





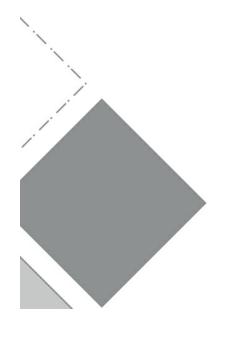
## The Inly Thing I'd Do in a No-Boys-Allowed Game World

Reincarnated as a Yvri Ship-Sinker

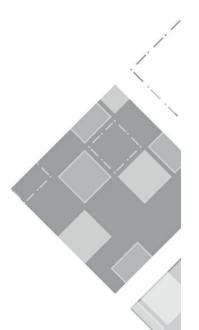


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Ryo Hazakura Translation by Eriko Sugita

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DANSHIKINSEIGAMESEKAI DE ORE GA YARUBEKI YUIITSU NO KOTO Vol. 1

YURI NO AIDA NI HASAMARUOTOKOTOSHITE TENSEISHITESHIMAIMASHITA

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## Contents

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Copyright

**Begin Reading** 

<u>Afterword</u>

Yen Newsletter

"Haaah... Haaah..."

The sound of her breathing echoed through the back alley.

The girl ran frantically, checking behind her again and again as she desperately tried to outrun her pursuer.

"...!"

Her expression became twisted with despair.

Before her towered a wall—a dead end.

It had to be at least eleven feet high. With her slender arms and lack of upper body strength, she had no hope of scaling it.

"...Miko."

The girl jerked and turned around.

A beautiful girl met her gaze.

Her moonlit black hair fluttering in the pale moonlight, the mysterious girl approached the one called Miko.

Miko slowly retreated until her back pressed against the wall. She grit her teeth in acknowledgment of the futility of her situation.

"T-to be clear, I don't intend to get romantically involved with y—urgh!"

The black-haired girl pressed her lips to those of the girl she'd cornered.

The moon illuminated the pair's silhouettes, tracing their soft contours. It was as if the moon goddess herself had blessed their kiss.

After a long moment, they separated. The girl who had been cornered looked away, her cheeks rosy.

"E-enough, you idiot... I told you I wasn't interested..."

"It's okay. Just close your eyes."

The girls' lips reunited.

The moonlight pierced the veil of darkness and cast a spotlight on the girls as they stood center stage.

A blossoming love story between these unparalleled beauties...is not what this story is about.

*"…"* 

In a dark corner of the back alley...

...a man, squatting low to the ground and munching on a hamburger, stared at them.

"...Yep, I knew it. Yuri is the best."

This is a story about me—Hiiro Sanjo.



A yuri game depicts the process during which girls become couples.

Some may associate the word *yuri*—which means *lily* in English—with perennials belonging to the lily family of the order Liliaceae, but when we say *yuri*, we're talking about a genre that depicts romance and friendships between girls.

So why are they called *yuri games*, you ask?

There are various theories, but it seems that someone used lilies as a metaphor to describe romantic relationships between women, which was then used to represent friendships and romantic relationships.

*Everything for the Score*—or *ESCO*—is a yuri game.

Most yuri games use a visual novel format, and the story progresses while you read along with the text. *ESCO*, however, is an unusual type of yuri game with many simulated elements.

The setting is a parallel world, a modern-day Japan where magic exists.

Its characteristic feature is that every little thing—from a person's general demeanor and day-to-day activities to how they make their beds—is evaluated, and then they're awarded a score by the government.



The objective of the player is to increase the score of the protagonist while boosting her stats and getting her an ending with one of the game's four heroines.

For true yuri enthusiasts, *ESCO* is a must-play game. However, the general public isn't really aware of it because it's practically nonexistent on the market. They didn't release a digital version.

Thanks to the limited availability of physical copies, the price of the game spiked shortly after its release.

I'm a yuri superfan, but even I neglected to acquire one of the egregiously overpriced copies that scalpers flooded the market with.

It may sound like I'm making excuses, but I had just entered college. I was busy with moving and stuff, so I didn't have much time or stamina left to devote to my yuri research.

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"...Help me."
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"I beg your pardon?"

"Help me ooooout!"

"Are you a monster with an audio bug?! That was so loud! You nearly shattered my eardrums!"

I'd been using voice chat to beg a fellow yuri enjoyer to lend me their copy, and two years after the initial release, I was finally able to get my hands on the game.

I was proud of my love and admiration for yuri and truly believed it to be life's greatest gift.

The wait for the shipment to arrive at my home was too agonizing. As soon as it arrived at my local distribution center, I called the delivery people and hopped on my bike.

"Hello? Is this Yama Delivery Service?! My name is Tachibana! You have something for me, right?!"

"Huh? Um, I'm sorry. What?"

"I'm gonna need you to throw it to the address I'm about to give you! Leaving it at the door is fine!"

"Huh? What? No human has arms strong enough to throw it to your address!"

"Don't wait. I trust you!"

"Huh? No, um, that simply isn't possible—"

"W-wait a minute. I'm not going to throw it! Please stop screaming like you're doing a movie trailer!"

In the end, I biked to the distribution center to pick up my package normally. Since I'd calmed down, I got on my hands and knees and bowed to give a sincere apology to the man I'd spoken with on the phone.

And that's how I finally got my yuri game.

The *ESCO* package seemed to radiate a brilliant glow, and my vision became blurred by the time I started playing it.

"l...can't see!"

I shed tears over the beautiful illustrations and devoured the wonderful opening cinematic.

That Sunday was pure bliss.

Even God took Sundays off. As someone recognized by the god of yuri, it was my duty—nay, my God-given right—to take a break and enjoy the game.

I could feel my fatigued body and soul, which were worn out from the troubles of the real world, being rejuvenated.

"All four of the heroines are cute. I can't wait to watch them get lovey-dovey with the protag."

My dream is to become a houseplant in an apartment shared by a cute lesbian couple and have them water me and feed me romantic scenes every day.

To be clear, I don't ship myself with any of the female characters.

I just want to offer them a gentle, guiding hand along their yuri routes from my position as an outsider.

"This game's more complex than I thought... I'm not sure where to start... And what's with this system? A *magic device*...? That's a little much, isn't it? At least it looks like I won't have to worry about the score since it'll go up no matter what I do."

Each magical aspect was classified by attribute and ability value. Including the magic device weapon system, the game seemed a lot more flexible than I'd initially expected. To my surprise, this dating sim had a fair amount of RPG elements.

The player needed to plan out the protagonist's life day by day in order to optimize her stats, get key interactions, and lead her down the path of her happy ending.

The protagonist was free to spend the mornings and afternoons however she pleased, and it was up to the player to plan out her free time as well. The results of the chosen actions were displayed at the end of the day.

Activities such as taking classes at school or practicing magic would increase her parameters, ability values, and overall score.

Events would occur depending on her actions, and the ability values would increase and decrease. But basically, all events were beneficial, so the heroines would start to like you at an accelerated rate.

"This is so easy. It's about as easy as day-old bathwater is on your skin."

There was next to no stress at all.

However, depending on the routes you took, the level of challenge could increase dramatically.

There were not only four types of endings for each heroine but also an Adventurer Ending, in which the player becomes known as an adventurer; a Headmaster Ending, in which the player becomes the headmaster of the magic academy; and even a Fall to the Dark Side, in which the player rejects all the heroines and succumbs to malevolence.

No stress, but plenty of substance.

This game probably would have been popular even if it hadn't been a yuri game. But even then, it also had a unique stress factor.

"Hey, what are you two doing? Let me join you!"

"Argh, there you are, you loser!"

The guy's name was Hiiro Sanjo, the only male character in the game and the king of all pests.

True to his nature, he said and did things that tore the protagonist and heroines apart.

Most negative occurrences in the game could be traced back to the suspicious blond guy.

"Oh, heading to the dungeon? I'll go with you!"

"Leave us alooooone! Go to hell!!!"

Not only was he incredibly annoying, but he also inserted himself into the characters' dungeon delves and acted like he belonged there, making it impossible for events with the heroines to occur while he was around. On top of that, he gobbled up a portion of the experience points rewarded for these events.

"What's going on? Hey, what are you two doing? I smell something fishy. Don't leave me out!"

"Read the goddamn mood! Die!"

I now knew why this game failed to take off in terms of popularity, only gaining a cult following at best.

Him.

This guy irked the hell out of me.

He annoyed me to the point that I wanted to write him out of the game even if I had to give up half of my remaining lifespan to do so. He was a pest—the natural-born enemy of every person who hated seeing a guy anywhere near a yuri romance.

Naturally, the heroines despised him as if he were some venomous creature seeking only to corrupt and despoil. But he was clearly incredibly resilient because their open hatred of him didn't seem to trouble him in the slightest.

Since romantic relationships between women are the driving force of any yuri game, there is hardly a need for male characters. Even if one does show up, they're usually just background characters, like a random enemy or obstacle.

Most male characters that appear in yuri projects are no better than land mines, and this is true for more than games. But if the average male character were a land mine, Hiiro was more of an air strike. He was such an ugly bastard that the back of the game jacket should have given a warning, like, *Some of the characters depicted may cause psychological damage*.

"N-no, no... I'd be putting my life in danger if I kept playing any longer... I need yuri to cleanse my mind...or I won't be human anymore..."

This guy was the sole reason I had to tear myself away from the game and play a different yuri title on occasion.

The only saving grace is that in every ending, Hiiro dies a tragic death. There's a mental palate cleanser where he carries an imaginary coffin on his shoulders and congratulates you from the shadows.

ESCO is so compelling.

The sheer volume of events keeps the game progressing at a healthy clip.

In the blink of an eye, day turned to night and then back to day again. Hiiro aside, I continued to lose myself in the game, cutting back on sleep as much as my body would allow.

A few days later, after getting all the endings, collecting all the event scenes, and devouring every last bit of main-story and side-story text, I finally decided to get a good night's rest.

"... Maybe I'll go out and get some dinner before hitting the sack."

With an appetite that exceeded my desire to sleep, I left the house and strolled over to a nearby convenience store.

As I was walking along the side of a residential street, fighting the drowsiness

clawing at my eyelids, a car barreled down the narrow road.

"Whoa! That was too close!"

In my hungry haze, I had barely managed to dodge the car. It was hard to believe that idiots would speed even in a place like this, but it was something I'd grown used to.

I quickened my pace back to the main street, and my eyes caught the silhouettes of two people ahead of me. There were two girls walking shoulder to shoulder—not too close, but not too far from each other. Their bodies were almost touching.

I couldn't help but stare.

*""* 

My yuri sense began to tingle. I quickly held my breath and made myself invisible. The two girls closed the distance between them at a tantalizingly slow pace, gently intertwined their fingers, and eventually took a firm grasp of each other's hands.

A wide grin wormed its way onto my face as I glued my back to a wall and blended into the background.

What a beautiful, sunny day today was. Life is wonderful. Stop the hands of time. You're both radiant. No amount of flowery verbiage that came to mind could do the scene before me justice.

Happy to witness something so wonderful, I decided to remain rooted in place until the girls left.

Just then, I saw *another* large vehicle come charging straight at us. The furious sound of tires scraping the asphalt and the sight of the car plowing into the narrow alley made me tense all over as every fiber of my being screamed, *Danger!* The girls noticed the car and tried to sidestep it, still holding hands... and pulled each other in opposite directions. Naturally, they fell to the ground with a thud.

Hey, hey, hey... Stop, stop! You can see us, can't you?! Stop...!

Despite my desperate prayers, the car kept traveling well beyond the speed

limit, the thought of braking long forgotten.

It was drawing close. Closer! Closer!!!

The driver looked to be messing with his smartphone, completely unaware of the gruesome situation about to unfold.

The girls screamed—and I was already running.

"Aaaaaaahhh!"

Frantically pumping my clumsy, sleep-deprived legs, I used all of my body weight to shove the girls out of the way as they finally scrambled to their feet. The car was mere inches away from me now.

"...Ah, I haven't even been able to read this month's Princess Yuri yet."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the girls, who were now out of harm's way, holding hands again. The vehicle struck my torso, and I went sailing through the air.

"So the yuri pairing is safe, huh? Then I guess this is fine..."

I lost all sensation in my body, and my vision began to fade. Everything went dark—and then I immediately jerked to my senses.

"Whoa! What was that, a dream?! Sheesh, that scared me! For a second, I thought I actually di—"

I could hear the sound of a train traveling over rickety tracks.

Lights that were nearly out flickered on and off, and I saw men's urinals lined up in a row.

Flash, flash! My vision flickered back and forth on the border between light and dark.

There was a mirror in front of me.

With a reflection of my face.

The man in the mirror had golden hair, looked utterly frivolous, and displayed the oddly fine features that always irked me... It was the face I had sworn at too many times to count. "Huh?"

I blinked a few times, then stroked my face.

"Isn't that...Hiiro's face...?"

A few hours later...

I, Itsuki Tachibana, realized that I had been reincarnated in the world of *ESCO* as Hiiro Sanjo, the ultimate pest of all yuri games.

No matter how many times I looked at myself in the mirror of the train station's men's room, no matter how much time passed, and no matter how I tried to rationalize, the ugly truth stared me in the face. I had become Hiiro.

I wandered the streets and slowly came to my senses.

I was able to regain my composure after admiring the previously mentioned yuri couple in a back alley, hamburger in hand.

There was no denying it.

I'd been reborn in the world of *ESCO*.

It was pretty easy to figure out, honestly. Because, you see, the male presence in this world seemed to be something of an afterthought.

The men walking down the street definitely existed, but they just seemed to blend into the background. They had no discernible features to speak of.

In the past, I had typecast the status of males in yuri games into four categories. Applying those four types to the situation, the men of this world displayed the characteristics of a composite of Types 3 and 4.

Type 1: Males don't exist.

- Type 2: Males don't enter the picture because the games are set in places where men typically aren't (like an all-girls school).
- Type 3: Males do exist, but they're treated as side characters, rank-and-file enemies, or they're just part of the background assets.
  - Type 4: Males exist, but they're obstacles or villains.

Because in this world, everyone—and I mean *everyone*—was a girl. They were all doing things like linking arms and making out in back alleys.

"Am I in heaven...?"

Apparently, I, a pious man, had been called to heaven, embraced by the arms of the yuri god.

As much as I wanted to indulge in the euphoric feeling that permeated all five of my senses, once I sorted out my current situation, I realized that I was actually in danger.

If I had been reborn in the yuri game world as a girl, I would probably be on my knees right now, offering a prayer of thanks.

But I was reincarnated as *Hiiro Sanjo*.

The absolute menace of *ESCO* was a character who existed only to get in the way of yuri romance... And he was also destined for a miserable end.

"Damn... This...is actually pretty bad...isn't it...?"

I once again sought refuge in the men's room train station and loosened my tie.

For some reason, I—Hiiro—was wearing a suit. I looked fine, perhaps due to his okay-at-best looks, but my pathetic expression was still contorted with frustration.

Only one ending awaited Hiiro in the ESCO world.

Death.

On one route, he falls to his death. On another, he drowns. And on another, he starves to death. On yet another route, he dies of shock, and on another, his sister murders him.

Hiiro's death at the end of the game was programmed purely for player satisfaction. It's schadenfreude from every angle, and Hiiro's death is the icing on the cake of your playthrough. No matter how things go for the player, Hiiro always dies.

Most of Hiiro's death patterns involve the main characters and the four

heroines. If I am to survive as Hiiro, I'll need to approach the main characters and the heroines in some way.

Maybe I should kill them first...

"Absolutely not! I'll protect those yuri couples even at the cost of my life!"

What came to mind was an outrageous idea, and it simply wasn't possible. If the yuri heroines are destroyed, then all Hiiros on the field will also be destroyed!

The order of priority went like this: yuri >>>>me>>others.

I'd happily give my life to protect a yuri couple, but I didn't want to die a dog's death for a dumb reason, as was the case in many game scenarios.

I'll have to think of another way to prevent that from happening.

Like by working hard enough to overcome any gruesome fate that awaits me. Perhaps Hiiro can escape certain death with enough of the right sort of training... However, there's a good reason why he doesn't do that.

I was lost in my thoughts, walking around in front of the train station, when the sound of a voice froze me.

"Hiiro."

I turned around and saw a girl with long, jet-black hair standing there.

Her eyes were pitch-black and reminded me of the dark vacuum of outer space. The central pupil shined like a brilliant star with a luminosity that frightened anyone who stood before her.

Her dignified appearance and shapely physique stood out even among the beautiful women walking down the street. Everyone turned around to take another look at her, their cheeks rosy. The blue dress she wore was a gradation of light.

Rei Sanjo is one of the four heroines in ESCO, and she is Hiiro's younger sister.

"I was worried when you suddenly disappeared," she whispered without a hint of concern in her voice.

"With all due respect, Hiiro, please hurry. We have a limousine waiting.

People will frown if you're late to dinner. You do understand the importance of this dinner, don't you?"

In the latter half of her route in the game, Rei ends up killing Hiiro.

Of course, it was because Hiiro asked for it after what he did, and I couldn't complain because I was dancing with delight when it happened.

I wasn't one to talk, but now that I was facing her as Hiiro, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of dread.

I could tell by her words and attitude...

She didn't have an ounce of affection for me.

"Yeah, I know."

"Then please get in the car. Tracking you down has taken up a lot of my time."

Lifting her opera-gloved arm gracefully, she pulled out a pocket watch and glanced at it.

"....!"

That was when she frowned slightly.

I racked my brain.

Dinner, dinner... Was it a Sanjo family dinner?

I finally understood why I was in a suit.

Hiiro was the only son of the Duke of Sanjo.

*ESCO* was set in a parallel, modern-day Japan, a world where the nobility—the aristocrats—continued to thrive.

Dukes, marquesses, viscounts, and barons.

There were senior and junior nobility ranked according to the nobility ordinance, among which the Sanjo family was a prestigious family with the rank of duke. In other words, I was the heir of an aristocrat.

If things proceeded according to the game scenario, I would be spoiled rotten, taking advantage of my status and making no effort to do anything—only to eventually die... With that in mind, if I, the son of the Sanjo family, was late for

dinner, people were sure to see me as a problem, considering I was already in a shaky position.

"Well, then don't be late," Rei said icily. She was about to leave when I stopped her.

"Oh, hey, wait just a minute."

"...Why?"

"To be blunt, you look really pissed off."

And did she ever.

"Huh? I do not."

"Oh sorry. My brutal honesty kicked in... I guess I just said the quiet part out loud... Hey, wait a minute."

I dashed to the convenience store and came back with a bandage.

"Here."

"...What's this for?"

"You hurt your hand, didn't you? And you use knives and forks at dinner, right? I just figured you wouldn't want the wound to ache while you ate."

She stared me dead in the eye.

"What's your angle?"

"Well, you see...," I said with a brilliant smile. "Nothing gets by me when it comes to yuri girls."

"...Huh?"

A crack appeared in her expressionless mask.

I hastily replied as I watched a look of disgust appear on her face.

"You looked like you were in pain when you took out your pocket watch, and I thought you might have injured your hand or something. You have to be careful and take care of it if only for your future (female) partner's sake."

She looked stunned.

Then she opened her mouth to speak.

"Is your head okay?"

"Oh, I have a yuri IQ of 180."

Rei remained expressionless as she opened her phone and punched in a number.

"Hello, 119? We have a medical emergency here," she said.

"Please don't call an ambulance. It isn't my intention to confuse ER staff and interrupt the hospital scene."

"Just kidding."

She closed her phone, her face still devoid of any emotion.

"But Hiiro, to think you would joke about anything... I'm surprised that you would say something like that."

"Never in my life have I insulted a yuri girl with a joke. As a dutiful Japanese citizen, I have never once failed to pay my taxes or protect the sanctity of yuri."

"I should be on my way now, or I'll be late."

Rei grabbed the bandage from my hand and turned her back to me.

"Don't you be late, either, Hiiro. Not after taking up my precious time."

"Well you took away my precious oral moisture. Give it back."

I pointed to the puddle of water at her feet with a grin, and she walked away. Then I got into the limousine—and the Sanjo family dinner ended without incident…as everyone in attendance ignored me completely.

It had been decided that Rei would inherit the Sanjo family name, and apparently, I, the eldest son, had only been invited for one reason.

It was a spectacular sight, seeing the lineup of older women dressed in kimonos like yakuza mobsters. They were so intimidating that you'd think they'd killed a person or two.

People were wearing forced smiles on their faces, trying to get on their good side, so I figured they had to be pretty important.

Rei was seated among the big shots, appearing to be completely at ease with her forced smile.

No one came to say hello to me, though.

And since no one was coming to me, I decided to go to them. My innate politeness struck critical as I greeted them, and they looked at me with frightened looks on their faces as I grinned and talked about a must-play visual novel about love blooming between nurses.

People from branch families didn't seem to be a match with Rei from the head family, but they treated me less like I was some stone sitting on the road and more like I was an air polluter emitting carbon dioxide.

They were practically bad-mouthing me to my face—or right next to where I sat—so I fought back by blowing bubbles in my drink without a shred of decorum.

"Hiiro."

The party was in full swing.

When I grew tired of my childish protest, an old lady whose arrogance and pomposity could erect an entire building in Roppongi began addressing me.

"You will enroll at Houjou Magic Academy next year."

Houjou Magic Academy... That's the school that would serve as the main setting for *ESCO*.

That was where the player character would meet the heroines.

Hiiro would enroll at the academy and meddle with the yuri girls, and eventually, he would die a cruel death. How sad.

"I'm not asking, by the way. You will attend. You were born into the Sanjo family, so you don't have a say in the matter. The family has decided it's time we did something about you."

Incidentally, there are several endings in which the Sanjo family has Hiiro assassinated, much to the delight of the player base. This must be the guy who lazily spreads a picnic sheet under the stars of misfortune.

"Why Houjou Magic Academy?"

"Independence. I hear you've asked people from branch families for money on several occasions, pressing the matter in a way that should've registered as shameful, even for a brat like you. An idiot with more energy than he knows what to do with might as well attend a magic school and see if he can put that energy to good use."

You've gotta be kidding me!

That's because with all the money the Sanjos have donated to the school, you can always easily murder me whenever you want! Geez, you're prepared! Go ahead! More! If I haven't turned into Hiiro, that is!

"Well, good luck. We will support you."

So as it turned out, the purpose of this dinner was to declare to me that the family was either going to *bring me to heel* or *have me killed*.

"And this is the support I get, huh...?"

Having safely returned home from dinner to the Sanjo family villa, I stared at the magical catalytic converter—or simply, magic device—on my bed.

It was seven AM, the morning after the Sanjo family dinner.

I had woken up at six, gone for a run, come back, taken a shower, and returned to my room.

A magic device, huh?

At a glance, it appeared to be a perfectly normal katana.

But upon closer inspection, I noticed that the sheath had several indentations in it, and each one seemed like it was meant to hold something. Straight and curved lines ran between the indentations like they were connecting them, creating a design like a crest.

I unsheathed the sword, and it was immediately apparent that this was no ordinary weapon.

The sword didn't have a blade.

Secured tightly with subtle magic, the entry point was between the sheath and its sword guard. The curved grip had a trigger, and in the center of the sheath was a muzzle.

The reason for this mechanism was a bit...special, unique to *ESCO*'s method of activating magic.

First of all, magic can only be activated in this world through this magical device.

You can chant *Fireball!* without using your hands, but nothing will happen. All that'll happen is you being called crazy for shouting nonsense in public.

Magic is activated by pulling the trigger of this magic device.

In addition to this device that resembles a sword, there are also walking sticks, crystal balls, bracelets, holy shrouds, and even unique hair ornaments. Still, they all have one thing in common: They all have a trigger that you pull to activate the magic.

Simply pulling the trigger won't activate any magic, though. The concave portion of the sheath is called a slot, where you have to fit a console.

The magic that can be activated depends on the kind of console you put in this slot.

In addition, the effects and power of the magic will change if consoles are linked by the wires inscribed on the sheath.

This combination relates to the depth of *ESCO* combat, making me think the developers needlessly overcomplicated elements of the game that had nothing to do with girl-girl romance.

"Ugh! This console is mostly junk... It's worse than the equipment the main character starts out with...and it needs to be used with another one for the buff to take effect... It's useless as is..."

The magic device is undeniably first-class.

As you'd expect from the Sanjo family, they were so concerned with keeping up appearances that they even gave the black sheep of the family an incredible device like this.

Still, the console I had to use with it was garbage. Just about the only use it had would be as an educational tool for a three-year-old.

"This is no good. I'm way too short on consoles... I guess I'll go check out the dungeon after I have a meal...since I have to beef up my combat skills before I start school, or who knows when the Sanjo family will catch me off guard..."

I was busy playing with the magic device when—

*"…"* 

"Whoa!"

That was when I noticed a girl silently standing in the corner of the room.

Her hair was as white as snow, and the eyes that peeked out from between the strands of pure white hair were a deep crimson. She wore a tight-fitting black-and-white maid uniform, and the white headband added to her loveliness.

She must be one of the NPCs. I had never seen a character like her in the original game.

She was petite, and she gave a small tilt of the head as she stared at me.

"A meal, sir?"

"...Pardon me?"

She pointed with her thumb to the rear door.

"Your meal, sir."

"Huh? Oh...um, okay..."

Turning on her heel, she spun around, looked back at me again, and said, "Idiot."

"Huh? Hey, wait a minute!"

Stopping like it took tremendous effort, she turned toward me.

"Yes?"

"I'm your master. Your mentor. Why the harsh language? Is there a girl you're crushing on?"

"Are you giving me a lecture or asking me about my love life?"

"Is there a girl you're crushing on?"

"So that's the part you care about most..."

The expressionless maid answered honestly, "I don't have a girl that I like. As for the verbal abuse, it's to get back at you for bad-mouthing a colleague of mine the other day. 'Are you sorry now, you marginally attractive creature? Haha, don't think you're too good to get fired, you rotten blonde! Your mother has an outie belly button! I hope you grow a hairy mole!"

The other day...? It must have been before I was reincarnated as Hiiro.

That bastard went ahead and plucked a yuri flower before it had a chance to bloom. Hiiro truly is the scum of the earth.

"Okay. I'm the one to blame, no matter how you look at it. I'll endure whatever you have to say to me. I only want you to do one thing... Find a girl that you can love. Promise this delightful heir that one thing."

She tilted her head further to the side.

"...Who are you?"

"The delightful heir."

"The scumbag Hiiro I know has never made a polite request a day in his life."

"There's a first time for everything. Imagine how shocked I was the first time I read *Princess XX*."

Her look of bewilderment never left her face as she took me to the maid I had abused so I could apologize. Then, after lunch, I decided to go to the dungeon to burn off some calories.

But as I was heading out...

"Hey, why are you following me?"

*""* 

For some reason, the maid had joined the party. The white-haired maid didn't respond to my questions, and she didn't even tell me her name as she played with her nails like she was bored. It appeared that her affinity for men who get

between yuri was past zero and into the negative. I felt the same way, to be honest.

Setting aside the maid situation for now, I called up to the forefront of my brain what I remembered of my knowledge of the original game that I'd burned into my soul.

The Dungeon.

A naturally occurring anomaly that connected this world with another... It was a place where violent monsters appeared en masse, and only destroying one of its cores would seal that dungeon entrance permanently.

Magic was the only means of attack effective against the monsters of the dungeon.

For that reason, the game's characters attended a magic academy so they could repel the monsters overflowing from the dungeon.

Their battle wouldn't be over until they learned how to use the magic devices and crushed the dungeon cores that existed throughout the world!

