it's fallen below the ground in Japan all the way to Brazil! It's going to be a super low evaluation made in Brazil!!!

"You got reckless again to save that girl, didn't you? You idiot. Your cast is falling apart. I could hear demons moaning when I went

inside the ship."

Rei walked up to me, said, "Excuse me," and checked Hizumi's breath.

"I don't smell alcohol on her nor you. Falsifying the facts is a crime under Article 172 of the Penal Code, and you will be rewarded with three months to a decade living with me."

"……"

"H-hey, I'm only kidding. What's wrong with you guys? All I did was try to imitate Snow."

Rei blushed and turned away, stroking her hair.

"So, Hiiro, demons attacked her, and you happened to be around, so you shielded her, huh? It's so obvious that it's boring. It's more interesting to watch Rei, who has finally stopped trying to hide her brother complex."

"I—I do not have a brother complex! Hiiro's the one who has a sister complex!!!" Rei argued, blushing a bright red, as Tsukiori laughed.

I was cornered in the blink of an eye, and as tears welled in my eyes, I sought help from Hizumi.

"Hizumi—"

"That's right. I was attacked, and he helped me. That's all. Nothing happened between us."

I looked up and stared at the sky with vacant eyes.

I was finished.

Surrounded by three girls in their swimsuits, I was dumbfounded when they went for the kill.

"Okay, then, Hiiro, take her to the infirmary…then you're going to the pool with us."

I mumbled a curse and covered my face with a hand and my cast.

*

I heard cheers.

Milky-white skin splashed about in the water, high-pitched voices echoed through the air, and girls frolicked about.

Cold splashes of water flew from the pool that was crowded with students. They pushed each other around merrily, and their soft bodies pressed against each other.

Someone's shoulder touched mine now and then, making me more conscious of their presence when I had only considered them a friend or acquaintance before.

"Oh, s-sorry…"

"N-not at all… I'm sorry…*I* bumped into you…"

Oh, Yuri God, so this is where the glorious Garden of Eden existed.

Catching a glimpse of this wonderful sight of heaven, I am eternally grateful for having been your devout follower.

If I'm not in the center of this melting pot of yuri beauties, that is!!!

Skin, skin, and more skin!

Under the faint light in the center of the pool filled with skin, I stood frozen in place as the only foreign object in this lovely scene.

The luxury cruise ship carrying the students of Houjou Magic Academy passed through the dimension gate and entered the Otherworld.

The Otherworld—called *Star Mine*.

It was a marine cave about four hundred miles wide, submerged in an otherworldly sea called the Lanova Sea.

The sunlight shining into the cave from its entrance and its pits had turned the seawater inside aqua blue.

The crystals growing on the walls of the cave were called *star crystals*, glowing in seven colors. Fragments of the star crystals, which were periodically shattered by corrosion, reacted to the magic in the air and scattered it about in a luminous glow.

It was a cave closed off by the night.

The sky was full of stars, which illuminated the water's surface, creating a romantic setting.

The stars lit up the ship's pool, making it a wild night pool native to the wilderness, where rich daughters who said they loved nature crowded together, not wanting to miss out on the pool with its 360-degree panoramic quartz view.

Suddenly, there was a big wave of girls. Unable to withstand the raging wave of girls, girls, and girls, I was struck by an elbow, hit by a knee, slammed into the water, and swept away.

I don't know who brought it aboard, but a huge speaker—the kind you see at nightclub events—blared love songs that might induce diabetes. A narration rang out that the world had entered an era of big matchmaking parties, and the atmosphere was such that it looked like we were starting the self-introduction phase.

The ship's staff walked around handing out tropical juices while I was trapped in the softness of female bodies.

"There are so many people here. Too many, and I can't move," said Tsukiori, clad in a white bikini with a sheer pareu around her waist and standing pressed snugly against my chest.

With her bangs plastered to her cheeks, she put her ear to my chest without my permission.

"I thought something was noisy. It's your heartbeat, Hiiro. Man, you're healthy."

"Brother dear, stop moving like that. You must stand firmly on your feet so the stormy waves of society won't sweep away your sister," Rei complained, wearing a black bikini and her arm still wrapped around my left arm.

"I can't move a single step… I don't understand why everyone loves playing in pools so much."

Oh dang. The pool was way too packed. If this kept up, the Sanjo family monsters were going to show up.

Lapis had been quiet for a while. Her face was down as she plastered herself against my back.

She was probably doing her best to stand steady whenever someone pushed her, but her feet seemed to be slipping on the pool floor.

The frills at the chest on her swimsuit were hitting my back. Every time they did, she whispered an apology, sounding embarrassed.

With dead eyes, I looked up at the sky.

They say, "The more you look back, the more precious memories become…" But all I get is seawater in my eyes and nose. Where do I have to look to feel those precious memories? Tsukiori was supposed to be at the center of this while I stood guard at the side of the pool.

I savored the softness of the three girls as a tear escaped from the corner of my eye.

Help… If this kept up, the boy in me would start getting ideas.

A float flowed in front of me as I sought salvation, crying like I was at a graduation ceremony.

"Oh my! This place is full of the scent of commoners!"

Here she was: Ophelia, the rich daughter, wearing expensive sunglasses and sipping tropical juice. She put her full weight on a floating ring and gracefully came my way.

"Sakura Tsukiori, your cronies, and the servant! What a tight and amusing pack you are! What are you doing in a place like this?"

"Ophelia. Take me with you!"

I reached out desperately from the center of the whirlpool of female bodies.

"Take me on your boat! Please! I'm begging you!!! I have to get ahead! I can't stay here and say, 'It's the end of the story!' Please!" I screamed through my tears.

"Let me join you! Please!"

I threw a second blow at the rich girl, who was completely unresponsive.

"Ophelia—"

"No."

Hee-hee…! I was really no match for her.

Ignoring me as I rubbed the skin under my nose and nodded, Ophelia used the tip of her straw and pointed at Tsukiori.

"Sakura Tsukiori! So we meet again! Indulging in a swimsuit game with that good-for-nothing male? That goes to show your upbringing. This is like poison to my eyes, running after someone who has committed a foolish act, wondering what kind of parents brought up an idiot like them! But I suppose a commoner like you can only get the attention of a lowly male!"

Ophelia did a desperate flutter kick and turned around and around, trying to meet Tsukiori's eyes. She was gasping as she waved her straw.

"B-but…(*pant, pant*)…wh-when you're at my level? You…(*pant, pant*)…receive mountains…(*pant, pant*)…of offers of marriage…(*pant, pant*)…from beautiful women—"

"Hey, Hiiro? What's the deal with your pecs? It looks like you train too hard. Can you move those muscles?"

"G-grrr! Listen to me when I talk to you!"

Ophelia actually said, *Grrr*!

Gasping for air, she kept turning around and shouted, "I challenge you to a duel!"

A total stranger turned around and said, "Huh? Who, me?"

Another girl I didn't know also turned around. "Is she talking to me? A duel? What's this about?"

With just that one sentence, Ophelia was under siege. Scurrying around, she moaned, "Ugh… Sakura Tsukiori…!"

I swallowed and clenched my sweaty and slippery hands.

W-was it going to start right here…?

"I—I won't forget this!"

"Whoooooooooooooooaaa! 'I won't forget this'? All right!"

Shaking her hands and feet around in circles and flutter-kicking as if her life depended on it, Ophelia, bright red in the face, sashayed away.

I could resonate with her professionalism as a spoiled rich girl. She touched my heart.

A professional foil was something else. She was stable. A wonderful gem. She declared defeat and took off running, even

though the protagonist wasn't even responding to her. That was something that I could never do…or rather that no one could do. It was something…that only Ophelia could manage.

Not that this was the time to talk passionately about Ophelia.

It was about time I did something about this situation. I had to come up with an excuse—anything—like I wanted to go and check on Hizumi, an aunt of mine was playing a game, or I had a stomachache that was the worst I could have in fifty years—and get out of here.

"R-Rei?"

The Sanjo daughter, who was holding onto my arm and curiously attempting to poke my pecs, reacted to the sound of my voice. She quickly let go of me and looked up.

"I—"

"The answer is no."

What was she, a volleyball player doing a quick attack…?

"I'm going with you if you want to go and see Hizumi. As your sister, I'm concerned about your injuries, and I can't let you wander around alone."

Was this a counter trap…?

I gently undid the arm lock she had on me and started walking toward the poolside.

"Okay, people, keep up your partying! With great ambition in my heart, I, Hiiro Sanjo, will now go and visit Hizumi! Yeah! Keep on rockin', everyone!"

Spinning an imaginary towel above my head, I moved the three girls away from me and started to move. I walked a bit, still feeling soft all over, and when I stopped, the threesome was back, pasted against my body.

"Wh-why are you following me…?"

"Because you're moving, Hiiro."

"Ditto."

"Precisely, brother dear."

Then what do they want me to do?! Die?!

I calmly considered a way to get out of this situation.

Settle down, Hiiro Sanjo. Compose yourself. You're a smart guy. Be cool, cooler, coolest, and think. It's tough to bluff my way out of this when I'm dealing with Tsukiori and the others. Be logical and push hard with a good argument.

"This pool is mighty crowded, and we'll never get out of it if the four of us stick together. I don't mind you guys following me, but why don't we step out of the pool one at a time?"

"Well, yeah, you've got a point there. It *is* packed."

The three girls looked at each other and nodded in agreement—and I grinned.

Hee-hee, you idiots…!!! I have Masamune Kuki stashed by the pool. I'll trigger the *enhanced projection* as soon as I crawl out of the water and take off! You three can stick together in this hell of a female pool forever!

"Okay, then let's split up—"

"Hiiro Sanjo!"

I heard the sound of footsteps. It was the God of Death. Clad in a skirtini, Hizumi waved to me as she stepped into the pool.

"You said you were going to the pool, so I figured you'd be here __"

"No, Hizumi! Don't come in here!!!"

My face turned purple as I screamed, with veins appearing on my forehead.

"Hizumi, noooooooooooooooooooooo! Don't come in here!!!!!!"

"Huh? Why not?"

Contrary to my advice, Hizumi waded into the pool—and a few dozen seconds later, I was sandwiched between four beautiful girls on all sides.

"H-hey, why is it so crowded in here…? Hey, Hiiro Sanjo! Move over a bit! Y-your body's touching mine!"

"……"

The absurdity of it all.

Hizumi and I were shoulder to shoulder, and we looked at each other in a state fit for a secret discussion.

"Well anyway, Hiiro Sanjo, there's something I want to tell you."

"Don't 'well anyway' me… Don't wrap yourself around me. Get away from me… Oh, for goodness' sake… Why did you have to come in here…? Did you come to kill me? You're a heck of a hitman… Utterly amazing…"

"What are you mumbling about? We're in the middle of a crowd where we can be anonymous, and we don't have much time, so I'm going to talk. Okay?"

"Whatever."

Hizumi splashed her way over, her hair flowing over my shoulders.

Putting her hand on my shoulder, she whispered in my ear.

"…Seriously?"

I opened my eyes wide in surprise.

✳

Something was happening.

Seeing myself in a mirror wearing a tuxedo, I sighed.

The information that Hizumi gave me was shocking, and it was going to affect our future actions.

A demonic cult was going to attack us tonight.

Tonight. That was the problem.

In the original story, their attack was scheduled to take place on the third day of the camp. It wasn't supposed to happen until the next day.

The script was changing.

Was that good or bad?

I couldn't tell at this point, but I guessed that something had caused the game to deviate from the original and changed the flow of events. What was different from the original story was that I had taken on Hiiro's role, which had to be the factor behind this change.

I was going to protect my yuri…those girls.

I had braced myself long ago, especially now that I might be the cause.

An attack by a demonic cult.

If we were going with the original story, then I wouldn't need to intervene.

Tsukiori alone was enough, and I could watch her heroic actions and cheer, "Go, yuri, go!" from the sidelines But that was only if the demons were attacking as scheduled.

As long as they were branded, clan members were bound by a rule that they couldn't say or do anything that would disadvantage their boss, Alsuhariya.

Although Hizumi concealed the identification with a skin sheet, she was firmly branded.

So there were two possibilities.

One, she was lying, or two, something so major would happen tonight that Alsuhariya didn't see her telling me about it to be a disadvantage.

Hizumi had been attacked by demons, perhaps to silence her. That fact alone made it almost certain that a high-ranking magic handler was involved.

As long as *the involvement of a high-ranking magic handler* was the only deviation from the original story, I was confident that I could deal with it.

But if something happened that exceeded my expectations, then…

After mulling it over, I looked up and stared into the mirror.

When I laughed, the blond trash (Hiiro from the original story) also laughed. Seeing that, I couldn't help sighing.

Why did I have to become a character that everyone hated the most in the ESCO world, who flirted around with the heroines? I've been following yuri girls forever, but it was no wonder I'd never get where I wanted to be if I ended up taking the wrong road.

"Hey, jerk," I said, laughing at the blond nitwit in the mirror, "this is the moment of truth. Stock up on what little resolve you can

muster. I shouldn't have to ask permission from a piece of trash like you, but…you know what's going to happen when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, don't you?"

I flashed a wry smile at the bum, who didn't offer a single reply.

"I'll protect everything you tried to destroy."

I removed my cast, placed it on my desk, made sure my right arm was fully mobile, picked up Masamune Kuki, and stepped out of the room.

"That's probably why…I came here after all."

As the door closed slowly, I raised my middle finger at the mirror, standing in the darkness.

"Yuri girls are the best."

One of us was in the darkness, and the other headed into the light.

Leaving Hiiro trapped in the darkness, I began walking toward the shining light.

✳

This was the main event taking place on the second day of our camp.

A dance was being held in the ballroom on the Amethyst Deck on the lower level.

A staircase spiraled through the hall, party dresses in a thousand shades of purple and crimson bloomed, and the most glorious furnishings radiated a dazzling brilliance. The glittering chandeliers emitted a radiant glow, casting the seven colors of majestic beauty across the marble floor, creating a spectacle of splendor.

The ballroom was so spacious that it was hard to believe it was inside the ship. Still, it couldn't accommodate everyone from Class A to E. For that reason, the party was divided into five half-hour parts, for a total party time of two and a half hours.

Rather than a yuri game, the dance was more like a romantic simulation game…with a legend.

People who danced together would become romantically involved.

It was like an old saying that a couple created after a girl confessed her love for the other under a sacred tree would be happy forever.

At this dance, where students whispered about such legends, Sakura Tsukiori had to make a choice.

She had to decide who to dance with.

Because the likability of a heroine who danced during this event would skyrocket like the first star in the sky that pierced the heavens, she had to be careful when she made her choice.

There were no dorm heads around.

It was often the case that despite having feelings for a particular student, a girl might enjoy dancing with some heroine who happened to be nearby, and the few hours (or even dozens of hours) of lead-up time she'd spent thinking of the girl she was interested in would go to waste.

If that special someone wasn't here in the banquet hall, the girl needed to force herself to *go back to her room and go to bed* or *participate in a half-hour segment that no one was taking part in*.

Of course, I would never participate in an exciting event like that.

To me, my only option was to *go back to my room and go to bed*. An exotic pollutant that harmed the yuri environment would never have a choice.

So I wanted to go back to my cabin, but you could see, by glancing at me looking dashing in my tux, that I was here in case demons attacked.

Naturally, I didn't intend to dance to the jazz, Latin, social, pop, or belly dance music they played. I was going to behave, enjoy the standing buffet, and keep watch while I picked at the caprese salad.

In preparation for battle, I'd hidden Masamune Kuki in the banquet hall.

Before tucking it away, I had activated a *distortion field* and made myself invisible in the corner of the hall.

Hee-hee, this was a perfect cover. It was the ultimate way for a yuri observer to be… You could call it my *Yuri Observation Log*. I was now mighty and invincible.

Grinning, I looked around the venue and smacked my lips.

Tsukiori, Lapis, Rei, Hizumi, Ophelia… I could hardly wait to see who danced with whom and bloomed as yuri girls…!

I was watching them, full of anticipation, when I noticed a commotion at the back of the banquet hall.

The rich daughters who had been engrossed in small talk made way for whoever it was, their attention focused solely on a single point.

A pale-blue dress.

The gentle tone reminded me of a calm sea. The shades hanging from the ceiling were filled with lights from the chandeliers, accentuating the footsteps and ripples made by the blue dress worn by the person who was the only individual illuminated, like a golden tree.

The profile of the beauty gradually appeared on the floor as she took one slow step, then another, totally fearless.

Lapis Clouet la Lumet was the focus of all eyes, drawing the magic powers of those present as she proceeded along the center of the hall. Her long, honey-colored hair was gathered in a ponytail, and a golden light fell upon her as the blue and gold colors cut through the silence she had created among the others.