...Or so I remember the game instructions saying. However you played it, the girls generally forgot all about the dungeon in the end and lived happily ever after.

A specialized agency manages the dungeon, and the entrances are sealed with barriers. Unauthorized entry is forbidden and requires a permit, which I, as the Sanjo family heir, was easily granted.

But I learned a frightening truth in the process.

It appeared that my score at the moment...was zero.

In the *ESCO* world, everything is evaluated—from your behavior, performance, and contributions to society to the way you fold your bedding. The government gives you a score based on these evaluations, which determines your rank.

Your score determines everything in this world.

Family status, how you're treated at school, the advantages you have when looking for a job, the quality of the drinks you're served, and the number of side

dishes you get at dinner.

Even monetary dealings are held with these scores at the epicenter. You can use your score to pay for something in place of money.

Scores are also linked with magic devices.

Say you wanted to buy a soda from a vending machine. The machine automatically reads your device and decides what you can get (with a score of zero, all I can buy is a flat cola).

In the city of Tokyo, where I live, you can only shop with your score at most convenience stores and vending machines. With my score of zero, I have to go all the way to a convenience store near the train station that accepts cash to procure goods.

But even with my bottom-tier score, I could easily obtain a dungeon entry permit, probably because the old ladies of the Sanjo family arranged it.

They were probably hoping that I'd get myself killed in the dungeon or something.

And now for the obvious question. Why is my score zero?

Fortunately, the answer is just as obvious.

I'm a guy in a yuri-verse, and the entire world hates me. In MMO terms, I'm constantly walking around in tank stance. I might as well write *punching bag* for my first, second, and third choices on my career-preference questionnaire.

But anyway, I, newly reincarnated as Hiiro Sanjo, am destined to die a gruesome death during my school life—in the main game, that is.

I think that at the very least, I'll have to become powerful enough to resist at least the assassins the Sanjo family hires before I meet my fate of destruction.

To achieve that, I must learn and strengthen my abilities in magic.

I need consoles to do that, and I also need to develop various abilities to boost those values. That's the very reason why I've come to the dungeon where I can obtain consoles and hope to grow my skills.

Dungeons in the world of ESCO extremely diverse.

There are orthodox types like caves, sky castles, and world trees, as well as those connected to everyday life, like deserted department stores, demolished buildings, and mansions with many traps set up.

The dungeon I arrived at was styled after an abandoned train station—pretty suitable for beginners. It was a shallow dungeon with five underground levels, and the monsters that appeared there were all weaklings that I didn't know how to defeat.

I bent down and stared at my magic device.

Masamune Kuki... It's a true-to-life sword and a mighty sharp one considered to be a national treasure.

In the *ESCO* world, it's a device pre-loaded with three consoles and passive skills that boost strength and agility.

It's fairly easy to use since the internal wires connect, resulting in a chain reaction regardless of which console you have slotted.

In the main game, if you choose the option **Take even if it means killing Hiiro** when you first meet him, the protagonist will obtain the sword. The moment that choice is made, Hiiro spontaneously explodes for some reason. Make one choice, and he dies—the developer's murderous intent is something else.

I fit Masamune Kuki with the consoles *Attribute: Light* and *Generation: Ball* conductors and pulled the trigger.

Instantly—the consoles and the wire connected.

A pale blue light ran through the sheath, and the magic was activated.

A ball of light appeared before my eyes.

"Whoa!"

Cool!

I'm a gamer to my core, and seeing real magic get activated set my heart ablaze.

*"…"* 

But I could still feel the maid's stare burning a hole in the side of my head. Maybe I'll set a trap for her.

"Okay then. Maybe I'll move the ball of light now!" I said in a loud voice and opened my hand, revealing my palm.

"Huuuh? Something's wrong with this."

The maid twitched in reaction.

"Why isn't it moving? Is this thing defective?"

The maid glanced in my direction, her body trembling anxiously.

Hee-hee... You want to show me, don't you...? I can tell. Human beings love to feel superior to others!

"I—I suppose it can't be helped."

With a smug look on her face, the maid came trotting up to me, perhaps giving up after my playing dumb.

She took the bait! I got her!

Silently reeling her in, I turned my head about ninety degrees and went on the offensive.

"I don't get it! I don't get it at all! Not a thing! Is this like knowing nothing except the fact of my ignorance?! Oh no. I think I'm growing a brain cell!"

"It looks like I have no choice. Get on all fours and bow until your head is kissing the floor, and I'll teach y—"

"Gimme that."

Suddenly, another girl appeared from the side and grabbed the magic device from my hand. She began fiddling with it, clearly engrossed in the gadget.

*"…."* 

Who the heck was she?!

She had blond hair as smooth as silk and distinctive pointy ears.

She had a slender figure characteristic of elves, wore colorful earrings, and had a bow strapped to her person.

Her blue eyes shined as beautifully as the moon, and they were sure to bewitch anyone who beheld them.

Her outfit was very revealing, typical to elven culture, and of course, I knew exactly who this beautiful girl was.

"Okay, perfect. Here you go. Be sure to slot an operation console, or else you won't be able to shoot."

She was one of the strongest elf princesses, first in line to kill Hiiro, and one of the game's four romanceable heroines.

"Is this your first time in the dungeon?"

Lapis Clouet la Lumet.

"You should go home before you get killed."

Instead of catching a maid, I reeled in a way bigger fish.

Astonished by her sudden arrival, I opened my eyes wide.

Lapis is a princess from the land of the elves. Since the *Dungeon of the World Tree* that the main characters visit at the end of the game is part of her country, we can't gain entry unless she's present in the party.

Naturally, she's rich beyond measure, and the Sanjo family couldn't hope to compete.

And she's as strong as she is wealthy. It's probably no exaggeration to say that she's the strongest when it comes to long-distance combat.

The magic device she used, called *Iliovasilema*, was an overpowered bow. If you were some distance away from her, she'd kill you first before you could ever hope to close the gap. Besides, depending on the combination of consoles, it can also be used at medium range, so the only way to win was to challenge her at close range.

I fought her on an *Evil Route* playthrough, and to tell you the truth, she's even stronger than the game's final boss.

Among all in-game enemies, there was likely no greater threat to the pestilent Hiiro's life.

I don't know how many times Hiiro has died on her route. She was thorough, killing him over and over when a certain witch revived him using necromancy.

One wrong move with her, and she'll treat you as being *out of the game* and kill you without a second thought. The most laughable cause of death for Hiiro in the game came after he ate the ice cream she'd been saving for herself...but that didn't seem as funny at the moment. Nope, not in the slightest.

"Hmm? What is it?"

Her golden hair fell to her waist.

The girl's long hair cascaded down and around her back and shined even in the dimly lit, abandoned train station.

She was so beautiful that she could only be a game character. She gazed at me, brushing back her hair with her fingers.

"A guy, huh?"

She put a hand over her mouth and laughed.

"I saved him on reflex, but I guess I didn't have to do that since he's a guy."



It was a derogatory remark but a natural thing to say to a male.

Male characters were pariahs in the yuri community, and the unwritten rule was that any man who threatened a yuri ship was better off dead.

As things like that were common knowledge, male characters in *ESCO* were either ignored or abused. I would have ignored guys, too, if I'd been reincarnated as a girl, and I couldn't say anything about Hiiro because of his situation.

"And with a score of zero."

Anyone could check the score of anyone else through the use of a magical device.

The sight of my pitiful score made Lapis giggle.

"You'd better hurry on home. Zeroes can't afford life insurance, right?"

I knew she was making fun of me, but this wasn't the time for me to be concerned about that.

What about her...? She wasn't around, was she?

I looked around and was relieved that *the woman* I least wanted to see at this point, who was even nastier than Lapis, was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, are you listening?!" Lapis growled, ready to attack me.

I guess she thought I was ignoring her.

"Oh sorry. Yeah, you saved me. Great. See ya," I responded noncommittally.

I knew I was playing with fire, but at this point, Lapis's weapon hadn't yet become the threat that I knew it to be. It was still early.

It must have irked her because she grabbed my arm as I was about to walk away.

"Wait just a minute."

Which was it? Did she want me to go, or did she want me to stay?

"Do you realize who I am?"

"A lasciviously dressed elf."

"I—I am not! This is my formal attire!!! Wh-what are you staring at?!"

"Your boobs, your thighs, your boobs, and your thighs."

"Don't give a weird answer like that with such a straight face! And don't look twice! At least pretend to be sorry!"

Her face was beet red as she struggled to stretch down the length of her skirt.

Lapis has always been quick to pick fights with people. Realizing a little late that I'd taken the wrong approach, I looked at her as she held tightly to my arm.

*"…"* 

I liked Lapis when she was with a key character. If you were to ask me if I liked Lapis herself... Hmm...well... I still think her charm is when she's bantering with a main character she can be more relaxed with.

Yuri girls create a nice picture when two of them are standing next to each other, but if it's just one of them by herself, I'm not really sure how to feel.

"Wh-what? Do you have something to complain about? For your information, my score is thirty thousand," she bragged, puffing out her modest chest.

"My score is thirty-thousand times better than yours. Understand?"

"Huh?! Are you saying...?"

I gave her a look of surprise, and her face radiated with anticipation.

"...You're thirty-thousand...better...?!"

Agitated, Lapis grabbed the bow at the small of her back without a word.

"Consider yourself lucky," she whispered as blue veins appeared on her face.

"Since we're here now...I'll give you some combat practice... Get ready."

Whoa. She's gonna to murder me in the name of practice, isn't she?

I was reminded of all the Hiiros who died *accidentally* on her route during practice—may they rest in peace.

"Gladly, but on one condition."

Well, I guess it was worth aggravating her.

"I want your console if I win."

It was pointless to start digging for a wire that wasn't even rare at a low level like this. It was a good opportunity, so I might as well take advantage.

"What? Are you telling me you expect to beat me?"

She snorted and nodded at the same time.

"I'll not only give you this console. You can have them all."

"Oh yeah...? Then let's have a look at each other's magic devices, just to make sure there's no foul play. It's the Sanjo family's etiquette for dueling to be fair and square. You're a long-distance fighter. Would you like me to keep a certain distance from you?"

Nodding, she held out Masamune Kuki after she had finished checking it.

"This is fine. I'm giving you a handicap."

I knew she'd say that.

I chuckled inwardly.

The early-game Lapis wasn't particularly bad at close-range combat. She was actually the type that gradually adjusted to long-range combat.

So she was confident in her close-quarters combat ability and said what I'd expected.

"Okay, let's start."

"All right."

Lapis took her bow in hand with a grin that suggested this was a piece of cake for her.

"Maid. Give us the signal."

The Sanjo family maid, who had been watching the developments, nodded and raised a hand.

Then she lowered it, saying, "Begin."

Naturally, Lapis stepped away from me to create a distance.

She placed her fingers against the string of the mechanical bow and pulled the

trigger, which fortified her body and made her jump backward...or so I'd expected.

"Huh?!"

"Okay."

I drew Masamune Kuki from its sheath, and—

"We're done."

—I lay my sword of light against her neck.

Bzzzt... The blade changed shape against her neck while undulating like a wave, and sweat dripped down her forehead.

"H-how...? You didn't even know about the console used for operation... I-it was t-too fast...from pulling the trigger to the sword taking shape... And why didn't my physical enhancement kick in...?"

I opened my other palm.

I was holding the five consoles that should have been attached to her device.

"Huh?! When did you take those? Oh, when we exchanged devices! But I would have noticed!"

"I replaced them with shitty spare consoles. You can't really tell just by looking at them, can you? An expert would have noticed the difference in the weight of the weapon, but...I guess that's asking too much from a princess with thirty thousand points."

Lapis's face turned red with humiliation.

"Y-you cheater...!"

"Who cares when you're in battle? Did anyone say we *couldn't* remove our opponent's consoles? You were a fool to willingly hand your only weapon to your opponent."

Couldn't be me, no way in hell.

I deactivated the magic and returned my sword to its sheath.

"I'll just help myself to all these, as we agreed. You're very generous, thanks."

I was about to walk away with all the consoles I had removed from her device when I saw Lapis with tears in her eyes. I gently placed them on the floor.

"I...think I'll just take one."

M-making a heroine cry...is a misinterpretation of my intentions...

I got carried away and won, but I was starting to get worried. I wondered if she'd hold a grudge against me and kill me in the future.

Was it a mistake to focus on beefing up my battle strength rather than developing a rapport with the heroine?

"B-bye."

I tried to sneak away—and she grabbed me by the sleeve.

"...time."

"What was that?"

"I said, one more time!" she shouted, her eyes bright red. "Fight me again!"

"Huh...?"

I did as she said, letting her win this time, and as the princess cried out, "Get serious!" I fled from the dungeon.

From the next day on, I felt two sets of eyes on me every time I went into the dungeon.

*"…"* 

*"…."* 

One set belonged to the maid with the white hair, and the other belonged to that blond elf.

It wouldn't be a problem at all if these two were dating, examining a rare beast that was crying *Yuri!* Yuri! in a cage and using that as a pretext to flirt with each other.

But in reality, the girls were turning their curiosity toward me.

Lapis Clouet la Lumet...the princess of *Alfheim, the Land of the Elves* that exists in this other world, was one of the four heroines in the original game and a tremendous beauty. And she was half hiding her body behind a wall, staring at me.

Perhaps because I'd called her lascivious the other day, she was wearing an oversized hoodie over her formal elf attire, exposing only her alluring thighs. But the hoodie actually made her look even sexier.

She was supposed to hate men. So why was she following me around?

The answer was simple. She was still reeling from her first-ever defeat, and she wasn't going to be satisfied unless she crushed me.

I could understand that when I put myself in her shoes.

It was a matter of prestige and pride. A guy with a score of zero couldn't defeat a princess with a score of thirty thousand. She would want to challenge him to a rematch and win, even if it meant stalking the male she looked down upon and canceling out the previous results.

Besides, Lapis didn't seem satisfied with the results from our last competition.

To her, a duel had to be fought fair and square. You had to be able to proudly declare your victory to the heavens. Then the opponents would go through an exchange, saying, "God, you're strong!" and "So are you!" And they'd become friends in the spirit of your typical shounen manga.

She probably thought my victory didn't count since it was a sneak attack and that she'd be stronger than me in a fair fight.

Well...she was absolutely right, so let's leave it at that.

I let her beat me in our rematch because I was well aware of that face. But she seems to see my noble spirit of sacrifice as *not taking our fight seriously*.

But hey, what's *serious*? I'm a good, healthy kid who always does his homework and never misses a day of school except when a yuri game drops.

As I was getting frustrated with the unreasonable nature of the situation, Lapis, who had been hiding behind a wall, deliberately cleared her throat and came up to me.

"Oh, if it isn't the zero. Fancy meeting you here. It's been a while. What are you up to?"

"…"

It was a stretch to pretend this was a coincidence. I mean, her body was poking out from behind the wall, almost as badly as a high school boy who didn't tuck his shirt in his pants properly.

"We might as well fight since we've run into each other, don't you think?"

"…"

The elf challenged me abruptly, like a random encounter in a retro RPG. What was this? Did we really have to start a battle every time our eyes met? I hadn't even been walking around in any tall grass, so I wished she'd stop popping out at me.

With a smile on her face, she deployed her magical device, the *Snow White* bow, also called an *Ehrenberg* and usually folded into a stick shape, and looked at me suspiciously as I refused to take a fighting stance.

"What's the matter? Have you died?"

"Do I look dead to you? I wouldn't suddenly freeze to death for no reason."

"You know something, Lapis? You and I are basically strangers meeting for the first time. I'm a man, and you're a princess. Are you sure you want to risk someone seeing us being all chummy like this?"

I pointed to the white-haired maid who was leisurely drinking tea from her thermos.

I was implying that I wanted her to give up on fighting me and consider the fact that people could see us. In fact, I wanted her to sink with resignation to eternity.

Lapis snickered and pulled the magic-enhanced string.

"It's worse for me to remain a loser against a zero-scorer. Besides, I have no problem touching bugs or men."

"So for you, I'm no different from some insect, huh? Well, I'm very pleased to

receive such a low evaluation from you, Princess."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to be condescending or anything. I'm just following the rules of our world. Most of the men I've seen thus far were either incompetent or lowlifes. I'm not saying you're like that, but I believe most people in this world hate men."

"So it's a rare exception that you're willing to have a pleasant chat with me like this, huh?"

"I can say for sure that it's inconceivable in Alfheim. But don't worry. I don't discriminate like that."

Normally, I could be killed for disrespectful behavior simply by talking with her. Maybe it's true that she doesn't discriminate. At least compared to others.

"Anyway, I have no intention of being friends with you."

Lapis squinted slowly, her eyes glinting off the console.

"Hurry up and get ready. Don't tell me you believe bluntness is a virtue."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Hasn't anyone taught you that nothing ever goes smoothly if you rush people?"

It was no use. Maybe I'll let her beat me within an inch of my life without actually killing me. That ought to calm her down.

This was essentially a fight, and if I followed Lapis's rules, I wouldn't have a chance. No fancy acting was needed. All I'd have to do is fight properly, and if that was what it took to satisfy her, then I had no choice but to do that.

I pulled out Masamune Kuki and—feeling her presence—ran at once.

"Huh?! Another surprise attack? You're as sneaky as ever—"

"Duck!"

Boom!

With a tremendous crashing sound, the wall behind Lapis shattered. I pulled her into my arms and just barely avoided a large sword that nicked my head.

Still holding on to Lapis, I rolled on the ground, hid her behind me, and looked up.

I saw a pair of large swords.

A huge mass of armor floated in the air, purple haze oozing through the gaps and connecting the two pieces, and the two large swords clashed.

An armor geist, a spirit armor floating in midair, was a demon that shouldn't exist in this low-difficulty dungeon. Lapis appeared dumbfounded as she watched it, but I grinned.

"So this is a rare encounter, is it?"

The dungeon is a singularity that leads to a different world.

This singularity is always unstable. Therefore, it can lead to other worlds one would never expect.

During such events, we get rare encounters like the armor geist.

From the original game's perspective, this *rare encounter* is a powerful enemy that you have a lower-than-usual chance of encountering when wandering in a dungeon. By defeating these enemies, you can obtain rare consoles that you wouldn't normally be able to get your hands on, or you can develop your character with the tremendous amount of experience points you earn.

During these rare encounters, powerful monsters are spontaneously spawn in for the purpose of giving players a healthy boost in experience and power. Thus, they are called *summoned experience points*, and ordinary players consider them a nuisance, which is a bit unfair.

But wow, a rare encounter *now*? Those monsters are really tough and take a long time to defeat, not to mention that Lapis is so stunned she's practically useless.

"The best way to escape is to run. Shall I show off my ability to go home, having belonged to the *going-straight-home-after-school* club so I could indulge in yuri?"

A console, connections...Generation: Magic Surface, Changes: Optic Nerves, and Changes: Musculoskeletal.

A pale blue line flowed through my grip and down Masamune Kuki's sheath.

Activate and enhance projection.

Using the *Generation: Magic Surface* console I got from Lapis as the foundation, I activated the magic to enhance my physical strength, and a layer of blue-and-white magic surrounded me.

The magic lines that kept the magic flowing through my body connected with my optic nerves, enabling me to perceive movements that my body would never have detected in its usual state. The magical structure developed within my body enveloped my bones and muscles, amplifying my abilities.

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"Excuse me, Princess."
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"H-huh...? Wh-what?!"

When I picked up Lapis, whose legs had buckled, she was bug-eyed and kicked her legs in protest.

"H-hey, put me down! I can run on my own!"

"Sorry, but I can't have you die here. You'll have to bear with me for the sake of the yuri pairings I want."

Because her legs had turned to jelly, I was carrying her full weight.

I was carrying her bridal style so I couldn't help touching her legs and waist. It felt like a crime for any man to touch her like this, but dammit, this was an emergency.

I checked to make sure the white-haired maid had fled, then turned to the armor geist.

Riddled with scratches and dents, the great armor expelled purple smoke —whoosh, whoosh—and tried to block the escape route with agile movements despite its heavy-looking armor. The greatsword floated in the air and sliced through space with a wind-splitting sound as if it had a mind of its own.

Still holding Lapis, I smiled.

The helmet of the spectral armor looked down at me without a word.

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"Ready..."
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With great force—

Thud!

—the sword swung down.

"Aaahh!"

I heard the elf's high-pitched scream and jumped to the side.

The greatsword slashed down at the spot where I had been standing. With a roar, the flash of the blade bounced off the cobblestone pavement.

I shielded Lapis with my own body, letting the flying debris hit me in the back, and groaned as the stone projectiles bit into my flesh.

A second strike came, and I willed it toward me, then barely avoided the attack.

"Hey..."

Lapis wiped some of my blood away with her hand and gawked at me in dismay.

"Wh-what are you doing ...? You're hurt ...!"

"Well, staying *completely* out of harm's way is a bit of a tall order. I'm just a zero, after all."

"Th-that's beside the point! Put me down! You're just a zero! Put me down now! I'll crawl out of here! At this rate, you'll die!"

"Sorry, I don't really understand the request," I said, laughing, "Must be because I'm a zero."

Whoosh!

The mass of armor rushed forward, spewing purple smoke all around. I caught the figure with my eyes, which glowed bluish-white and crackled with magical energy, and leaped.

It was an exchange of power.

I dodged the flying armor, landed on top of it, and ran. Blue-and-white magic lines began to appear on the armor, and I sprinted while avoiding the flying greatsword.

Thwack!

I kicked the armor away, flew, and tried to run straight to the exit, but there came a loud crash as falling debris blocked the way.

I turned around.

The armor was a solid mass of steel, ready to throw the sword at me, almost *grinning* with anticipation.

A yellow train station sign that read EXIT was stuck in the rubble, and...I smiled at the floating armor geist.

"Oh geez. Do you love me that much?"

Then I felt a tug on my sleeve.

Lapis was looking up at me anxiously, and I smiled at her.

"Lapis, do you want to play a game?"

"...Huh?"

"Over that mass of steel," I said and pointed my thumb at the floating spirit armor.

"Destroy it successfully, and you win. If not, I win. Are you game?"

"But I...I can't..."

"Huh? Are you going to run? After everything you said about being superior? You've gotta be kidding. When you've been chasing after me, begging me to fight you?"

"I—I haven't been chasing you! Y-you're the one who's been running from me! That's why I've been going after you... Is there anything wrong with that?!"

Whoa. The princess is acting defiant now.

I looked down at her as she huffed and puffed and threatened me, and I laughed.

"Come on. Fight! Are you scared to lose against a zero?"

"I-I'm not scared...but my knees feel limp...and I can't run..."

"Then I'll be your legs. I'll respectfully carry you and help you reduce that iron idiot to scrap metal."

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"What in the world?"

A gentle smile appeared on Lapis's face.

"It won't be a competition if you help me."

"That depends on how you look at it."

With a sound, Lapis readied her Ehrenberg bow.

I sensed her intent and smiled at the armor geist as it blocked all the exits.

"Let's do this."

I magically forced strength into my legs—

"I'll send it straight to the recycling plant."
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At that moment, the greatsword spun in an arc and grazed my cheek, sending a spray of blood onto Lapis's face, but she did not close her eyes and drew her pure white longbow.

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"Zero!" she shouted, and I halted. "Three steps to the left!"

"Roger!"

One, two, and—

"Three!"
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As I took the third step, the magic arrow Lapis released roared as it zoomed in on the great armor and...bounced right off it.

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"It's no use! That thing's too tough!"
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"The gaps, Lapis! Aim for the gaps!"

I told Lapis the armor geist's weak point that I knew from the original game.

"Shoot your arrows in the gaps in the steel!"

She made a split-second decision and shot three arrows in rapid succession.

The elf unleashed her magic arrow with a wind-swishing sound. The arrow moved the way it wanted as it zoomed into her target.

Shriek!

—and ran.

The arrow traced a peculiar curve that defied the laws of physics and pierced the gap in the formidable armor—and a soul-chilling scream reverberated from it, sending shivers down our spines.

"Yes!"

Lapis and I both shouted at the same time, then accelerated our attack.

My every step left a magical blue-and-white imprint on the ground, and debris from the smashed cobblestone pavement flew through the air.

Faster, faster, faster!

Speeding through time gaps, I dodged between the sword and the magical arcs trailing from the blade, even using them as a springboard—and jumped.

"Lapis!"

Space. Stillness. Loading!

Lapis put every buff at her disposal into a single arrow as she freed herself from my hold. She soared over my head and caught sight of the enemy before her eyes.

"Here I goooooooooooo!" she cried out and released a huge pale arrow.

Vroom!

The magic arrow trembled with tremendous force, then got sucked into a gap in the great armor's helmet and went on to pierce the ground, drawing a pale straight line from the heavens to the earth.

And after a moment of silence...

With a ghostly wail, the great armor began to writhe in agony, scraping its entire body against the floor and the walls. Overwhelmed by intense pain and a sense of defeat, it was enveloped in a blue-and-white light and burst away.

"Oh. Ah! Aaaahh!"

"Upsy-daisy."

I caught the princess, who screamed as she fell, then clung to me with a big smile on her face.

"We did it! We did it, we did it! We won! We beat that thing! Hey, are you really a zero?! That was amazing! Incredible! We actually did it!"

"Um...could you maybe do stuff like this with another girl...? I'm really sorry, but...like, no thanks..."

She immediately let go of me.

Her face bright red, Lapis gasped in panic. "Oh, s-sorry! I didn't mean to do— I got caught up in the moment! U-um! Down. Put me down!" she said, thrashing about.

She was so out of control that I had no choice but to put her down, and she lay on the ground, defenseless, her knees still shaky.

*""* 

"Huh? What're you looking at?"

Did she get her garment caught on something? Looks like it's ripped.

I looked at her thighs, now fully exposed. Lapis blushed and pressed her hands against her legs, and I covered them with my jacket, then helped her up.

"All right, let's go."

"O-okay..."

As I began kicking the locked emergency exit door, she looked up at me and said in a soft voice, "You."

"Huh?"

"What...is your name...?"

Finally, the door opened inward, and light streamed in.

Lapis looked embarrassed, her cheeks still red, as her blond hair shined beautifully like a golden field in the sunlight.

"Yamada," I whispered with a clear smile on my face. "Taro Yamada."

"Taro..."

For some reason, she giggled like she was enjoying herself.

"I didn't know...there were men like you..."

I decided that I must have imagined the comment that I thought came out of Lapis's mouth as I climbed the stairs that led outside, assuming that I was finished with her.

So I gave her a false name, and I figured our paths wouldn't cross again.

Or so I thought.

\*

Early the next day, I put on my jogging clothes and went for a run.

It was a pleasant morning.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and the world was blessing everything except for Hiiro.

I inhaled twice, then exhaled twice rhythmically.

"One, two, three four! One, two, three, four!"

I'd pulled the trigger.

My lower limbs were strengthened.

The magical currents traveled down both my legs, which were hauling my body forward and rapidly changing the backdrop from one scene to the next.

The magic device was the starting point for all types of magic.

But it was up to the capacities of the witch or wizard, a common name for those with magic abilities in the *ESCO* world, to use and enhance that magic so they had full control of it.

Parameters, in terms of games.

Strength, constitution, magic, intelligence, and agility.

These were the five different stat values in the *ESCO* world, but magic was the most important.

It was the foundation for spells and abilities.

No matter how strong your magic device or console was, it would run out of magic power after shooting a single magic bolt if your power was minimal.