Overwhelmed by her beauty, the crowd forgot to breathe.

The elf princess absorbed the light particles that fell from the lights, and as she overwhelmed every onlooker from every angle around her, you could even say she was an art masterpiece named Lapis.

She folded her long-gloved hands in front of her, lowered her eyes, and came to a halt after instantly calming the audience.

As if she was waiting for someone.

The orchestra standing by in the hall began playing a tune that seeped into the night. The music seemed to bring the rich girls, who

had been stunned by Lapis's appearance, back to their senses, and they took each other's hands and started dancing.

Lapis looked up and let her gaze wander.

She had to be looking for Tsukiori.

The elf princess appeared to have stepped off her shore and into another realm. She stood out at this mundane gathering, with no one present to take her hand and beg for a dance.

Who but Sakura Tsukiori could do that?

But the clock continued to tick, and a minute, then ten minutes passed, yet not only Tsukiori but even Rei hadn't shown up at the hall.

A sense of frustration was etched on Lapis's beautiful profile. Several times, she clenched her hands and looked around.

But I couldn't give her a helping hand.

This dance event was one of the important milestones that Tsukiori had to get through. It would determine the future direction of their lives, and Tsukiori herself had to choose who she danced with.

"The princess of Alfheim must be feeling miserable."

I heard people giggling and saw two girls in front of me looking at Lapis with cruel smiles on their faces.

"So it's true that the princess of the Land of the Elves doesn't have friends."

"Well, she's an elf after all, not human. And she's royalty and so over-the-top dressed up. I don't imagine anyone would want to dance with someone like that."

With a mean smile on their faces, they gradually started talking louder.

Had Lapis heard them? She grabbed the hem of her blue dress so tightly that her knuckles turned white as I watched from the corner.

She had talked about school starting soon and this camp being held.

She'd really been looking forward to this dance.

She'd mentioned something about buying a dress in advance.

She'd gone out of her way to drag me around as she looked for a dress to wear to this event.

"Oh, the poor thing. To think she made such a grand entrance."

"Geez, it's a waste of that dress."

She wanted to make friends at this camp and dance with them tonight, so she left her bodyguards behind and worked up the courage to come here alone.

"I think she's going to cry."

"Ha-ha, look. Her eyes are welling up."

Lapis was now clutching the hem of her precious dress more firmly, and tears were pooling in her beautiful eyes.

The moment I saw her like that—my body was already moving.

I walked straight ahead and plunged into the two girls.

"Hey."

They turned around, saw me, and shied back.

"Will you get out of my way?"

"H-huh? Wh-who do you think you are, talking to us like that—?"

"This is a place for young ladies to socialize. It isn't a place for those who don't understand social etiquette. Go home to your parents and, for starters, have them teach you basic manners."

With my hands in my pockets, I continued to intimidate them, and they looked at each other, uttered profanities, and took off.

Despite attracting attention, I headed toward Lapis, naturally avoiding the people who were blocking my way.

She looked surprised when I reached her, kneeled reverently, and asked her if she'd dance with me.

"Will you dance with me?"

I looked up at her and grinned.

"That dress looks great on you."

She smiled as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"What took you…? Dummy…"

Lapis and I stepped onto the dance floor, hand in hand.

A male and a female.

She was a princess, and I was a frivolous-looking blond guy.

The talking in the hall faded away, and the orchestra's music dominated the place. We stepped in time to the glowing lights of the chandeliers that danced above us.

Brightly and colorfully, we breathed as one.

Lapis looked at me dreamily.

There was no way that I could return her gaze, and instead, I focused on her shoulder area.

"Hiiro, you're a lousy dancer."

"Huh? Well, of course. I'm a baby dancer, only dancing for zero years, zero months, and zero days. There's no way I can dance when I'm still an infant waddling."

"Then you can practice now. I'll do you a favor and teach you."

"It's very kind of you to offer to teach me, Princess."

And we danced.

Time flew by, and before I knew it, the song was over, and Lapis was staring into my eyes.

I turned away from her heated gaze, let go of her, and said in a loud voice, "Hey, I can't believe it!!! Princess Lapis actually danced with me, a mere guy! How gracious can she get, huh?! What's that?! She'll dance with anyone now?! You're kidding!!! First come, first served?!"

The hall buzzed. The rich girls sounded excited as they whispered to each other.

"P-Princess Lapis really danced with a male!!! Maybe she'll even dance with me!!!"

"Sh-she's sure to dance with me if she's willing to dance with a male!"

I made a show of asking for another dance.

"I'm going to ask her for another dance if no one else is—oomph!!!"

I was knocked out of the way by the young ladies who came charging toward Lapis.

She was surrounded in no time.

"I'd love to dance with you! Please! I've always been a fan of yours!"

"Hey, don't butt in! The princess is dancing with me!!!"

"P-Princess, if I may humbly ask you for your number?! L-let's go out together sometime!!!"





"Huh…? Oh…um…"

Suddenly very popular, Lapis stared at me through a gap in the crowd around her.

I smiled.

"Go for it."

"Oh… H-Hiiro…!"

I left with a grin on my face, very satisfied with the results.

Just as I'd planned, there was now a huge increase in the number of girls who wanted Lapis. The possibilities were endless, and in a worst-case scenario, I didn't have to be hell-bent on matching her up with Tsukiori. Yuri girls had to have their freedom. Good luck, Lapis. Good luck finding your fated mate among them.

I waved without turning around and walked briskly away.

A male who gets in the way of yuri girls has to make a cool exit.

As I set out to return to my corner in the hall, someone suddenly blocked my path.

"Hi, handsome."

"Tsukiori… Now you show up…?! What kind of grand entrance was that…?!"

Clad in an evening dress, Tsukiori smiled at me as I glared at her.

"Come on, go back. You're holding up the line."

"H-hey, don't push me. What are you talking about?"

"Sakura, please don't disrupt the queue. I'm the one who's dancing with my brother next, so please don't disturb our family reunion."

"Hold on a sec. A family reunion?! Hey, don't you guys understand how this legend is supposed to go?! Huh?! You can't just get up and dance with me on a whim! Dang! Tsukiori, use your magic and help me!!! Someone help me! I'm being forced to dance! Nooooo! I'm being forced to dance in front of all these people!"

My resistance was futile, and they dragged me into the dance area.

Tsukiori and Rei took turns dancing with me. To reset the legend that people who danced together at this event would become couples, I picked up a vase in the corner and started dancing with it.

"O-oh my god, Hiiro Sanjo is dancing with a vase…"

Hizumi appeared at the scene and stared at me in horror.

"You're dancing with a vase!"

"So what? Don't stop me. I'm serious about getting into a romantic relationship with this vase."

"I'm not interested in getting in the way of your complicated and bizarre love life. Now come with me."

Hizumi was in a bright-red dress and had animal fangs hanging from her neck. The tusks were wrapped in plant paper with red and black writing on it. I frowned as I looked at the necklace, which I couldn't say was in very good taste, and she pulled me by the hand.

"What's with that necklace?"

Hizumi stopped in her tracks, thumbed her fang necklace, and winked.

"It's a memento, a talisman, and my trump card."

"So it serves many purposes."

"It's a *coffin*."

Pretending to dance to the music, she pulled me into the dance area.

"It's a catalyst for the magic of the senses. I inherited it from my mentor and carry it with me at all times. It contains the magic powers of countless magic handlers. When I thrust the tip, engraved with the words 'Protection of Day and Night' into the heart of an opponent, the magic power stored in it is released at once, and it explodes."

A *coffin*, huh? That was a mighty rare magic item she had. Because it's tough to fulfill the requirement of stabbing your opponent in the heart, its success rate was only about one percent in the original game.

The *coffin* could also be used in a particular way…but the disadvantages are too great, and here again, the success rate is

about one percent. Since you need to take a gamble, so it's seen as more of a romantic ornament.

"Hmmm. What if you fall and accidentally stab yourself with that?"

"Hee-hee!" Hizumi chuckled loudly. "No problem. It's engraved with *hero* regalia, and the moment you initiate its trigger by stabbing someone in the heart, it measures the similarities with the *hero* defined by the person focusing their magic power on it. The closer you get to your hero, the magic power there becomes your ally, and the further you get, the more it becomes an enemy. The name of the ancestor who initially put her magic power into this *coffin* is Braun Les Bracketlight."

She laughed happily.

"She was a rare hero. She would never harm you if you were a good person."

"So what you're saying is that it's okay if you accidentally stab yourself."

"It's not okay. You'd have a hole in your heart, and you'd die like anyone else would. The hole would be temporarily closed while you're connected to the *coffin* since a tremendous amount of magic power covers your body inside and out, but you're finished once you use up all the stored power."

"That's scary… It's the end of the line if you're careless and slip…"

"You just have to watch your step on a daily basis and stick it in the bad guy's chest."

Hizumi led the way for us to dance in a corner of the hall.

"So here's the thing."

She frowned.

"Do you have a penchant for belittling a person's good intentions? I even gave you the time of the attack, so you should act accordingly."

"I am. This is my response."

"Dancing with a vase…?"

Hizumi frowned at the guy who almost stepped on her foot.

“You are an amazingly poor dancer. No wonder you dance with a vase instead of a girl.”

“You humans should learn from the vases that don’t take wild steps any way they please. They’re the best. They don’t even need to put their feet on the floor.”

Hizumi and I did slow turns on the floor as we whispered to each other.

“You’re a good dancer. I thought you were sick until recently.”

“Ever since I was a princess in a tower for the sick, I dreamed about dancing like this,” she said with a smile. “I’d love to dance like this in the future with the girl that I love… Though, unfortunately, I’m stuck dancing with a rotten guy for now.”

“Well, excuse me, my fair lady. It’s an honor to dance with two princesses in a row.”

We looked at each other as we measured the distance between us.

“Aren’t you going to run?”

“No.”

“You people-pleasing fool.”

“Thanks.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

I raised my arm high, and Hizumi twirled in response. She turned beautifully and stepped left and right as she moved closer to me.

“Don’t you think…you might die?”

“I’m much more afraid to think that yuri girls might die.”

“I can’t understand you.”

“You don’t have to understand me. You’re fine as you are. Live your life the way you want. Better yet, fall in love. Find a cute girl and send me a picture of the two of you on your first date. Marry her.”

Hesitantly, Hizumi let go of my hand.

“I’ll be your enemy once the attack starts.”

“Yeah?”

“You underestimate me. For your information, I’m seriously going to take you down. I’ve paid you back for saving my life once by giving you details about the attack. It’s your fault for not running. I decided once that I’d be on Alsuhariya’s side, and if you’re going against us, then as a member of the demonic religion, I’m going to eliminate you.”

“Then I’ll do everything in my power to save you.”

Smiling thinly, I looked into Hizumi’s eyes. “Because you’re destined to die happily in the sun, holding hands with your girl. Don’t defy fate. You should become a yuri girl. Together, we can witness the yuri world.”

“Sorry, but my fate already ended once.”

With a chuckle, Hizumi held out a hand.

“If we meet again, I’ll dance with you so you don’t have to dance with a vase again. Though we’re still enemies.”

“Don’t worry about it. Look, you’re targeted, so stop hanging around like some kid and perfect the ultimate self-defense maneuver near the girl you love.”

“Don’t mind me. I have a trusted fellow cult member I can rely on, so I’ll have her protect me.”

“Can you send me a selfie of the two of you later?”

I shook hands with Hizumi, then she turned around and disappeared from the dance area.

After seeing her off, I exhaled and looked around. My blood ran cold when I finally realized who was missing.

“Tsu-Tsu-Tsu-Tsu—!”

“Yeah? Are you talking about Ophelia? Isn’t she here?”

Tsukiori was enjoying the buffet with Lapis and Rei. Playing with the roast beef on her plate, she turned her attention to me as I failed to make out the words.

“Tsu-Tsu-Tsu-Tsu-Tsu-Tsu—!”

“No, I haven’t seen her.”

“Tsu-Tsu-Tsu-Tsu—?! Tsu-Tsu-Tsu-Tsu—!”

“Okay. Leave Lapis and Rei to me, and you go on.”

“What the heck, Sakura? Do you have a deciphering machine built into your brain or something?! It isn’t fair for you guys to be able to communicate between just the two of you!!! Rei, don’t you agree?!”

“Settle down, Lapis. There’s no such thing as a sister who doesn’t understand her brother’s words. I got as far as doing a frequency analysis.”

“I was just guessing from the look on his face.”

I panicked and ran, pulling out Masamune Kuki, which I’d hidden behind the curtain on stage. I initiated its enhanced projection and dashed out of the banquet hall.

I ran around the ship, single-mindedly searching for Ophelia.

Why didn’t my Ophelia Watch System get activated?! It was supposed to be a passive skill that any ESCO fan had!!!

I was tearing through the ship—when I suddenly ran into *A* and almost collided with her when she ducked.

“Good evening, Mr. Sanjo. We have a lovely round moon out tonight.”

“U-um! I don’t care if the moon is shaped like someone’s bottom, and you’re trying to sexually harass me!”

“I never said a word about someone’s bottom.”

“A-a girl! Have you seen this girl?! She’s like a human being attached to blond rolls in her hair that go down her shoulders!!! Have you seen her crying somewhere?! She’s a darned foil who can start crying in seconds!!!”

“Are you talking about Miss Ophelia von Margeline?”

Th-this woman…! Was she trying to insult Ophelia…?

I pushed back my anger and waited for the smiling woman to answer.

“Yes, I saw her. She was enjoying the night breeze on the Tanzanite Deck. There’s a beautiful moon out tonight.”

“Thank you for the information! I’m on my way—”

She suddenly blocked the way and stopped me in my tracks.

“I’m sorry, there was one thing I wanted to ask you.”

“The shape of my bottom…?”

“No, sir.”

Her pitch-black eyes looked into my eyes.

“The other day, you seemed to have put six girls on a boat and prompted them to leave the ship… Why didn’t you go with them?”

So she’d seen me when I let those clan members escape after all.

There was no need to lie. It might complicate things later on.

I decided to go with the truth.

“It’s to save the yuri girls.”

“…Yuri girls.”

She put a finger to her chin and smiled.

“It’s the first time I’ve heard that term. I’d like to learn more about it if time permits—”

“How about I give you a beginner’s course for three hours a day, five times a week, for a year—?”

“No, thank you. Please be brief.”

I answered.

“I guess it’s love.”

“Love.”

“You might laugh at me for being so clichéd, but if I can’t lecture you for 365 days, I have no choice but to give you that one-word answer.”

She smiled at me and stepped aside reverently.

“I apologize for taking up your valuable time. Please go ahead.”

I was about to walk past her when—

—I heard her murmur something and turn around.

Still smiling, *A* stood there as if nothing had happened. Remembering what it was that I had to do, I quickly put strength into my legs.

“Okay, thanks for the information!”

“My pleasure.”

She gave me a deep bow, and I ran up to the Tanzanite Deck—and spotted Ophelia leaning against the bulwark, taking in the night breeze.

I figured she considered herself cool, showing off her delicate profile and letting out a heavy sigh.

"I'm so cool… Picture-perfect…"

Wow…! Her whole body was leaking what she was thinking!

Maybe she heard my footsteps. She jerked and turned around with a start.

"Y-you! The new enslaved person in town!!! H-how long have you been standing there, trying to get the scoop on me?!"

"Since you mumbled, 'A Margeline daughter not attending a dance…(*sigh*…) Perhaps it means an existence too noble is bound to be on its own…'"

"Y-you've been here that long?!"

"'That long'?!"

It was a wild guess, but I was right on target. I can get an A-plus on an Ophelia Proficiency Test.

Blushing in embarrassment, Ophelia pulled back her prized blond rolls.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee. It doesn't bother me that a rude, arrogant servant has seen me. I have a mind that is most fitting for a higher being."

"Pink."

"Shut up!!!"

I stood with my hands behind my back, bowing silently after she slapped me in the face.

"And? What does a mere servant want with me?"

"I thought it was a good opportunity for us to chat."

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! Do you realize your station in life? I am Ophelia von Margeline! I don't have a tongue for speaking with a common male!"

"Oh, no? Are you saying the daughter of House Margeline won't reward a poor commoner after he rescued her when she flopped to the ground in a grand style? I wonder if that wouldn't put a blemish on the career of the great Ophelia von Margeline?"

“Ngh…! Y-yes, perhaps. It’s the spirit of risking it for the biscuit! Hmph!!! Just a little, though!”

What a pushover. She had to be a treasure of humanity.

Exhilarated, I put a little distance between Ophelia, who was blatantly disgusted, and myself and leaned against the bulwark.