On the other hand, no matter how weak your device was, if you had a high magic stat, firing off magic bolts was no trouble at all.

The only way to boost that magic stat was to dedicate yourself to training.

When I held a controller in hand outside this world, all I had to do was set the *Train* command in line with my plans and choose the magic enhancement that I wanted. But now that I was actually a part of this game world, I needed to train and boost my magic power if I wanted to enhance my magic efficiently.

Though, of course, all I was doing was focusing on strengthening my lower limbs and running.

"Whoa! Look at that guy! He's fast!"

"Is he using magic?! That's a little too fast even with enhancements?!"

The effects were gradually showing. By five AM, it seemed no one around was able to run faster than me.

I slowed down and deliberately bumped into a pair of runners.

"Aaahh!"

"A-are you okay?"

One of the girls lost her balance, and the other pulled her into her arms.

"...Oh."

"S-sorry... I'll let go of you right away..."

A yuri moment at last, hallelujah!

I vaulted over the stair railing, leaped straight up, and took a major shortcut.

And I landed in a park.

A woman who witnessed me jump froze in shock. I must have interrupted her yoga session.

I continued thinking about my plans as I ran.

The real work would begin after I enrolled at the academy.

For now, I would raise my stats to prepare for my school life, one that was sure to be full of death flags. That was a given. I didn't want to die a miserable

death like Hiiro in the original game.

Hiiro was a character that all players unanimously despised, but his base stat spread wasn't too bad, actually.

In fact, they were pretty good.

If I played my cards right, Masamune Kuki would end up being pretty useful. Perhaps because everyone hated Hiiro, his strength stat was outstanding. And as a member of the esteemed Sanjo family, he also had tons of potential for boosting his magic stat.

With the right training, he likely could have handled himself pretty well in the final boss battle.

Unfortunately, he usually died before that point (LOL).

Because of his surprisingly high potential, I figured I could at least find a way to avoid the sudden-death events that regularly plagued Hiiro as long as I worked to beef up my stats.

The next crucial step was to up my score, but maybe I should consider giving up on that.

I'd snuck into the dungeon several times at this point, but my score remained fixed at zero. No matter what I did, it wouldn't go up.

I tried contacting the score evaluation agency, but they hung up immediately and have been rejecting my calls ever since. I may or may not have cried.

It doesn't look likely that Hiiro's score is ever going up.

My score is going to matter way more once I'm enrolled in the academy. If I don't find some sort of loophole to raise it, I'll be in for hell.

I mean, it's about time I could drink something other than soda without the fizz. Otherwise, I'm going to cry.

Having heroines like me will be about the only thing that matters besides my ability values and score, but it isn't a good idea to get involved with them now.

Of course, if they did start to like me, then I might be able to avoid attacks by girls intent on killing me, like Lapis.

But if, in the process, Hiiro is judged to be a yuri ship-sinker, I don't know what this world's system will do to him. The final boss could show up out of nowhere, and it'd be game over immediately. That could actually happen. Hiiro was the sort of character who would get murdered just for eating someone else's ice cream.

Besides, I want to see the heroines getting together. The best thing for me to do is water the lilies from the shadows.

So anyway, I was glad I was able to break off my relationship with the elf who kept insisting that I fight her.

""

I glanced around and discovered elves hiding in a treetop.

Beautiful girls, their dark green robes and hoods concealing their figures, were positioned sporadically across my running route.

They were communicating with each other using magic devices.

What was it with that creepy elf surveillance network...?

I was feeling fed up when I spotted that maid, wearing pince-nez glasses in broad daylight, watching me through binoculars.

*"…."* 

What's with her?! She's like a stain I can't get rid of!

I instantly moved in on her and pulled off her glasses.

"Hey, you! Miss Pince-Nez!"

"This is Maid Delta. Affirmative, he hasn't noticed it's me in disguise. Hee-hee. The man is an idiot."

"Can't you hear me? Do your glasses have a listening device attached to them?"

"Hee-hee. He hasn't spotted me."

"He has spotted you! Don't try to escape reality! Are you the type of kid who brags that she hasn't been found in a game of hide-and-seek, and then starts crying when everyone leaves you behind and takes off?"

The white-haired maid grabbed the pince-nez from my hand and ran away.

I sighed, then went back to my running as the group of elves continued to watch me.

I had a bad feeling about this. The original Hiiro was supposed to be someone everyone hated and wouldn't approach. Why was he—I mean, I—attracting so much attention when I wasn't even getting in the way of any yuri romance? Maybe I should have acted more like the real Hiiro. But then again, I knew I couldn't do that.

"I'm exhausted..."

I went back to the Sanjo family villa after running for a couple of hours.

First things first, I needed a shower. Then a glass of cold water. The only vending machines on the road were vending machines where you paid with your score, so I'd only been able to drink flat cola, and my throat was begging for mercy. I wouldn't mind drinking yuri if I could.

I set out to open the front door. Then...

"You're late."

"Whoa!"

A curtain of gold fell before my eyes, and I leaped back in surprise.

A work of art, or rather, an elf princess...Lapis Clouet la Lumet descended before me, pushing her hair out of her eyes as she stood there in a stunning dress.

"You can't go running for two hours without even getting permission. All this time, I waited outside for you. A gentleman doesn't make a lady wait. The least you could have done was call. I would have left if it hadn't been for the careful surveillance work of the elf archers."

*"…."* 

As I stood there speechless, she poked me in the chest and closed in on me, so angry that her veins bulged.

"Did you think you could avoid me, Hiiro Sanjo? Oh, that's not right. You told

me, with a friendly smile, that your name was *Taro Yamada*, didn't you? ... Hmph!" she said as she hit me in the kneecap with a bag she kicked away.

"Don't take me for a fool. It's easy for me to find out your personal information. There aren't many male nobles who have a score of zero and can still enter the dungeon, and I learned about this house as soon as I looked up the maid who was with you."

The princess flipped back her beautiful blond hair and grinned as my mouth hung open.

"As of today, I be living here."

"...Huh?"

She picked up her bags and entered the Sanjo family villa as if she owned the place.

"Hey, is your room upstairs? I want a corner room next to yours. It's more convenient that way, don't you think?"

"...Huh..."

I was stunned for a moment.

"Huuuuuuuuuh?!"

Then I quickly rushed after her.

Lapis carried her bag and practically waltzed inside.

She made herself right at home, looking like someone who had returned from a long journey.

The entrance was draped with a red carpet, and a spiral staircase led to the second floor.

Paintings of the past and present adorned the corridor walls.

I didn't know if they were genuine, but the paintings in the hallway were *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* by Katsushika Hokusai, *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt, and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* by Johannes Vermeer... Next to them, I had put up a poster of a yuri series by one of my favorite authors.

Lapis moved close to the poster and stared at it.

"...What is this?"

"It's a work of art crafted by the hands of a god. It hangs in the Louvre within my heart. You can consider it *the* landscape for yours truly."

"Hmm... So you like stuff like this ...? Huh..."

"Oh hey! I said wait!"

Rumble, rumble, rumble.

Lapis rolled her bag as she pushed her way through the hallway and arrived at a hall that was large enough to host a ball.

This is where meals are served at the Sanjo villa. After glancing at the huge dining room table, as well as the maids hard at work cleaning it, Lapis moved farther and farther inside.

On the first floor, where the great hall was located, were a recreation room, a library and reading room, a gallery, a theater, a reception room, and two bathrooms. Across the corridor, there was a Japanese-style Yamato room, a Western-style room, two hot spring baths, three bathrooms, three storage rooms, and five guest rooms.

Lapis went around every single room on the first floor, checking their locations and asking me what they were used for.

I told her politely, "We're closed for business today. Bye."

Then she started asking the same questions to the maid and went upstairs after hearing the answers.

The second floor was mostly guest rooms.

The guest rooms were Japanese and Western, and some had a Chinese atmosphere, perhaps just for fun.

There are about a dozen such guest rooms, with recreation rooms, bathrooms, and powder rooms scattered throughout.

"Is your room over on this side? Or over there? I'll take the one next to it."

I smiled and pointed toward the door, and Lapis asked the maid the same question.

"If this is Hiiro's room, then I'll take this one," she said and began dropping off her things inside.

Having gotten rid of her bag, Lapis stretched, seemingly satisfied, then went up to the third floor.

The third level was for stargazing and was modeled after a tower observatory.

There was a ridiculously large telescope at the center, practically begging to be peered into.

You had to climb a ladder to get to the viewing platform. Lapis placed a hand on the ladder and looked at me.

"I'm wearing a skirt today. You go first."

"You can borrow my pants if you want."

She silently kicked me a few times, and I had no choice but to go up the ladder before her.

"Wow!"

Climbing up after me, Lapis let out a cheer as she marveled at the bright blue sky and cityscape.

The stargazing platform was small to begin with, and with the two of us there, our arms and shoulders touched, and her scent tickled my nose.

Was it her deodorant? Her shampoo?

I didn't know the answer, and of course, I couldn't ask her, but she smelled good—very different from the sweaty musk of a man. Perhaps the princess thought nothing of her body touching mine as she giggled and enjoyed the view.

Wait a minute. This is odd. The Lapis I knew was a mighty warrior who believed that the only time she would ever touch Hiiro was when she was violently murdering him. It was strange that a high-scoring elf princess would ever enjoy the company of a zero-score male.

Maybe she started seeing me as a friend or a pet or something when we were fighting in the dungeon... The gravity of the situation made me break out in a

cold sweat, and I racked my brain trying to figure out what to do.

"Hiiro."

At close range, her beautiful blue eyes caught mine. Through a gap in her short dress, I could see her healthy, tanned thighs.

She sat on the floor holding her knees, her long golden hair reflecting the rays of the sun and flowing down her shoulders as she looked shyly at me.

"Are we going to the garden next? Lead the way."

"No, no, no, wait a minute. You were kidding when you said you were moving in, right? Wasn't that just a joke? Where did you get the idea to cohabitate with a man? Didn't you learn in school that only girls are allowed to live with girls?"

"If we live together, we can fight anytime we want, can't we?"

"...Huh?"

I was stunned by her answer, and my mouth fell open.

"We're pretty evenly matched at the moment, right?"

"Evenly matched' my ass! Stop talking like we're friends at a bar. We aren't an even match at all. The difference in our scores is night and day! It was enough to make me want to run home crying. Speaking of which, you should go home, too."

"And I'm telling you that I'm living here until our score is settled. It's simpler and easier to fight that way."

"Seriously, you haven't been listening to a word I've been saying... Are we lowly zeroes not even allowed to speak, let alone argue...?"

"Enough! Just show me the garden, already!"

Lapis stubbornly refused to listen to me, and I slumped in disappointment.

"...All right, but after I show you the garden, please leave."

Lapis smiled at me without answering. The look on her face was pure evil. She already seemed rather adept at using her feminine wiles to get her way.

She and I went down from the third floor to the second floor and then to the

ground level, then stepped out into the garden.

It was so large that I doubted one could call it a garden.

There was a house for live-in maids, a facility for combat training, and showers. There were about a dozen stalls—though I was the only one who used them.

The garden had a pond teeming with carp, an open-air bath connected to the first floor by a corridor, an armory displaying magic devices, and a storage room with a bolted door.

The villa basically looked like a samurai residence.

There was a large gate with the family crest on it and an impressive moat with an demon-repellant wall surrounding it.

The villa belonged to Rei, the heir to the family fortune, and I was strictly a tenant here for a limited time. The main residence where Rei lived was even more impressive, which gives you an idea of the tremendous power the Sanjo family had.

Anyway, this whole villa had been made available to me.

Naturally, I didn't know what to do with it.

Even I, as Hiiro—the weed between the lilies—had trouble figuring out how to deal with it.

If only I could voice my concerns.

That...was what I thought...

"Thanks for the tour. It's a little cramped, but I like it. I love Japan, and I've always wanted to live in a house with this kind of atmosphere."

*"…."* 

I never asked to live with a heroine in a yuri game.

"We're bringing everything in! Get out of the way, or we'll run you over!"

"Yay! I want the corner room on the first floor! It's mine!"

"Hey, no fair! I'll take a room with the window on the second floor!"

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"…"
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I never asked to live with twelve of Lapis's bodyguards—all of them beautiful girl elves—who called themselves *alfr*, which means *elves* in Old Norse.

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"Hey, Hiiro? Which shampoo can I use?"
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"…"
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And I never asked to live with elves who went right ahead and took a bath in my home and asked if they could use my shampoo.

"Um, Hiiro. Why don't you tell us the ground rules for this place first? We don't want to impose, and I hope we can get along. Anyway, I'm going to take a shower, so go ahead and wait for me in your room."

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"…"
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"Princess! They have hidden paths here! It's nothing compared to the castle, but this level of trickery is sure to be fun!"

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""
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"Hiiro? Can you hear me? I need shampoo!"

*"…"* 

"Oh, and Hiiro, I can't sleep without a proper bed. But since I'll be living here, I'd like a Japanese room. Can I use two rooms? One as my private quarters and another for sleeping? Yes? Great. Thanks!"

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"…"
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I ran outside without saying anything and started magically enhancing my legs.

Then I leaped off into the sunset.

"What is this, a porn game?!" I shouted.

I landed and then shouted again, "It's a porn game!"

I punched the ground with my fists.

"It's the opening of a porn game!"

Panting and gasping, I went to the park and sat down on a bench.

Something was off.

I verbalized the question that was whirling around inside me.

It's a damn porn game... How did this happen...? I helped the elves move into the place, not understanding any of it, and it was already evening... No matter how I looked at it, I'd wound up in the situation where I'd accidentally open the door to the bathroom, and an elf would scream, "Aaahh! Pervert!"

I sat on the bench and cried.

I...I... Where did I go wrong? All I wanted was to watch over their budding romance... I wanted to be reincarnated in a yuri game as a random NPC, and watch the yuri girls from a corner of the classroom, grinning to myself...

I was depressed and then quickly came to my senses.

Now wasn't the time to be depressed.

So an elf princess forced her way into living with me, claiming that we could fight more easily if we shared the same roof, so what?

If she was going to live with me, then...she was going to be here with her. A worst-case scenario flashed through my mind, and I was terrified.

If I were to face her at this point, I probably had less than a 1 percent chance of winning. You couldn't even call it a fight. She'd kick me once, and it would be over. I could try any number of battle tactics, but there wouldn't be a single way for me to beat her.

It would be over once we made contact.

She was a natural-born slayer of men who sank yuri ships, and Hiiro lived rent-free in her crosshairs... Because I didn't stand a chance against her, the only thing I could do was avoid her.

The worst thing that could happen was to come in contact with her when Lapis wasn't around.

Our first contact had to be through Lapis. It had to be a friendly situation in which I could show her that I had no intent to fight.

Fighting was out of the question.

Perhaps we could establish friendly contact over dinner this evening...?

I checked my watch and my heart did a backflip.

This was bad! I had to have the best chef in this world come over right away! It had to be a chef who practically lived and breathed fine dining! The type to be a natural fit for those poofy white chef hats! I had to use all the Sanjo family's power to entertain *her*! I mean, my life was in danger! If I didn't do absolutely everything I could to win her over, Hiiro was as good as dead!

I quickly stood up...and shivered.

I felt a chill.

Magic power was emanating from somewhere nearby.

The timing was that of a master.

And I was...frozen solid.

Their gaze pierced right through me. I was glued to the spot where I stood. I dripped with cold sweat, and my whole body was screaming *Danger*!

Silver.

Argent death stood before me.

She had long silver hair and wore a combat uniform that blended Japanese and Western tastes. At her side, she held a long sword that exceeded her own height. A tall, beautiful elf with glowing blue eyes was staring right at me.

Her killing intent pierced my skin like a needle.

The silver beauty manifested in the reddest dusk.

She drew her long sword and tossed the sheath aside.

"I hear you're the one who defeated Lapis," she whispered in a beautiful voice that reminded me of the sound of a bell.

"Face me."

Clang, clang.

I heard the sound of the sheath falling to the ground—and her eyes opened. They were blue and white.

"Hiiro Sanjo. You..."

The immensely strong woman that I had least wanted to see quietly curved the corners of her mouth.

"...interest me."

Well, it seems she's just signed my death certificate...

As I stood there, a question popped into my mind about how to describe the girl in front of me.

Who was the strongest character in *ESCO*?

To this question posed by the development team, players only ever seemed to have one answer.

Astemir Clouet la Killicia.

The middle name, Clouet, was a clan name in the Land of the Elves.

She was an elf who had the same ancestry as Lapis Clouet la Lumet, Princess of Alfheim, the Land of the Elves.

Astemir was Lapis's mentor and bodyguard, the strongest warrior in Alfheim, and holder of the rank of *Ancestor*, the highest in her world.

Her strengths were close-, medium-, and long-range combat and the versatility that allowed her to deal with any threat.

From the original game's perspective, strength and endurance were required for close-range combat, while magic, agility, and intelligence were needed for medium-to long-range combat.

Elves in the *ESCO* world can easily increase their magic power and agility but have difficulty boosting their strength and constitution.

Therefore, elves weren't supposed to be good at close-range combat.

But this Astemir was good at everything. She excelled in all areas.



Ability values increase for the main characters and their companions at the end of each day according to the training they have chosen, but...for some reason, the training to increase their magic power also boosts their strength and constitution. Players call this phenomenon *sneak training*.

When I first saw that, I thought it was a bug.

*ESCO* is an easy game to play, so the characters' stats would go up without the need to focus on grinding any one stat in particular. However, Astemir's stats were improving at an impossible rate.

It was so fast that it was scary.

Not only that, she also brought her treasured Iliovasilema bow with her when she joined. It was cheating to counter cheating. The scene where the main character is left behind while the rank-and-file enemies get knocked out made me afraid that the game's balance would collapse.

This damned elf! She's in the same position as the sword saint from that other game I love!

As a player, I removed her from my party as soon as I could, but it wasn't necessary.

The reason she was so strong was because she was a character with a supporting role.

She only fights as an ally at the beginning of the game and leaves permanently after a certain event, leaving the treasured Iliovasilema bow to Lapis.

No wonder she was so strong, I thought with relief. But you could say paradoxically that no one else was as fierce as she was in the early stages of the game.

As usual, Astemir hated the very sight of Hiiro.

Astemir is active in the early stages of the game with Lapis before she goes off on a different route. Even in that short period, she bashes Hiiro's face with her sword sheath, hacks him into pieces, attacks the Sanjo family villa and makes it explode. She's so ruthless that the players who adore her took to calling her *The Slayer*.

In summary, she's the executioner I referred to as her.

If you're wondering why I seemed so afraid to even say her name, it's because I thought the casual mention of her name would trigger an appearance flag and cause her to show up.

She's Lapis's guard, so it's natural for her to be with her, and I'd expected to be able to get through the early stages of the game without setting off those flags.

But...

At the moment, a malevolent god of strength stood before me.

She held a long sword that exceeded her height. It wasn't magical but was a simple Japanese sword that she called *Unmarked Tombstone*.

Her magic device was the treasured Iliovasilema bow.

The fact that she was holding her Unmarked Tombstone indicated that she wasn't serious yet and was only in the wait-and-see stage.

"…"

But of course, this girl was a monster of a swordswoman! Hiiro didn't stand a chance whether she was only in the wait-and-see stage or not!

"... Taje your battle stance."

Is she kidding?! I'll die if I do that!

Laughing, I spread my arms out wide.

"Um, I'm kind of lost here, but why don't we talk first...?"

I felt her killing intent—she was coming. She unsheathed her sword...and pulled the trigger.

She synchronized her moves, the magic waves interfered, and the calculations were complete.

She connected with her console to *Generate: Magicloak, Alter: Optic Nerves,* and *Alter: Musculoskeletal.* 

A bluish-white channel ran through the sheath, and the magic was activated.

Activate and enhance projection (Tenebrae)—and then an eyeball coated with bluish-white magic captured the flash of the sword.

I swerved with all my might to avoid it.

A few strands of my hair were cut horizontally and floated in the wind.

"You dare avoid that?" Astemir asked, grinning.

I channeled my magic to my legs and leaped as far back as I could.

Cold sweat ran down my face and fell to my chest.

It was only by chance that I was able to pull the trigger.

No matter how I thought about it, she was aiming for my throat. Was she going to kill me? Maybe she would stop her blade at the last minute. Or would she? I couldn't say. There was too much of a gap in our abilities.

As if flicking away blood, Astemir wielded her long sword and walked toward me, laughing.

"Next."

Uh-oh. I'd better get serious, or I'll die.

I flew backward as quickly as I could—and Astemir, her sword back in her scabbard, warped.

Hey, when did you manage to pick up your sheath?! And you're telling me you have a console for warping at this point?! Don't casually warp when you're supposed to be sword-fighting! Die, Hiiro!

My hands were starting to move in a flurry before the moment I warped.

There were a few moments of change: Attribute: Light, Generation: Ball, Operation: Burst.

Activation, magic bolt.

The ball of light created between me and Astemir exploded.

Dazzling rays of light spread in all directions and were sucked into Astemir's eyes from the front.

I succeeded in blinding her!

I was about to turn around and run...but I tripped. "Okay." Astemir's eyes were closed as she placed her sword back in its sheath. "I can give you a perfect score so far. Excellent." *Slide!* The slope behind me had been slashed and shifted. She had gouged huge chunks out of the very hills, which were crumbling one by one, and I felt the tremendous impact through the ground. A few seconds later, I felt blood dripping down my cheek. Aaahh! I'm gonna to die! I sprinted out of the way before the next blow. I channeled all my magic to my legs. I stepped on it as fast as I could, leaving a trail of mana as I glided away. A ridiculously powerful slash chased after me, chopping up my running course. Teacher! Someone's bullying Hiiro! (Teacher: We don't have bullying in our class.) "H-help me!" I turned the corner, screaming like a baby. Astemir kicked the wall and didn't slow down as she chased after me. *"…"* Bull's-eye. I'd been waiting for her. I channeled all my magical energy to Masamune Kuki and swung down with everything I had. She can't unsheathe her sword in time. I got her! Clang. My blade pierced the pommel attached to her Unmarked Tombstone. "....?!" What the hell?!

Don't tell me she met that blow with the handle of her sword because she couldn't draw her sword in time??! How crazy are her reflexes?!

"...Wow."

Astemir laughed and delivered a front kick.

"Ungh!"

She hit me hard, and I backed off a number of steps.

Having gained some distance from me, she raised her fingertips to the sky.

"I shall sing a song of the past."

The astonishment slowed me down.

That was because I knew...

"The gates of heaven have shut, the requiem of death begins, and the worlds of men are intertwined. I swear on my homeland, I forge a pact with my allies, and I live by my creed. Come on, let us sing. Let us sing together. The light of the Alfheim shines upon us."

Her special magical device had a unique ability that could only be activated with a specific trigger.

"Oh, my ancestors, wizened archers, keepers of the ages."

This, I realized...

"Let my arms embrace and guide you."

...was a chant.

"Come, treasured bow."

A torrent of magical energy enveloped Astemir, and her silver hair stood on end.

As she floated, the space behind her was torn apart, and the *treasured bow* was about to manifest.

She pointed at me without mercy.

"llio-"

"Oh, Astemir. What are you doing, trying to summon a treasured bow in a place like this?"

Astemir heard the voice, and her magic fizzled out.

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"Lapis..."
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The princess walked over to us and looked, with suspicion in her eyes, first at me and then at Astemir.

"What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here...? Well, this is the route Hiiro always takes when he's out for a run. I figured I would intercept him and bring him home."

I moved behind Lapis and grinned.

Astemir looked vacant for a moment...then covered her face with a hand and began laughing.

"I see. It appears I've lost. You greatly exceeded my expectations, color me surprised. Who would have thought I would be pushed to summon the sacred bow?"

Astemir had sensed it, too.

It was obvious that I couldn't possibly win if I fought her head-on.

So instead of trying to win, my goal was to not lose.

Determined to defend myself to the death, I'd tried to come to this particular location, at the exact halfway point between the Sanjo family villa and the park. I figured that if Lapis or the other elves were to come looking for me after I suddenly left for a run, they would begin by following this route.

As it turned out, I won the bet.

It was wonderful...to be alive!

"Hiiro."

Astemir approached me while I was overcome by emotion.

"You have a rare gift. You may even surpass me in time. Would you..."—she trailed off, smiling beautifully at me and holding out her hand—"...like to

apprentice under me?"

...I beg your finest pardon?



According to the background material, all magic in the *ESCO* world is contained within the framework of technology.

Triggering the magic device sends out a synchronized signal called a magic wave.

These magic waves synchronize with magicells, fictitious particles of the *ESCO* world. After synchronizing, the nexus, an input signal constructed through the connected consoles, is activated.

The magicells activate their magic upon receiving instructions from the nexus, such as transfers, capturing, vibration, classification, and concentration.

In short, this magical device is an instrument of nanotechnology that manipulates these particles.

Magical energy can be quantified as the amount of endogenous magicells in a living organism, and magic through the use of a magic device is merely an interfering element that acts on exogenous magicells outside the living organism, and so on.

But if they want to be that elaborate, why don't they stop tossing in outlandish fantasy elements like dungeons?

There was probably a guy who loved thinking up fantasy plots among the developers.

This yuri game could get pretty chaotic.

Among the developers, there must have been guys who loved yuri, some who loved fantasy, some who loved outlandish settings, and maybe scheming conspiracy theorists as well. Thus, they ended up creating a game that was like a ridiculous melting pot.

At worst, you could say it lacks unity, and at best, it's deep.

No wonder some people complain and say ESCO isn't a yuri game. Some of

the routes are almost devoid of yuri elements.

The fact that Hiiro Sanjo, a male character, exists at all even though the game is supposed to be a yuri game, shows that the members of the development team didn't have their heads screwed on straight.

Still, the game does have its good points.

Like the fact that a player's efforts to improve will definitely bear fruit.

*"…"* 

It was now four in the morning.

"Ummm... Hiiro. It's a lovely morning. Perhaps a little chilly, but we'll be warm with a little exercise."

Perhaps a player's efforts to improve will bear fruit if he plays his cards right...

"…"

I never asked to live with beautiful women, have the most OP character as my master slash mentor, and have to wake up at four AM.

"Um, excuse me. May I ask you something?"

"What is it? Oh...before that..."

The silver-haired elf, dressed in cute training wear that was a far cry from her functional combat uniform, tucked her long hair back and pointed a finger at me.

"Speak casually!"

"Huh?"

"As I have said to Lapis, I do not want formality in the master-disciple relationship. I want to talk with my apprentices casually."

What the hell is she talking about...?

I recalled a vivid image of Astemir bashing Hiiro's face into pulp in-game.

I applauded, whistled, and sang the national anthem back then, feeling glorious... But now that I had *become* Hiiro, it was a different story. I knew how horrifying she was, and I couldn't possibly speak casually with her.

"But, Astemir, you speak pretty formally yourself—"

"Maaaaster...!" Astemir folded her arms, puffed out her cheeks, and turned the other way, pouting. "I'm not responding to you until you call me *Master*."

Th-this elf... She's four hundred and twenty years old (twenty-one in human years)... and she thinks she's cute...? Okay, she *is* pretty, dammit...! She should act like that in front of the girl she's destined to be with...! And please let me witness all the lovey-dovey moments...!

What the hell happened to the sword-wielding demon I remember?

She's just glancing this way, cute as a button, as if saying, "When's he going to call me *master*?"

By nature, the character Astemir is supposed to be very guarded.

That's why she kept seeing Hiiro, who rudely continued to approach Lapis without her permission, as an enemy. She's the perfect bodyguard who tries to remove any man who dares come between her and her princess.

And Hiiro—no, I match that description.

I mean, I'm stuck right, aren't I? Lapis is saying she's going to live with me. So why is Astemir saying she'll make me her apprentice?

Still, this was a good opportunity for me.

At the very least, becoming an apprentice would nullify Astemir, the most powerful of them all. The death flags for Hiiro are too numerous to count, but it's way too much trouble to go up against Astemir. My luck would eventually run out, and I'd meet the business end of her sword sooner or later.

Frankly, I wanted neither Lapis nor Astemir to get involved with a guy like Hiiro.

That isn't what yuri girls do, is it?!

But even if I forced them out at this point, Lapis and Astemir would come after me... And I, Hiiro, the Sanjo family heir, would stand out too much, and it would be impossible for him to hide from them... And because of the original game scenario, his contact with the two of them was inevitable.

I had no choice but to accept it.

"...M-Master...," I squealed in a mosquito-like voice.

"Huh?"

With a twinkle in her eye, Astemir spun around.

"What was that? What did you call me? Hmm? Well? What was it?"

What a pain in the neck...

"M-Master."

"Yes! Yes, that's it! That's me! Your master!"

She's a major pain in the neck!

Astemir hopped around and raised her hand.

She appeared to have realized she was acting pathetic in front of her apprentice. She stiffened, cleared her throat, and then blushed.

"I—I seem to have gotten a little too excited. What is it, my dear apprentice?" Don't *dear apprentice* me. She still hasn't recovered.

"I just called you that because you told me to. You're going to train me, right? Should I say, 'Please, Master'?"

"Oh...! Oh!!!"

She seemed to like the fact that I was doing as she said, talking more casually, and was ready to start my training.

Astemir nodded happily and drew her long sword.

"All right, we'll start by warming up."

"...Hey, wait just a minute. Why do you need to pull out Unmarked Tombstone if we're only warming up?"

She thrust the tip of the blade at me with a smile on her face.

"Knives are necessary for warm-ups, aren't they?"

"I don't understand what you're saying. Please stop beating me up with your meathead culture. How about doing radio calisthenics, the profound warm-up

exercises of modern Japan, then moving on to your usual training... Master?"

"Okay then. Let's do it."

"Don't start on your own and leave your disciple behind! Is it just more muscle in your head instead of brains?! I mean... Hey, w-wait!"

Ah...ah...aaahh...! (kill me)

I somehow made it through the warm-up.

The monstrous elf kept smiling as she swung her razor-sharp sword at a man who had barely any experience in swordsmanship, and I was nearly reduced to tears as I struggled to keep up. I honestly didn't know why my head was still attached to my body.

The master laughed happily, her breathing perfectly even, as I collapsed.

"You lack stamina, Hiiro. This is something we will have to work on."

You have too much stamina, you gorilla! What's going on here, who developed this game?! Hiiro's the one who's supposed to have outstanding physical strength early on, so why isn't she even out of breath with the same amount of exercise?! Can someone please patch this bug out?!

"But I do think it's good that you have the will to try to keep up with me to the very end. The Astemir motto is to *slice the flesh, break the bones, and come out ahead.*"

"I-I'll die if you slice my flesh and break my bones..."

"Then try not to die."

This has got to be gorilla harassment.

I fell on my back, panting and wheezing when she pressed something cold against my face.

It was an energy drink.

My master squatted near me and smiled.

"Shall we move on to classroom lessons that can also double as a break?"

Master, I love you... I'm sorry I called you a gorilla...!

"And we'll resume the lesson right after that."

Keep beating your chest forever, you damn gorilla!

She lifted me up with one hand and plopped me down on the bench.

Then she sat down next to me and used a hand comb to fix my messy hair.

"Hee-hee...you may be in training, but you should put a little thought into your appearance."

I'd rather you told that to a girl.

That's what I wanted to say, but a gasp was all I could manage.

Perhaps because my master carefully tended to me, I finally recovered, and we began our classroom session.

"Hiiro, have you decided on light as your attribute for training?"

"Well...actually, I'm still mulling it over."

Attributes for training...meant attribute parameter.

Strength, constitution, magic, intelligence, and agility were called basic stats. In addition to them, there were attribute parameters related to the power and effectiveness of magic and sometimes the magic that activated it.

The attributes themselves were orthodox.

Fire, water, wind, earth, light, dark, and void.

There are six types of consoles: fire, water, wind, earth, light, and darkness. Each could be fitted into a formula frame to activate the magic within each attribute and increase an individual's attribute parameters.

If magic were activated without fitting these consoles, then your non-attribute parameters would increase.

Huh? Then wouldn't it be better to raise your non-attributes like crazy?

Don't you think so? I certainly did.

However, the weakest attribute in this game was, without a doubt, non-attributes.

The reason is that the six attributes—fire, water, wind, earth, light, and

darkness—have a full attribute value applied to the magic that's activated. In contrast, the unattributed only has a fixed parameter that matches your unattributed value.

In simple terms, damage from the six attributes would be your parameters multiplied by attribute value times two, while the non-attributes would be one point two times the damage of your parameters multiplied by a fixed value.

And on top of that, that fixed value is nasty, so even if you spend a mind-boggling amount of time training your non-attributes, it's common to find that the fixed value is less than the six-attribute value you spend a little time on.

Therefore, it's wise to consider non-attributes auxiliary.

For example, body enhancement, spur-of-the-moment magical barriers, magical grants for weapons, and the six attributes will fill one of the format frames, which you may later need, depending on the customization of your magic device.

So it's guaranteed that it'll be one of the six attributes that I'll be boosting in the near future.

Since the beginning, Masamune Kuki has been fitted with light consoles.

Maybe because of that, the Hiiro character in the game could use light-aspected magic. But I mean, sheesh...

He would never belong to the light. He's pure darkness—the shadow in between radiant yuri girls. He should only be able to use unaspected magic like the nothing character he is. Seriously, go back to where you belong, Hiiro.

Now, as for me, which attribute should I train?

Going by the theories of the *ESCO* world, it would be either attribute-specific or dual-attribute with one main-and one sub-attribute... But I'd rather die than have the same attribute as Hiiro, so maybe I'll avoid the light attribute and build something with a focus on dual attributes.

"Hiiro, I think you should train your light attribute."

"I beg your pardon?" As I was mulling it over in my head, an unexpected piece of advice was tossed my way. "I mean, why?"

"Swordsmanship and the light attribute go together very well. When used together, you'll be able to move at the speed of light."

No, um, you're the only one who can do that. I don't have enough magic power. You're pretty much the only one in this game who can move that fast.

"But, um, I don't want a light attribute—"

"What about your sub-attribute? Any ideas?"

Th-this woman...!

Astemir hummed happily as she closed in on me. I wondered why she wanted such close contact, but she probably didn't notice the proximity, preoccupied as she was with brainstorming possible attributes for me.

"Maybe water."

"Why? Please give me a reason."

"Water is easy to combine with other attributes, right? In the event of an attribute combination, I'll have to let go of Masamune Kuki, which has three console slots... Thanks to the ease of a water combination, I'd be vulnerable for the least amount of time."

"Very good. You've given this much thought, Hiiro."

"You can leave all the head-patting to Lapis. Oh, but when it's your turn, please let me know." So I can watch...

I ignored the fingers she affectionately ran through my hair and continued. "I'm thinking of learning how to wield weapons other than swords... Will you teach me how to use a bow?"

"A bow?"

Stunned, Astemir stopped moving.

"A regular bow? Or a magic device?"

"A regular bow. I plan to use Masamune Kuki for a while. With my current magic proficiency, it's too soon to use two magic devices, and I'd like to learn to use a regular bow so I can cover medium distances."

Astemir beamed with pride.

"Then you can learn archery alongside sword-fighting. You're doing well with a sword, considering you're self-taught, but your skills are still somewhat inconsistent, and the way you enhance your legs when you run... It's at a level that makes me wonder how you managed to get so strong... First, we'll need to restructure your training regimen."

"All right! Now that that's settled, it's back to the Sanjo house for a strategy meeting! We have no time to lose! Let's get going."

She grabbed my shoulder with an iron grip.

I turned around and saw that my master was smiling.

"You haven't finished your workout for the day yet, have you...?"

"Urk!"

"Draw your sword... We'll have a fun workout round until we decide on your training regimen... Hee-hee. Right now, you're just a lump of raw potential. But I'm gonna mold you into something great."

"Um, I really don't think I can handle more today..."

I was beaten within an inch of my life after that.

After parting with my master, who said she had some business to attend to, I limped back to the Sanjo family villa.

"I need...a shower first...to wash away the blood, sweat, and dirt... What's with that monster...? I'll die if we keep 'training' like this."

I got to the villa, walked into the training area, and headed straight for the shower.

In a daze, I quickly stripped naked and peeled back the shower curtain without a second thought.

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"…."
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*"…."* 

There she was—Lapis, butt naked.

Her lip quivered as she stared at me.

*"…"* 

I stared blankly at her skin as it burned cherry red.

"Ah..."

Then she opened her mouth.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!"

We're not beating the porn game allegations, are we? Great. Hilarious.

Lapis screamed and squatted where she stood. I felt a gust of wind and a blade held against my throat.

Moore Hasempton Kir, one of the shadow archers that protected Lapis, looked up at me with murder in her eyes.

She was holding a curved blade called a *shadow hand* that was small enough to hide in the palm of one's hand and pressed it to my throat.

The other elves rushed in one after another and reacted in various ways.

"Oh, it's just you, Hiiro... Sheesh, I wasted my energy running here."

"H-Hiiro Sanjo! You've deflowered our princess! I knew from the very start that your face was overflowing with lust!"

Amid the commotion, Lapis, shrunken and red-faced, desperately waved her hands.

"I-it isn't like that! I—I was using the shower! Hiiro's the only one who lived here until recently, so he wasn't used to the possibility of there being anyone else in it! It's my fault!"

"But Princess, he saw your naked body, didn't he? You can say it was an accident, but I'm not sure how it looks from the Alfheim perspective."

The elves looked at each other. No one seemed concerned that their princess was naked.

I shifted Moore's shadow hand with my fingertips and tossed Lapis a towel from the changing area.

"Th-thanks..."

"I should have been more careful, now that we're living together. I'll take responsibility for this."

With a towel wrapped around my waist, I sat up straight, stuck out my stomach, and touched Masamune Kuki to my belly button.

"I guess hara-kiri is the only option..."

"Whoa! I forced you to let me move in with you! Why do you have to commit suicide, you idiot?!"

With a towel wrapped around her naked body, Lapis frantically stopped me.

What I was about to do was a perfectly reasonable punishment for any man who threatened the chastity of a yuri heroine, but I decided not to, partly because Lapis was so disheartened.

Now that I had been forgiven, I took a shower and then went to the Yamato room.

Having changed into her loungewear—a loose-fitting gray parka and shorts— Lapis sat down on the tatami mat and looked up at me apologetically.

The elves were scattered around her, playing games, putting on makeup, and caring for their magic devices, but they reacted differently as soon as I appeared.

Maybe the split between those who liked me and those who wanted me dead was more even than I thought.

Moore, the one who had thrust a weapon at me a moment earlier, was not only hostile but deadly and took a step forward as if she were protecting Lapis from me. On the other hand, Milla Acht Schatten—a golden-haired elf with naturally curly hair who appeared to be the leader—took her hand off the bow she was cradling and spoke to me.

"Um, Hiiro. Sorry for causing a commotion. Our young ones have a habit of being quick with their blades...and tending to go for the kill right away."

I guess it couldn't be helped since Hiiro's life was less significant than fluff on a dandelion.

"It's okay. It's my fault, too, for burning the image of Lapis's naked body from top to bottom into my brain."

"Why do you say things like that?!"

Because I want you to hate me, sashay out of this house, and find happiness with a beautiful girl—the protagonist, if at all possible.

Lapis's face flushed as she came at me like a bulldog, but I ignored her and glanced at her guards.

The *Twelve Shields* of Lapis Clouet la Lumet, Princess of Alfheim—Land of the Elves.

Thirteen clans exist in the Land of the Elves, and the strongest elves, excluding *la Clouet*, the king's lineage, are selected as the *shadow archers*.

In other words, these elves were the elite.

Elves are often associated with bows and magic, but there are exceptions, like my mentor, who excels in close-range combat.

As I already experienced firsthand in the bathhouse, some elves are assassins, hiding daggers called shadow hands on their person. If you were foolish enough to think you could take one in a fight, you'd be dead before you even processed their blade in your throat.

The most distinctive feature of these girls was their eyes.

Sure, you can use those consoles to enhance your dynamic vision and optic nerves, but these elves can accurately see several miles away. On top of that, one could easily use a regular bow to shoot out the eyeballs of a hostile target accurately at that distance.

They had extraordinary vision.

Elves were a race of hunters and sharpshooters who coexisted with the forest. For them, eyesight was one of their most valuable weapons. In addition, they could even see in the dark, so it was like they were always wearing night vision goggles.

They also used a long-range shooting spell called *farsight mirror*. Once they started using that magic and you got separated from them by a distance, you had next to no chance of winning.

You would fall victim to a storm of arrows, and the game would be over.

Naturally, those elves were powerful characters.

They don't stand out because there's Lapis's head bodyguard, that cheating elf named Astemir, but these other elves are pretty strong.

In *The Evil Route*, a group of four elves stands in your way in three battles as a prelude to the fight against Lapis.

And, man, are they strong.

*ESCO* is known to be an easy game, but *The Evil Route* is considered more challenging than any other game around. The archers on that route are extremely powerful, and they'd defeat you if you challenged them without a plan.

So that's why I didn't want to antagonize these elves.

I didn't want to die in vain. I wouldn't throw my life away unless it's for the sake of yuri girls of the future.

Hiiro may be a creep, but he can at least be a meat shield for the main character, so it was my duty to stay alive until that time came. It would be an act of betrayal against yuri to go out of my way and willingly reduce the number of those shields that would protect them.

*"…"* 

Moore glared at me.

I felt her burning desire to kill me. With things left as they were, she could very well attack me in my sleep and kill me.

Hiiro's causes of death were, in fact, quite varied and diverse, and naturally, there was a wide range of patterns where an elf killed him.

Of course, the original story didn't involve Lapis and Hiiro starting to live together in a nightmare scenario similar to this. However, it was possible that his Peeping Tom act would be used as an excuse for him to be unable to wake up the next morning.

Oh, you scumbag! Don't ever bother trying to wake up again, jerk!

I'm sure I would have said something like that, wearing a tricorn hat, firing off party poppers, and devouring a celebratory cake if I had been watching this world through my game screen. But as I said a moment ago, I had no intention of being unable to become a shield and dying in vain.

I needed a plan. At the very least, I needed the elves to like me enough not to kill me.

I was in the world of a yuri game, and as a man, I needed those girls to like me... How had it come to this? The answer didn't matter.

"Oh?"

The sliding door opened behind me as the elves and I stared at each other, and Astemir stepped in, her arms full of bags of sweets.

"What's with the heavy atmosphere? So a mysterious rift has formed between my beloved disciple and our elves. Hee-hee! I can see the reason why!"

My master pointed her index finger at us.

"You were arguing over whether to have fried chicken or hamburgers for dinner, weren't you?!"

"I envy you for your peaceful thoughts. I really do! I mean, do you have a pigeon stuck in your brain somewhere?! Huh?! Try popping it out your mouth like a cuckoo clock and telling the time, why don't you?!"

"Oh my! My dear apprentice is already losing his temper! Does this mean that even I, the strongest in the world, am unable to stop my disciple from running amok?! Is that the fate of we who are too strong?!"

"...I really envy how bubbly you can afford to be."

I was shaking my master's head like mad when Hiiro's sister—Rei Sanjo—

appeared from behind me.

Her eyes reminded me of the frozen night sky in the middle of winter.

Her long, glossy black hair was perfectly coiffed, and even the elves stood silently admiring her beauty.

By simply standing there, Rei Sanjo could convey her dignified beauty, perhaps because of the fine balance between her face and the rest of her body. It felt like the place was suddenly dominated by the air about her.

"I picked her up on my way home while I was buying sweets."

"Will you please refrain from casually bringing a person's sister along like you've picked up food?"

"Hiiro."

She combed back her long hair and glared at me.

"We've been receiving information at the main residence. It sounded like a rumor in bad taste, and I wouldn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes, but you've really brought the elves of Alfheim to our villa... Do you intend to keep them as concubines?"

"Huh?"

A petite, silver-haired elf named Si Puruatte Leyer looked displeased as she moved in on Rei.

"What do you mean by that? Never mind us, but don't tell me you see our princess as a concubine, too?"

With a sigh, a corner of Rei's mouth curved upward.

"An elf is an elf. Nothing more, and nothing less. You otherworldly fool... wandering around the Sanjo residence like you own the place. Have some common sense."

"...Oh?"

They glared at each other—and I got in between them.

"Okay, that's enough. Rei, stop saying things you don't mean. I don't mind the Sanjo family's arrogance, but it can cause misunderstandings. I'm sure you

didn't come here to pick a fight."

"...Acting so important...when you're no different from them," she mumbled, then plastered a fake smile on her face.

"I beg your pardon, Hiiro. I appreciate your intervention. However, I have no business here other than to confirm with my own eyes the rumors of your insolence."

"Heh-heh, that's funny. You're saying the next head of the Sanjo family would come all the way here to the villa to check on Hiiro, the family troublemaker and womanizer, just because he brought a woman in? Next, are you going to ask me what I had for breakfast since you're so interested in my daily routines?"

*""* 

Rei held one of her arms with the other and turned away. The white-haired maid behind her stepped forward.

"Miss Rei."

"Stay back, Snow. You're just the hired help. Do you really want to interfere in Sanjo family affairs?"

"...Pardon my intrusion."

Her eyes were dead as dead could be.

In the preliminary stage of the game, Rei Sanjo is dragged down by the dark aspects of the Sanjo family and only says things that were contrary to her true intentions.

There was no doubt that she came to see me for a reason, but although I had already played the original game, I couldn't figure out what it was. As far as I knew, there were no events in the game where Rei went to Hiiro for help or advice.

We don't want a yuri game heroine to go and see some guy, even if he happens to be her brother. I know I don't. But I had a feeling it wasn't smart to leave it at that.

Having racked my brains, I laughed as I opened my mouth to speak.

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"Rei, spend the night here."
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"...Huh?"

Rei gave me a look of contempt and scoffed.

"I see. So you're going to lay your hands on me, too, since our blood ties are weak. Knowing you, I figured it might eventually come to this."

Then she whispered sadly, "...I never had any expectations of you from the start."

She spoke so softly that it was barely audible, but my ears picked up on it.

So I smiled and kept my distance so I wouldn't alarm her.

"Lapis."

"Huh? What ...?"

"This is my sister, Rei Sanjo. Let her bunk with you today, okay? Treat her like a princess. As the princess of the elf world, you understand the heart of hospitality, right?"

"...Who said I was staying?"

"I did. Okay, she's all yours. Oh, by the way, I'll weep tears of joy if you film the sleepover and send it to me later. I'll get down on my knees and beg if I have to, okay?"

"Huh? No... Don't do that...," Lapis said as my master stood there with her arms crossed. Then she smiled and nodded.

"Okay, now that that's settled."

She led us all to the villa training area.

"How about a battle to break the ice?!"

"...Huh?"

We were standing in the training hall at the Sanjo family villa.

The cedar floor was waxed, and wooden and bamboo swords hung on the

walls—the very picture of a sword-fighting hall. The setting sun was shining through windows at eye level and onto our feet, casting a warm glow of the sunset on the walls and floor.

The wooden and bamboo swords weren't the common ones I knew. They were all magical devices. They looked like ordinary swords, but it seemed that a formula frame existed and magic power could change their material.

I stood in the center of the training area, which was so large that there was still plenty of room, even with sixteen of us there, and I raised my voice.

"Hey, what is this?! My whole body's already cracking to pieces! A friendly battle? What is this, a shounen manga?! Weekly or monthly?!"

"It's a tumble-tumble comic," Astemir replied nonchalantly.

"I couldn't care less where it gets published! Put yourself in my shoes! I came home exhausted after getting beaten to a pulp, and now I'm being forced into a shounen manga?! Readers won't stay if it's just one battle after another! I'm a humble Japanese citizen, not a fighter!"

"Hiiro, are you crying?"

"Yeah, I'm crying! I'm crying an ocean! The tears won't stop! I'm drying up! And since I'm doing that, I'm going to drown you, Master, in a hundred million liters of tears!"

"But I can swim."

"Please don't swim in my misery...!"

I held my mouth and crouched, crying.

"Hiiro."

Was she suffering from some trauma?

With dead eyes, Lapis leaned close to me, shivering and staring at the void to her upper right.

"It's useless to try to say anything to her... I mean, I'm the princess, yet she made me do this and that...pushing me to the brink of death during training... Oh dang. I'm having flashbacks..."

"Lapis, get a grip! Think of something fun! Like today, I...only worked out at four in the morning... Oh no. I'm having flashbacks, too..."

The two of us trembled, and Rei let out a loud sigh.

"...This is ridiculous."

She was about to leave the training room when she reacted to a wooden sword thrown at her, turned, and grabbed it.

"…"

Still holding the wooden sword, Rei glared at the silver-haired elf who had thrown it at her—Si, one of the elf archers.

"Are you running away?"

"You misunderstand the meaning of—"

Rei smiled.

"I'll teach you what it means. I'll demonstrate for you."

I hadn't realized...

...that Moore, another elf archer, was standing before me, looking sharply into my eyes.

I laughed while patting the wound on my neck where she had cut me.

"Shall we shake hands and make up?"

"…"

I smiled and pulled my hand back after being ignored.

"Then since this is a friendly affair, we will now hold a goodwill match between the Sanjo family and Alfheim. Even though it's a friendly match, we want it to be serious so that the winner will have one privilege."

My master held up a finger and smiled.

"If the Sanjo family wins, Alfheim will never again harbor hostility toward them. If Alfheim wins, they'll have the right to have a say on the dinner menu."

"What? That's all we get? We have a say in what to have for dinner if we win?"

"Hey, don't get cheeky. You're only a guest. We've created a stir and are acting spoiled, and they're going along with it. Do you understand that?"

The leader, Milla, said that with a smile and rendered the elf who complained speechless. She took a step back, mumbling to herself.

"Now, if we do things as we usually do, we elves are sure to win. How about giving them a slight advantage, huh, Lapis...?"

Lapis returned to her senses after trembling from the trauma and looked at Astemir.

"You fight on behalf of the Sanjos alongside Rei and Hiiro. If the elves lose even one battle, then we lose."

Si and Moore agreed without complaint.

It showed their confidence in their abilities, and the looks on their faces said their pride wasn't conceit but rooted in fact.

"I'll use my spear. Is that all right?"

"No problem."

Rei picked up a practice spear that was hanging on the wall.

She spun it around to check the swing and thrust, then stopped it under her armpit. Lapis and I were impressed by the smoothness of her moves and sighed.

No wonder she was one of the four heroines... She was quite adept.

She glared at me when I continued to stare.

"Yes?"

"Oh, I was just wondering if you'd be able to win. Do you think you will?"

"Probably not," Rei said. "But that's only if both sides fight under ideal conditions. This hall has no bows, which are their specialty, and I think we'll have a chance to win if we use Lapis wisely."

"Okay... It's in your hands, Main Shield Lapis."

"I, Lapis Clouet la Lumet, am the princess of Alfheim. The next time you call me *Main Shield*, I'll perform surgery on your face with my fist so that no one can ever bear to look at it again," she said, beaming, and I raised both hands in surrender. Seeing me like that, she looked sorry and lowered her eyes.

"I'm sorry it's come to this, Hiiro. Those elves aren't bad girls, but they tend to be overprotective... I'm truly sorry. I know I'm the one who wanted to move in with you."

"I know. Don't worry about it. I got to admire Your Highness in the nude, so I think we're even. Actually, I rather like these girls. I really do, even if they look at me like I'm the enemy."

Lapis smiled.

"But that aside, I want you to move out. And don't ever come back."

Her face turned serious.

"Hey, I have my reasons. Please understand. There's something I want to protect, and it really isn't good if you stay here—"

I heard a sniffing sound, then saw Lapis rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands and beginning to cry.

"H-Hiiro... D-do you hate me that much...?"

Stunned, I stood there and stared at her.

"I—I don't have friends in this world...and it was so much fun fighting you in the dungeon... H-Hiiro, you've been so nice to me despite the terrible things I said in the beginning... S-so I—"

"I-I-I was just joking! You can stay here! No problem at all! You don't have to cry! It's okay! Perfectly okay!"

It has to be a misinterpretation on my part to make a heroine cry, right?! Even if I'm trying to make her move out for the sake of yuri, the very root of my greatest desires, a heroine who's at the foundation of that world shouldn't cry! Please stop crying, I beg you!

She looked at me with misty eyes as I desperately tried to get her to stop crying.

"R-really...? I-I'm not being a nuisance...?"

"Of course you aren't! Not in the least bit! You're beyond being a nuisance and making me confused, so it's perfectly okay!"

"Good..."

Really?

"B-but you know, Lapis, I'm a guy, and, um, you know how guys are treated in this world. You came at me with full force when we first met, right?"

"That's because I didn't know you then...and my great aunt told me to be wary of males... But it's okay now that I know you..."

With tears in her eyes, Lapis smiled shyly but beautifully.

"It doesn't matter if you're male or female. You're you."

"Lapis..."

She was acting like such a good person so she could stay on... Hey, never mind that. Just get out of here...

I don't know what she liked about me so much, but now that the lonely princess had treated me like a *friend*, I realized I had no way to escape and prepared to meet my fate.

Still holding a spear in her hand, Rei watched our exchange with a blank look in her eyes.

"It's lovely that the two of you get along so well. Now, if you're done with your heart-to-heart, may I ask you to hand over the princess?"

"Escort her properly. She is a princess."

"You don't have to stress that..."

Our duel was then underway.

Si moved forward, and Rei and Lapis stood side by side and took her on.

"Ugh. Don't you have a bow here? A sword, a dagger, a spear... I don't like any of the stuff you have."

Si picked up a wooden sword, and after hesitating, Lapis did the same.

"Don't be so nervous, Lapis. You'll be fine," I said, and Lapis smiled happily.

"Even if I'm attacked, it probably won't hurt that much."

"I'll rearrange your face later on...!"

"Both parties, prepare to fight."

Si shook her hair back, and her gaze locked with Rei's.

"I'm sorry, but the thing I hate the most in the world is holding back. The second worst thing for me in the world is when someone gets cocky right in my face."

"Me too, little one."



"Begin!"

Charge! Rei took off with her spear and closed in on Si with tremendous force.

And—

"Huh?!"

The elf easily dodged the blow, slid the belly of her wooden sword over the hilt of the spear, then glided her body around without a sound, and struck.

Whack!

A clear burst of sound resounded.

Lapis took the blow with her sword, frowned, and tried to push back but was pulled in the opposite direction. She staggered forward, tripped, and fell with a mighty thud next to Si, who had pulled back.

Si was now competing one-on-one with Rei.

Si's eyes sparkled, and she readied the sword she hid at her waist and ran at a furious pace. Or rather, it was more like she leaped.

Thud, thud, thud!

She closed the distance between them in a mere three steps, flew like a bird of prey, and attacked from overhead. Rei took the impact with her spear, pushed it back as her face contorted, and then quickly spun her spear to aim at the side of Si's head from a blind spot.