“That necklace is a magic device, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s correct. It’s a Margeline family heirloom.”

Inlaid with azure gems, the necklace twinkled against the light of the moon and the stars. The light contained in the gems illuminated her smile in the evening darkness.

“Just as every great individual was once a child, I, Ophelia von Margeline, had a childhood. This is a wonderful treasure that my best friend gave me then when I was barely old enough to understand what was what.”

“Huh…?! That best friend… Was it a girl…?”

“Of course she was! She had short hair, but naturally, she was a girl.”

I couldn’t stop shaking.

I covered my mouth with my hands to prevent my voice from leaking out.

What the heck…? That magic device necklace she wore, called *Ophelia of Indulgence*, was nothing but a piece of junk. A lovely story about it being a gift from a best friend shouldn’t have existed. If it had, I would never, ever call it *a piece of junk*.

Stunned to realize there was potential for more possibilities, I felt the spinal cord in my brain go numb.

W-wait a sec… even in *The Ophelia Route*, Ophelia would never get romantically involved with Tsukiori. I thought that was just to make things convenient for the developers, but what if Ophelia was in love with that best friend? Oh my god… Everything would then make sense… My tolerance for yuri loveliness was going to explode!

“Ngh…! Ngh…! Ngh…!!!”

The corners of my mouth curved upward.

N-no… Don’t laugh yet… Hold back… B-but…I’m dying to ask her if she loves that girl… B-but no, don’t! N-not in a place like this! I can’t die in a place like this!!!

I can’t die—

“A-are you in love…with that girl…?” (I’ve died. I’m dead) Ophelia blushed and turned away from me.

“I—I don’t remember… I-it was a long time ago…”

Yeaaaaaaaaaah!!!

“Y-you are, aren’t you? D-don’t be shy! You love her, right? Huh? Well? Tell me!”

“I don’t know! I—I no longer even remember what she looks like!”

Lethal.

I stretched my arms out to the heavens to celebrate this world, collapsed to my shaking knees, and then looked up at Ophelia.

“Wh-what color hair did she have?”

“Wh-what has gotten into you? You’re suddenly so vibrant… B-blond hair! She was a beautiful blonde!”

“A-and what kind of relationship did the two of you have?”

“M-my father said…she was my fiancée…a-an aristocrat…and we would eventually marry each other…”

Huh??? What the heck??? Was she putting me on??? I would do everything to give them a boost!!!

“She was very kind. She was like a princess in a picture book. She looked unusually fantastic in short pants, and she always played with me when I was a loner.”

Ophelia gazed lovingly at her beautiful necklace.

“I’m told that I will be able to see her in a little while so we can start considering our engagement. She may not even remember me, but…I’m hoping she’ll recall those days when she sees me wearing this necklace.”

Ophelia closed her eyes and hugged her one-of-a-kind necklace to her chest.

"So I have always been wearing this necklace…waiting for that day to come…so she'll be able to find me right away, no matter how much time has gone by since we last met, and so she'll remember the lovely times we shared. I will continue to be the fair Margeline maiden who is right for her… Huh?!"

Ophelia saw me crying and gasped.

Sobbing and choking, I desperately struggled to tell her my thoughts.

"Hey!" I screamed, wailing. "I'll protect you! I'll protect you and that necklace! I'll guard you until the day you see the girl again! So don't worry! I'll protect you, that necklace, and your beautiful love with my life!"

Ophelia watched me as I continued to cry, and a gentle smile appeared on her face.

"This necklace is a treasure that I value more than my life. Of course I don't feel bad when you say you'll protect it. You've got potential for a male. Hee-hee-hee-hee!!! I suppose this means my spectacularly ladylike ways have even attracted a lowly being like you!!!"

"Precisely! Thank you! I will seriously do my best! Please use me as your shield!"

"Hee-hee-hee-hee!! Good, good, very good, I say!"

I knew it! Ophelia was the best!!!

I was moved to tears by the intense encounter with her yuri ship —when I heard a high-pitched scream and the sounds of battle approaching, sensed rage and confusion, and smelled a mixture of blood and iron.

So it's begun.

My moonlit blade was automatically unsheathed below my hand.

"Ophelia, get behind me—"

"That scream. It's a sign of great evil!!! Let's go, servant! It's time to show the courage and grace of the Margelines! I'm coming to your aid before it's too late!" she called out.

Ophelia turned around before I had time to stop her, and she took off, running into the ship's interior. I chased after her in a hurry — "Drop your weapon."

A cult member had captured Ophelia and was holding a blade against her neck.

"E-eeep… H-help me…!"

This was unreal… She was captured only seconds after diving inside to save the day…! I—I wasn't sure I was a match for the opponent… O-Ophelia…just how far are you going to go…??

"I'll only warn you twice, and this is the second and last warning. Drop your weapon."

"H-help… I don't want to die…!"

"Okay, okay, I'm dropping my weapon. Don't point a knife at the girl who's crying with a runny nose. Geez."

I tossed Masamune Kuki, hooked my finger on the trigger—the enhanced projection—and jumped the cult member, who froze in shock.

I ran and threw my console with an underhand move.

"Ngh?!"

It hit the cult member's wrist and made her lose her hold of her blade.

Bending backward to dodge the console that came flying at her, the cult member let go of Ophelia and backed away.

I caught Ophelia, then rotated and released the knife in my sock. The defensive move the cult member took wasn't fast enough, and I delivered a kick between her arms and whacked her in the gut.

"Ngh!!!"

As stomach acid leaked from the corner of her mouth, I smashed my heel against her head as she crouched in pain and caught Masamune Kuki.

An attack from behind came simultaneously.

"Hey, hey, are you working as a group…? Dear guests, do you have permission to come aboard?"

Having heard the commotion, more clan members showed up.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven… I quickly grasped their numbers, holding Ophelia, who had almost fainted.

"Y-you bastard…!!!"

No matter how much strength they put into their arms, it's useless if they don't use their feet and legs.

Blades clashed.

The clan members desperately tried to beat me to the ground, turning bright red as they put force into their strikes.

Now what should I do?

The cult member group consisted of girls around the same age armed with mass-produced double-bladed claymores. They must have already pulled the triggers on their physical enhancement since it didn't look like they were having problems with the weight of the devices.

The first one that fell at my feet was unconscious. The second one that attacked me from behind wasn't much better, either.

Based on what I knew of the original game, the clan members involved in this attack event were supposed to be the Black Cats, the lowest class among my enemies. I didn't expect them to defeat me, but it wasn't a good idea to take on this number carrying the always defeated and never victorious Ophelia.

We were now in the center of a trendy café.

As we stared at each other, the chairs and tables between us, gauging each other's strength, I thought this might be a bit of a hassle. Maybe I should make a run for it.

"Ngh."

I suddenly relaxed and dodged my opponents' claymores.

"Huh…?! H-hey… Hey…!!!"

Leaving the swords that dropped forward as they were, I pushed one of my enemies on the back with my foot as she lost her balance.

After making sure she'd fallen, I respectfully picked up Ophelia in my arms.

"Excuse me, I'm going to borrow your legs."

"Eeep!!!"

Holding the precious rich daughter in my arms—and running a magic line along her legs—I bounced off the floor and took off running.

"H-he's getting away! Go after him!"

The clan members went into a frenzy and chased after us.

"We're going to slide, slide, slide! And jump, jump!"

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

The view we saw became a bunch of horizontal lines as we flew at lightning speed, and the floor material scattered with a flourish after we stomped all over it. I slid and leaped over tables, dodging shots from behind, and eventually, the pool-slash-hot-tub came into view.

"Ophelia. Are you amphibious?!"

"Huh?! What in the world do you mean—? (*Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle, gurgle, gurgle!*)"

Without waiting for a reply, I jumped into the pool-slash-hot-tub.

A tremendous amount of bubbles filled my vision, and the warm and pleasant water enveloped my body.

I held Ophelia's head down and dragged her underwater, then waited for a few dozen seconds, staring at the water's surface above as I waited for the right time, and— "(*Gasp*!!!)"

I pulled my head out of the water.

I guess our pursuers didn't expect us to jump into the water.

All signs of them had disappeared, and I heard footsteps coming from another direction and moving away.

"I was looking forward to my first time in the pool-slash-hot-tub… but why did it have to be like this…? Hey, Ophelia? Are you okay? It looks like we're in the clear now—"

Her arms were crossed in front of her chest as she floated to the surface, asleep with a peaceful look on her face.

"Sh-she's dead…"

Panicked, I pulled her up and pumped her chest with both hands. She spat a stream of water out of her mouth in a cartoonish style, and the almost-drowned body jumped up with a start.

“Y-you! Are you trying to kill me?! N-never in my life have I put my face in water for more than a second!!!”

“S-sorry… But I think even a kindergartner can hold their breath in water for about three seconds…”

“You should have told me we were hiding in the water if that’s what we were going to do—”

Suddenly, she blushed and covered her chest with her hands.

“What’s the matter? Did you suddenly get an urge to hug yourself?”

“N-nothing… Sh-shut up…!”

I saw her now-see-through shirt and understood. I took off my jacket and pulled it over her shoulders.

“Oh…!”

She looked up at me. Our eyes met, and she quickly turned the other way.

“H-hmph!!! I—I suppose you have a shred of decency, though, compared to that lady’s compassion, the difference is as vast as the difference between the Margelines and the rest of the population.”

“Well, thank you very much. I couldn’t be happier. Now let’s cut the chitchat and get moving. It’ll be a hassle if those girls come back, and I have to hide you somewhere since I have to watch over Tsukiori and the others.”

I started walking, and Ophelia took baby steps and followed me.

After suddenly taking an unexpected dive and dip in the pool, the prized vertical rolls in her hair were undone, and she looked different.

Her hair must have been long since she had enough of it to make those rolls.

The soaked blond hair stuck to her neck and shoulders and reached down to her waist. Pulling my jacket up in front of her chest, she walked slowly and looked like a different person.

“Wh-what is it…? Why are you suddenly staring at me like that…? Face front and walk… It’s rude…”

“Seeing you like that, I was just thinking you’re plain beautiful.”

“Huh?!”

Her face turned beet red, and she fluttered her arms, looking embarrassed.

“A c-compliment from a male isn’t going to make me happy! I-I’m the Guinness record holder for the number of times people have told me I’m beautiful. Even now, I’m sure that voices praising me are echoing somewhere in the world, and I’m getting five-star reviews! B-besides, I already have someone special—ngh!!!”

I covered Ophelia’s mouth and whispered, “Shhh.”

I pointed to the end of the bend with my index finger.

Three clan members stood around students they’d restrained with ropes. They were holding claymores and checking their surroundings.

“What is it?” she asked, peeking her head out and jumping out in front toward the bend.

“Don’t!” I grabbed her and dragged her back to where she’d been moments earlier.

“Hmm?”

One of the clan members turned this way.

I had Ophelia in a full nelson as she squirmed and struggled on top of me and finally let go after telling her to keep her voice down.

“You shouldn’t touch a lady’s body like that…”

“Excuse me, excuse me. But please do not jump out where they can see you. We’re on a stealth mission, you see.”

“I—I know that… I was just testing you…”

With her body halfway out into the open, Ophelia examined what was up ahead at the bend.

“……”

After squinting at the enemy, she returned to me with vigor.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee…! This is what the Margelines, elegant at all times, are made of… I did it. I saw the enemy without them noticing…!”

Perfect, Ophelia. The tears won’t stop falling down my cheeks for various reasons.

"So what are we going to do? As a respectable lady, I must save those girls."

"Please leave this to me, your faithful servant. You needn't exert yourself dealing with scum like them. Heh! I'll eventually turn them into the rust on my body as I start to be called the pocket knife of the Margelines."

"You have a point there… Since I was young, I've long been called *the star performer*, *a secret weapon*, *a trump card*, and *a pinch hitter who only goes up to bat when it's two out and the bases are loaded*. My mother strictly forbade me from standing out too much."

Mrs. Margeline, I'm sure you've been giving your daughter a wonderful education, but you really need to hire a babysitter.

"But I'll get rusty if I don't exercise my skills now and then. So in this case, the two of us can form a team and defeat them at once."

"S-seriously…? Ophelia, what kind of console do you have…?"

"I have many. Look at this. Isn't it pretty?"

Ophelia, that's a marble (*smirk*).

"Well, then I'll get in front if you'll kindly cover my back. And please, if I may ask you not to go too far forward—?"

Ophelia jumped out into the hallway.

"I am Ophelia von Margeline! Ta-daa! Bow down, you evil beings! (*Boom*!) Heaven and earth may forgive you, but I shall not!!! (*Boom*!!!)"

I—I couldn't get enough of her… This was so typically Ophelia; I was afraid I might cum…

Forgetting my presence as I stood there twitching and wavering, she breathed heavily, her hands on her hips like she owned the world.

The three clan members came charging at us, their claymores at the ready—and Ophelia confidently held up her necklace.

"Take this, you villains!"

Flash! Her necklace emitted a little light and was finished.

"Oh?"

"Oomph!!!"

I caught the three blades as our enemies tried to slash Ophelia while the little lady tilted her head in confusion.

"Come to think of it, I've had a bad morning today… I wonder if my batteries are dead…"

"Ngh…mmm…!!!"

I grabbed Ophelia in a back hug while catching the three blades, poured magic power into my arms at once, and pushed them away.

"Aaah!!!"

The three villains fell back. I grabbed Ophelia by the shoulders and spun her around behind me.

"……"

"What? Will you stop patting me on the head? Show some manners."

I took a swing with Masamune Kuki—*trigger*—then generated a light sword and held it in a low position.

"Okay, it's time for your punishment. Ready? Bad deeds will always be punished, and my little lady here says she will tolerate no evil. As guardian angel of yuri girls, I'm going to obey her orders."

"Freeze! Freeze if you want our hostages to live—"

Whoosh!

I exhaled, sank, peeled off the claymores from the girls' hands—and shot them at the ceiling.

"Huh…? Huh…?"

"Wh-what? Where's my claymore?"

"Th-that…was way too…fast…"

"Remember this," I said, pointing the tip of my sword at the clan members in front of me.

"There are people in this world who protect the precious, and they exist where yuri girls bloom. Behold the protector who condemns evil. The name is—"

"Ophelia von Margeline!"

I—I will never…ever…be able to beat this girl…

Despite having the highlight of my show ruined, I released the bound hostages and restrained the clan members in their place.

Ophelia flashed her necklace and declared victory while I urged the students to seek refuge outside the ship.

"This ship has lifeboats. They operate automatically, and the ship's staff should be directing an evacuation, so follow their instructions. Oh, and by the way, have any of you fallen in love among yourselves after sharing a life-threatening experience? I'll give you a prize later if you'll tell me your full name and which class you're in."

After scribbling their names on a notepad, I explained the safest route and sent them on their way.

"You should go with her," I said to Ophelia. "It's better to get off this ship now than to hide. Things could turn into hell after this."

"Oh? What about you?"

"Huh? Are you worried about me?"

Ophelia crossed her arms and turned the other way.

"Why would I care about a male? Don't get me wrong, okay? It's inconceivable for a member of the Margelines, a family that stands for bravery, to stop rescuing others and to run."

"Okay, okay. Listen, Ophelia, I'll be fine, so you go with these girls—"

Shiver!

A chill ran down my spine as I sensed a horrifying rush of magic, and I quickly looked up at the ceiling.

Hey… Something's here… What's with this huge volume of magic power…? It's nothing like those clan members… It's absurd…… I can't guess the extent of it… All I can say is that it's far beyond my powers…

"Wh-what is it?"

Ophelia trembled and grabbed the hem of my shirt.

"Ophelia, get off this ship right now. Right now. Got it?"

I broke out in a cold sweat and did some hard thinking.

Even Tsukiori couldn't…handle this… Was it a high-ranking witch or wizard…? No, it was greater than that… Can I…fight it…? No, never mind that. I have no choice… Tsukiori's in the midst of a battle with the bosses now… The only person who can fight this thing… That's me… I have to do it…

"Everyone, get off the boat now! You! Take her! And these clan members, too! Get away from this ship as quickly as you can! Okay?!"

"Huh?! Hey!!!"

I pushed Ophelia to one of the girls and ran up, heading for the upper deck.

Higher.

Higher and higher.

I reached the Tanzanite Deck on the top level—and felt a wind.

A cool breeze caressed my body, heated from running in a panic, and my sweaty limbs turned cold.

I saw four figures.

There was a swirling vortex of magical energy with a captivating woman at the center, illuminated by the moonlight and the starry sky.

"*A*."

Proving who she was with that one letter, *A* was surrounded by security staff as she held down her fluttering hair.

"The moon tonight has made the sky drunk," she whispered as she smiled.