Whoosh!

It resembled the sound of the wind—not mild, like crops swaying in the breeze, but more like a stone being pitched.

Si reacted quickly to the blow that came from the opposite direction. She dodged it with her knee, spun around, rolled to the side, and slammed her heel into Rei's body.

"Hngh!"

It sank into her collarbone, but Rei instantly stepped back. Thanks to her quick response, it was shallow.

My master didn't approve of it as a legitimate strike, and Lapis pulled herself up and furiously attacked the silver shadow from behind.

However, the strike was an amateur attempt, and Si kicked her without even turning around, and Lapis fell flat on her buttocks.

"Are you okay, Lapis?! Did that rearrange your butt before you could rearrange my face?!"

"Shut up! Keep your mouth shut, you idiot!!!"

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me, dumbass!"

Here I was, seriously concerned about her, but she called me an idiot. That stunned me, but the situation seemed to be moving forward.

With both eyes open—

—Rei delivered a blow with blinding speed.

Man, she was quick!

Even the dynamic vision of an elf couldn't capture the shadow of her spear — clunk—but Si shocked Rei by blocking it with the tip of her wooden sword.

Not one to miss an opportunity, Si swung from the top.

"Oh?!"

I'd been shouting so loud that I'd drowned out the noise that Lapis was making. She had crept up behind Si and was tugging on her clothes as she fell.

Si staggered, her sword flashed and wobbled, and Rei took advantage of that moment.

Almost simultaneously, the competitors landed blows to vital sites of each other's bodies, and silence ensued.

"...This looks like a draw."

Whoa.

The elves who weren't interested in participating in the first place got excited and cheered both sides.

"Not bad."

Laughing and fixing her messed-up silver hair, Si held out a hand to Rei.

"That was a great thrust. I apologize for being rude. It's been a while since I got my blood pumping like that. Thanks."

Rei took the hand without comment.

The handshake of these young girls could be considered unsportsmanlike...if you didn't think of them as a potential yuri pair. I started fanta sizing about Rei and Si becoming rivals and then eventually falling in love with each other...when I noticed that Moore was standing in front of me, her black hair fluttering about.

"Okay, next."

Holding a wooden dagger backhandedly, she stared at me with open hostility.

"Hey."

I laughed and stared back at her.

"Are you sure you want to come to me with an attitude like that? When I'm about to break you into pieces?"

"Will you stop acting big while you hide behind my back?"

Lapis pulled me forward to stand beside her, and I readied a wooden sword.

"Both parties prepare to fight."

Lapis and I got into position.

"Begin!"

Moore, who had been in front of me, disappeared.

"Hiiro, behind you!!!"

I quickly twisted my body and swung my wooden sword.

Luckily, the sword caught a flash from my opponent.

I felt a sudden numbness shoot up from my fingertips to my arm and scowled. The power of the blow was so great that I could barely believe it was just a dagger strike, but my opponent seemed unfazed.

Lowering herself, Moore glided across the floor and delivered a slash from an unseen spot.

"Whoa, wait a sec. I-I'm an amateur!"

Not having been taught how to swing a sword properly, I backed away, desperately trying to defend myself. I retreated and led my attacker toward Lapis, noting that her swings weakened—and laughed.

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"Lapis."
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"What?"

I whispered a plan to Lapis, and she chuckled in disgust.

"Coward."

"I've had a taste for cowardice and yuri ever since I was young."

Lapis and I stood back to back.

"Ah."

My master grinned, and that was when a piece of Moore's sword came flying at me.

Lapis and I pivoted.

Moore was stunned, and her sword flash became twisted. I struck it from the side, and the moment Lapis repelled the attack, we touched arm-to-arm in unison and pivoted again.

A moment later, I unleashed a flash I'd been flexing at my waist.

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"....!"
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Pop.

As soon as Moore started attacking again, I slapped Lapis's arm and switched places with her.

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"Hngh! Urgh!"
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With a look of anguish on her face, Moore tried to get behind me, but Lapis and I continued to spin around and wouldn't let her.

Our arms were entwined, our backs pressed closely together, and we took

turns at offense and defense.

I'd taken advantage of the fact that these elf archers were loyal to their master and would never want to risk injuring her.

"...You sneaky bastard!"

Moore was revealing her emotions to me for the first time, and I smiled...

...as Lapis and I continued to slap each other on the arm.

We were moving at a fine tempo and began to create a rhythm, smiling at each other as sweat flew off our faces.

With a big grin on her face, Lapis no longer hesitated about touching a man, and she continued to spin around, happily slapping and pulling my arm.

It was like a kind of dance.

Escorting and being escorted by a princess, I kept spinning round and round with her in the sunset-tinted ballroom.

And finally...

"Oh!"

Moore's dagger flew out of her hand, and her pocket became wide open.

"Hiiro!!!"

I turned with tremendous momentum, aimed vigorously for her wide-open torso—while seeing the look of despair on her face—and missed.

"Huh?!"

I heard the deflation in Lapis's voice as the dagger struck my torso.

"Ippon. Moore scores to win," my master declared, and the elf archers erupted in wild applause.

As her fellow elves swarmed around her, Moore looked down at her dagger, up at my wooden sword, and then stared at my face.

"Oh geez!"

Lapis laughed as she slapped my arm again and again.

"You jerk! We would have won for sure if you had hit her! What a buffoon! You're going to have to make it up to me sometime!"

"Ow, that hurts. Sorry, my foot slipped... Ouch. I'm sorry. I really am. Hey! I said that hurts!!!"

*Slap, slap, slap, slap.* I ignored the princess, who was treating my back like a drum and set out to leave the hall to take a shower.

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"…"
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Rei was waiting for me by the door, staring at me.

"Oh? You know where the shower is, don't you? I'll go to the other bathroom so you and the others can use the shower—"

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"Why?"
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"Huh?"

Fwip.

Rei turned away, brushed back her beautiful black hair, and walked out.

Lapis, who had been punching me in the back as if clinging to it, looked up at me, her mouth hanging open.

"What was that about?"

"Maybe she wanted to know what we were having for dinner."

"I want hamburgers!"

"No one asked you."

"What kind of attitude is that? I'm a princess!"

Lapis got behind me and tugged at the hem of my shirt.

What's with this kid? As soon as we were alone, she was acting sweet to me. She'd decided that we were buddies before I realized it, and that wasn't what I wanted.

After dealing with the spoiled princess, I took a bath, washed away the sweat,

and went to see the elves to ask them what they wanted for dinner.

Everyone said they wanted curry with rice.

Was Japanese curry the ultimate meal for them...?

Moore sat in the corner, and she didn't respond, so I turned toward her with a notepad in hand.

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"What about you?"

"....."

I smiled wryly and turned to the elves.

"What's her favorite dish?"

"Curry with rice," they chirped in unison.
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"Again?"

I asked the maids to let me use the kitchen. Strangely enough, they seemed to have grown fond of me at some point since I started living in the Sanjo villa.

They initially looked at me with fear, disgust, and contempt when I first arrived in this world, but now they were smiling gently at me. They didn't need to go out of their way to be nice to someone like Hiiro, but he was too terrible to begin with. I couldn't blame them for the change in their attitude.

Using what I'd learned in home-ec and from camping, I dumped store-bought curry powder into a pot of veggies, simmered it, and served it over rice.

The Alfheim gang and members of the Sanjo family gathered in the grand hall. They tried my special curry and showered me with compliments.

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"Curry!" "Curry!" "Curry!"

"Yep! I've made curry for you guys!"
```

Curry was curry if I used an instant seasoning mix, and it was a cinch to satisfy elf palates.

Once we finished dinner, my boss and Lapis wanted to play a game, so I tossed the rule book for a TRPG, a tabletop role-playing game, to the crowd of elves.

*"*....?"

The effects were just as I'd hoped for; everyone looked puzzled, and the elves began to try to figure out how to play silently.

Hee-hee-hee... Once they understood the rules, I'd throw in a yuri scenario I created, and then I could watch a beautiful profusion of one yuri moment after another.

Pleased with my 180-IQ yuri competence, I grinned to myself as I headed for the large bathroom on the first floor and spotted my sister walking up the stairs.

She went from the second floor to the third level...

...then up to the stargazing platform, and...

"...Do you want something?"

She'd spotted me at the bottom of the steps that led to the platform.

A round moon floated in the night sky.

Rei was sitting on the floor, looking absent-minded in the moonlight that came through the skylight. She looked rather sad, like that story about Princess Kaguya, who had been banished from the moon.

And she had taken her shower.

Her long black hair was slightly damp and gave off a lustrous sheen in the moonlight.

She was looking at something illuminated by the moon's rays.

A heart-shaped chain made of fish scales joined together...and the gorgeous eyes moved away from the item and in my direction.

"Come on up if you want something."

"No, I—"

Rei turned away like she was sulking. That did it. I couldn't help but go to her, and I climbed up the ladder and went to sit next to her.

It was a small area, so naturally, our arms and shoulders touched.

I felt the warmth of Rei's skin and could hear her gentle heartbeat through her clothes.

"…"

"…"

Without a word, she brushed back her hair.

Her neck was bright red, and I thought she shouldn't have invited me, a guy, to sit with her if it was going to embarrass her.

A somewhat bittersweet silence followed, making me feel a little restless and — "Why?" Rei finally asked. "Why did you miss that shot on purpose?"

For a moment, I didn't know what she was talking about, and I froze...then realized she was talking about my sword-fighting round with Moore at our evening get-together.

"You knew I did it on purpose?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what can I say?" I whispered, looking up at the moon. "I lost, you know."

"Huh?"

She stared at me, and I laughed.

"When I set out to strike at her, that elf looked like it was the end of the world. If she lost, it would mean she'd have to allow me to get close to Lapis. She didn't want that, and that explained the look on her face...and I thought it was noble of her... So I threw."

"I don't understand."

"You wouldn't get it, would you? You have yet to reach this mental state!"

Clad in a thin summer kimono, Rei rested her cheek on her knees and stared at me.

*""* 

The contour of her body became visible in the moonlight, highlighting her

fascinating beauty.

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"...l..."
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Her cherry-colored lips parted as she whispered, "I...don't believe... anyone. Not my stepmother or stepfather, who've showered me with false love...my aunts, who always bought me everything I wanted...my grandmothers, always forcing me to be the *Rei Sanjo* they want me to be...or you."

*"…"* 

"Acting so proper."

Rei clenched her fists and spat out bitterly, "Every damn person...uses me... Some family they are... I believed them...had faith in them, over and over again...and I had feelings for you, too... But not once...not even once...have you helped me!"

She glared at me.

"Don't pretend to be...a good guy...at this point!!!"

Tears glistened in her eyes.

She stood up briskly, jumped off the stargazing platform, and ran down the stairs as if to get away from me.

Ever since she was a little girl, Rei had been caught up in the love-hate drama of the Sanjo family and had always been used since she was too young to know what was what... That was how Rei was brought up, and Hiiro continued to use his position as her older brother to take advantage of her.

As she said, she was not about to start believing people now. She had become afraid of hoping and then being betrayed, and she had to take a stand to protect herself.

I wondered who had driven her to this point—and as she left me alone on the stargazing platform, I stared into the void and became aware of someone downstairs.

"Hiiro."

Her pretty white hair shined and glistened in the white light. The white-haired

maid looked up at me with an expression that made me think she was about to cry.

"I want to ask you to do something."

She bowed deeply.

With trembling hands, she held out a card to me.

It was a membership card for a restaurant operated by the Sanjo Group. She trembled all over and seemed to shrink as she continued to hold out the card.

"Would you be willing to have dinner here...in a week, next Saturday...?"

*""* 

She continued desperately in a trembling voice, "Oh, I know it's...a strange thing for me to ask you... And I—I may be making a mistake...but...you...you're the only one...that I can count on..."

Her eyes were moist with tears as she stared straight at me. The little maid contorted her face as tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

"Help me..."

Oh.

Oh dear.

This was an event meant for the game's protagonist.

It wasn't Hiiro's place to get involved, and any strange interaction could destroy the yuri that I so dearly loved.

But...

But she was crying.

Don't pretend to be...a good guy...at this point!!!

Rei had been crying when she said that, too.

The protagonist wasn't here now. If I didn't help this girl now, she would surely suffer a deep psychological wound before entering school.

That was probably what was supposed to happen in the game scenario, and maybe the scar that formed would bring the protagonist and the heroine together.

But...

If I didn't help her now, it would be yet another betrayal in her life.

She'd been betrayed again and again, and now I was going to do the same thing to her and bring more tears to her eyes. The despair that she had repeatedly experienced was going to repeat itself.

I asked myself a question: Could I bear to allow that to happen?

I couldn't change my ways.

Even if I had become Hiiro, this was one situation where I couldn't change my ways.

I just couldn't.

I wouldn't allow these girls to have a future where they'd have to continue crying.

So I jumped down from the stargazing platform—accepting the fate I'd been handed—and gently patted the maid on the head as I passed her.

"Okay."

She sobbed as more tears fell from her cheeks, and she bowed her head deeply again.



Her arms and legs were long and pale.

She wore a lightweight hoodie and shorts...and the golden hair that usually fell down her shoulders to her hips was braided into a ponytail. Her beautiful turquoise green eyes peeked out under the baseball cap she had pulled down over her eyes, and they seemed to glow brighter every time she blinked.

The wind blew, and her long blond hair swayed.

*"…"* 

The beautiful girl was hugging my arm tightly.

Huh? Why...?

Her modest breasts were pressed against my arm. I wondered idly if she'd kill me if I pointed it out.

For she was Lapis Clouet la Lumet.

The only daughter of the queen who ruled Alfheim, the Land of the Elves. She was a true princess, and she wasn't someone a mere male could touch. In fact, she was a sanctuary that no male could intrude.

That was the vibe I got from her when I played *ESCO*. But now she was leaning on me and walking beside me like we were lovers.

She was a heroine of a yuri game.

Meanwhile, I was the bastard who invaded yuri ships.

We weren't meant to cross paths, yet here we were, walking down the street in front of the train station, snuggling up to one another.

Nauseated by this contradiction, I whispered, "...Lapis."

"Huh? Yeah? Oh, hey, what are we going to do about lunch? Is there anything you want to eat? What would you like?"

"Yuri—lilies, I guess."

"You eat flowers?!"

"Um, no... Wait a sec... I'm confused to death... Sure, it's lunchtime, but can you give me a moment to figure out what's what...?"

She was close enough for me to count her long eyelashes.

Her respectable face was so beautiful and ethereal that I wondered if it was a high-definition 3D model.

"Go ahead."

"Today, I'm on a holiday that my country recognizes, and I've rushed out into the blazing sun to run an important errand that involves national affairs. And I need to handle that errand alone."

I looked at her with exasperation on my face.

"Why have you been clinging to me like a duckling?"

"Got a problem with it?"

"I do, and that's why I'm asking."

"Oh gee, Hiiro. I didn't think you said things like that! I'm sitting at home with a lot of free time on my hands, and you mercilessly go out on a date by yourself! And to think that I was defeated by an elf, who is one of my subordinates, because of this particular someone!"

"...You're saying I should take responsibility and let the selfish princess have a great time?"

"Huh? Well, yeah. I guess."

Lapis smiled smugly, all sweet.

"No, I can't get you involved in this, and the elf archers would kill me if I took you everywhere I went... And there's this."

I looked at Lapis as she hung onto my arms.

"How did this happen?"

"I told you."

She clung to my arm even more tightly and said, "It's a disguise!"

I sighed.

"...Do you know what a disguise is?"

"What do you take me for, an idiot? Of course I know what a disguise is. I'm wearing a hat, and I'm dressed just like any other girl who might be around. And I'm walking arm-in-arm with you, a man. No one would ever think I'm Lapis Clouet la Lumet. It's a problem that goes with being famous. Even when I'm just strolling around, people approach me. It's baffling since people come to me and profess their love for me after only laying eyes on me once."

It wasn't intentional, but I'd seen her naked. The only reason I was still alive was because she and my master spoke to the elf archers in my defense.

Hiiro should have died then.

If I had acted as the normal Hiiro would've, my life would have been cut short the moment I saw Lapis naked. The elf archers would have stabbed me to death, with my blood leaving a dying message, reading ELVES.

Lapis wouldn't have forgiven Hiiro, either.

The mere sight of him had disgusted her in the original story, where she said she got goose bumps just having him lay his eyes on her. It wouldn't have been enough for them to crush my eyeballs if the guy who'd gotten killed for eating ice cream saw her naked.

"Of course Princess Lapis wouldn't walk arm-in-arm with a guy. But hey, this is all wrong. You *are* the princess. What if someone suspected you of having a relationship with me?"

"Huh? Am I making you nervous by simply linking arms with me? Ha-ha. That's cute."

"...Huh?"

Lapis giggled and poked my arm.

"Hey, it's perfectly normal for me to link arms with other girls. I often do walk arm-in-arm with Astemir."

Now that she mentioned it, they did walk around, all lovey-dovey.

All the girls walking down the street in front of the train station had their arms linked and looked like they were enjoying themselves.

"Linking arms doesn't mean you're romantically involved. People will think you're dressed like a man, and that's it. I sometimes see couples like that. They'd flip if they saw your score."

"Oh right. Okay."

"But I approve of you as a guy...I mean, as a human being. Even Astemir does. I'm glad I chased after you when you went running, trying to avoid having a match with me, and I think it's a good thing that I moved in with you. You're funny, too."

"Well, fine."

Dwelling on our situation would do me no good.

I decided to think of it this way: Lapis was walking arm-in-arm with some

ornament that was lying around.

"So, Princess, what do you want to buy today?"

"Clothes! School is about to start, and there's going to be that thing as soon as we enroll. I thought I'd buy myself a dress."

I'd been vaguely aware of it...

But the day was approaching when Lapis, Rei, me, and the two remaining heroines...and the protagonist would start studying at Houjou Magic Academy.

It was about to begin.

Our days at Houjou Magic Academy, the main stage of *ESCO*, would be rife with masses of murderous intent to kill Hiiro. There would be death flags waiting for me around every corner.

I knew about that *thing* Lapis was looking forward to...and how the script went... So yeah, she could keep looking forward to it. I'll be watching from a corner, cheering her and the protagonist on for their bravery.

"How about lunch first? Do you know any good places?"

"Oh...yeah..."

I fumbled around in my pocket.

After a few seconds, I pulled out my membership card for a restaurant run by the Sanjo Group. The family maid...Snow...had given it to me last night with tears in her eyes.

"Will a restaurant be okay?"

"Oh? Are you treating?!"

"Hey, don't underestimate an heir. I have enough money to fill a swimming pool with wads of cash."

Lapis was startled when I showed her my black credit card.

"... Are you saying you have money on you?"

What a genuine princess! I wish she wouldn't overlook the only thing Hiiro has going for him!

Slightly depressed, I checked Masamune Kuki at my waist.

"Lapis. Do you have your magic device with you?"

"Yeah."

Lapis tapped her finger against the mechanical bow that was folded and hanging from her waist.

"You won't have to use that dangerous device. Or rather, don't use it, no matter what. And I'm going to apologize in advance. Sorry."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Oh, well... It's just in case... Hey, I'm gonna go make a phone call."

Just in case.

It probably won't be *just in case*, but...if I don't prepare, it's going to be mighty risky.

I made the call.

\*

Choices didn't exist.

Like if I preferred red or blue.

If I liked short hair or long hair.

Or the type of girl I wanted to date, whether I wanted to build a happy family or spend the rest of my life with someone I love.

Choices like that didn't exist in the path that lay ahead for me. Most of the paths in the future, which I could only vaguely see, were branched out in several directions and blocked off, and it was predetermined that I would walk along the nicely paved road that had flowers planted along it.

The first time I stepped into the main residence of the Sanjo family, when I was made to take off the kids' sneakers my birth mother had bought me, and the servants threw them in the trash can.

That was when I knew that no choices existed for me.

I was told to keep my back straight, take baby steps when I walked, be seated

sixteen rows of stitches from the edge of a tatami mat, play a sonatina after performing a Burgmüller piece, keep smiling when I met an assemblyman or assemblywoman, and speak about subjects that matched the person's interests within five to ten minutes.

I'd get my hair pulled or a slap across my cheek if I failed.

I didn't like having my hair pulled because my father liked my hair.

I didn't like getting a slap across my cheek because my mother praised my cheekbones.

"You have beautiful hair, Rei. You look exactly like your mother and father."

My hair fell out, my cheeks were swollen, and I cried at first, but it stopped mattering as I got used to it.

"You are a woman of the Sanjo family."

My great aunt and the other women who beat me had sour breath.

The stench from hell reached into my heart and permeated every corner.

"You're no better, and you're no worse. For a filthy little girl like you to survive in this household, you have to acquire knowledge, education, and life skills. You have no other choice. All the women of the Sanjo family have been through a lot worse."

```
"…."
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"Hmph."

The hair between my fingers fluttered down to the floor, and I counted the seams in the tatami mat as blood dripped from the edge of my mouth.

"Your hair's dirty, and you have a terrible face."

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"…"
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"Sit down sixteen rows of stitches from the edge of a tatami mat."

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"…"
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True to the teachings, I automatically went to the sixteenth row of stitches, and I collapsed.

Time went by.

They say the passing of time is cruel, but also merciful.

Years, months, and days had gone by, and I had drifted along the river of time, my mind and body numb and less responsive.

For the first time since coming to this house, I finally knew why I'd been happy as a child.

My mother and father had given me those feelings of happiness.

Those were times when I ate a big cake on my birthday, or when they read to me in a warm bed, or when they gave me a piggyback ride once I got exhausted after running around a huge amusement park, or when we played board games that they let me win.

The *happiness* I'd felt and enjoyed with a smile—it was my parents who had given it all to me.

But they were gone now.

Instead of having a big cake on my birthday, I was now entertaining legislators. The warm bed had become a cold place to sleep. I could no longer remember the huge amusement parks. The board games I'd packed in my backpack had been burned in the garden.

I had probably stopped being happy.

All the *happiness* that my parents created for me was gone, so I had to create it myself from now on.

At the end of my blurred vision, my fingers lay on the tatami mat, sixteen seams from the edge, pointing to a space.

"But...," I whispered to myself. "How do I become happy...?"

The space didn't answer because nothing existed there, and that included me.

I had no friends. No family. I had nothing.

That's why I wanted a real family, as everyone around me wore fake smiles.

"...Here, eat."

We had a small pond in our garden.

Many Nishikigoi carp swam there and came to me when I brought them food. Groups of the koi fish rippled on the water's surface, snapping open their mouths and begging with the cutest faces.

There was an array of Nishikigoi carp: Red and white, tricolored, those with white spots on black, *Ochiba Shigure*, *Beni Kumonryu*, *Yamabuki Ogon*... But I found out that one female carp didn't belong with the rest and would not come near me, even when I went to the pond with food.

It was a Kohaku—a red and white one with a heart pattern on its body.

The carp looked somewhat weak and frightened as it swam all by itself.

I saw myself in the carp and wanted to be friends with it, and I went to the pond every day, trying to feed it.

Day in and day out.

I was careful so the scary women of the Sanjo family wouldn't find out.

One day, I went to see it—I walked to the pond without food—and glimpsed a heart pattern peeking out from the water amid beautiful ripples.

*""* 

Immediately, the carp stared at me and slapped its tail fin on the water.

"Aaahh!"

It dove underwater, and I was soaked from the splash and laughed for the first time in a long time.

"Hey, will you be my family?"

Then, as if to reply, the Nishikigoi showed its face and opened and closed its mouth.

From that day on...

Under the roof of the Sanjo family, my exchange with the carp began. I went to the pond regularly, and I revealed all my innermost feelings to the carp. Like a mirror reflecting my heart, the carp swam with its tail wagging, silently listening to what I had to say and occasionally splashing me in place of offering words of advice.

It was fun.

I thought I could live as long as the carp was there.

I thought she could make me *happy*. I thought I didn't want to be *Rei* of the Sanjo family anymore.

So I was at a loss for words when I found the carp with its belly torn open—its intestines exposed.

Gaping.

With her heart cut and pointed to the sky, the only family that I'd known had ended her life on her back.

A smoky, reddish-black band of blood flowed around the pond, the now colorless intestines floating on the surface and the prized heart mark ripped to shreds by a blade.

"Fool."

A woman from a branch of the family whose name I didn't even know laughed sardonically.

"Don't think that a girl who's just come from the countryside can easily inherit the Sanjo name."

*"…"* 

The other carp in the pond chomped on the shredded intestines, and the even finer pieces were devoured. I stood there, speechless.

Oh, I get it.

This wasn't a world that I was seeing. It was a world that Rei Sanjo was witnessing.

My family turned blank again, and I mandated myself to become Rei Sanjo.

As I became *Rei Sanjo*, it seemed as if invisible strings were attached to everything, from the tip of my head to my toes and my thumb to my index

finger, steering me in motion.

One, two. One, two. Put your leg out. Now push your chest out without backing down.

I had become a puppet. Like a well-made doll, I avoided being beaten and pulled the puppet strings on my facial muscles.

Now smile at your best angle so you will look beautiful.

"You're like a doll, Rei."

Yes, that's right.

"Ha-ha-ha! The heiress of the Sanjo family looks like a perfect, immaculate Japanese doll."

One, two. One, two.

"How I envy you. You're an electric doll that can dance without a will of its own," a girl with a burn scar on the right half of her face said, hiding the scar with her bangs.

"Little girl."

A woman—tall, with dark circles under her eyes and morbidly white skin—with a magic circle drawn on the back of her left hand and a tattoo in runes on her fingers blew smoke from her cigarette and smiled.

"Oh! You're so bad at that... I can see your puppet strings."

Oh, she can see them, too.

Lurking backstage, I continued to manipulate the string puppet that I am in the way that I was taught. *Rei Sanjo, who people handle poorly,* is a big hit. Everyone applauded, told me how beautiful I am, and tossed money at me.

I looked at the audience and finally understood.

I never knew it was this easy.

I laughed backstage.

So this was how easy it was to make Rei Sanjo happy.

Finally, I felt at ease. I thought that I could be happy if I continued to

manipulate Rei Sanjo like this.

But...

"...It's Hiiro again."

"I have to find a way to get rid of that troublemaker once and for all."

"Why do women give birth to males anyway?"

Disturbing noise began buzzing in my mind.

Hiiro Sanjo.

My older brother who exists somewhere in the world...I mean, a boy who came from somewhere and became the older brother of the Rei Sanjo that I'd become.

He was my only family in this world.

My brother.

I tried saying the words in my mind, and the heart I thought I'd lost shined brightly.

It was a safe, blank space, just for me.

I curled up under my cold duvet, held my breath, and folded my hands in the darkness.

"...My brother."

I wondered what he was like.

What did he look like? What did he like to eat? How did he spend his days off? Did he know about me? Would he pat me on the head when we met? It would be nice if he'd compliment me on what a great job I've done making it on my own.

But I knew I'd be betrayed.

Yet the anticipation grew and grew in my heart, and I felt *happy* when I thought of the moment we'd meet face-to-face one day.

Long ago, when I still had a mother and a father and was allowed to watch television, an anime was broadcast that showed siblings who were close to each

other. The brother told the sister he was always on her side and swore that it was his role as her brother to protect her, no matter what.

Silly me. I forgot everything I'd learned since coming to this house.

I clung to my sweet dream, and like a maiden in love, I continued to believe that the prince, called *my older brother*, would come and save me.

But no matter how much time passed, my older brother never came.