The three security staff members held their sword-type magic devices at the ready and gradually inched toward me.

"…You."

One of the security guards whispered, "What?" as sweat dripped down her face.

"You're human," I responded, and the sharp tip of my blade pierced the darkness.

Naturally, *A* caught it with the palm of her hand. She examined her slashed hand, tilting her head, looking puzzled as if she were

looking at a frog that had been gutted.

"You won't be able to capture him. Go for the jugular!!!"

The women split up in three directions—*trigger*—and attacked *A*, flailing their thin water swords like whips.

The swords wrapped around her neck, and the threesome laughed, certain of their victory.

The moment the water devices were entwined around *A*'s neck, they pulled their triggers again, and the whip-like devices regained their form as sharp blades that were supposed to cut her head off.

That was what they were supposed to do.

"Huh?"

The three security staff members stood stunned, dumbfounded.

"Is something…happening…?"

The blades weren't moving.

There hadn't been time for *A* to pull her trigger and activate her magic.

Yet the thin swords, which were sharp and solid again, didn't cut her neck. Instead, they were only standing upright in the night.

A touched a finger to her neck and smiled, saying, "Thanks for the lovely necklace," and waved.

Then the threesome disappeared.

The gawking security staff disappeared, and *A* looked up at the moon as if nothing had happened.

I was speechless and stared at her.

Hey…this isn't funny… What did she do with them…? I don't understand the principles behind this… And when did she pull the trigger anyway…? I can't let someone like her go near Tsukiori, Rei, and Lapis…

Clang. Something clattered against Masamune Kuki's scabbard.

Bracing myself, I leaped forward—but was pulled into the darkness behind me with a hand covering my mouth.

"Ngh…! Ngh…!!!"

"Quiet… Don't move…!"

I bent backward to see who was behind me.

The girl who was holding me down…Luri Hizumi…breathed hard as she whispered into my ear.

"Why are you always in the middle of things, you permanently suicidal bastard…?!"

"Oh, Hizumi, it's you."

"This is no time to 'Oh, Hizumi' me…! I came here with a bad feeling, and sure enough, you're trying to do something stupid…!"

"I have a chance."

With a bloodcurdling look on her face, Hizumi pressed hard against my shoulders.

"Get out of here right now…! Go with blond curls and get on a lifeboat…! You can't be here…! Go…! Go before you're noticed…!"

I tapped the plank.

"Tsukiori, Rei, and Lapis are down below. There's no time to get them and run, and even if there were, I wouldn't do that. Those girls have to work together in harmony as the story goes—without an irregularity (me)—then somehow overcome this and move on. Otherwise, they're sure to get stuck somewhere."

"Abandon them."

"I refuse to do that."

"You're wrong again," Hizumi said, narrowing her eyes as she pointed at *A*. "From now on, you won't be able to make any more stupid wisecracks. You've never been on the verge of death, and you think it's like a joke, believing you can continue to be righteous in the face of death."

Hizumi stared at me hard.

"The lives of others aren't for protecting. They're for watching over when they end."

A stretched like she was bored and mumbled, "The break's over, and enough of being cooped up. We can spread out more bait."

Rip!

A dry sound echoed, and she shed not only her clothes but also her skin.

Skin peeled along her spinal cord, her flesh was scraped away, and her hands and feet crawled out of her body. Viscera splurted from her every pore, her fingernails and toenails sank in pools of blood, her hair fell out, and the smell of ripe peaches began wafting in the air.

Shiver, shiver, shiver. My hair stood on end, and my body stepped back in the face of the extraordinary show of magic power.

"Phew."

Her hair was black with golden tints.

Jade-colored eyes were stuck in her skull.

She was eerily symmetrical.

Her arms and legs stretched out as if they had suddenly emerged from the void, and the fluttering brown trench coat was more reminiscent of her epidermis than clothing.

Between her index and middle fingers, she held a cigarette, its purple smoke curling in the air.

And those eyes.

They shone brilliantly in the moonlit night.

They were what was called *the evil eye*, with a brand in the shape of a bottomless abyss in them.

The mark that fluttered in her eyes was the same as what was engraved on Hizumi's skin.

"You're an evil spirit…"

Horrified, I mumbled *A*'s identity.

"You're…Alsu…hariya…"

There was a huge thumping in my head, as if my brain and my heart had become attached, warning me of danger.

This was a worst-case scenario… It wasn't impossible… The reason why too many clan members were around…and why one of them tried to let me escape… Only a high-ranking cult member or the evil spirit behind it all could use these members any way she liked… In the original story, Hizumi suffered from an incurable disease, and she pledged allegiance to Alsuhariya after she cured

her on a whim… That was why Luri Hizumi didn't appear until the end of the story when Alsuhariya returns to life…

Alsuhariya doesn't appear in this scene in the game, but her appearance in place of a mob distorted the script.

It all made sense when I thought about it that way.

"Hizumi… You knew, didn't you…?"

She nodded.

"Why has Alsuhariya come back…? The only trigger for her resurrection should be *interest*… Tsukiori hasn't become strong enough yet to attract her attention… Who else is there…?"

She stared at me.

"Me?!" I shouted, pointing at myself. "Why me?!"

"When I heard there was a person aboard this ship who rewrote the destiny of *death* and *misfortune*, I thought it was Sakura Tsukiori… But no matter how we look at it, it has to be you, Hiiro Sanjo."

"I haven't the faintest idea why it would be me."

"I heard that 128 good people who were supposed to die haven't, and 279 good people who were supposed to be hit by bad luck have been saved. If this goes on, the evil spirit and the demonic religion would no longer exist by the time the demonic god was resurrected. I also heard that it's hard to tell if you're a friend or foe since you use sneaky tricks to destroy, distort, and create *love*."

"I really have no idea what you're talking about… But that probably isn't me… Thank God…"

I very gingerly glanced at how the evil spirit was doing.

Her inhuman magical power was always ready to strike. I couldn't see myself confronting her head-on and winning.

Hizumi tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a dimension gate—a gate that separated this world from the Otherworld. It was small, barely big enough for a small boat to pass through.

"That's the starting point from where the clan members launched their attack. It's tough to detect things in a world you don't live in,

so they came to attack through that gate when the ship sailed alongside it."

That was the same as the original game, though the timing was different.

"Use a lifeboat and get over there when Alsuhariya becomes distracted. Your magical power isn't much, so I think you can do that without her detecting you. Tsukiori, Rei, and Lapis will also probably be running out of magical power when they've finished fighting, so she shouldn't notice you if you can meet up with them."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll slip out when the time is right. Never mind me and think only about yourself. You can get moving right away when Tsukiori and the gang come up here—"

We heard the sound of an engine.

Hizumi and I froze, turned around, and saw Ophelia and others come up onto the deck and get into a lifeboat.

The evil spirit was standing with her back to the moon, feeling the night breeze with her trench coat. And she grinned.

Then—she disappeared.

Less than a fraction of a second later, she was blocking the lifeboat's path.

"Hey, hey, hey, it's a gorgeous evening. A beautiful night like this makes me grateful for the once-in-a-lifetime chance encounter I've been blessed with."

With a pompous gesture, the evil spirit bowed gracefully.

"To stomp out this wonderful encounter, I'd like to kill you…but first, here's a question. How many pieces do you think there are to a dog?"

The inhuman being, in the form of a beautiful woman, hummed to herself as she smelled the fear that permeated the air.

"I know it's a tough question. Not many humans have had the opportunity to take apart their pet dogs. Shall I give you a quick list? The pharynx, trachea, esophagus, bronchi, heart, lungs, liver, stomach, spleen, kidneys, pancreas, large intestine, small intestine,

ureter, penis, bladder, urethra, rectum, anus, prostate, testicles, seminiferous duct—and that's only the organs. Make clean slices to the bones and the muscles, and you'll get more. Now, enough of my quiz. I have a proposal for you."

Smiling, the evil spirit raised her index finger and waved it left and right.

"Only one. I will kill only one of you. But I shall kill that human through painstaking disassembly. There are twelve parts to a frog, eighteen to a pig, twenty-two to a dog, and to answer your question of how many parts a human has, I will show you through a demonstration. I'd like you to choose someone in ten seconds since I'm a busy individual."

I was about to run toward her—and was restrained from behind. It was Hizumi.

She locked my limbs and joints in place, and I couldn't move. I tried desperately to stretch out my fingers, but I couldn't reach my trigger.

"Hizumi…!"

"Sorry, Hiiro Sanjo. When someone saves my life, I have to return the favor. So please be quiet."

Locked in a full nelson, I looked at the girls as they panicked.

"N-no! Not me! You die!"

"Huh?! Why should I have to die?! You can die!!!"

"Y-you're the one who's always dragging us down!"

Alsuhariya smirked as she watched the girls argue.

"Five more seconds—"

"I'll die."

Perhaps Alsuhariya hadn't expected it.

Her eyes were wide open as she stared at Ophelia, who stepped forward.

A *whoosh* sounded, and a drop of blood dripped down Ophelia's cheek. Even with a flash to threaten her, she took another step forward as if to protect the others.

"Wh-what's the matter…?"

Trembling, she took yet another step forward.

"W-we've already chosen who you can kill… Me… S-so please, go ahead…"

The evil spirit turned her eyeballs to the sky and sighed, indicating that she'd been turned off.

"Let me ask you a question. Why are you volunteering?"

"I…"

Clutching her precious necklace, Ophelia flashed a brave smile.

"I'm a lady of House Margeline."

"I see. The type of human that I hate the most," Alsuhariya said, then grinned in amusement. "But that's also the type of human whose smile I most enjoy distorting."

"Oh!!!"

Alsuhariya suddenly took her necklace, and Ophelia's smile crumpled.

"Ah. This is quite an old item. Which garbage dump did you find it in?"

Alsuhariya held the necklace high in the air and grinned.

"It's a gift from a lover or someone you love just as much… Isn't that so?"

"G-give that back!!!"

"Among us demons, I'm the kind who's kindest to humans. I prefer ruining people to killing them. I have always enjoyed breaking up couples and tossing in a male between women in love. Now, that's fun. It makes my brain tremble with pleasure."

Alsuhariya tightened her hold of the necklace, and tears spilled from Ophelia's eyes.

"S-stop it… Please… Th-that's…my precious…one and only treasure… Without it, I will never see her again…"

"Thank you for the wonderful seasoning. You've just increased the richness of the pleasure I'm enjoying on my tongue!"

As Alsuhariya held her down with a hand, Ophelia sobbed and struggled, fighting to reach the necklace.

"Please…stop it…!!!"

The necklace made a jittery sound in Alsuhariya's palm as the evil spirit laughed—and her whole arm was blown off.

"Huh?"

Pointing the tip of my sword to the air, I glared at Alsuhariya after slashing her right arm.

"…Don't touch that yuri girl with your filthy hands."

I grabbed the necklace from the arm that came spinning to the floor. I gave it to Ophelia as she cried and tapped her on her back.

"Go. It's okay. You'll see her again someday. I guarantee it."

"B-but…wh-what about…you…? What are you going to do…?"

Instead of answering, I adjusted my shoulder after working my way out of Hizumi's hold. Snapping out of the horror, the other students pulled Ophelia into a death grip and dragged her to the lifeboat.

"Give her VIP treatment, huh?" I said, smiling at them. "She *is* Ophelia von Margeline."

The students nodded. Ophelia's mouth was hanging as the boat quickly sailed away.

The arm I had cut off had already grown back, and Alsuhariya was grinning like she had all the time in the world.

"Hiiro Sanjo, I've been waiting for you. First, I'll introduce myself to you. I am Alsuhariya—"

"Die!!! (*Whack! Whack! Whack!*)"

"You've got to be kidding. I was introducing myself."

Over and over, I kept twisting the tip of my blade into Alsuhariya's chest.

My head was filled with the words, *I'm going to beat this monster*.

"Hey, relax."

Backing up, Alsuhariya smiled, put a hand to her chest, and bowed.

"How do you do? My name is Alsuhariya—"

Thud! I threw Masamune Kuki at her, which pierced through her brain, and she fell backward.

She got up and pulled the blade out of her head.





“Don’t be in such a rush and listen to me—what? You’re coming at me with your bare hands? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Die, die, die!!!”

I went at her with my bare knuckles, but she kicked me and put some distance between us. I was blown away and stopped as I grabbed Masamune Kuki from where it was stuck in a plank.

“Hey, come on, relax. We’re meeting for the first time, huh? Don’t you have any common sense?”

“Shut up! You don’t think you’re going to get out of here alive after all you’ve done, do you?! Huh, you nobody?!”

Screaming, I took position.

“Do you want me to tell you how many times I’ve saved and loaded my game and killed you?! I’ve been killing you and Hiiro Sanjo for a long, long time, and your deaths are the best tranquilizer for me! Die! Hiiro can die, too! Die as many times as you want! I’m going to kill you now! Yes, I will! I’ll plant yuri—lilies—for you on your grave!!!”

“What the—?”

“Shut up and die!!!”

The gazes of a human and a demon intersected—and Alsuhariya rose, dodged my kick, and got farther away from me.

“Geez. Haven’t you ever had a decent chat with anyone?”

“You aren’t anyone. You’re a demon.”

Breathing heavily, I took a good look at the evil spirit in front of me.

An evil spirit.

Her body was shaped by magical power.

An evil being that called itself a demonic god imitated the myth of the creation of humankind from mud, fabricated demons, and created six humanoids.

An evil spirit was a mass of magicells that didn’t have a body.

Humans were a collection of cells.

A cell is a collection of molecules; molecules are a collection of atoms, and atoms are a gathering of elementary particles.

From a reductionist view, we could say that humans were also a mass of elementary particles.

But the humans in this world weren't shaped by magicells. While they had a mechanism for storing magicells in their bodies, they only kept them within their bodies, and it wasn't as if the magic calculators created them as beings.

A large number of magicells floated around in this world.

That meant evil spirits that were made solely of magicells could regenerate their damaged bodies with them or change their bodies as easily as if they were snacking on food on a table.

The bottom line was that an evil spirit was basically invincible.

In the original game, they healed what was damaged at every turn.

Players who continued to play without any information on strategies generally ended up losing for the first time when they fought an evil spirit.

I had feared being killed when I confronted one for the first time… One wrong step, and it was a battle that I would lose no matter what I did.

This world wasn't a game. Once I died, that was it.

I had been reincarnated as Hiiro, but I hadn't committed suicide, and I remained alive… And that was probably to tell Tsukiori how to defeat this no-good-piece-of-trash being before me.

Once again, I glared at Alsuhariya.

"What's with those eyes? You shouldn't look at a person like that. It's full of the determination to ground me to dust, put it in a blender, and pour it down the sewer."

Solemnly, I generated my invisible arrow.

Water flowed over my arms.

The arrow fitted between my outstretched index and middle finger, then it flowed backward and sent up a bluish spray of water.

"Humans lean toward day, and demons lean toward night. It's a miracle that clan members of the day, those of the night, and us humans exist here now as equal beings."

Bearing the moonlit night on her back, Alsuhariya stood at the bow of the ship and received the twinkling of the stars in the sky.

"Let's be grateful for that one-night miracle. It's the perfect time for us to talk."

"I don't understand a word of what a piece of trash like you says. Die! Explode into pieces in the middle of the night sky!!! I'll cry out in joy for you! Explode with great force and become a firework that lights up the night! In short, die!!!"

"All you've been saying for a while is *die*."

"Shut up and die!!!"

I tried to close the distance between us, but Alsuhariya fled at a tremendous speed.

"Don't run from me! Don't run from your responsibility as a demon with a form that has to perish!"

"Of course I'm going to run. Please listen to me. What are you, a product of the intent to kill? You're scary with those bloodshot eyes. You're standing there holding a sword and smirking. You can't complain if someone uses you in educational materials as a model case of a serial killer."

"I'll listen to you, so die! Please!"

"Okay, okay. I'll give you a decent fight if you listen to me. I was going to have you die here anyway."

I sheathed Masamune Kuki—a feint—and with a thud, an invisible arrow pierced Alsuhariya's forehead.

"I can't believe this. Aren't you ashamed to be more sly and willing to do anything than an evil spirit? Pretending to put away your weapon, then going ahead and trying to kill someone? What is wrong with the ethics education they provide in this world? Don't shoot while I'm talking."

A mountain of arrows stabbed at Alsuhariya's body, and she raised her hands, looking like a hedgehog.

"You want me to die, but I want to kill you more."

"Have you cultivated a will to kill from an early age?"

Sighing, Alsuhariya pulled the arrows out of her body.

"Hiiro Sanjo. Do you remember what you said to me when we passed each other when I was still *A*?"

"Please kill me."

"I didn't tell you to put your desires into words. You said, 'It's a shame.'"

Behind the backdrop of smoldering purple smoke, the evil spirit with a handsome face whispered, "I like people. It's no exaggeration to say I love them. I especially like people who are small and miserable but can change the course of the world. Wouldn't you be interested in an ant if it could impact the world, even if it's just an ant?"

She chuckled.

"I wanted a human friend for a long time… The human world is beautiful… You compared love to lilies, which was very strange but poetic… However, a difference of opinion existed between us…"

She exhaled white smoke.

"Love isn't something to save. It's something you harm."

"Oh, I see."

Trembling all over, I scoffed.

"We couldn't possibly be friends. We can only see each other as sworn enemies…and kill each other."

"That's the answer. I agree. That's why I decided to kill you. It's really a shame…after going through the trouble of awakening and coming all the way here."

The Temple of Death sneered.

"Here I come—human."

"Come to me—evil spirit."

Both of us prepared to fight—one taking a higher position, the other low—and as we crossed blades, blood sprayed from my cheek.

She was fast.

Enveloped in a swirl of smoke, Alsuhariya swept away every bit of that smoke and wielded her sword, soaked wet in my blood.

I saw the blow.

It came on my right side—*trigger, synchronize technique, initiate magic wave interference, operation complete*.

Not even conscious of the sword that pierced my side, my eyes opened wide as I smashed the light I generated into her brain.

Generation: Sword of Light.

The particles of light gathered together turned into a spark and split Alsuhariya in two. Then she was restored, laughing as her eyes glowed a bluish white.

The devil's eyes—they're coming—!

I let go of Masamune Kuki and reached out with my fingertips at close range.

My index and middle fingers pierced the chasm between the eyes that shone brilliantly.

Alsuhariya's eyes widened in astonishment, and—

"Blow up to smithereens."

Boom!!!

Her head blew off. The headless demon clapped her hands in applause.

"Nice," a voice said from the dim cavity of her torso.

I shivered and jumped back as I stared at the evil spirit regenerate. Blood leaked down my side, and I pressed the wound.

"But really—"

Careful. Take things slowly, a step at a time.

Having rebuilt herself from her capillaries, Alsuhariya reattached her skin, making a flip-flop sound, and smiled after regaining her beautiful appearance.

"The performers are a little boring… It's in bad taste not to make the most of the night with the hazy moon, to waste my beauty, and simply slaughter the fool who thinks he's a hero in this state."

Her long black hair flowed in the wind.

Alsuhariya narrowed her eyes, held her hair down, and snapped her fingers.

"We will paint this night with some makeup."

A crack appeared—in the sea.

The ship tilted to the right, my view rotated sideways, and a jet of seawater drenched me.

A woman's face emerged from the water.

A figurehead of a goddess breathed through the water. Next, the port and starboard sides of a ship rose on high waves, and the stern surfaced at once and was bathed in the moonlight.

It was a galleon.

A sailing ship appeared from the sea. Enveloped in a slowly thickening white fog, it showed itself, caked with starfish and barnacles.

The two-story bow and stern towers had large holes in them, the four masts were tilted and eroded, and dried human heads surrounded the goddess adorning the bow. It was a ghost ship.

The ghost ship's helm was spinning on its own. The torn sails fluttered in the wind, and white thunder rumbled against the hazy moon in the background.

Alsuhariya gently stepped on the goddess's face and landed on one foot, holding up a cigarette.

"*Nuestra Señora de Atocha*."

Alsuhariya now had everything in place—the moon, the fog, and the ship. She stood tall and waited for things to begin.

"Whatever you do, it's important to set the scene. Hiiro Sanjo, let us link toys, hum a childish tune, and make a play out of this epic of a foolish hero."

The evil spirit raised her cigarette as she would a conductor's stick.

"*Nuestra Señora de Atocha*…do you know how to dance with the Holy Mother?"

The sailship loomed toward me.

I had no time to react. The port side of the *Queen's Watch* and the starboard side of the ghost ship collided. The ship swayed, and I went rolling on the deck.

"Ngh…!!!"

The wound on my side rubbed against the wood, and I moaned.

This wasn't good. I slammed the tip of my bladeless knife against the plank and gritted my teeth as I repositioned myself.

Tsukiori was still fighting inside the ship… Ophelia and the other girls hadn't left the area yet…and I couldn't let this monster get her hands on them…!!!

Spirits that looked like skeletons slowly oozed out of the air as they blended with the fog.

"Come," the evil spirit said and raised her arms.

"Let's play some music to this night."

Sounds, sounds, and more sounds rang out.

White fog stirred in circles, thunder rumbled, driving rain pounded the ship's hull, and the spirits of sailors strummed their instruments.

There were violins, violas, cellos, flutes, oboes, bassoons, and an organ… The fog, rain, and thunder rotated around the two ships, a herd of lifeless water spirits performed an oratorio, and the flying skeletons sang Handel's *Messiah*.

Swinging up and down overhead, the sailor spirits tapped their fingers against the keyboard, creating a staccato as they flew around. The violins had become a single mass, and they laughed as they drew their bows, drank rum, and ate cookies. A mixed chorus of sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses sang a rousing rendition of words from the writings of Isaiah, Malachi, and Luke.

In the midst of the chaotic orchestra, Alsuhariya conducted in a whirlpool of white smoke she created.

Time and again, the ships kept colliding with each other.

Soaking wet, I screamed as I jumped from bow to bow and slammed the sword of light I'd generated into the evil spirit.

With every swing, white lightning sliced through the darkness, and the shadows of humans and demons emerged in the gray clouds—as if making fun of a hero's efforts to fight evil.

Not concerned about me at all, Alsuhariya closed her eyes, all wrapped up in keeping pace with her score. The white smoke swirling around her took the form of a blade and slashed about, attempting to drive away the winged insects that disturbed its master's performance.

Swirl.

Swirl, swirl, swirl!!!

Before I knew it, the surface of the sea was also swirling.

Engulfed in the whirlpool, Alsuhariya and I sliced at each other on the ship's stage.

The demon attacked with her sounds, and the human responded with blades.

In an accelerating killing dance, I was blown away, rolling on the ghost ship and leaking blood from my mouth as I pulled my trigger. I shook off the skeletal spirits of sailors who attacked me, releasing magic power from the soles of my feet, and ran up the creaking mast.

The mast was chopped to bits in an instant, and it slowly began to tilt. Having run to the top of it, I dove.

The light of the moon twinkled in my eyes, and I went on the offensive—throwing a flash at my opponent—which she stopped with a single cigarette.

Exhaling white smoke, Alsuhariya looked at me and smiled.

"Hey, you ant-like specimen. Don't you see that you don't stand a chance?"

"Don't be so sure of yourself when you've had to use two fingers to counter that ant, demon."

My view turned 180 degrees.

Grabbed by the collar, I was slammed against the plank and stopped breathing.

Making a split-second decision, I launched my trigger, rotated my legs and my hips, and delivered a water-surface kick. Alsuhariya leaped out of the way, and the ball of light I kicked up floated before her eyes.

"We have a full moon out tonight."

I crooked the corners of my mouth.

"We can enjoy gazing at the moon, though it isn't the season for it."

The round ball of light burst, and rays of light were sucked into the demon's eyes.

I had gotten up from a prone position and was already running. I grappled at the helm, which was moving on its own, and reversed it.

The ghost ship finally began moving away from the *Queen's Watch*.

I tried to slash away at the rusty helm—and a hand that reached out from behind the thick fog grabbed my middle and ring fingers and twisted them in the opposite direction. I yelped in agony.

From behind the fog—an index finger reached out and swayed from side to side in slow motion.

"No fooling around. The performance isn't over yet—"

Without a pause, I cut open the space in front of me, slashing my two fingers in the process.

They flew through midair.

A spray of blood rose from behind the fog. The music stopped, and the view cleared, revealing Alsuhariya looking stunned.

"Hey, maestro."

Having shed blood and sweat, I slammed the sword at her.

"I'll end the music for you."

Cross.

Having been struck twice, Alsuhariya beamed as she backed off.

"Hey. Did you cut off your fingers so that you could take a swing at me…? You're insane… Has the moon confused you and made you a lunatic…? A messiah complex to this extreme is laughable…"

Alsuhariya clawed at her face with her leather-gloved hands—and smirked.

"Good…very good… I would love to see you writhe in hell…"

I wrapped handkerchiefs around the wounds on my hands, stopped the bleeding, then laughed back at her.

"And I would love to see you dead."

We both paused.

Alsuhariya obliterated the gap between us with her speed, scooped me up, and threw me overboard. I soared over the ocean, landed on the *Queen's Watch*, and rolled backward to crush the impact.

Then Alsuhariya descended from where she stood and spread out her arms.

"That's enough fun and games. It's time to move on to the climax of the show."

"I agree. It's time for the great evil to explode with a bang and for me to watch the closing credits."

The evil spirit caught the cigarette she'd dropped, inhaled the smoke, and spat it out.

"I'd like to see you pee your pants and take off running. I'm looking forward to seeing a righteous human crawling on all fours, crying, begging for forgiveness, and then trying to save himself, even if it means abandoning his friends, lovers, and family."

"Sorry, but I don't intend to respond to your crappy request. I decide what happens to me. Whether you're a god, demon, or human, your own will is the only thing that shapes your outcome."

I smiled as greasy sweat dripped down my body.

"Unlike you…I have things to protect… So from here on out…"

Laughing, I pointed the tip of my sword downward and formed a wall with Masamune Kuki.

"…I'm not going to let you get to them, even if it costs me my life."

"Geez, I'm hating you more and more."

Things were gradually getting worse.

Panting, I curved down the corner of my mouth and breathed hard.

Well, okay…that's my last resort… It's all or nothing… I have to do it…

"We'll experiment. We'll see how many inches I have to cut your fingers until you, a human, give up the things you *have to protect*. It'll be fun. My brain is already starting to tremble in excitement."

"Shut up… Don't put a vibration function in your brain, you jerk… I'll call you every day…so leave it on, get a concussion, and die…"

"It's sad to think that that noisy mouth will soon be out of commission."

Alsuhariya took a step forward, and I shot an invisible arrow—*whoosh*—and naturally, the evil spirit grabbed it.

"An elf's arrow, huh? I haven't seen one since I encountered Estilpament and her apprentice…but it's still crafty. Hmm?"

Alsuhariya craned her neck.

"Hiiro…Sanjo… Did you have something to do with Estilpament?"

As Alsuhariya spoke unintelligibly, I shot one invisible arrow at her after another, but she grabbed every one of them.

I smiled bitterly.

"Don't make the mistake of showing yourself at the wrong time… you rotten cheater…"

"You're the one who was born at the wrong time. You could have gone on playing the hero a little longer if you hadn't met me. It's a pathetic, banal, and despicable life."

Alsuhariya opened her Magic Eye.

"It's time to call it a night."

The pupils of her eyes were cut open from top to bottom, left to right, and the essence of her magic power crawled out through the cracks.

"Alsuhariya!!!"

The evil spirit turned in the direction of the voice.

A girl stood there, alone and trembling.

"D-do you remember me…? I'm L-Luri Hizumi…a girl you saved… P-please listen to me… Th-that male still has his uses…s-so please…"

Her knees were shaking as she drew attention to herself—her life—to protect a jerk who was practically a stranger to her.

"D-don't kill him…"

"No, Hizumi, stop it! She'll kill you!!!"

"N-no… I—I…I'm not running anymore… A-after seeing you, I finally remembered…that if I backed off now…everything my teacher passed on to me would be in vain… So…I…I'm going to—"

Blinking back tears, Luri Hizumi shouted, "I'm going to follow my hero…!!!"

"Oh, you're going to make me cry. My pounding heartbeat is starting to slow down."

Alsuhariya's Magic Eye was activated, and—

"It's time to put away the toys I've finished playing with."

Memories of days passed flashed in Hizumi's eyes.

✳

Was this a *chimiazome*, an endogenous magicell that traveled within the human body?

A chimiazome was one of the intracellular organelles that broke down magic power.

The small organ was either sabotaging, striking, or shutting itself away. The chimiazome in me, Luri Hizumi, refused to work, and the magic power it didn't break down became accumulated, causing symptoms of heart failure, kidney failure, and respiratory issues due to the underdevelopment of my motor functions.

My disease was called *Chimiazome Disease*.

By the time I was old enough to know what was what, I had become a girl who dressed in hospital gowns that smelled of medications and wore bracelets with injection scars.

"Okay, then make sure you check your timetable."

The more the waste magic power built up, the more likely the chances were that my heart would stop working. I had a time bomb

hidden in my chest, and there was no way I could go to an ordinary elementary school.

As a patient with a designated intractable disease, I shared a study room set up at the hospital for children suffering from similar diseases.

"We're going to start with arithmetic today. Please open your textbooks," a teacher would say to the eight pupils at the hospital's elementary school.

Girls with chronic respiratory problems, kidney disease, and others like me who had symptoms that could kill them at any time attended the classes. It was a jumble of kids in various grades and was an arts and crafts room, library, and music room all in one.

We studied Japanese, math, social studies, science, arts and crafts, music, and home economics… We had English classes now and then with AETs (Assistant English Teachers,) computer studies with students from a social welfare university, and events like the Star Festival in July and celebrated Christmas.

"L-Luri."

Not looking at the blank wall that was decorated with everyone's smiling faces—feeling threatened that space meant someone would disappear—I looked up from the notebook with my name, Luri Hizumi, written on it.

It was Riina Shiina… The girl everyone called Rii-chan came to me and whispered, "I—I heard Ai's going to start studying at her bed today…"

There were nine of us, including the teachers. It was reckless to whisper in a small classroom of eight people, not including Ai, who had started studying in her bed.

I clammed up, finished what I was writing, and showed Rii-chan the edge of my notebook.

"She won't come back."

She looked stunned.

Her eyes widened—and a girl in a pink hat came from her side and grabbed my notebook.

Her name was Ruby Oliet… She was a foreign girl who everyone nicknamed Ru-chan. She wrote something boldly and showed it to me.

"She will be back."

"…No, she won't."

"She will! For sure! She'll be back!!!"

"I'm telling you, she won't—"

She grabbed me by the chest—and glared at me with tear-stained blue eyes.

"She *will* be back…!!!"

"……"

"H-hey, hey, hey! What's going on here?! Don't fight!"

Nagisa, the teacher in charge of the in-hospital class, pulled our small, frail bodies apart.

Carefully, as if we were fragile objects that could easily break.

Irritated by her kindness, I lashed out and quickly lost my breath. The sound of my heart racing echoed through my brain, and my breathing became labored within seconds. I crouched, huffing and puffing as I pushed against my chest.

Nagisa put a hand on my back like she was used to doing that.

"Are you okay, Luri? Luri? Can you hear me? Does your chest feel tight? Is it hard to breathe? Hello. A student is having trouble breathing. Her oxygen level hasn't changed. She may have symptoms of tachypnea, level two. She has discomfort in her chest."

As usual.

I was carried away by the nurses who charged in, and the worried look in Ruby's eyes as she watched me truly irritated me.

After that, it was the usual routine.

They took my blood and put a nasal cannula on me, and my grandmother worried about me.

Finally free, I returned to my made-up bed and flipped through the pages of a book.

"…What?"

A pair of blue eyes peered at me through a crack in the door.

Accompanied by Riina, Ruby slowly opened the door and entered with an apologetic look on her face.

"L-Luri…"

As Riina gently prompted her to step closer, Ruby slowly lowered her head.

"I'm…sorry…"

"Why don't you at least take off your hat if you're going to apologize?"

"L-Luri… Ru-chan's, um, taking medications…and, um…"

"It's okay, Rii-chan."

She removed her hat.

She bared her hairless head and gave me a deep bow.

"I'm sorry."

I ignored her apology and returned my attention to my book.

"Ai won't be back."

"…How can you say that?"

"She was moved to the intensive care unit."

Very slowly, Ruby's jewel-like blue eyes widened.

"It's the usual. They move someone from our class back to their bed, then to the ICU…and then…"

I closed my book with a thud.

"It's the end."

"……"

"You know, life is just like a book. The number of pages in a person's life is set from the time they're born. This girl has so many pages, that girl has so many, and they end when they run out of pages."

I threw my book against the floor.

The paperback slid on the floor and stopped when it hit Ruby's toes.

"And books under categories like *intractable diseases*, *genetic defects*, *children's wards*, and so on have very few pages. Like that book."

Ruby looked down at the novella on the floor, about a hundred or so pages long, without a word.

"…You don't know that."

"Sure, I do."

I grinned.

"A picture of a smiling face on the wall will be taken down in two weeks."

Ruby suddenly raised her head—and Riina desperately gripped her arm.