The rumors I heard about him weren't good at all.

He was fooling around with women while I was enduring hardships, renting out luxury cruise ships and throwing parties, using the Sanjo family name to abuse innocent people, horsing around as he pleased... But finally, I received a letter from him.

The heat immediately went to my head.

With a big smile on my face, I suppressed my excitement, opened the letter with trembling hands, and started reading.

"...Huh?"

He was asking me for money.

The letter contained a series of threats disguised as requests, and he also ordered me to send him the contact information for three staffers who worked at the main residence.

"Hee-hee-hee...!"

Unintentionally, I laughed and kept my face down as I burst into tears.

"Hee-hee-hee...! Hee-hee-hee!"

That day had been my birthday.

There had been no mention of it in the letter at all.

More time went by.

Hiiro contacted me saying he wanted to see me.

"…"

I was no longer going to get my hopes up.

As usual, I maneuvered my puppet strings and met Hiiro as Rei Sanjo and accepted his request to take in a girl with white hair.

"...All right."

Nothing mattered anymore.

The white-haired girl called herself *Snow* and, for some reason, tried to protect me from the chastisement and harassment that were an everyday occurrence in the Sanjo household. As if it were her mission, she used herself as my shield and quickly became covered in wounds.

But Snow didn't break down like I did.

She just stared straight ahead and built up her position in the family to protect me through whatever means required.

"...Why?" I asked.

"...Why are you helping me?"

"Because I promised," she said with a smile.

"I promised someone I'm crazy about."

*"…."* 

"Miss Rei," she whispered as she held my hands under the cold duvet. "They'll protect you. I'm sure of it. That person will surely put a smile on your face.

"...Who will?"

Snow blushed shyly.

"The hero."

"…"

"Miss Rei, there are people in the world who are willing to live so they can keep someone alive—people who can risk their lives to protect someone else's smile. I'm sure that person..."

As I lay under the cold duvet, she continued, "...will be able to save you."





Snow continued to protect and warm me for a long time, melting my frozen heart and watching over it as it thawed.

Snow.

She had a warmth that didn't match her name, and the cold duvet became warmer. Voids were filled, and I could smile as I gingerly peeked out from backstage.

Somewhere along the way, I started seeing Snow as my real family.

Then I remembered the red color floating on the surface of that pond.

The future I envisioned was so terrible that I ordered her to work at the villa so she could protect herself. And unfortunately, Hiiro came to live there.

"Miss Rei."

And...

Sounding sincerely happy, the pure white Snow whispered, "Hiiro Sanjo has become a new man."

When I heard that, I felt more emptiness than happiness. Anger and hatred welled up inside me, and resignation filled my vision.

It's too late...

He can't start messing with my heart now.

I could never live differently than the Rei Sanjo I've become.

So I smiled and let it go.

Nothing would change, and I wouldn't believe in anything.

I loved my carp friend. I had glued her scales together as a heart-shaped accessory and placed it far back in my chest of drawers. Then I had closed my eyes, vowing never to open it again.

So that no one could ever take it from me, I was resigned from the start.

Because I have always been and always will be—Rei Sanjo—a puppet.

I finished my call and returned, and then Lapis grabbed my arm again.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Princess. I, Hiiro Sanjo, will convince myself that I am but a stone on the side of the road as I take the pleasure of escorting you."

"O-okay... What's with you?"

"Oh, nothing. But today, I, Hiiro Sanjo, will show you what I'm made of."

I smiled fearlessly.

"This is a one-day deal, but everything you order today will be on me."

I ruffled my hair and gave Lapis a thumbs-up.

"Eat all you like. I have plenty of money."

"Oh! Hiiro, you're so cool!"

Lapis and I were full of excitement as we headed to a restaurant on the top floor of a skyscraper. But— "People with a score of zero can't come in here."

*"…"* 

I was turned away at the entrance.

*"…"* 

"H-hey, you don't have to look like you're about to cry! I'm a princess, remember?! I eat at restaurants all the time, and I'm fed up with them! I know. Let's go out for a burger! A hamburger! I love the cola they have at fast food places!"

"...Sorry."

"D-don't be! Don't get so depressed!"

I was about to leave the restaurant with Lapis patting me on the back when I heard a familiar voice and turned around.

"...Lapis."

"I told you. It's okay! We're tight, right? Don't worry!"

"Step outside. I'll be with you in about an hour."

"Huh?"

I left Lapis there and began walking inside.

"S-sir, you can't come in..."

A waitress in a tuxedo tried to stop me, so I pulled my trigger and cast a tiny amount of magical intimidation, and she flinched and took a step back.

"Are you sure you didn't make a mistake when you measured my score?" I asked with a smirk. "Well?"

"Y-yes...I must have..."

I pushed the sweating woman out of the way and walked right in.

I passed by a band playing, and there, at a table by a glass wall at the far end of the room...was Rei Sanjo, surrounded by members of the Sanjo family, with tears falling down her cheeks.

I...don't believe...anyone.

Snap.

Something ripped open inside me.

Blatantly ignoring all entrance criteria, this zero-score male who wasn't allowed in this place walked across the center of the hall with a resounding clang.

There was a stir among the ladies who had been having lunch in a refined manner, and security pulled out their magic devices.

Blade versus blade.

This zero approached, smiling and proud, between the weapons.

The old ladies caught sight of him and looked surprised.

"Hey."

I made an effort to look frivolous so they'd be offended.

Playing the role of Hiiro from the original game, I went to their table and threw my feet on it.

"You guys look like you're having a good time."

The women did not attempt to hide their surprise—and I grinned.

"Let me join you."

Didn't they understand the situation?

I glanced at the old women whose mouths were hanging open stupidly and gulped down a glass of mineral water on the table.

"Hey, stop looking like idiots and pour a glass of wine for this handsome new addition to your little group. Then I'll act like an innocent victim and report you to the cops for serving alcohol to a minor so they can throw you in jail."

"Hiiro..." Rei hastily wiped away a tear and said, "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?"

I smiled and recalled the information I'd read in the game notes.

"It's your birthday today."

Rei's beautiful eyes widened.

"As your older brother, it's only natural that I'd celebrate your birthday, and I thought I might as well show up to your party."

"Wh-where's Snow...?"

"So it was you who set me up with that guard. You went to the trouble of keeping an eye on me, which means you didn't want me to find out about this lunch."

I got a general idea about the background.

About who had ordered Snow to keep an eye on me. Since she worked at the Sanjo family villa, it had to be someone from the clan.

And who could it be? The family itself? They had been trying to kill Hiiro in *ESCO* every time they had the chance. Or could it be Rei, the next in line to be the head of the family...? However, that maid seemed to have been spying on me in a way that was bound to make me realize what she was doing.

If that were the case, the reason was obvious.

She wanted me to find out that Rei Sanjo was her master.

There was probably some deeper meaning to it, and she'd followed me to the dungeon, being a lousy tail, so I'd notice her. She wanted to see how I'd react.

And I passed her test, and she came to me to help Rei...by handing me a membership card for this restaurant.

Rei Sanjo should have been smiling happily next to her destined lover. Instead, she was crying, surrounded by people who looked as if they had been soaked from head to toe by a septic tank.

I could never forgive the elder Sanjo women for making her cry.

Because—I was a protector of yuri heroines.

"Hey, you old hags. Have you been getting your kicks picking on a young girl? It's...too noble a hobby for me that I can't understand it at all, but I'd love it if you'd help me by filling out a questionnaire," I called out to the senior members of the Sanjo family, and it was hard to miss the stir that ensued.

"Hiiro...who do you think you're talking to, acting so pompous?"

"Are there any other old bats around here? I think the Sanjo family's the only group that has a complete set of them."

"Do you realize who you're bad-mouthing?!"

"Do you realize who you've made cry?!"

Crash!

I slammed my heel on the table with tremendous force.

With a loud thud, the used plates and utensils bounced off and then landed back where they'd been. I crossed my arms behind my head and grinned.

"H-have you gone mad?"

"Choose your words carefully, lady. You and the entire Sanjo clan are picking on a girl while enjoying your meal. Why don't you speak with a bit more sophistication and show her a little respect, huh? Or do you want me to teach you some filthy language that might be a better match for you? Well? Hey," I said to the guard who was aiming at my neck from behind.

She jerked, and her sword-shaped magic device shook.

"Don't do it. There are other patrons here, and if you kill this young boy—me—in broad daylight, it'll be the end of the Sanjo family."

"How...did you sense my presence...?"

"Be a good girl and sit where you are. This will all be over soon."

I managed to intimidate her into silence with a look, crossed my legs again, and had the scene under my control.

But in reality...I was sweating profusely.

I mean, geez. I could never sense anyone's presence. I was just lucky to see her reflection in a spoon, and then I went ahead and bluffed.

I wasn't going to be able to take on this many people. Maybe I could handle one or two guards, but I'd die if all these people attacked me at once.

I was so mad that they hurt a yuri heroine, I had to enter the scene with a bang...but what now?

I carefully wiped away the sweat pouring down my forehead so no one would notice.

There was no magic left in me after training with my master. I was pooped, and I couldn't possibly swing a sword decently.

Still, the order of my priorities was yuri >>>>me>>others.

I'll put my life on the line for the future of this yuri heroines.

If I can evade death until my secret method is up and running, then I win. As the guardian of all yuri, maybe I'll get a little serious!

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"Rei."
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"...Yes?"

"What happened? I want to hear it from you."

```
"I—I…"
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"Don't worry," I said, smiling. "I'll protect you, no matter what. Though it may not be all that convincing when I'm here looking like this." I was a mess.

"Th-the Sanjo family is—"

"Rei! You'll be finished if you say it! You do realize that, don't you?! Guards!" the hag called out to them with bloodshot eyes. "The Sanjo family owns this entire building, from top to bottom! There should be any number of ways to deal with this! Now get on with it and take care of him!"

I saw the pale blue light. The guards pulled their triggers at once, and a black haze filled the air around us.

Hey, is this for real?!

Are all the guards really going to use *blinding shutdown*, a dark magic technique?! Are they going to obliterate the famed yuri ship-sinker in broad daylight, no matter what?!

I can appreciate their strong desire to kill me! What determination! The consecutive strikes are so cool!

Employees loyal to the Sanjo family were professionals who followed orders and promptly led the other guests outside.

As for me, I slid across the table and picked up Rei.

"Oh!"

"Sorry. This is out of control, and I can't do anything about it, so I'll back off now... Whoa!"

Whoosh!

The blade of a black sword tore through the haze.

I stared at the blade, and—huh? What?

I took a couple of steps backward to avoid it.

"Hiyaaaaaaaah!"

I braced myself in the high position.

The guards came swinging their swords at me, crying out loudly.

How kind of them to go out of their way to shout so I could tell where they were positioned. I wondered if this was the way of the Japanese samurai, the spirit of hospitality, and the Bushido moral code of those warriors.

Thanks to their hollering, the blinding shutdown became meaningless, and on top of that, they were coming at me one at a time, perhaps to avoid accidentally attacking each other in the darkness.

Come to think of it, the AI used for Sanjo guards who fought on the Rei route was utterly useless, with a few exceptions... But it wasn't only an AI issue. It was more...fundamental from Hiiro's standpoint.

I had already pulled the trigger.

I had my device set as *Generate: Magicloak, Alter: Optic Nerves,* and *Alter: Musculoskeletal*—the same as usual, but something wasn't right.

"Die!"

Weren't these guys kind of slow...?

From the corner of my eye, I saw slashes and flashes of blades come flying at me from all directions.

I could see them but—holding Rei in my arms—dodged them all.

Compared to my master's sword, their attacks were less varied, and I could avoid being struck with minimal movement.

Through actual combat, I began to understand.

Yeah, I got it now.

I hadn't been using my magic powers in the right way.

Because I'd been draining my magic power without suppressing output, I quickly ran out and had no idea how much power remained. I'd been fighting with my magic power at full capacity, and I'd never thought about how much energy I was unleashing or how I should pace myself during battle.

Fighting now with my magic power depleted allowed me to realize that.

Even during the magic-enhancing running I'd done, I had moved all the power to my legs and ignored the other parts of my body. It may have boosted my overall magic capacity, but I had never learned how to use it effectively.

And for that matter, the running hadn't been perfect, either. I was amazed by how strong I'd become with that level of training.

Okay, I finally understood the meaning of my master's words.

The next thing I had to learn was...how to handle my magic power and apply it to various situations through my magic device.

"H-Hiiro..."

Rei widened her eyes in astonishment.

"S-since when...did you become so strong...?"

I ducked under the storm of blades, bent down, and lowered Rei to the floor.

There was no way that I could say I was better at sword-fighting than these guards, and I was the one who'd get killed if I started crossing swords with so many opponents. Not only that, but the magical energy I'd been using to strengthen my body was about to run out.

I had to finish this with my next shot. That was all I could do.

I switched magic devices, quietly drew my sword, and thrust the tip at the guards.

They were out of breath, too, as if they had spent their magic in vain. The old hags were hiding behind the table, shouting and spitting.

"Hurry up and do something about that piece of trash! The world doesn't need a *male* who happens to have the thickest Sanjo blood in his body!"

"You want to know what the world doesn't need?" I shouted back, laughing. "Fools like you who break down yuri heroines! I'm going to make sure you pay for your sins!"

I pulled the trigger with all my might.

The magic power released from my body traced the wires engraved on my sheath with tremendous force, and the consoles connected.

Attribute: Light, Generate: Bolt.

"Go."

The restaurant was filled with azure light—Console: Change, Operation: Burst.

"Light."

A ball of light expanded, appearing ready to pop—and it did. Pop. Burst.

"....?<u>!</u>"

I continued to maintain my magical energy.

Fly.

The ball of light, now ruptured and broken into a thousand bullets, rained over the bodies of the guards as they slid through space.

Dull thuds ensued, people screamed, and the guards fell with a mighty *bang*. Holes appeared on the table where the old hags had been hiding, and their high-pitched screams echoed around the room.

Then everything fell silent.

The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling suddenly crashed down, creating powerful shattering sounds and scattering glass instead of applause.

I fell to my knees, laughing hoarsely.

"That's it... There's no more magic left in me now..."

"Hiiro!"

Rei rushed over and supported me as I collapsed.

"Why...do you have to be so reckless...?"

"Please go out with a girl..." Those were my last words.

Rei smiled with relief as she watched me utter my wish in a daze—and then the table blew upward, and a beautiful guard who had been hiding in its shadows appeared.

Her atmosphere was clearly different from that of the other guards. She closed the distance between us in a flash and then twisted my arm.

Everything suddenly went black.

"Hiiro!!!"

Impact.

I crashed into the glass wall and was thrown out a window of the skyscraper. I

rolled on the shattered glass, slid along the twelfth-floor exterior wall, frantically pulled my trigger, and slammed my unattributed blade into the glass wall.

The blade caught on the window frame and stopped my body from further falling down the incline.

From the ground level to the twelfth floor, the building was constructed of glass...and I'd been thrown out of it. My face twitched as blood poured down from the cut in my cheek.

The old hag stood safely, putting the beautiful woman who had tossed me out on standby as she thrust a magic device in the form of a small handheld gun.

Rei's smile froze.

"Great Aunt...you brought a magical device with you to dinner...?!"

"As a precaution. I haven't reached my age with nothing to show for it, you brats. Rei, you don't have your fallback *Heat Haze* here, do you?"

Rei stood in front of the woman with her arms outstretched as a strong wind blew from behind her. Every time the wind gusted, her long black hair fluttered and spread out into the air like wings.

Exasperated, the hag waved her hands, each finger adorned with a ring.

"Move. Move, and I'll let you go. You *are* the heir to the precious Sanjo name after all."

*""* 

Rei's arms were still spread out as she continued to stand firm.

"Is that your answer?"

"Snow...my trusted maid...told me," Rei said as she looked up. "She said Hiiro Sanjo had become a new man. He just risked his life to protect me, so I'm going to believe this man and his words. I won't join you when I know you're trying to kill him."

"You're one to talk. You were crying a minute ago when we told you about that. You know, I liked those cloudy eyes you had. Even at your young age, they were the eyes of someone who understood the ways of the world, seeing no one worth believing, deserving your affection, or worthwhile to love you. That, indeed, was an individual fit to be heir of the Sanjo name. Are you going to start believing him again, only to be betrayed?"

"You will be betrayed. Mark my words," the old hag said with certainty as she sneered, and Rei, breathing hard, broke out in a sweat.

"You'll be betrayed again. So you say Hiiro Sanjo has become a new man...? Ha! You knew perfectly well that he's been turning a blind eye to everything. The Sanjo blood also flows in that male's body. People don't change, and the blood that runs through their bodies is thick."

Wriggling her caterpillar-wide fingers, the old woman let out an ugly breath.

"You, Rei, are a good-looking doll. All you have to do is sit on my lap with your beautiful hair done properly and stare out at the world with your muddy eyes. Don't trust anyone, and you won't be betrayed. No one bothers looking at someone like you. All they see is your pretty face, body, and power. Dolls only exist to be admired. That..."—she halted, baring teeth that were so pure and white that they suggested they were dental implants—"...is the Sanjo fate, girl."

Rei held her chest, panted, and trembled. Her eyes wandered over to me, and she found me, then started sobbing and shedding tears.

Droplets of tears overflowed.

I could see the hesitation in her eyes, the long, sad, and painful path that she had taken to date. She had been separated from her beloved parents, deprived of all that she held precious. I saw the reflection of a girl who had been forced to live as *Rei Sanjo*.

It looked like she was praying.

She clutched something so tightly, so strongly, that her hands had turned white.

To the uninitiated, it was nothing but a dirty piece of fish scales. A poorly made piece of jewelry threaded through a cheap silver chain.

But it was one of a kind.

The only precious item that Rei still had.

I was the only one who knew about the treasure she hid in the palm of her hand and her heart because I'd played this game, and I glimpsed an image of an older brother in the tears that flowed down her face.

"I...don't believe...anyone," she whispered through her pale, trembling lips.

"Mommy... Daddy..."

The prayers she must have kept saying many times under her cold duvet reached only my ears.

"Help me..."

Oh yeah. That's right.

I'm the only one who can help her now.

"Arrrrrgh!!!"

I poured out my draining magic power.

Spraying a huge amount of blood from my body, I shaped my unattributed blade. I slammed my right hand against the distorted window frame, grabbed a piece of the glass that had slashed right through my palm, and pushed my body up with my bloodied hand.

I was wobbling.

"...I'll tell you something since this is a good time," I whispered in front of the people who had become speechless. "I'll tell you about that girl's fate. She'll eat a big cake on her birthday...sleep under a warm blanket, dreaming of her beloved parents...run around at an amusement park until she's exhausted... have fun playing board games...and tie the knot with the woman she loves...!"

I slammed my fist into my shaking knees—and screamed into the blowing wind. "That's what she's destined for!!!"

"You..." The old hag's lips quivered, and she spat. "You should have been dead by now!!!"

Without waiting for her cue, the beautiful woman with a sword in tow ran

outside and dashed toward me. I repelled the blade that came at me in seconds and moved my limp body back and out of harm's way.

"You talk big, but you're a total amateur with a sword! Our doll isn't half as bad as you are!"

She had cloudy eyes.

With the same cloudy eyes as Rei's, she silently and mechanically wielded her sword precisely to catch me off guard. I poured magic power into my eyes and desperately chased after its trajectory. From the edge of my vision, I focused all my attention on the pale light that flashed at the tip of her sword with her every swing.

Cut, be cut. Cut, be cut.

Blood splattered as she and I fought in the skyscraper.

We were at a high altitude, and a gust of wind blew.

I stumbled forward and lost my balance, and my beautiful opponent came charging at me.

"....!"

Right.

Feint.

A high kick flew in from the left and struck me on the side of the head.

My vision wavered, and I pivoted on the spot and spat out the blood that had collected in my mouth.

The relentless attacks came one after another, and I avoided being hit in vital areas and somehow managed to stay alive.

The unattributed sword blade that I, a novice, generated wasn't even shaped decently and was smashed as soon as it took form. Each time, I regenerated it with the little magic power I had left as massive amounts of blood spurted from my nostrils and gave me a pounding headache.

Panting and gasping, I wheezed, and it was hard to breathe as my nose was clogged with blood. The lack of oxygen dulled my thinking, and my vision

gradually began to blur as I stumbled and rubbed my eyes.

I wanted to fall. Collapse. Be comfortable.

Help me...

An image of Rei praying for salvation came to mind, and I bit my lip and held on.

Don't whimper like a baby! Don't fall. Don't fall. Don't fall! I won't dare fall here—even if it costs me my life—not in front of her!

"Hiiro..."

She slashed my shoulders and gouged my thighs.

We were fighting at close range, blow for blow, and she pushed me back. My legs got tangled, my back was slashed, and I writhed in agony.

"Hiiro...that's enough... It's okay... Please—"

"It's not okay!!!"

I screamed and swung my sword in front of Rei as her eyes widened.

"You're in pain, and you're suffering. You want me to help you, don't you?! Why do you have to put up with all this crap? Why do you have to shoulder the Sanjo fate?! Why do you have to lose everything important to you?!"

"Because! Because it's my fate as a member of the Sanjo—"

"The Sanjo family fate?!"

I tugged on the blade that had wounded my lungs, blood dripping from my mouth, and— "I'll crush it for you!"

I slammed the blade into the obstacle before me.

"You're Rei, right?! Nothing more and nothing less! I can't believe what you're saying! Is that what you really want?! Isn't that old hag making you say things like that?!"

The beauty's face contorted. Her movements lacked precision, and she backed away as if trying to escape me as I kept getting back on my feet no matter how many times she cut me.

"Say it! I'm your brother, aren't I?! I'm your family!!!"

I smiled and put all my strength into my words.

"I'm saying I'm your brother, and I'll grant any wish you have!"

The girl with the jewelry made of fish scales slumped on the spot.

Still hiding her face with her long bangs, she let out a small sob.

"I...wondered...why I was even born... No one...wanted me since...I came to the Sanjo household...and I didn't know...why...I existed...and...and..."

She raised her face and smiled as she continued to cry.

"I...always wanted you...my brother...to celebrate my birthday with me..."

It was her first time saying what the real Rei wanted.

"Happy birthday," I whispered with a smile, catching the blade that came at me.

"Happy birthday, Rei."

"Hng!"

She held her clasped hands out in front of her as her whole body trembled.

"Ugh...! Oh...! Oh...!"

The strength went out of her hands, and the heart-shaped scales spilled onto the floor. Bathed in sunlight, the heart shimmered and sparkled and celebrated Rei's birthday.

"…"

The beautiful guard relaxed in front of me, her enemy, and watched Rei.

"Stop watching that farce and finish that idiot off."

She responded to the old hag's order and reflexively swung her sword.

"I'll give you something to mark my kid sister's birthday."

The blade cut through my left shoulder and stopped before it reached a vital organ.

I was overcome with intense and numbing pain and released a counter-flash

—damn, I was out of magic power—and somewhere along the way, the blade suddenly disappeared.

I glimpsed the hag's victorious sneer. The beautiful guard tried to pull the blade out of me and stared at it when it wouldn't budge.

Drenched in blood, I sweated profusely and laughed.

"Slice the flesh, break the bones."

She saw her blade biting into my flesh—and froze.

"I win."

I slammed my fist into her face, and the beautiful guard was blown back.

She bounced off the glass surface and collapsed, unconscious, and I chuckled and shook my aching fist.

"That's the Astemir way. Remember it."

Her body slid down, making a squeaking sound, and I caught it, breaking the glass at my feet before lowering her on the floor below.

I held the left half of my body, which was almost torn apart, and staggered back to the top floor.

Rei grabbed the edge of my pants without a word. I gently patted her on the head and smiled at the old hag who was left on her own.

"Hey, it's been a while...have you aged since I last saw you...?"

"A-are you really Hiiro...? Why are you doing this now...?"

Instead of answering, I moved forward, and the hag gradually stepped back.

"Wh-what can you do now with a battered body like that ...?!"

"I can at least undo your rotten doomsday forecast."

Horrified, the old woman held up her small gun, and I laughed.

"My sister..."

I was now speaking to her as Hiiro.

"I wonder how you're going to make up for making my sister cry, you old

bat...!"

I wobbled forward and heard a gunshot. The water bullet pierced my right shoulder, and intense pain and heat followed, making my body sway to the right.

I stopped for a moment...

...then laughed and continued walking toward her.

"...Urk!"

Another gunshot. Another. And another.

With her face distorted with fear, the hag kept pulling the trigger, leaving holes somewhere in my body. Still, the holes weren't fatal and would never be a reason for me to stop moving forward. The poor shooter continued her despicable shooting, and I, the target, continued to walk forward, covered in blood.

The hag pulled the trigger again—and my palm covered the muzzle.

A gunshot rang out, and a hole appeared in my palm. I looked through it at the dirty face of the hag.

"...How do my eyes look?"

"Urk! Eep! Ah!"

She put her finger on the trigger again. I stuck out my index finger and turned on the safety.

I stared at her and whispered, "Do you know how it feels to be alone...all alone, tormented by loneliness, surrounded by scum like you, and forced to live not as a human but as a Sanjo family puppet...? Crying alone with no one to turn to, and having no choice but to play a despicable character...?"

I shouted.

"Can you imagine what that's like?!"

The old hag, pale and rapt, opened and closed her mouth wordlessly, and I staggered to my feet and slammed my fist into her face—wham—and in a move that wasn't anything you'd expect from an older woman, she kicked me in the

stomach, blew blood out her nose, and raised her gun.

"You call yourself her brother?! Ha! You're just baggage with the Sanjo name on it! Rei's older sibling, for convenience's sake, so don't go acting like her guardian, you pile of trash! Shut up and go to hell!"

A shadow loomed in front of me. The figure jumped in between me and the hag and frantically held and shielded me.

"Rei! Move!"

She shook her head vigorously.

"Get out of the way! I'll shoot you if you don't!"

Not heeding the warning, Rei clung to me, her face wet with tears.

*"…"* 

A sad smile appeared on the older woman's face.

"...I guess you couldn't become a Sanjo woman after all."

She slowly squeezed the trigger—and the bullet hit Rei in the neck.

"And here I thought my cute protégé had invited me to lunch."

Thrusting her blade against the skin of the woman's flabby neck, the strongest one in this world grinned.

"Do people in Japan eat their meals with a magic device instead of chopsticks?"

The hag moved only her eyes as sweat poured down her forehead.

"Y-you're Astemir Clouet la Killicia... What's a ghoul from Alfheim doing here...?"

"That's enough."

Lapis solemnly appeared before us.

"I'm not interested in your family quarrels, but it'll be a different story if you try to lay even a finger on my friend."

She took off her baseball cap and let loose her golden hair, her eyes shining bright and piercing.

"I'll take you on if you don't want to stop."

"L-Lapis Clouet la Lumet...!"

Big shots were appearing one after the other.

The old hag trembled and glared at me.

She finally seemed to realize who had set up their appearance.

"Hiiro, you bastard...!"

"A trump card...is what you play at the very end when the other guy has no more options...idiot..."

Rei was still holding me, and my body trembled as I gave the crone the finger.

"I'm not young for nothing, you old hag... My brain...actually works..."

After saying that, I quietly lost consciousness.



I came to.

As my vision blurred, I saw a pink game character.

"Hey! Will you stop hitting the B button?! I'm losing my mind!"

"Sorry, no can do. The reason being, I know my opponents get frustrated if I keep pressing the B button."

What...was with these characters...?

"Boy, this white-haired maid is good in a different way! She's well aware of how annoying the B button can be."

Are they playing a game as I'm on the verge of dying next to them...?

I strained my eyes and was able to see them clearly.

Twelve elf archers were playing a game in the great hall where I lay on the floor.

But that wasn't all. Snow, the white-haired maid, was also participating, and the thirteen of them seemed to be holding a tournament.

"Croak, croak, croak, croak, croak, croak..."

*"…"* 

"Croak, croak, croak, croak..."

"I'm asking you to please stop spamming the B and A buttons on the character selection screen like that and playing those weird character sounds!"

"I refuse. I know a series of character sounds irritates my opponent."

Our maid was launching a nasty character sound attack against the elves.

I regained consciousness, hearing the clear *croak, croak, croak, croak, croak*, sounds from their game.

"My brother...you're back with us..."

Rei must have nursed me without getting any sleep.

Her eyes were a little swollen as she held my hand and smiled.

The look she gave me when we first met had been frosty like ice, but...now there was a warmth in her eyes like the sunlight in spring.

Perhaps like the gentle, serene Yamato Nadeshiko image of the ideal Japanese woman.

The girl with long black hair and unfaltering beauty looked at me with moist eyes.

In the original game, Rei had seemed aloof until she started getting emotional, but she was acting meek in front of me, her brother, who was on the verge of death.

Zzzzz, zzzzz, zzzzz.

Lapis was snoring lightly as she slept at my feet.

Her blond hair spread out on the duvet and looked like a golden carpet without a single bristle.

She looked so good as she lay her head on my feet like they were a pillow, mumbling in her sleep, that I thought I could put her on exhibit at some art museum.

Rei looked just as lovely, which convinced me that she, too, was indeed a heroine.

"About what happened with the Sanjos... I'm sorry... I never wanted to get you involved," she said slowly.

I was bandaged all over, and I tried to pull myself up, realizing my body felt like lead—Rei quickly supported me.

"You were covering for me, weren't you?"

Rei looked up in surprise, then seemed to give up on maintaining a bold front and nodded.

"It wasn't the first time you had to go to a meal like that. I figure it's probably happened several times since Snow started watching me. The objective was to decide how to finish me off at the academy...right?"

"...Right."

Of course. School was starting soon, and they had to make up their minds about what to do about Hiiro.

Whether they sent an assassin after me at school—a fantastic venue for that—they needed Rei's approval as the next head of the family.

That old hag would be accused of jumping the gun if she killed me without Rei's permission, and that would hurt her position in the family.

The question was just how much money and power the family members could get out of the Sanjo fortune... To increase that amount as much as possible, people in the branch families competed with one another.

No one wanted to get their hands dirty.

That had to be why they were planning my murder with approval from Rei, who was still young and naive.

If those mobster-like old hags had pressed her to kill her brother, then of course she would have started crying.

Rei had been trying to protect her scum brother...Hiiro...to the end.

Even if Hiiro had gone out of control at the end of the Rei route and made

everyone his enemy.

Rei thinks hard, and to at least allow him a dignified death as a human being, she euthanizes him.

She regrets her actions and dies, and the main character gently takes her in her arms.

It's really moving...and precious.

Incidentally, fans of the game call Rei's plotting and killing of Hiiro the *Tsume-Shogi Murder*—for the Japanese chess game *shogi*—because it's done in a thoroughly logical manner.

"Sorry. It's all my fault."

"I-it isn't your fault at all! It's because I—I lacked courage...and couldn't stop my great aunts...so—"

"Thanks."

I grinned at her.

"We're okay now. Leave the rest to me. I swear I'll make you happy." Well, not me, but the main character will.

Rei cried as she hugged me.

Smiling, I turned to Lapis, who was glaring at me, contemplating how to pull Rei away from me.

"Lapis. Trade places with me if you're awake."

"Huh? Why do I have to hug you?"

"Not me! You're going to hug Rei! You can surely understand that if you think —huh?!"

"I-I can't..."

"Oh geez."

My master, Astemir, approached me with a long sword, a faint smile on her face.

"You summon me with a single phone call, then you leave me to clean up the

mess. Have you no respect for your master?"

She placed the sword on the floor, sat up straight, and gently patted my head.

"Still, you did well. Good for you. You've become a little stronger again."

"I take the blame for tricking you into coming, saying, 'Let's eat together!' and using you as a last resort...but wasn't it kind of terrible of you to watch from the sidelines until I'd nearly died?"

"Ha-ha-ha. I don't know what you're talking about."

This elf... I know she'd been standing by, all excited, waiting for just the right moment to make her grand entrance.

"You used me, too, didn't you, Hiiro?"

Lapis pulled up on her duvet, propping her face on her elbows and flapping her legs.

"Didn't you want to show the Sanjos that you had Lapis Clouet la Lumet behind you...? Isn't that why you didn't ask us to join that battle, saying no magic devices, and got us to show up at the very end? Just how far ahead did you think in that single moment? You're impossible to read."

"Ha-ha-ha. I don't know what you're talking about."

My master and I looked at each other, smiled, and put our arms around each other's shoulders.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Like mentor, like apprentice... Oh well," Lapis mumbled.

"You did apologize first...and I suppose you really meant it when you said... you didn't want to involve me, but..."

"Oh sure. I wanted to involve you. What are you mumbling about? Speak up so I can hear you."

"That's when you're supposed to pretend you can't hear me!"

I refused since I intended to knock out all flags other than those that flew for yuri heroines.

"Well, anyway... I introduced you guys, my backers, to that family with so much flair that they won't be able to touch me for a while."

I finally pushed Rei back and smiled.

"Enjoy school. Especially in the love department. I don't care about your schoolwork or anything else, so find your destined love and be happy." With a girl and preferably one of the main characters.