Ruby opened and closed her mouth, unable to get the words out—and relaxed her strained muscles as Riina dragged her out of the room.

Two weeks later—

The hospital staff removed Ai's drawing of a smiling face from the wall and replaced it with the smiling face of another child.

Ruby watched that, holding a friend's IV stand, and stood speechless in front of the replacement picture.

"A hospital magician?"

"Yeah, I heard she's an important magic handler who's going to give us an interesting lesson."

"Oh yeah?! I hope it will be fun!"

The young children were making a commotion.

Our class now consisted of eight people, including the teachers. Everyone was talking loud except me, the girl people were saying bad things about, as if to ward off negative energy.

"L-Luri?"

Riina, the only person who talked to me, smiled and tugged on my sleeve.

"Th-this hospital magician… I wonder what she's like…? Hee-hee-hee… Could she be like a witch who comes up in wizardry…?"

"Wrong, dummy."

I snickered.

"It's part of the charity work the Magical Society does. It sends magic handlers to hospitals as temp teachers to help patients recover from illnesses related to magic and magical powers. They aren't appreciated by medical practitioners, though, since they're just trying to score points with the public, and they aren't helping patients recover at all. They're fake teachers who aren't qualified to teach at special needs schools or even have basic teaching licenses, and they're frauds."

"Hey, Rii-chan."

Propping her chin on her hand, Ruby whispered, looking straight ahead, "Don't talk to a girl like her. It's a waste of your kindness."

"Huh…? B-but…"

I snickered again.

"Why do people who consider themselves kind souls talk like they're offering charity with a higher-than-thou attitude? Will you please stop pushing your *kindness* on me?"

"…You bitch!"

Ruby stood up, and I was about to intercept her—when Tutankhamun's golden mask got between us.

A woman with leather sandals was wearing the golden mask from ancient Egypt, squatting and staring this way.

Her golden skin could be seen through her *Kalasiris*. A necklace adorned with gold and jewels covered her neck, and a black veil held in place by the bracelets on her wrists covered her back.

She intimidated us by slamming a triple cane shaped like a combination of an ankh, a *Djed* pillar, and a *Was* scepter.

"…I'm cursing you."

Ruby and I froze before the monster.

"…An ancient Egyptian curse is about to burst."

The being stood up, and we were stunned to see how tall she was.

She had to be at least six feet tall.

She struck a pose with her hands. A pose that said she was going to eat the girls. Then her golden mask shook as she said in a sweet

voice, "I'm going to curse you! A beauty not second to Cleopatra has come back from ancient Egypt, and I'll let you see my outstanding figure while I curse you! I'll introduce every skincare item I've spent at least seven hundred dollars on this month alone while I'm at it!"

"…Atiifa."

Nagisa looked appalled as she pulled the golden mask off the woman.

An exotically beautiful face appeared, and the children exclaimed in awe.

"O-oh. Oh! D-don't do that, Nagisa. I-I'll die of embarrassment…if you do that…!!!"

The tall beauty hopped around, desperately trying to get her golden mask back.

A petite woman herself, Nagisa hummed as she moved the mask away from her. The tall beauty, who looked like she could easily do a dunk shot if she played basketball, chased after her with tears in her eyes.

I couldn't understand why she couldn't grab it back.

Unable to get her mask back, she hid behind Nagisa, shrinking her tall body, and whispered in a muffled voice, "I-I'm Atiifa Izdihaar Widad…"

"Louder! Don't hide behind me!"

Twitching, the woman pouted like a scolded child.

"I'm Atiifa Izdihaar Widad… I've come all the way from Egypt to serve as a hospital magician… My hobby is cosplay… I made this costume myself… And I don't like Nagisa…"

"What did you say?!"

"Eeep!"

She backed away furiously, jumped over the desk, and hid behind us.

Seeing that, Nagisa pressed her temples.

"…Ati. You've become an important magic handler. Why haven't you changed at all since you were a student?"

"Y-you haven't changed, either! You're still as mean as ever! You're terrible! Next time, I'll make you wear an outfit that shows your butt!"

I looked down at the complaining magic handler—and our eyes met.

At that moment, she looked away, turned bright red in the face, and wore a goofy smile.

"H-hey, what is it…? It isn't polite…to stare at someone like that… I—I have fans and get many retweets…so you better not get too carried away…"

"You're the one who's getting carried away! How many rehearsals do you think you've done every time you come?! Get over here! Do you understand your responsibilities as a hospital magician?!"

"Waaah, I hate this…! I don't want to do any more rehearsals that go on through the middle of the night. It's a violation of labor laws…!"

The hospital magician was grabbed by the neck and dragged away, and Ruby and I looked at each other.

"…What was that?"

"…Beats me."

We were both so puzzled we'd forgotten all about our fight.

Her name was Atiifa Izdihaar Widad.

Everyone in our hospital class called her Ati. She was a head taller than the others, and her striking beauty made her stand out. Perhaps because she could communicate smoothly when she put on her golden mask, she quickly became popular at the hospital.

The pupils loved what was like a comedy act as Nagisa chastised Ati daily for coming in an anime costume, and she also mastered the art of having the pupils console her.

I watched her for several weeks, and I still couldn't believe it.

The fact that Ati was one of the six *ancestral* magic handlers who existed in this world…and were equal to Astemir Clouet la Killicia, lauded as the toughest magic handler in the world.

The photo on the home page of the official Magical Society website showed an individual wearing that golden mask. The person had said in a past magazine interview that her hobby was cosplay.

"…She has to be a fake."

She was now on an important mission in southern Egypt.

Understanding that, I tossed my hospital-issued tablet device to the floor.

Children like me, who had a disease related to magic power, weren't allowed to touch magic devices. And since becoming a princess in this pure-white *sick tower*, I was strictly forbidden from providing any input or output of magical power.

"…A woman like that couldn't possibly be an ancestral magic handler."

I pulled out a scrapbook I kept under my pillow.

There was a photo of a short-haired woman pasted on a page.

She was an ancestral magic handler worthy of being called a hero. She saved a young child who had been caught up in an attack against demons and died in the process. She was known as *the hero who lost her left arm*.

Her name was Braun Les Bracketlight.

I traced a finger over the hero I had admired since childhood.

"……"

Then someone gently held my shoulders, smiled, and stroked the photo of a peace symbol being flashed— "…Do you like her?"

"Oh!!!" I shrieked when a suspicious figure in a golden mask spoke to me.

Enshrouded in darkness, Atiifa appeared from a corner of the room, waving her stick and puffing out her chest.

"Braun is strong! So strong that Astemir said, 'Well, she's pretty tough, though compared to me, you know, but yeah, she's good!' She's so tough that she'd be looking smug after a mock battle."

"……"

I was speechless as Ati, without asking, sat on a round chair and began peeling an apple someone had brought me.

“For someone who idolizes Braun,” she said, munching on the apple, “you’re far from being a hero, Luri.”

“You…!!!”

I tried to argue, but I was so angry that it took me a while to find the words.

“You… What do you know…?!”

“I know.”

Ati, in the creepy mask, stared at me.

“There is no hero in the world without pride and a will.”

“……”

“Why do you intentionally isolate yourself?”

This time, Atiifa began peeling a pear.

“…What are you talking about?”

“You’re deliberately making people hate you. You find ways to make everyone avoid you. For a grade school pupil, you’re too smart and pessimistic, and it’s sad.”

“…I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

A wry laugh sounded from a gap in the mask.

“Don’t you like those pictures?”

“Huh?”

“Those pictures on the wall. You’re always staring at them like they’re long-standing enemies.”

This time, I laughed wryly.

“Of course I do. I hate that travesty. Why do we have to draw pictures of people who might die at any moment? I don’t know if it’s a custom here or what, but it’s no use putting them up since they’re going to be taken down anyway.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” the masked Ati muttered as she examined the pear that she had peeled beautifully. “Everyone’s smiling in the pictures.”

I turned around and saw my photo. The younger version of me was beaming in the image.

“Nagisa never said a word about drawing pictures of each other smiling… And it’s lovely, very lovely, that that’s what everyone did…

That classroom is filled with smiles…which proves that it's the only place in this hospital where people can have smiling faces…"

"Geez!, that's just a childish trick! Everyone's going to die anyway! What good would it do to draw pictures of them smiling?! Everyone—everyone's going to die! You can't cure me! You can't cure the others! You can't cure anyone, so why do you call yourself a hospital magician?! Is it your job to talk about the ulterior motives of adults that are sold at bargain prices?! Outsiders like you can sit comfortably outside these safety cages and keep throwing shots of pity at us!!!"

Panting, I grabbed my chest and squeezed out the words.

"Get out of this room… Get out of that classroom…from my world…and disappear…!"

"……"

Silently, Atiifa stood up and placed a bent fang on top of my scrapbook.

A tattered scrap of paper smeared with blood in places was wrapped around it, and reddish-black letters were written in a winding pattern.

"…What is this?"

"It's the *coffin*. The catalyst of my magic. It's cut out of a dragon's tusk, engraved with the symbol of protection and the words *Protection of Day and Night*. It isn't a magic device. You could say it's like a disposable Magic Eye. According to the sympathetic magic inscribed on ancient paper about *heroes*, it contains the magic power of heroes passed down through the generations," the teacher murmured. "It also contains the magic power of Braun Les Bracketlight."

"Huh…?"

"You trigger it by inserting the tip engraved with *Protection of Day and Night* into the heart of your target and pouring your own magic power into it… The magic powers of heroes contained in this fang react, and they destroy your malicious enemy. This is my precious treasure. It's a mission that Braun entrusted to me."

Ati carefully wrapped her fang in a handkerchief and tucked it back into her chest—and then flipped a page in my scrapbook.

"Oh…don't…!"

A photograph was pasted there.

It was a memory of times she'd spent with best friends who no longer existed in this world. They were happy moments of laughing together, putting up strips of paper where they'd written their hopes and dreams, joking around, and eating cake with lots of cream on their cheeks.

An arrow had been drawn in crayon that looked like a worm slithering about, pointing to photos of precious friends and their names, *Luri*, *Mii*, and *Yua*. As if filling the gaps in between, promises were scribbled, saying, "Friends Forever."

"…Your treasure is beautiful."

As I put my hands over my scrapbook, attempting to hide my memories, Atiifa opened the door and whispered, "The picture they took off the wall wasn't the one that Ai drew."

Huddling over my scrapbook, I opened my eyes wide.

"It wasn't the picture that she drew… It was the one you did of her smiling… Your grandmother gave it to her parents, and they thanked your grandmother and cried…saying it most closely resembled her smile… They said she must have enjoyed herself here…and kept thanking your grandmother, bowing again and again…"

I buried my face in my hands and trembled.

"Your grandmother didn't tell you because it seems she thought you'd be mad… But I think you should know about it…"

The door closed—and I got out of bed and headed to our classroom, my bare feet making a flopping sound against the floor.

For some reason, the classroom door was open.

And the room was lit by the light of the moon.

The smiles we drew were beautiful and radiant.

And at the center of them all was a smile that was shining particularly brightly.

I had always been curt with Ai, but it was the one time that I thanked her and smiled.

The smile was sparkling—and the name *Ai Kinoshita* came to mind.

Luri, I recalled her saying as she beamed and I dug my fingernails into the wall.

"Aaah… Aaah… Aaah…!"

Crying, I clawed at the wall I clung to and fell weakly to the floor.

"Oh… Aaah… Aaahhh… Ai… Ai… I-I'm sorry… I'm sorry… Oh, God… Aaahhh… Sorry…!"

I cried and cried as if begging for mercy from the drawing, and Ati put her jacket over my shoulders.

Atiifa…Ati…couldn't cure us of our illnesses.

The ancestral magic handler was neither a magician who came up in fairy tales nor a phony. But although she couldn't cure us, she improved our conditions, eliminating the *despair* in our hearts like a magician on a count of one to three.

"Okay, class, today, we're going to do cosplay as guardians who save earth—oh. Oh. Ohhh! N-Nagisa, give me back my face mask!"

It was tough to accept that she was an ancestral magic handler.

You didn't have to be an ancestral magic handler to do the work that she did. It seemed to me that there was no reason for her to be working as a hospital magician in a remote place like this.

But that didn't matter now.

She saved my heart. That fact was all I needed.

"I'm sorry."

I bowed my head and apologized to Ruby from the bottom of my heart.

"Why don't you at least take off your hat if you're going to apologize?"

"Oh…that…that was… I'm really sorry—whoa!!!"

Ruby pulled my hat down to my eyes and pulled it back up again. I saw that she was smiling.

“Let’s be friends.”

I clutched my hat and nodded.

“…Yeah.”

Riina had been gripping her portable game console and watching us. A smile bloomed on her face, and she ran over to us.

“M-me too… I’ll be friends with you guys, too…!”

We wrapped our arms around each other, cuddled up cheek to cheek, laughed, and made up.

Ati watched us with a gentle smile on her face.

Then days went by.

I talked with Ru-chan and Rii-chan a lot. We shared many events, had many memories together, and shared many smiles.

It wasn’t because we would someday die.

It was so we could remember that we’d been alive.

So we could smile at our deathbed.

“Luri, what kind of girls do you go for?”

We particularly talked a lot about love and relationships—like regular girls.

We lay under the covers of a bed and whispered to each other after the lights went out.

“H-huh…? S-someone like Braun…cool… Someone I could risk my life for… Even if I can’t be like Braun…I’d like to be around someone like that…and help many people.”

“What about you, Riina?”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee… Someone who plays games better than I do…”

“Give it up.”

“Huh? Huh?! Wh-why…?”

Rii-chan’s a gamer to the core… Not only that, she’s a gaming addict who once got discharged from the hospital to participate in a world tournament and was scolded like crazy for trying to bring a gaming PC and three monitor screens to her hospital room.

“How about you, Ru-chan? Maybe you like engineers?”

Ru-chan cracked big companies that everyone knew. She'd also disassembled and then reassembled the teacher's motorcycle, installing an engine system the owner was completely unaware of. Squinting, she said, "Someone who doesn't raise their eyebrows at what I do."

"Give it up."

"Huh?! Why should I?!"

We chuckled as we continued to talk about the future that awaited us.

I would have insisted in the past that no girl would fall in love with me when I had a bluish-purple IV and injection marks on my arms and couldn't even leave my hospital room.

But I wasn't going to say that anymore.

"Hey, why don't we draw pictures of Ati and put them up on the wall?"

"Oh, that's a good idea! Brilliant, Luri!"

"L-let's all…draw pictures of her and put them up… Hee-hee-hee, I wonder if it will make her happy…?"

Someday.

Someday, a miracle would happen. A miracle that was so wonderful that God would be jealous.

I kept praying for a future where we could live happily together… where we'd all laugh and casually tell each other stories about our lovers.

And as I prayed, one day—Ru-chan's condition got worse.

She spent the majority of the day vomiting into a sick bowl.

Her medications were strong enough to make an adult beg to be killed, and the situation was so hard on her parents that they collapsed from the mental strain.

"R-Ru-chan… She's studying in bed again today…"

"……"

From the in-hospital classroom to her bed, then to the ICU.

I was scared.

I was terrified.

What if Ru-chan died…? What if a space was created on that wall…? I wouldn't be able to find a replacement picture anymore… I covered my ears with my hands to escape the footsteps of death that I'd been dreading, curled up in bed as I continued to pray.

I couldn't bear the fear.

Using the picking tools I borrowed from Ru-chan, I opened the classroom door and snuck in under the round moon.

I folded my knees, crossed my arms, and prayed before the altar of smiles.

"Please help Ru-chan… It's too soon… Way too soon… Please give her time… She's a very sweet girl… I don't care what happens to me…but not Ru-chan… Please don't kill her… Please don't take more away from me… I… I don't want to see any more people die…"

My teeth chattered as I prayed with all my heart.

"Please… Please save us… Save Mii-chan, Yua, Ai, Braun… everyone…"

"Is that your wish?" an unfamiliar voice said.

I shot my head up—and saw a smiling woman glowing bluish white in the moonlight.

"Then I shall give it to you."

She had black hair with golden rings.

Jade-green eyes fitted into her skull.

An eerily even and symmetrical form.

Fluttering her brown trench coat, she landed from her toenails, put a hand against her chest, and bowed.

"Hello, sweetheart. The sky is moon-drunk tonight."

"…Who are you?"

"Can't you see?"

She opened her arms—and laughed.

"I'm an angel."

"An angel…"

"Yes, precisely. I heard your wish up in the sky. It's wonderful. I love humans, but I particularly love humans like you who fear death.

You made me cry. Look, my favorite handkerchief is soaking wet with my tears."

She waved the dry handkerchief in the air.

"By the way, Ruby Oliet died a while ago."

"…Huh?"

"Oh, you don't have to look at me like that. I'll resurrect her one of these days. I'm the one who killed her, but she wasn't a very stimulating subject. A mentally immature child isn't a good subject to toy with, so I made things easier for her."

What was this woman talking about…?

I was stunned as the woman acted dramatically with theatrical gestures.

"I also killed Riina Shiina while I was at it. Actually, I killed the majority of patients at this hospital. I also killed the doctors, nurses, and security guards, but that was an unavoidable tragedy. In any case, there's no need to weep since I intend to bring them back to life eventually. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is—"

The self-proclaimed angel winked mischievously.

"You're the last one."

Whoosh.

I thought I heard a whirring sound, and then I saw a mist-covered knife in her hand.

"Don't worry. It's okay. I'll gouge out your heart in an instant. I'm running a time attack event now. The rule is to use a knife, and I'm competing with myself to see how quickly I can gouge out a human heart. I'm probably the world's best cardiac decapitator."

Her crescent moon-shaped mouth revealed her reddish-black oral cavity.

"Now what color is your heart…?"

My throat, stiff with fear, hissed.

Sneering, she held her knife in an underhand grip and came beneath me—and then the wall by the window blew out. As rubble came flying at me, a human shadow appeared.

"Alsuhariyaaaaaaaaa!!!"

"Ati?!"

Launch trigger.

Covered in blood, Ati stabbed her triple walking stick into the body of the woman she called *Alsuhariya* and slammed her into the wall.

A radial crack appeared, and Alsuhariya's body blew apart from the inside out.

Ati used her hands and her feet to kick, punch, and toss every fragment of debris away, sealing the pieces of flesh that had scattered and were attempting to escape inside the wall.

"Luri, are you okay?!"

"Ati! A-are you hurt?! Wh-who is this woman?! Oh, Alsuhariya is a demon, right?! Is it true that Ru-chan and the others are dead?! She was lying, right?!"

"…Dammit!"

Dressed in Egyptian garb, Ati gritted her teeth in frustration and pulled the trigger on her triple stick as it came spinning back into her hand.

A piece of debris at my feet took the form of a scarab—a dung beetle—and fluttered its wings as it pulled me up.

"Ati…"

Seeing hatred in Ati's eyes, I finally realized why Ati had come here.

"Were you chasing Alsuhariya…? Is that why you came to this hospital…?"

Now revealing her true face, Ati nodded.

"This hospital is one of Alsuhariya's playgrounds… I don't know why her awakening happened earlier than expected, but…it would have eventually been attacked. Her accelerated awakening was actually a perfect opportunity…to get things back on track. If she'd taken her time, things would have been irreparable… I'm here…and I…I'm going to end it all now…!!!"

Ati put on a mask of a golden wolfdog—and her entire body became covered in swirls of pitch-black sand.

Then she cheerfully began singing a chant that echoed out into the world.

"My name is Atiifa, Izdihaar is my mother, Widad is my grandmother… I am immortal, a priest, the one who opens the way… and spells the book of the dead…"

The eyes behind the mask opened—a pale blue.

"Paradise will not accept you."

A gust of wind blew, every piece of glass in the room shattered and flew in the air, and I shielded my face with my right arm—and the seal of debris was blown away.

Leisurely, Alsuhariya sat crossing her legs on an invisible midair throne and spread out her arms.

"Hey."

The demon, repeatedly destroyed and regenerated as pure-black dust scraped it away, curved the corners of her mouth upward.

"I thought I'd sent Sylphiel and the others to handle things… Why are you here?"

"I killed them all."

"You've got to be kidding me. You barely have a scar on you. I wish you wouldn't do that. It takes a lot of time and sacrifices to regenerate that class of followers. I'm getting ready for a date with the one who interests me, and I'll have to present myself with my powers severely diminished."

"You're dead. Stop chirping."

Every grain of sand took the form of an ankh and pointed its tip at Alsuhariya.

"I will destroy you if it's the last thing I do…!!!"

"Good grief. Why are my fans such a pain in the neck? Haven't you heard of the Anti-Stalking Act? You should go and check out the Metropolitan Police Department's website. I don't know who or which generation you are, but I played with you and your clan of perverted cosplayers in Nubia. Why can't you realize that the Egyptian magic you take such pride in and my power and authority

are fatally incompatible? I don't know about other evil spirits, but you can't beat me, no matter how hard you try."

"Ati…!!!"

The scarabs grabbed me with their legs and had me hanging, and I reached for Ati.

"Let's run, Ati…! We could never beat that thing… She's lying… Everyone's alive…and smiling… See? On that wall…? So, Ati, stretch out your arm… Please…!!!"

I was crying as I reached out—and grabbed her *stick*.

It was a stick made of crooked fangs, the trump card where generations of heroes had instilled their magic power. It was the sleeping intents of heroes, dormant—in the *coffin*.

"It's filled with my magic power, too…so use it in case of an emergency…though it may not have accumulated enough to defeat Alsuhariya yet… But it should at least buy you time… You know how to use it, don't you…?"

With her hands behind her back, Ati gave me her very own lifeline—and turned to face me.

"Luri."

Removing her mask only for a brief instant, Ati flashed her usual shy smile.

"I know you can become a hero… You're just like Braun… You have the pride and the will…to help others… You're a kind girl… A girl who can smile as you think of the future…and work hard for those you care about… Braun said…a hero isn't special… A hero isn't a hero because they're powerful…special…or loved… It isn't like that… A hero… A hero is—"

She looked straight ahead.

"A hero is someone who uses her pride and will—to stop others from crying."

The wind blew.

The pictures of the smiling faces came off the wall. Freed from the confines of the classroom, they flew into the sky.

The smiling faces slipped through my outstretched hands and flew away, making a fluttering sound as if they were laughing.

It was time for the smiling faces drawn on pure-white paper to leave happy memories behind, flap their wings, and take off.

But one of them—just one smiling face—remained.

It was the picture that eight of us, including Nagisa, drew together of that shy girl.

It wasn't good, but it was a smile we drew in this classroom without a sense of unity.

In it, Atiifa Izdihaar Widad—who we loved—smiled, flapping in the blowing wind.

"See? I told you… This is a classroom where everyone can smile… So that's…how I was smiling, huh…? Oh, what—"

A big smile appeared on her face.

"What a wonderful smile…"

A gust of wind blew—and the picture of Ati set out to fly out, following the other images—when Ati grabbed it with her right hand, squeezing it as if pouring her will into it.

"Atiifa Izdihaar Widad…"

With her clenched hand still outstretched, Ati put her mask back on with her left hand—as the golden wolfdog bared its fangs and grinned.

"This is where you'll be."

The scarab that pulled me up took off into the sky, and I kept reaching out as Ati moved farther and farther away from me.

"The will of heroes will be passed on… A hero will eventually descend on this land… Even if I die here, Luri…or someone who won't allow others to cry…will definitely…definitely hunt you down and turn despair into hope… Everyone's smiling face…will fill this world… That wall, decorated with a wonderful future, will remain forever… And for that… That's why we'll keep forging ahead… Isn't that right…?"

Her voice faded into the sky.

"Braun…"

The entire upper floor of the hospital blew up. An intense bluish-white magical light exploded. Crushing sounds and the sounds of the building collapsing rang out. It was a sight that made me want to cover my eyes. The ear-splitting noise moved farther away, and I was sent down to a branch office of the Magical Society.

Perhaps Ati had contacted them in advance.

Magic handlers were rushing about and took me in, and my grandmother hurried to the scene and held me tightly in her arms.

And a week later—

I was transferred to another hospital, where I bumped into someone in the hallway, and—

"…Huh?"

I looked down at the hospital gown, where my left breast was damp with blood.

"Good grief."

Alsuhariya laughed, clutching a small heart in her hand as I fell to the floor.

"The timing has worsened greatly. I suppose your chart wasn't good."

My vision narrowed, and my limbs were getting colder.

With trembling hands, I tried to pull out the *coffin*, but I was losing consciousness—and then I awakened.

"Luri!"

"You're alive again! Thank God!"

I woke up in a strange room. Ru-chan and Rii-chan hugged me… and I was stunned to see Ru-chan with her hair again and shocked that Rii-chan had a glowing complexion.

"Congratulations on your resurrection. How does it feel to be reborn?"

It was the evil spirit, Alsuhariya.

Catching a glimpse of her face, I set out to punch her—and was stopped by Ru-chan and Rii-chan.

"Wh-why are you stopping me?! She's evil!!! She killed Ati and the others!!!"

"Calm down. We owe our lives to Alsuhariya. She's the one who brought us back to life. You should be grateful to her, but to punch her?"

"Y-yeah… Hee-hee-hee… I can run all I want now…and no one scolds me if I eat too much…"

"I heard Ati's been brought back to life, too! We heard Alsuhariya's accepting the people who died as members of her clan!"

"…Huh?"

Resting her legs carelessly on the sofa's armrest, Alsuhariya murmured, "Relax. I don't tell stupid lies. I don't lie."

Alsuhariya smirked.

"I-is that so…? W-well, then, I guess…yeah…I guess it's…okay…"

Feeling dazed, I accepted the strange scene before me and quickly thanked Alsuhariya.

"Don't worry about it. That Atiifa was more persistent than I thought, and I was barely alive myself. It will take me years to recover, and I need your help with some things."

Alsuhariya puffed on her cigarette and leered.

"Why was I resurrected sooner than expected? I'm curious about that. Something inside me remembers. An interesting human will be coming. If my resurrection was hastened to prepare for that…we'll have fun preparing for our date."

To pledge my allegiance to Alsuhariya, I was about to hand over the *coffin* that could be a threat to her—and remembered Ati's voice —*Luri*—and slipped it deep inside my jacket.

✳

Inside both of Alsuhariya's eyes, her brand whirled around, and the Magic Eye's *return to the next life* was activated.

"Ati… Braun…"

With tears in her eyes, Hizumi smiled, her voice trembling—

"I wonder…if I've managed to be like you…"

My left arm was obliterated.

"Huh?"

Drop. Drop. A huge amount of blood fell on Hizumi's face.

It painted her face dark red. She had smashed her entire body into the plank when I jumped at her and pushed her down.

Having lost my left arm, I stifled the screams that threatened to leak out my mouth and almost fainted from the insane loss. I gouged the wound with my fingers so the intense pain would keep me conscious—and smiled.

"Hey, Hizumi… Are you okay? She hasn't gotten to you, has she…? I'm sorry…for coloring you with my blood… You'll be okay now…"

I wiped her tears with my index finger.

"Don't cry."

"Why…? Why…?"

I was falling unconscious, my vision was distorted, I was dripping greasy sweat, and I smiled at her.

"Because you're crying."

Hizumi opened her eyes—and I wobbled in front of her.

"Go… I'll buy you time… The boat's still on the ship… Use it to get away… Go… Go, Hizumi… Go…"

I spilled blood as I wandered to and fro, and my vision was fading.

This looks bad.

I wobbled and swayed from side to side as my thoughts went around and around.

You'll probably die soon.

Recalling Julie's words, I looked at myself as my body gradually became colder and colder.

"…So this is it, huh?"

In the original game, Hiiro watched Alsuhariya kill Hizumi at the end of *The Lapis Route*.

Why don't you try to change your fate?

Covered in blood, I put force into my muddy feet.

"Yeah… Tsukiori and the others are still on the ship… They might die if this character keeps throwing her weight around… And if God… A mere god calls that fate…"

I grinned.

"I'll get stuck in between…and crush it to pieces…!!!"

"Hey."

Alsuhariya looked at me on the verge of death and scoffed.

"Did you put other people's lives before your own? Somehow, that sounds familiar. Why would you do a thing like that?"

"If you don't get it…I'll show you…"

I started walking inside the ship, drawing a line of blood on the floor—and found that someone was supporting me.

With a desperate look on her face.

Dragging her feet due to her sprained leg, Hizumi supported me as she tried to get us away from Alsuhariya.

"Hizumi…"

"I… I'm not going to run anymore… I don't want to run…flee…be protected…crying… I don't want that anymore… I… I… I'll do what I can…here and now…"

A photograph fell out of her breast pocket. It showed her linking arms with a woman I didn't know, flashing a peace sign—and she smiled.

"I don't want to be special… I'll be a hero…!!!"

Watching us as we inched away, Alsuhariya laughed and chased after us.

"Yeah, that's good. Try to escape me. It's very nice."

"Ngh…! Ah…! Aaahhh…!!!"

Alsuhariya popped a smoke bullet from her fingertip and punctured Hizumi's body as she shielded me. We pressed our bodies against the wall and continued on our path of death.

Taking one step. And another.

The pain was so excruciating that I thought my brain marrow was being scorched. I was on the verge of fainting but continued pushing forward to escape the sound of footsteps echoing behind us.

Crawling through my blurring vision, I continued as screams and shouts echoed inside the ship.

The *Queen's Watch* swayed violently, and our bodies slammed into a wall.

Blood flowed.

Life, colored red, flowed down the cold walls of the ship's cabins.

The bright red streaks merged with other streaks and formed a single path that flowed down as if to indicate our predetermined fate.

The pain was so intense that my body begged for comfort. Still, I kept going on sheer willpower.

Leaving a bright red trail of blood, we went deeper and deeper into the bottom of the ship.

Somewhere, a sound rang out.

"……"

It was the sound of a sword fight. Tsukiori and the others were fighting.

I smiled.

"…Hizumi."

"It's okay… We're okay… I swear…I'll save you… I…I'm not going to let anyone else…die…," she said, crying.

She continued moving forward, dragging her twisted leg and screaming from the intense pain.

"…Hizumi."

"It's okay…okay…okay…"

"…We've reached a cabin."

I hung my head and pointed with a twitching fingertip.

"We'll hide…there…"

"Y-yeah! O-okay!"

Hizumi slipped her body inside the narrow opening in the door and was about to fling it open—when I pushed her inside.

Caught off guard, Hizumi fell inside, and without a moment's pause, I pulled my trigger and kicked down the door.

"Hiiro Sanjo?!"

The door now had a dent in it.

There was a small gap on the doorknob side, barely enough space for an arm to pass through. Hizumi twisted her arm into the gap and tried desperately to open the door.

"What do you think you're doing?! Huh?! Open this door!!! Come on, hurry! Alsuhariya's coming! Open up!!!"

Her nails peeled off.

Crying, she tried to pry the door open with her crimson fingertips.

"Hizumi…no…"

"Open this door!!! Open it, open it, open it!!!"

She screamed at the top of her lungs and hit the door with her fists.

"Hizumi… You…"

Tears flowed, she had a runny nose, and her face was a mess as she punched and kicked the door over and over, hurting herself more and more— "Can't die here."

She finally stopped moving her hands and feet, and her eyes widened.

"No…"

Huge tears spilled down her cheeks as she reached out to me.

"No… I… I want to be a hero…like her… I want to exist for the sake of others…like Ati… To make someone smile…for the people who made me smile…"

"You're already a hero."

I laughed.

"You aren't the only one… Tsukiori, who's fighting desperately now… Ophelia, who pushed away her fear and stood up to Alsuhariya… You, who continue to put your life on the line for me… Everyone's a hero…and that will…will be passed on…"

I held her hand.

"Leave the rest to me."

Hizumi sobbed and shook her head.

"We can't win… We can't… No one can beat Alsuhariya… A miracle won't happen… We're always… Our lives are always nothing

but a tool to that demon god… We could never resist her… The number of pages is fixed from the beginning…and all we can do is give up…”

“I’m going to win.”

“You can’t!!! Braun couldn’t, and Ati couldn’t. No one could! No one could defeat her! Why do you think you can?!”

“Simple.”

I flashed her a big smile.

“Because I swore I’d give your story a happy ending.”

“Are you…stupid…? How can you laugh…? You’re going to die… You’re going to die here, unable to do anything about it…helplessly… like me… So why…?!”

Huge tears spilled down her cheeks, and Hizumi’s face contorted.

“Why are you laughing…?!”

“Hizumi, trust me. No matter what happens, I’m going to win. I’m ending it here. I’m writing an ending that I can believe in. So have faith in me. You aren’t going to die here. I’ll risk my life to make you smile—if only you’ll believe in me—”

Firmly.

Very firmly, I held Luri Hizumi’s hand—and laughed.

“I’m a hero.”

Hizumi was stunned as I smiled at her and began to walk away.

“Hiiro Sanjo!!!”

I turned around—and with trembling fingers, she passed me a fang through the gap in the door.