```
"Huh? O-okay... I guess?"

"Master."

"Whoa!!!"
```

Snow had suddenly approached me without making a sound and was bowing deeply.

"Thank you... I truly appreciate what you've done... Thank you...," she said with a tearful voice, and I waved it off.

"You don't need to thank me. I only did what I did because there was something I wanted to protect. Before you come bowing your head to me, you should go and apologize to your opponent you hit with the A and B buttons on the character select screen."

Snow looked up with a smile.

"Hiiro! Get over here and play this game with us! I've learned how to use the technique of hanging off a cliff and annoying my opponent!!!"

"Can't you see that I'm totally exhausted after I've already had a real-life smackdown?! Hiiro here can't choose his characters! Be quiet and keep playing with our white-haired maid!"

As I yelled back to the elves, sleepiness set in. The medicine must have started working.

Ignoring the elves, I closed my eyes and let my body fall into slumber.

The tournament had ended by the time I woke up, and Snow had been declared the proud winner.

Perhaps they'd gotten physical in real life right after or during the game—all the elf archers had collapsed, piled like corpses as they spread out before me.

"Are you awake?" came a cold tone of voice.

Perhaps Rei had gone and gotten changed. She was wearing a cream-colored cardigan and a plaid miniskirt, stretching her black tights as she stared at me.

"I know I acted a little unreserved earlier, feeling relieved that you had finally awakened...but it isn't as if I trust you yet, so please don't misunderstand."

"Th-that's a sudden change of attitude. But well, I'm okay with that."

I pointed to the thigh where my head was now resting.

"So wh-why is my head resting on your lap...?"

"Please don't misunderstand. It is a necessary procedure. I'm only letting you use my lap because there are no pillows at this villa."

"There's one right behind you...," I said, pointing to the pillow she'd hidden behind her hips.

The moment I pointed to it, Rei threw the pillow as hard as she could, hitting a collapsed elf archer in the head, and she yelped.

"There's no such thing here."

"There was one...wasn't there...?"

"No, there wasn't."



Declaring that with absolute certainty, Rei lifted a bowl of porridge that sat on a tray at her side.

It seemed to be fresh out of the pot. She blew air into the steaming porridge to cool it, hooked her bangs behind her ears, blushed, and offered me a spoonful.

"...Say ahhh."

"Oh, um, stop it. I don't understand this. You've got our distance all wrong. I'll eat that on my own."

"Impossible. We don't have a spoon."

"We do have a spoon! That's what that thing you're holding is called!"

"We don't have a spoon for you."

"Isn't it strange that there's no spoon for me, the master of this Sanjo family villa...?"

"N-never mind. Just open your mouth. Or are you saying you can't eat porridge that your sister made for you? I had Snow taste it, so I can guarantee that it won't kill you."

"A guarantee that the food won't kill you is a guarantee that comes with most meals. Would *you* want to eat at a restaurant with a proud sign that says, 'We guarantee that our food won't kill you'?"

"L-let it rest and open your mouth. Say ahhh. Ahhh. Even a child can do that."

She pinched my nose, forced me to open my mouth, and shoved the spoon into it.

"'Ugh! We are witnessing abuse against a sick man! It's like a foie gras factory —ugh!!!"

"I-It's because you're being stubborn... Um...do you...like it...?" she whispered.

Rei stared at me, her cheeks tinted like a maiden's. An emergency alarm went off in my mind, and the Lily Protection Act was immediately passed.

I absolutely must not smile and say, "It's good." To maintain the proper distance between us as siblings and for the future of yuri girls, I have no choice

but to lower myself!

"It's terrible! It isn't edible!"

*"…"* 

"It's like eating glue! Hey, you can use a grain of rice as a substitute for glue. Did you know that?!"

"...Hiiro," Rei whispered, smiling happily. "Unlike the others, you don't lie to me. You're so clumsy... Do you think you're giving me a pep talk by being so blunt?"

*"…"* 

If pushing doesn't work, I'll try pulling!!!

"This is fantastic. Super! My sister is the best cook in the world!"

"I'm glad...that you'll say something made so poorly tastes good... I'll keep trying harder for you, my brother..."

Die, Hiiro! Go to hell! You are absolutely useless!

If I'm like this, all that awaits me is death! It's all my fault, so take responsibility and die, me!

"B-but it isn't as if I made this just for you," Rei said shyly as she combed back her black hair.

*"…"* 

Now she's starting to act frosty. Oh damn. This isn't good. If this were a yuri game, this would definitely be the start to another romance route. Then again, I'm a guy, so I don't have to worry about being on any route, thank God.

"By the way," Rei mumbled, turning her head away from me. "My lap... Um... how does it feel...?"

My cheeks were pressed between her left and right thighs, and I was breathing hard as I felt the softness of her flesh and the fabric of her tights.

For your information, I wasn't breathing hard because I was excited. It's because I felt doomed.

"A-according to reference materials I've read, a woman's black tights arouse women of a certain age...and men... So, um, do you...feel aroused...with your head resting on my lap...?"

Rei fidgeted and shook her knees.

With each movement, her soft thighs moved my head around and spread the scent of her perfume. A feeling of dizziness and euphoria came over me, and I whipped myself out of submission.

Resist this world! I am the guardian of yuri! My will is ironclad, and I won't be swayed by a beautiful girl's thighs!

"H-huh? N-not p-particularly. Oh, um, yeah. I—I don't f-feel a thing. A-aroused? Huh? Wh-why would I be aroused?"

"...I see."

Rei's cheeks twitched—and she slowly lifted her skirt.

"In that case, may I add a little more stimulation?"

I was stunned as she lifted my head and, blushing and smiling, invited it inside her skirt.

She pulled the skirt over my eyes like a curtain.

"P-please enjoy...?"

"Aaaaaaaahh! I'm excited! You're distorting the tender spirit of an innocent adolescent with fetishism...! Whoooooa! I am the protector of yuriiiiiii! Aaaaaaaaahh!"

Desperately escaping from the depths of the skirt, I breathlessly drooled and rubbed my cheeks against the duvet.

"S-someone...help me... My sister's trying to kill me..."

"Y-you said you weren't aroused, so..."

Covering her face with her hands, Rei writhed, then pulled me back and put my head on her lap again.

"D-don't... Stop it, please... I don't want that softness...that nice smell...no...I love yuri... I-I'm the yuri guardian... I won't be able to do it... Please...stop it..."

"I'll stop doing this. Drink your medicine and go to sleep."

"Y-you said you read reference material...and you're doing *this*...? What kind of material was it...?"

Rei's face became red. With her face downcast, she mumbled in a whisper, "A...w-women's...comic book..."

"They're the super-dirty kind!!!"

I poked my finger at Rei, who stuttered, teary-eyed.

"They're super-duper dirty, Rei! Like porn!!! A Sanjo daughter shouldn't be buying porn in broad daylight and practicing on her brother! Practice with a girl! Take videos and send them to me!!! Let me decide the quality of the image and sound!"

"I-it wasn't porn!!! I even checked with the clerk and made sure it wasn't agerestricted! It's a perfectly normal, wholesome romance manga! It expresses the emotional turmoil properly, and the erotic scenes are just an afterthought!"

"Don't lie to me! They're just erotic books with huge spreads of animals devouring each other on instinct!!! They're basically nature comics!"

"No, no, no! They're wholesome romance!!!"

My sister gripped her cheeks with both hands and shook her head, but I confronted her with the truth.

"Listen, the only truth here is that you have a super dirty mind! Don't be so careless as to show it off in front of a guy! Especially not your brother! Don't do that! We're siblings! Siblings don't do stuff like that!!!"

"But we don't seem to be related by blood, and there were many nature comics about stepsiblings!!!"

"Maaaaaaaaaaid! Maid! Get over here right now! Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaid!!!"

"Maid here, at your beck and call."

The sliding door opened, and Snow stepped in.

"What is it, sir? It's noisy here like a fire's raging."

"Rei has one hell of a dirty mind! What kind of education do the Sanjos provide?!"

"Th-that's low! The lowest, Hiiro! You didn't have to tell Snow that! You jerk! Fool! Idiot! Nincompoop!"

As Rei slapped my cheeks, the white-haired maid's gaze turned cold as she looked down at me.

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"Did you...do it...with Miss Rei...?"

"Huh?!"
```

Snow pointed to me where I lay my head on Rei's lap.

"No matter how you look at it, the distance between the two of you makes you look like lovers. If you've laid a finger on Miss Rei, I'm going to have to kill you according to our ancient covenant."

"N-no, no! Hiiro and I haven't done the stuff you see in nature comics!!! We're human! Even if we were to do it, as a member of the Sanjo family, I would never become a beast... I—I don't think..."

"Don't make things even worse, you natural-born pervert! Now put my head down! On the duvet! Quickly!"

"B-but the mattress is hard...so no, I won't do that..."

"You think you're being nice, but it'll backfire! It is backfiring! Put me down, down, down!"

```
"…"
```

The maid strode toward us and planted herself on the mattress in a sweeping motion.

She gently picked up my head, placed it on *her* lap, hooked a few strands of her white hair on her ears, and smiled.

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"Isn't your problem resolved now?"
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```
"I don't think—"
```

Snow gently touched her index finger to my lips and smiled mischievously.

```
"Shhh...!"
"....."
```

I fell silent. As for Rei, who sat next to Snow, veins were appearing on her forehead.

"Are you saying you prefer Snow's lap to mine...after all I've done for you?"

She lifted my head and put it back on her lap.

"This is nicer..."

She combed back my fringe, patted my head, and smiled.

```
"...isn't it?"
```

"Well, um."

I felt my head being lifted again, and Snow put it on her lap without a word.

*"…"* 

Rei picked up my head and put it on her lap.

Without a pause, Snow lifted my head. Rei grabbed my head with both hands to hold it down.

*"…"* 

They smiled at each other and began a tug-of-war with my head.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh! You're making my cervical vertebrae, which were fine, crookeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Hearing my cry, the two girls gasped and let go simultaneously.

And for whatever reason, my face dropped and landed neatly between their knees.

```
"…"
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Still smiling, they patted my head.

"Hng, hng, hng...!"

Sadly, I was the only one who was crying.

Perhaps because magic is used in medical treatments in this world, my wounds healed more quickly than they would have in my previous world.

Even as I grieved, my life as Hiiro continued.

My master's *friendly icebreaker-slash-battle* had been more effective than expected, and Moore's hostility toward me had disappeared after our ferocious fight.

```
But instead...

"...Curry."

"....."

"I want curry."

"....."

"Cur—"
```

"Stop harassing me over curry, for crying out loud! Don't keep pressing me for curry while I'm trying to sleep, day in and day out! I don't have curry coming out of my hands automatically! It's a store-bought spice mix! Mix it with veggies, and you'll get curry, no matter what you do!"

Moore started appearing at my bedside, and she began harassing me for curry, begging me to make it.

I had no other option but to make it for her when I was able to get back on my feet.

```
"…"
```

"Will you stop standing there and eating curry in front of me? At least say something. This isn't a curry stand."

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"…"
```

"What are you, a curry fairy? Am I the only one who can see that?"

I wasn't the only one whose relationship with the elf archers had improved. Rei had started dropping by the villa under the guise of *nursing me*, and thanks to Si's mediation, she'd stopped frowning at the elves and began getting along with them.

So with this and that, things started getting busy around me for some reason.

Before I knew it, I was getting used to the hustle and bustle of this life, and time flew by.

It took me a while to recover after having run out of magic power, and my training with my master remained suspended—until finally, the day came when we would start school.

There was a big cherry blossom tree outside.

Clad in my new school uniform, I stared at her under the tree.

She and I—the protagonist and the interloper—stared at each other.

"This is where...," I began declaring to her in a whisper, "...things really get started. Right?"

"The Japanese bird cherry tree?"

She smiled a little—then turned her back to me.

Watching her walk away, I stood there in front of the huge Houjou Magic Academy, feeling the cherry blossoms congratulating me, and laughed.

It's finally about to begin.

It's showtime—the school-life portion of the game.



The schools that appear in yuri games are usually all-girls schools.

It's only natural.

You don't need guys in a romance between girls. Guys can only get in the way. When telling a story about a coveted romance between girls, the presence of a guy is irritating. It's not only unnecessary but downright unpleasant.

Houjou Magic Academy also followed that example. It was an all-girls

institution and a preppy one at that.

And I, Hiiro Sanjo, was now attending this preppy all-girls school where divine romances would unfold.

There's one question that would naturally arise.

You might be wondering, What?! There's an all-girls school that guys can attend?!

I'll answer that question for you. Yep, there is! The *ESCO* world has an all-girls school that boys can attend!

Or to put it another way, it *only* has schools for girls that guys can go to.

The schools in this world are either all-girls or all-boys institutions.

In a world where people don't think it's natural to see a boy and a girl simply walking together, males and females are separated to perfection.

There are far more girls' schools and far fewer boys' schools.

It's because this is the world of a yuri game, where girls must fall in love with girls...so naturally, there are more girls' schools where such romances can take place.

If this had been a yaoi world, it would have been the other way around.

So in this world that's full of all-girls schools, boys who can't attend boys' schools due to capacity issues have no choice but to enroll in all-girls schools.

Boys going to girls' schools.

I don't know how it differs from coed schools, but that nonsense is accepted perfectly naturally in this world, with hell promised to the boy who goes to a girls' school.

It's because they aren't supposed to exist.

They are viewed as enemies and treated as beings who get in the way of things.

The opinion of guys is so low that it would be a blessing if they were ignored completely, and at worst, they would be treated as underlings throughout their student lives.

For that reason, boys with high scores go to one of the few boys' schools that exist, beaming as the winners, while those with low scores attend girls' schools, looking like it's the end of the world.

You may wonder how the human race reproduces in this world, but fear not.

I cross my heart and declare loud and clear—in the *ESCO* world, women can have children with other women.

You may say, Wait, how could they do that? But the game development team provides the answer in their game notes: magic.

It was described in such large font as if to say they weren't taking any objections, making me wonder if the developers were invincible.

It's a wonderful world where women can make children with each other though the power of a magical kiss.

So what's going to happen to me, a guy with a zero score, stuck between yuri girls at a magic academy in a world like that? You probably have the answer to that.

I get watched like I'm a suspicious person by simply standing in front of the school gate on the road flanked by cherry trees.

A couple of students who appeared to be enrolled at the school whispered as they stared at me and said as they passed me, "Is that a girl dressed as a guy...?"

The girls who looked at me were all wearing the same uniform.

The uniform at Houjou Magic Academy is an elegant black blazer adorned with a red ribbon. The quality black fabric stands out against the white blouse, and above all, the highlight is the long skirt, elegant and ladylike.

In short, it's KAWAII!

Meanwhile, the guys' uniform...is something that seems to cry out, Who gives a crap about boys' uniforms?! It's just a normal pair of pants and a blazer. Nothing more, nothing less.

The difference between Houjou Magic Academy's uniforms and those at ordinary schools is that they're made with consideration for the use of magic devices.

These uniforms are made of a special cloth called *Gaifu*, which is sensitive to triggers and helps release magic from the wearer's body. In addition, it's covered with an anti-magic barrier, automatically taking in magicells outside the body and generating a blockade, so it won't tear, even when it is subjected to magic.

So no erotic scenes will occur if the main characters or heroines fight in this uniform.

That's natural since yuri games aren't about erotic scenes. They're about yuri.

I checked the time as new students passed by, staring at me.

It was 8:45 AM.

A short homeroom period would begin at nine. It was okay to go in now.

Having walked separately from Lapis and Rei for the sole purpose of watching the main characters' faces, I loosened my tie and headed for the entrance.

A class list was posted at the entrance.

Without even glancing at it, I headed for my assigned classroom.

It was a class I'd seen thousands of times in the game. I could basically plan my day once I went inside. The main characters, the heroines, and yours truly, good old Hiiro, were supposed to be in the same class.

The Houjou Magic Academy campus was ridiculously spacious.

All the facilities necessary for the game to proceed were on hand.

Three dorms, a research building for magic and magic devices, a training hall, an alchemy workshop, a magic warehouse, a school store, an adventurers' association, a social salon, a botanical garden, a library...and the list went on.

Can I give you a sense of the scale of this anything-goes place if I told you that there was a character selling magic devices next to the baked goods section in the store? (It reminds me of the United States, where some people say you can buy a gun at a supermarket.) Anyway, the majority of new students get lost before they reach their classrooms.

Seeing these girls crying hopelessly here and there, I remembered the despair

I felt during my first go at the game and grinned.

I've played around and memorized the route perfectly, so I was able to get to *Class A*—my class—without a hitch. I reached for the door, and it blew open.

A character in a boys' uniform ran out into the hallway and took off.

After watching him go, I looked at the source of the blown-away door.

"Oh? Do we have another male?"

The girl with the flashy golden curls shook the necklace she wore.

"I didn't know there were two boys in this class."

Her name was Ophelia von Margeline.

She was one of the sub-characters of the *ESCO* world, commonly known as—"Tee-hee-hee! Sit there. I, of the prestigious House of Margeline, will punish you!"

She was known as *The Young Foil*, who contrasted with the main characters to highlight their qualities in the *ESCO* world.

She was a sorry figure used to make the heroines look better.

Like a delinquent who gets into a fight with the protagonist and gets knocked out with a single punch, or a good-looking jerk who talks about how strong she is and then gets killed right away, or a spectacled character who insists that their data is never wrong and is then stunned to see someone outdo her.

This character was a pious sacrifice used to get the main characters' spirits up. In other words, she was their buffer.

The Young Foil was popular among fans as a hero who appeared dashingly when the protagonist was going through rough times.

Arriving on the scene in seconds, losing in seconds, she leaves with the parting line, "Remember this!"

Even in the easy games of the *ESCO* world, she was super weak, and I always felt warm and fuzzy whenever she got beaten up.

She could turn a serious atmosphere into a comedy scene in the blink of an

eye, making her a popular character among players as a true comedienne.

Because her ability to let others one-up her was unmatched.

She had a rich daughter appearance that was easy to spot and was the only person in this world who laughed, "Tee-hee-hee!" When she was about to be defeated, she'd say, "Oh no...! Who would have thought a girl even stronger than me existed...?!" Making use of lines like that, she'd make the protagonist's strength stand out.

The Margeline family heirloom necklace she wore—a magic device called *Ophelia of Indulgence*—was surprisingly, format frame one, a piece of garbage that couldn't even be used for magic.

Wearing trash like that and challenging the powerful hero, she was more like the protagonist than the actual protagonist.

Despite the obvious difference in their abilities, she went after the protagonist until the very end of the game, and her persistent swearing and cursing as she was beaten up brought tears to your eyes.

In some cases, she would even participate in battles against demons, the absolute worst of all evils. "It's...terrible to have to be side by side with you," she would say, and the way she gallantly came to the rescue and was destroyed in seconds made players laugh and cry.

Throughout the game, Ophelia never reconciles with the protagonist.

A normal ending tells how each character ends up, but in her case, it clearly states that she never acknowledges the protagonist from start to finish.

Only in the Ophelia route does she recognize the protagonist's ability and get a little lovey-dovey—though they don't start getting romantic even though this is supposed to be a yuri game.

In a sense, perhaps players felt empathy toward her for her graceful attitude.

Despite her position as a sub-character, *ESCO* fans talked about how she was ranked highly along with the heroines in the first character popularity contest held for players.

Anyway, this Young Foil Ophelia was standing before me now, showing off her

stunning golden curls.

"What's the problem? Can't monkeys today even talk?"

*"…"* 

Like my fellow fans, I, too, was rather fond of Ophelia.

At one point, the *ESCO* Society, a group of researchers who played the game so often that they had the developers say they had nothing to do with it, even launched a *Vertical Blond Curl-Nurturing Project*. It made Ophelia the most powerful character, able to kill the protagonists in an instant, which shows how fans sometimes became crazy in love with her.

In the original game, Hiiro and Ophelia engage in a war of tongues.

It's a battle between the crème de la crème of interlopers and foils.

Hiiro asserted that *Vertical Curls* die, while Ophelia screamed for the male to *go to hell*. A useless quarrel ensues, and the protagonist, who comes to class late for a particular reason, says to herself that she can't get inside the classroom.

Then, as I recall, the teacher walks in, and a brief homeroom session begins...

Incidentally, no mention is made about the broken door.

"Excuse me?! Do you plan to ignore me?! Why don't you say something?!"

*"…"* 

The foil exists strictly for the benefit of the protagonists.

If I do something uncalled for at this point, I may end up causing trouble for them. For the sake of yuri girls of the future, I told myself to keep silent.

I never liked Hiiro, which is why I didn't remember all his lines, and saying something dumb might lead to something unexpected.

Or so I thought.

Ophelia seemed to think that I, a lowly male, was underestimating her. She grabbed my tie and pulled my face close to hers.

"If you don't want to run screaming like that other male, then apologize for

offending me! Now hurry up!"

"…"

Protagonist! Quick, get over here!!!

That's what I was thinking, standing still where I was, when someone took Ophelia's hand.

It was a beautiful profile.

She had chestnut-colored hair, a clean face, and a special kind of aura—that of a number one reigning champion.

Here it was—a cluster of magic.

Hey...this girl...is something else...

An incredible amount of magic power swirled around, sending pale blue sparks flying.

Turning her jet-black eyes toward the classroom, she whispered without the shadow of a smile, "You've put him on the spot."

Her name was Sakura Tsukiori.

She was the protagonist of the game, and a monster who commanded superb development and mastery of all kinds of magic devices.

Her initial status at the outset had been outstanding compared to that of the heroines.

As one would expect from the protagonist of an easy game...her magic power seemed to leak out of her simply by standing there.

"Why don't you move out of the way?" the cool character said, completely without expression.

Seeing my choice to remain silent, this fine protagonist appeared to have shifted gears toward helping the poor male. A splendid protagonist if ever I saw one! She was nice! Yeah! The best in the world at stealing a girl's lips! A worldwide hunter of heroines!

I wondered what I was supposed to do.

I had to involve myself somewhat with the protagonist so I could avoid getting a death flag in the future. I decided to pretend I was scared and stimulate her desire to protect.

"P-please stop it. I-I'm scared. Those blond curls frighten me, going around and around like that."

"See? He's scared."

"No matter how you look at it, you're stirring him up!!! What's your problem, suddenly butting in from the sidelines?!"

"The name's Sakura Tsukiori," she whispered.

"Sakura Tsukiori... Hmph! A commoner. Neither my noble ears nor brain has ever registered that information before. But of course, as a member of the esteemed Margeline family, it goes against our ways not to give you my name. Tee-hee-hee! Open your ears and listen carefully. I am Ophelia von Margeline \_\_"

"Whatever. Move."

I could hear her snap. SNAP!

"It's time for a duel!"

Ophelia slammed her white gloves, a regular prop for our foil, on the floor.

"I! Challenge you! To a duel! You! Attend! I'll have you crying! Woof, woof! In embarrassment! Now fight!!!"

"You don't have to keep repeating that like a broken record. I can hear you," she said, stepping back and pulling out the magic device, a long sword, on her hip. "Anytime you're ready."

"You dare to make fun of me...!"

There was a buzz among the girls in the classroom as Sakura and Ophelia moved away from each other to create distance.

I took out my magic device next to Ophelia.

```
"…"
```

*""* 

```
"Why?!"
```

"Huh? Oh!"

Dang! I moved without thinking and got on the foil's side! But gee, there's too much of a gap in their skills! And I like this snobby rich girl!

"You're all making fun of me...!"

"No, this is a nerd's way of showing affection—"

And action.

Trigger, activation, light sword—I caught the blow aimed at Young Foil.

Oh...! Hngh...!

The protagonist's eyes were wide open as she regarded me with a look of amazement.

"Here goes, Sakura Tsukiori! Fight fair and square, upright with extreme pleasure—eek!!!"

Seeing Sakura and me clashing swords at close range, Young Foil let out a surprised yelp.

I suddenly felt the weight go out of Sakura's sword. She flipped her skirt and soared.



She kicked the wall with tremendous accuracy and came swinging her sword from above, and I hit her. She somersaulted, landed on the ceiling, flew from wall to wall in the flash of an eye, and came slashing at me from every possible direction.

Slash, slash, slash!

Surrounded by a storm of sword flashes, I desperately continued to swing my sword.

"Hey, hey, your opponent's over there! My move was just a reflex! A cute little mistake! I'm on your side!"

Bouncing back my countless swings, Sakura Tsukiori stared at me, dumbfounded.

"...What is with you?"

"I'm Ophelia von Margeline!"

She wasn't asking you who you are.

Looking smug, Young Foil held her necklace and smiled, flashing Sakura a fearless grin.

"And this is my serf!"

What do you know? She made me my serf without telling me. The way she thought up a way of taking all the credit in a mere few seconds was truly petty. Typical Ophelia.

"Come, serf."

She beckoned me with a smile.

"I'll let you go for now! It's the role of the nobility to show mercy to the poor commonfolk! Tee-hee-hee!"

Sakura watched us curiously.

Led by Ophelia, I took advantage of the opportunity to run inside the classroom.

I sat at the desk that I recalled was Hiiro's, and Ophelia took the one on my

left. After a short delay, Sakura sat at the desk on my right.

The Young Foil was on the left, the protagonist was on the right, and the guy stuck between them was yours truly, a good-for-nothing piece of trash.

```
"Hmph!"
"....."
```

They were like oil and water...or rather, the Young Foil had a one-sided hatred against Sakura, and I was stuck in the middle.

```
"Hmph, hmph, hmph!!!"
```

Young Foil, you only have to say *hmph* once... Cut it out now... You sound like some stray dog...

```
"Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph!!!"
```

I hooted like a drumming gorilla, scheming to mediate between the two girls. If Sakura was okay with that and got in the mood to join us, we should be able to find a way to improve the situation.

```
"Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph!"
"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot!"
"....."
"Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph!"
"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot!"
"....."
```

Maybe I should focus the drumming on the left side of my chest and die.

I guess I wasn't cut out to be a machine that created precious relationships. The heavens hadn't seemed to have given me the gift of intervening for love.

I looked left and right, then sighed.

Maybe it was to be expected, but Hiiro was too well suited to being the weed between the lilies. These are probably unique skills—getting himself stuck between these girls and the ability to invite death upon himself at a moment's

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot!!!"

notice. Geez, how I envied him. I wish he'd (I'd) die.

With nothing better to do, I took a look around the classroom.

At Houjou Magic Academy, a score check is conducted every six months.

The students' scores are checked, and they're assigned to the appropriate classes at the time of their midterm and final exams.

The best students are placed in Class A, and the worst go to Class E.

At the start of the game, the protagonists are automatically assigned to Class A. As long as they do okay, they should never fall into a lower class.

Because, you see, *ESCO* is an easy game. Midterm exams are simple quizzes, end-of-term tests are multiple-choice, and the practical skills test is just a rhythm game.

You need to intentionally fall behind in class and drop to a lower level if you want to go a specific route, but Class A has various perks and is extremely useful for game strategy.

Main characters like Lapis and Rei aren't likely to drop from Class A, so the only time the player would want to drop to a lower class might be when they want to pursue a side character.

And for some reason, Hiiro was also in Class A.

"A-all right, people! Please take your seats!"

The door opened, and a teacher walked into Class A.

Her name was Marina tu BaySands.

She was the only daughter of Count BaySands, a twenty-four-year-old woman who was starting her career as a high school teacher.

With short hair in a light peach color, Marina was famous for how easy she was. A player could choose *I* want a kiss, and she would be married to the protagonist in the next minute.

Yes! The BaySands family has too much yuri power! Keep up the great work! Turn the world into a field of lilies!

These thoughts had me grinning to myself, cheering Marina on in my mind,

and it was time for a brief homeroom period.

A little harried, Marina gestured as she explained the back-to-school ceremony.

"S-so when you're told to start walking into the hall—cough! Ahem! S-sorry... I'm n-nervous...and I feel like I'm going to throw up... Can I play a ten-shot gacha game first...?"

On the first day of school, the Class A students were astonished to see this teacher panting as she swallowed sedatives. I yawned since I was used to it from playing the game.

I sat in the back, propped up my elbows, and glanced over the class.

It was an all-star cast of familiar characters. It sank in again that I had really come to the *ESCO* world.

Toward the front of the class, by the blackboard, Lapis was staring at me from a seat diagonally to the left.

She looked grumpy and used hand signals to say, "What are you doing, causing a commotion on our first day at school?"

I moved a hand to respond, "What an amazing foil. She's terrific." She twisted her head in question. I guess she didn't understand the part about identifying Ophelia as a foil.

Then I felt a gaze from diagonally to my right.

Rei had been looking at me. She noticed my gaze and turned away to face the front.

*"…"* 

A chat message came in, and I opened the screen on my magic device.

"Please only look straight ahead during homeroom."

"Hey, tell yourself that. I'm facing forward, and you're the one turning around and looking back. Don't talk to me from a reverse world, little sister. You keep looking at Sakura."

"Can you tell the difference between forward and backward? Are you feeling

okay? Are you sure you aren't wearing your uniform inside out? Is the laundry tag on your collar at the front?"

"Please don't try to chat with me during homeroom."

"Jerk! Jerk! Jerk!"

From diagonally in front of me, Rei smiled, turned around in my direction, and then turned around again to face the front.

Then another message came in.

"Jerk."

Maybe I should slam her from behind and show her that her brother's stronger than she is. Though, of course, I know I'll end up losing, even if I catch her by surprise.

"So um...uh...w-well, I, uh... I've always been a bit of a geek...I mean, a lone artisan type, and...hee-hee!"

Behind the teacher's podium, the person who was supposed to be a mature adult was trying hard to introduce herself, her face bright red.

The entire class watched her efforts with warm looks on their faces.

The class was already united in serving as Marina's watchers, and I, too, was joining in while contemplating the days ahead.

My objective at this school was clear.

It was to achieve happy endings for Sakura and the other heroines.

Having prioritized yuri heroines over my own life, I should have disemboweled myself when I was reborn as Hiiro.

It's for the sake of yuri girls of the future that I'm living in disgrace with a bad reputation.

Because you see, while this game may be an easy one to play, several dangerous points are lurking about.

Maybe you could save and load in a game, but there are many situations where a protagonist you see for the first time could get defeated.

Sakura Tsukiori... She's one of the main characters, and if she dies, neither Lapis nor Rei will end up happily ever after.

I can tell because I've played ESCO time and again.

Only the main characters can make the heroines happy.

I don't know how often...or how many times I prayed... I mean, think about the heroines who don't tie the knot with her...and that she'd create clones of herself for the sake of all the heroines.

So that's why I'm putting everything into protecting Sakura's life, which amounts to protecting those yuri girls.

If worse comes to worst, I won't hesitate to be her shield.

For that, I can't go ahead and die. I have to intercept and break down the approaching death flags...and protect yuri with my life.

Since that was decided, it was clear how I should proceed.

First, I'll try to improve my score.

Neither the main characters nor heroines were likely to drop out of Class A.

I need to remain in that class to protect the yuri girls so they can bloom. I have to get out of my zero-score margin, even if it means resorting to some heavy-handed tactics.

Next, I'll have to maximize my strength.

This is so I can assist Sakura from behind the scenes and also help her move forward on her route.

Even by sheer chance, I absolutely mustn't destroy events between Sakura and the heroine or gain unnecessary experiences as the original Hiiro did.

I have to focus all my attention on improving things for the main characters. I also have to make sure Sakura doesn't die.

The tough thing for yuri gamers like me is that I have to do both.

I'll make myself the strongest of them all.

This is an easy game to play after all, and the main characters will effortlessly

outdo the results I achieve with blood, sweat, and tears without a hitch.

There's no way I can protect those girls if I can't keep up with their strength.

I looked down at my hands, which were shaking in the aftermath. The blow from Sakura was awesome. This wasn't good at all.

I have to be stronger. I can't imagine I could keep up with that powerful protagonist if I'm not prepared to give everything I've got to protect yuri.

"U-um, okay, people! Let's get moving! After the back-to-school ceremony, you will be introduced to the dormitory by the three dorm heads as part of your orientation! Please consider moving into the dormitory—cough, cough! S-sorry, I've been affected after my favorite social game opened a lousy game."

Homeroom was over before I knew it.

With renewed resolve, I glanced at the heroines who were walking in front of me.

I—I mean, Sakura Tsukiori—will definitely make them happy.

Sakura stood next to me. To my surprise, she looked like she was enjoying herself as she followed Marina's lead and walked on.



The back-to-school ceremony ended without mishap, and we walked into Houjou Magic Academy's main auditorium.

Rows of red chairs surrounded the central platform.

Like an opera house, it had a magnificent circular canopy with religious paintings. The rounded walls were lined with private rooms with red drapes.

The private rooms were for holders of high scores. They were VIP areas for honor students, who appeared to be older, sipping drinks and chatting elegantly.

Inside the dimly lit main auditorium, Marina, who was leading our group, was fumbling around.

The students frantically taking care of her as she looked like she was on the verge of tears, along with the atmosphere of the place, made it seem like a

tragedy.

"U-um, from here to there! This is the seating area for Class A, so you can sit where you want today! The dorm heads will soon begin their introductions, so p-please be quiet!"

I took a chair at random and sat down.

"…"

My classmates scooted away from me like a receding wave.

I mentally applauded them for their immediate show of disgust.

It was natural for them to treat a male like a poison, and I wanted to commend the girls for moving away as soon as I sat down. Lapis was the one who was acting weird by trying to involve themselves with me.

Isolated, I crossed my arms and decided to take a nap when someone took the seat next to me.

"Hello."

She smelled sweet.

Like the moon peeking through a gap in the clouds, Sakura Tsukiori showered me with her beautiful smile.

*"…."* 

Why was she involving herself with a guy from the very beginning? I wish she'd stop misinterpreting my actions. She didn't want a contaminant like Hiiro infecting her, did she?

"Um, excuse me, but a friend of mine is joining me...so can I ask you to move to another chair...?"

"Are you studying sword-fighting or something?"

Was there something wrong with her hearing?

"Well, I do have a master, but there was this little accident... I ran out of magic power and almost died, so we haven't gotten to sword-fighting lessons yet. Okay, I've answered your question, so would you mind moving?"

```
"No. You don't have any friends, do you?"
"....."
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I couldn't argue with that since she was right. Ha-ha! What a brat, giving me a fatal wound like that.

"So you're self-taught, is that it?"

She leaned against the unoccupied chair in front of her and grinned.

"You're really strong."

It only sounds sarcastic when a super-strong protagonist says that... What can we compare the difference in our magic ability to, the amount of water in a glass and that in a swimming pool?

I didn't know why she had suddenly started talking to me, but I had no intention of getting friendlier with Sakura than was necessary. Hiiro is a genuine tank. A meat shield. The more attention he gets, the more precious heroine time it robs from the protagonist.

I wanted Sakura Tsukiori to initiate more and more events. Her own romance was up to her, but I personally wanted her to go down the harem route...and I wanted to shout, *Get your butt over to Lapis or Rei! Get out of my sight!* 

```
"…."
```

So I closed my eyes to signal the end of our exchange.

"Hey, have you ever been to the dungeon?"

"…"

"Do you want to go with me? Do you have time after school today?"

*"…"* 

"Where do you live? You're moving into the dorm, right? Which one?"

*"…"* 

What was it with her?

Why does she want to get involved with me like this? She's supposed to be a cool character! Why does she keep poking me in the side?! What is it that she

sees in me? I wished she would quit poking my cheek. We only just met!

"...Hey."

"Ah, I knew you were awake."

With pitch-black eyes, Sakura stared me dead in the face.

She had pretty eyes. Very clear.

For a moment, I was almost drawn in by their unfathomable nature, but I regained my composure just in time.

"You're starting your new school life. Should you be wasting your time worrying about some guy? There are so many cute girls around. Are you going to spend your life poking a guy in his cheeks?"

"Those girls are weak," she whispered with a frosty look on her face.

"I only go for people who I deem equal to me."

There was a reason for that.

Sakura Tsukiori had initially enrolled at Houjou Magic Academy to become strong.

Her goal was to destroy the core of dungeons all over Japan. Although she was a commoner, she had been able to enter this school for rich girls because she'd been recognized for her aptitude with magic.

Through her encounters with the heroines, her stubborn heart gradually relaxes, she discovers love, and eventually says, "I don't care about dungeons! I'm going to make out with girls and be happy!"

Oh, well, it's still early. She'll eventually get around to kissing girls. It's okay. I trust the future vision with my yuri IQ of 180.

As I was thinking about Sakura's reaction, Lapis came over and sat next to me on my left. I silently got up and moved to the row behind me.

*"…"* 

*""* 

Coming after me like they owned the world, the two girls now sat on either

side of me.

What do they want to do? Are they trying to play a game of Othello with the man stuck between two yuri heroines...?

"Excuse me."

Now Rei was on the scene, smiling brilliantly at Sakura.

"We haven't met yet, but may I ask you to trade seats with me? The boy sitting to your left is my older brother... We're distant relatives and have almost no blood ties, though. He was born a little earlier than I was, which is why I behave as his younger sister. The other day, my brother was seriously injured, and the bandages under his uniform have yet to be removed. As his sister, I'm naturally concerned about him, and if something happens to him, I'll have to deal with it."

"No, the bandages are already off—"

"Shut up. I'm not talking to you. So given the circumstances I just mentioned, I'm sorry, but would you mind switching seats with me?"

```
"....."

"Will. You. Please. Switch. Seats. With. Me?"

"....."
```

Rei smiled and looked down at Sakura with eyes that weren't smiling. The enormous pressure she exuded made Lapis blue in the face, and I pretended I was asleep, hoping the moment would pass.

Sakura ignored Rei as she stood there and smiled at me.

"Would you like some gum?"

What kind of mental fortitude did she have...?

Unbothered, Rei sat down in the seat in front of me with a big smile on her face.

She spun around, her long black hair fluttering, and looked at me with a smile on her face.

"Brother dear."

```
"Y-yes...?"
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"As a member of the Sanjo family, you will not move into the dorm, will you? You know you must live in the Sanjo main residence, isn't that right?"

"I'm moving into the dorm."

Then Sakura suddenly joined the conversation.

"We promised a minute ago that we'd move into the same dorm."

No, we didn't! Don't lie so casually with a smile on your face!

"Huh?! You're moving into the dorm?! That's the first I've heard of it! What are you going to do about the house?! You'll stir up Astemir and the elves!!! You have to talk to us before making important decisions like that!"

Lapis chimed in from the side, and I cringed.

"My brother will live in the Sanjo main residence. He wrote a pledge the other day."

"Huh? You signed a moment ago, saying you'd live in the villa."

"Nuh-uh. He swore under oath in court that he'd move to the dormitory."

Th-this was scary... The facts were being twisted from three directions, changing shape so much that they were nothing like the original...

The three girls gabbled and argued, and I was stuck between them, tucking my face between my arms.

How did it come to this...? This was like a generic romantic comedy...about some harem situation... Since when had I become so popular...? At least it was just goodwill and not romantic in the slightest...but I still didn't understand it...

Seriously, I started thinking of a way to get the three girls' fondness of me down to zero.

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"….."
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Should I take a dump right here in front of them...? No, there had to be another way...

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"…"
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No, maybe it's the only way...?

*"…"* 

No matter how I thought about it, pooping myself was all I could come up with... I felt doomed.

Unfortunately, the moment I decided to sacrifice my dignity as a human being for the sake of the yuri heroines, the place turned pitch-black—and then a spotlight shined on the teacher's podium.

It appeared that the three dorm heads were about to be introduced.

The bickering trio calmed down, and I turned my attention to the podium.

Houjou Magic Academy had three dorms.

Rufus, Caeruleum, and Fraum... Distinguished by their three colors, *ESCO* fans called them *traffic lights*.

Each dorm had a leader called the *master*.

The masters served as the absolute rulers, and once you began living in a dorm, you were in no way allowed to defy them. These were the people who set the rules and regulations for the dorms and acted as leaders during interdorm events.

In the original game, the main cast was able to gain bonus stat boosts by moving into their dorms.

If they moved into Rufus, they would boost their physical strength and constitution, their magic power and intelligence if they went to Caeruleum, and their agility once they began living in Fraum... Their added scores would go to their dorms.

The higher the score controlled by each dorm, the higher the percentage became for additional bonus ability values. Students could also receive magic devices and tools or even get the dorm masters to like them more and enter their desired routes.

Classes were divided once every six months based on scores, and the dorm rankings were announced. The dorm that finished in first place was awarded a special prize from the headmaster.

The main characters do not have specific addresses at the start of the game.

Due to this, they must move into a dormitory, and they're free to select which one they would like to reside in. However, they might face rejection if they perform poorly on a test called the *dorm-entry exam*.

With a little hard work, you can manage to get into Rufus, even if you're in your first week.

You can only enter Caeruleum after your second or third week unless you're a member of the *ESCO* Society.

As to Fraum, it's easy to move into this dorm if you choose it.

In *ESCO*, where magic power is important, it may seem that Caeruleum would be the best choice, but you can't underestimate the unique perks offered by each dorm. In addition, different events occurred at each dorm, so you couldn't say which was best.

In the original game, Hiiro doesn't move into a dorm. Still, he has to choose which dorm to belong to.

It's more comfortable for rich girls to live at home than to move into a dorm with rules and regulations. Elite students aiming high are about the only ones who want to move into a dorm; still, they must be affiliated with one as a formality.

As far as the game design goes, once you move into a dorm and perform well, you get a better chance of finding a good job.

Various companies weigh students' performance at Houjou Magic Academy's dorms and use it as a criterion for job applications.

Besides, you can make connections with the dorm heads if you move in.

These connections will be useful during job hunting, and it's also beneficial to be friends with high-scorers while attending the academy.

That's because by being friends with a high-scorer, you can get a tiny share of what they enjoy and come across many opportunities if you hang out with them, and that will help you get a boost in your score, too.

Hiiro didn't move into a dorm in the game, but I'm going to try to get into

one.

Caeruleum is the only choice if I want to be strong, but with my score of zero, whether I can even get into Fraum is dubious.

A dormitory's score is basically the total score of all the students who live there, so with the exception of a case where you're a Caeruleum who wants to become an elite individual, they'll let you move in if they think *it's in their best interests to do so*.

But there is the rare occasion when all the dorms reject an individual, thinking it wouldn't benefit them in the least bit if they accepted the person.

For example, a jerk who's stuck between yuri girls, boasting a zero score... Didn't all the dorms reject him because they hated him too much...? Isn't that how the game went?

Well, anyway, I figured I'd concentrate on the introductions the dorm masters were about to give. Their going on stage meant they would also introduce *her*.

The third heroine—and one of the dorm masters.

My eyes were on the center podium.

The searing lights illuminated the stage. A spotlight was on a girl with red hair as she walked majestically down the catwalk.

She was a dragonewt and had two twisted horns on her head.

Flaire bi Lulufreim—she was the head of Rufus, specializing in the fire attribute, nicknamed *Enna*.

She moved her mouth toward the microphone with a small smile on her face.

"We are looking for the powerful."

Beginning with that single line, she delivered her speech with gestures and had the elegance of a good theatrical performer.

Even Sakura Tsukiori, seated beside me, had her gaze fixed on the podium, looking mesmerized.

Time flew by in no time at all.

After absorbing the audience's gaze, she finally unfolded a piece of paper and

murmured, "Special nominee for Rufus...Rei Sanjo."

"…"

The large auditorium was abuzz, and all eyes were on the person seated in front of me.

"…"

Rei had the crowd's attention, looking as composed as ever. She sat up beautifully straight as she stared at the podium with unclouded eyes.

Once a year, when new students come on board, the head of each dorm can designate one nominee whom she will *definitely want to invite to her dorm*.

That was what defined a special nominee.

According to the game notes, special nominees were determined at the sole discretion of the dorm master, taking into account family backgrounds, scores, magic abilities, and the capacity levels that were considered *outstanding*.

Naturally, I knew who the special nominees were.

So I wasn't particularly surprised, but Rei's boldness was impressive. She had been selected as a special nominee for Rufus, an achievement even the main characters had a tough time accomplishing, and yet she wasn't reacting with the slightest movement.

The audience settled down when one girl took control of the scene.

The great hall went quiet.

A beautiful girl with blue hair...wearing a crown of the world tree, put her index finger to her mouth and slowly exhaled.

Shhh!

The students stopped chattering as if mesmerized by her breath.

She was, quite literally, crystal clear.

She was a spirit. You could see right through the surface of her body, and a thin veil of pure white covered her holy and beautiful face.

Julie Froma Frigience was the head of Caeruleum, a handler of magic ranked

supreme with the nickname Absolute Zero.

"Thank you for your cooperation," she whispered. Her soft voice melted into the air.

Even without a loudspeaker, the sound of her voice permeated the large auditorium. She had taken over the scene in a mere few seconds but did not start speaking after that.

She just stood there.

A buzz occurred among the new students a few seconds later, and—

"My dormitory..."

—she suddenly began talking.

It was as if she suddenly grabbed our hearts.

The new students were immediately captivated by her, curious about what was happening, and gazed at the podium, searching for her presence. It was a brilliant oratorical technique.

She continued speaking loud and clear.

Lapis, standing next to me, barely blinked as she stared at the spirit on the platform.

Julie unfolded a piece of paper at the end of her speech.

"Special nominee for Caeruleum...Lapis Clouet la Lumet."

The place buzzed at once, and everyone's attention focused on the person to my left.

*"…"* 

Lapis remained silent as she stared at the podium, her eyes narrowed.

As if sensing her gaze, Julie looked back at Lapis and smiled.

That was it for Rufus and Caeruleum.

The dorm introductions were made, and it was time for the grand finale.

The fourth heroine and dorm master of Fraum was nicknamed *Faker*. Her name was Mule Esse Eisbert.

After what could be called perfect speeches by the dorm masters of Rufus and Caeruleum, the new students were full of anticipation, and all eyes were focused on the stage before the speaker stepped up.

Then a little girl with her arms crossed pompously walked in front of those expectant eyes.

A servant followed her, set up a type of boost to the podium, and stepped aside.

She had platinum blond hair, part of which was in a braid.

Wearing the school's designated hat and turning her beautiful deep blue eyes to the audience, Mule was...small. I wouldn't be surprised if someone thought she was a young child who had been kidnapped.

She crossed her arms, looking arrogant and stout, acting as if she owned the world.

"Ahem."

She cleared her throat and grabbed the microphone.

Screech!

The new students covered their ears as the microphone suddenly started howling.

Mule's servant quickly thrust out her hand and stopped the howling beside a flustered Mule.

She let out a breath of relief, careful not to direct it toward the microphone, and began to speak arrogantly.

"Um, first, I congratulate all of you new students on your enrollment. We sincerely welcome you to our school."

She began rattling off a litary of formalities that made me wonder if she was closing the ceremony for the school headmaster.

Far from the charismatic speeches the other two masters gave, it was boring and monotonous...and went on endlessly.

It was easy to see the new students' expectations wilting before my eyes.

Perhaps sensing the mood, the frantic masters of Rufus and Caeruleum started speaking with exaggerated gestures.

Still, the air wasn't getting any better.

"So the history of our school is unparalleled..."

Finally, she even started getting off the subject of the dorms and began speaking about the academy.

Giggles and laughter could be heard from the seats in front.

"What the hell? *That's*...a dorm master? How much money does her family donate to the academy?"

"That rumor about her is true. I heard the Fraum master was a bit of a dropout. I had high hopes for her since she's a daughter of the Eisbert family."

"I wish she'd finish up soon. It's a waste of time listening to a child like her. She's embarrassing to watch."

"The nerve of her, going up on stage after the Rufus and Caeruleum masters. I can't believe she isn't embarrassed. She's a disgrace to the Eisbert family."

The negative remarks and taunts echoed throughout the great auditorium, and Mule and the others on stage seemed to have heard them. Some faculty members were warning the students, but they hadn't found the ones who were making nasty comments.

Tears gradually began to trickle down Mule's cheeks.

*"…"* 

Silently, I got up from my seat.

"Hiiro?"

Without answering, I walked over to the two girls who were deliberately making fun of Mule so she could hear them, and I looked down at them.

"H-hey, wh-what do you want...?"

*"…"* 

"Wh-what is it? All I did was poke a little fun at her."

*""* 

"Y-you're freaking me out! You're nothing but a man! Let's go!"

The girls got on their feet and took off, and I sank my butt into one of their seats and crossed my legs.

It's okay for friends to talk about people in a whisper.

But yuri girls don't have to be wicked. That would detract from the flowers they are and make them wither, and it's out of the question for them to try to make other flowers that are blooming beautifully shrivel up.

Other students looked at me and said things. They seemed to think I had suddenly approached those girls and harassed them, and Hiiro's bad reputation was already starting to spread.

It was okay with me since I didn't give a rat's ass what happened as long as I could protect yuri heroines.

Sakura hadn't come after me this far, but she was staring at me, looking happy.

"Um, that concludes my introduction to Fraum!"

Meanwhile, Mule had regained her composure, finished her speech, and was unfolding another piece of paper.

The name of the special nominee written there had already been determined.

It was Sakura Tsukiori, one of the main characters. She had helped Mule in the morning