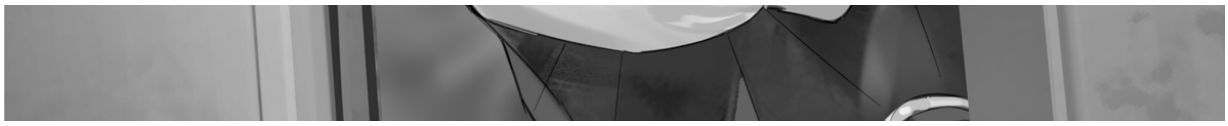
It was her trump card, wrapped in a bloody papyrus… Hizumi gave me her *coffin* and spilled her heart out with tears in her eyes.

“It’s…filled with my magic power…my teacher’s power…Braun’s… the person before her…and those before them… They included regular people…farmers, vagabonds, students… No one’s special… Not everyone…can be a hero who goes down in history…but…but…!”

Hizumi grimaced from the intense pain that came from going against the brand in her eyes. Her face contorted, and she sobbed, but Hizumi held out her *coffin*.

"Every one of them…with pride and a will…wanted to stop someone from crying…and kept moving forward… So…so…!"





Her emotions spilled out of the corners of her eyes.

"It's the wish…of regular people…who wanted everyone to be happy…!!!"

I took the *coffin* and the pride and will that was entrusted to me.

"I swear."

Through the stick I clutched, I swore to her, "I'll fulfill that wish."

"Please…"

Hizumi's head drooped as she said, "Please… Braun…Ati… It's what everyone wished for…"

Luri Hizumi laughed through her tears.

"Give me a smile…"

I smiled.

"I swear."

I heard footsteps.

Alsuhariya appeared, intentionally walking slowly to create a dramatic sense of fear.

To bait her, I went lower and lower into the ship.

I finally reached the bottom of the ship—the rugged engine room—and opened a large door, spilling a massive amount of blood down the wound in my side, and shot a water arrow at her.

"Oops."

Alsuhariya did not attempt to dodge it, and it landed behind her.

"You missed. I'd like to look forward to the next one, but there won't be one."

Alsuhariya's footsteps echoed in the room as she followed me inside—the heart of the *Queen's Watch*.

A special magic device called the Queen's Pillar continued to spin quietly—and the evil spirit laughed loudly.

"Too bad. You're at a dead end."

"……"

"I know what you want to do. This place, where the Queen's Pillar exists, is filled with a large volume of magical power…and

you're thinking of making it explode so you can kill me, along with yourself."

Dripping greasy sweat, I stared at Alsuhariya as she scoffed.

"You intend to self-destruct. If this much magical power explodes at once, even I won't be able to compensate and regenerate in time. I would evaporate and disappear in an instant. The quickest way to kill an evil spirit is to wipe out its existence at once without giving it time to regenerate. You destroyed the safety device with the water arrow you pretended to have removed, didn't you?"

Alsuhariya walked to the center of the room, bowed deeply, and laughed.

"And? Is that the end of the secret plan that your tiny brain has come up with? Or did you think you could stab my heart with that *coffin* Luri Hizumi gave you? Aren't you even going to thank me for standing back and waiting while you played out that moving scene?"

I closed the great door as blood spurted out my side, pulled my trigger, and the magical power in the room was activated.

"Unfortunately…"

Alsuhariya said with a bored look on her face as she spun the tip of her finger around and around. "We have about three minutes before a fatal explosion occurs, and I'm not so stupid that I'd be caught off guard by someone of your caliber. With that much time—"

Her right arm entered my body through my stomach and out through my back. Blood slowly poured down the edge of my mouth. She must have injured my lungs.

"I can kill you like this, then have a glass of wine and a nibble and leisurely walk out of this room."

Her victorious laugh smacked my earlobes—and I smashed my fist into the bridge of her nose.

She flew off the floor with tremendous force.

Alsuhariya collapsed backward and looked up at me, the guy she'd been sure she'd killed, as she wiped her bloody nose.

"…What don't you understand?"

With a big hole in my stomach, I looked down at the demon as my eyes filled with light.

"The only secret plan my tiny brain could come up with was to beat you to a pulp in the next three minutes."

Alsuhariya was shocked.

"Why aren't you dead…? And…"

I clenched my fist, swaying my entire being while working up a huge amount of magical power.

"What is with that magical power…? That strength…? It doesn't make sense…but this is somewhat familiar… It's as if…"

I ran as fast as I could and put everything into my fist—

"As if I'm frightened…"

And I slammed it into the obstacle in front of me.

Spewing blood from her nose, Alsuhariya began spinning to the left. I quickly stepped in and struck her again, this time to the right.

Go right.

Right, right, right!!!

I delivered a straight right, physically reinforced to the limit, and kept punching Alsuhariya relentlessly in the face.

Wobble.

Her upper body tilted to the left, her eyes turned upward—and she persevered, supporting herself with one arm, then stabbed me in the stomach with a smoking knife.

The evil spirit was smiling in satisfaction when I slammed my right fist into her brain.

Her head jerked, and her face contorted in anguish.

"Wh-why…?!"

Alsuhariya's eyes were full of confusion she couldn't hide.

"Why aren't you dead…? Wh-why…? Why…?!"

The knife slashed open my upper body, and I tore off my bloody jacket, which was getting in the way—and Alsuhariya stopped breathing in shock.

"Y-you…"

Stabbed into my left chest was a keepsake.

A keepsake, talisman, and my trump card—the *coffin*. The evil spirit stared at it, and her mouth hung open.

"Y-you stabbed your heart with the *coffin*… You drew on the magical power of the tiny ants…those self-proclaimed heroes…who put their homeopathic magic engraved with *hero* regalia into that… With one mistake, you would have burst from the inside and died… How…? How can you put your life on the line at a crucial moment like this…?"

"Easy," I said. "Because Luri Hizumi's crying."

I shot my right fist up from the waist.

The uppercut sliced through the air in a scooping motion, made Alsuhariya's stomach cave in, and her back bulged out. The evil spirit's body floated in the air as she spat blood.

Punch.

Punch, punch, punch!!!

That was my only focus.

I continued to smack the demon in front of me, and the frustration of knowing her life was draining away was evident in her face.

"B-bastard… You no-good bastard… Th-this is bad…I don't have time… To think a kid like this, a would-be hero…would…take my life… Bastard… Aaahhh!!!"

Alsuhariya released her Magic Eye and tried to obliterate me—and the Queen's Pillar's magical power reacted. She clicked her tongue and gritted her teeth.

"I—I have to get out of here…call Sylphiel and the others… B-but no… The location…is too unsuitable… I-is this…what this guy intended from the start…? Ngh…! Ah…!!!"

Another punch to the right, then the left.

My fist continued its dance and made the evil spirit crumble.

"You!"

Pure horror overcame the evil spirit's face as I continued to deliver blow after blow.

"The girl you treated like a toy… The girl you used, the girl you harmed, to pass the time… She fought a disease that plagued her tiny body…desperately…made herself smile…as she tried to be a hero…and attempted to seize the future… And if you…a mere being like you…want to ruin her smile…her will…her life, then I'll—"

The knife she thrust out slashed through my right fist—but I ignored the excruciating pain and followed through with my swing.

"I'll punch you to your death!!!"

My fist shot into the demon's face.

Her body flipped vigorously in the air.

Staggering from side to side, Alsuhariya repositioned herself, baring her hostility.

"S-stupid kid…don't get carried away… I have higher specs than you… You're nothing but a mortal…a toy… Don't think you're a match for an evil spirit… If you say magical power can block the fatal blows I give you, I'll simply… Ngh!"

A huge number of knives flew out from her trench coat. She grabbed one and pointed the blade at me.

"I'll shred you to death!!!"

"Try it, you demon… It's a good opportunity…for us…to go head-to-head…"

I steadied myself on my wobbly legs, and through my blood-soaked hair, I glared at the evil spirit. Extending my right arm, I gestured for her to come to me with my index finger.

"I'll show you what it's like to be human."

Alsuhariya stepped forward, as did I.

Right versus right, it was a clash of blade against fist as our killing intent seemed to be sucked into the other's weak point.

Bright red blood stained the floor in a violent duel with ferocious force.

Her blood mingled with mine as mortal and demon entwined, and we reveled in killing each other.

Fist and blade swung with tremendous fury, roaring through the air and shaking the room as the Queen's Pillar creaked, gushing out

a pale flash of light.

It was a clash of will versus will, teeth biting teeth, and cries leaking out of both mouths.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

Both our lives were on the line as we continued to chip away at the other's pride.

Overconfident in her abilities, Alsuhariya's expression gradually changed and became distorted with anguish.

"Why?!"

Her voice trembled as she saw that no matter how many times she slashed, cleaved, or stabbed me, I wasn't going down.

"Why won't you fall unconscious?! Why?! Why?! How can you endure all those wounds for the sake of another who's practically a stranger to you?! How can you endure all this pain?! This fear?!"

Now a ball of blood, I laughed and continued to unleash my will.

"You wouldn't understand, would you? A thing like you would never get it!!! You'd never understand the hopes she's embraced! The path she's taken! The heroes she's admired all her life! Not a monster like you who's ruined everything for people and played with their lives!!!"

With a shout of rage, I let my fist fly—and smacked the demon before me.

"How the hell would I know?!"

Alsuhariya backed away, blood pouring down her body.

"I swore I'd win! To make that crying girl smile! So she could keep on smiling!!! So the hero she believed in can live on in her heart!!! I don't see a single reason why I could die here! For that girl, who's practically a stranger to me! Not without overturning this terrible fate!!! Without showing her *a happy ending* where everyone will be smiling!!!"

My bloody fist shot into Alsuhariya's face—

"No way in hell am I going to let you destroy the hero she believes in!!!"

Unable to stay on her feet, the evil spirit flew back.

Farther and farther back.

Drawing a line of blood, Alsuhariya retreated until, finally, there was nowhere for her to run.

Every ounce of magical power in the room swirled in a pale-blue thunderbolt, and a burst of sound similar to a crash of thunder said we had reached the end.

"Hey, evil spirit. Do you want me to tell you why you're going to lose…?!"

I kept punching her as I whispered, "You lose…because you underestimated humans… Unlike you demons, we humans…have a will…that doesn't falter that easily… We have a lot of stuff more precious to us than our own lives…things we want to create, protect, or save… And to connect them, there's no way we can stop… We keep moving forward…with emotions that have been passed down to us… I'm not the one you're going to lose against… Not a guy like me…!!! What's caused your defeat—"

The smile disappeared from the face of the evil spirit before me—and was replaced with a twitching look of despair.

"—are the emotions that everyone's handed over to me!!!"

I slammed my fist into her solar plexus, and she crumpled with a thud.

Show me a smile.

Recalling the girl who smiled as she cried, I squeezed my right arm, which was stained a bright red.

"This…this fist…this pain…this wish…is from the *ant* you toyed with…!!!"

Magic power took on a human form and enveloped me as I raised my right fist.

"This is the will of those heroes!!!"

An image of a hero without a left arm—overlapped with my body—and an image manifested.

"Braun Les Bracketlight…"

The evil spirit was dumbfounded—and my fist connected with her body.

She flew into the air with tremendous ferocity, pounded against the floor, and spat out blood.

Her knees trembled as she staggered to her feet. The relaxed sneer was gone, frozen in a look of shock, and she backed away, no longer able to maintain her composure.

She took one step, then another, and inched back.

An ant she had looked down upon had finally caught up with the evil spirit that had continued to taunt humans—and with the wall against her back, the demon had reached her end.

Aghast, she turned around and saw her doom.

Trembling and shaking, the epitome of evil's eyes widened and traced the path the hero who had hunted her down had traveled.

"I—I remember… I remember now… Widad…Izdihaar…and Atiifa… Hizumi, Aimia, Sophie's relatives… The stupid faces of those humans who considered themselves heroes… They were always…always… obstacles that stood in my way…"

My vision narrowed as I remained focused on the demon. I staggered backward, and suddenly, all the sensations in my body disappeared.

I had exceeded my limit at this final moment, and everything turned dark. "Dang," I managed, but I couldn't see a thing and had no idea which way to turn.

The life was draining out of me. I gritted my teeth, cursing my uselessness, and was about to fall to the floor—when I heard footsteps.

In the dark.

They were soft, then loud, slowly approaching—and drew in the light.

And a barefoot girl in tattered clothes ran into the light, leaving muddy footprints behind.

She ran faster and faster, her head held high, as she laughed.

The girl turned around, ran back to me, and held out a hand.

Let's go.

The light of dawn illuminated my body, wrapped around me, and the shadows of the heroes who had left their footprints behind tapped me on the shoulder and passed me.

One, then another.

A trail of light was illuminated in the darkness, showing a single guidepost, and someone gently pushed my back.

Go.

As I stood puzzled, I heard a voice.

Go.

Making out the faint sound, I slowly saw the light again, and my vision opened up.

Go… Hero.

The woman without a left arm who had been with me pointed in the direction with her outstretched finger.

Go as far as you want.

She smiled. It was a soft, gentle smile without a trace of concern.

Keep going forever.

I took a step, fell forward, regained the consciousness I had lost, moved my foot against the ground as hard as I could, and ran.

Staggering, nearly falling, and with the last ounce of strength that I could muster.

"Oh. Oh. Ooooooohhh…!"

For the sake of the prayers that kept my heart going—I embraced those intents the heroes of the past had continued to pass down—and focused on moving my feet forward.

I followed the girl who was running ahead, reached into the blinding light—and ran.

Come on, catch up with her, I prayed as I moved my feet with pride and willpower as I ran so she wouldn't be alone.

Despite almost losing consciousness, despite a heart that threatened to burst, and despite thinking it was easier to die than endure this pain, I ran.

And ran and ran.

Finally, the tip of my finger came into contact with her back—and I had caught up.

Finally.

Watching over where I was going, the magical power that had taken the form of a woman let out a happy sound and disappeared.

It became a band of light that fluttered in the golden wind that blew from behind and twisted around my outstretched fingertip.

We're here, everyone… This…

I sensed it smile.

This is our goal.

I slammed my soles into the muddy footprints with all my might—and a flash of pale light enveloped my body—and I heard a bloodcurdling scream.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

"No matter how many times…I've tried to eliminate you… Why—?"

As the animal roar scorched my brain and the creaking world shook around me, I stabbed the *coffin* into the left chest of the demon.

"Why do you hold on to life for the sake of a stranger's smile…?"

I rotated the blade hidden in my pant hem and thrust its tip into her heart.

And—the sounds ceased.

Everything came to a standstill, the outcome was reached, and the score was settled between human and demon.

"……"

Alsuhariya was on her knees, and she slowly looked down at the *coffin* that had pierced her heart. *Pop, pop.* Her body bobbed, expanded, and contracted from the inside as its implosion began.

Naturally, my heart was now without a plug, and it, too, slowly stopped functioning.

I was losing my vision.

I smiled thinly and coughed up blood as memories of the past to the present flitted through my awareness.

If it isn't Hiiro Sanjo! I thought a rude intruder had arrived!

It's okay. I know! I've circled in red the events I want to attend!

I love you, darling! Come home soon!

I was just keeping an eye on my brother so he wouldn't do something funny again.

My name is Ophelia von Margeline!

No wonder you'd dance with a vase instead of a girl.

I thought something was noisy. It's your heartbeat, Hiiro.

My chest ached, and the blue light surrounding the area began to swell.

"Oh, geez… If this was how I'd feel… I should have hurried up and died… Sorry, Tsukiori… I leave the rest to you… Promise me… you'll take care of those girls… I have faith in you… I'm sorry…I couldn't stick around…to the end…"

With a smile on my face, I whispered, "Listen, demon. I'll give you the greatest aphorism ever created by humankind to take with you to hell."

Laughing, I said my final words.

"A guy who gets stuck between yuri girls can die."

"Ah, I get it… That…indeed…"

The evil spirit closed her eyes, smiling with amusement.

"That's being human," I squeezed out with the last of my magical power—and everything became stained with a pale-blue blast of light.

AFTERWORD

Hi, I'm Ryo Hazakura.

Thanks to everyone's support, I have been able to witness the launch of Volume 2 of this work safely. Thank you all so much.

After repeatedly reading the text, I've lost track of whether it's interesting, but I hope you've enjoyed it.

Here are my acknowledgments.

To the illustrator, hai, I am deeply grateful for your always lovely illustrations. I was stunned that your illustration of Ophelia was so Ophelia. The vertical rolls were perfect. It's fantastic.

To my editor, M, it's thanks to you always following up that a lazy, sloppy guy like me can somehow manage to keep up with my work.

To you readers, I'm genuinely grateful for your support and for spending your precious money on this book. I don't know how long I'll be able to do this, but I'll do my best.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who has contributed to the publication of this work.

Until we meet again,
Ryo Hazakura

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink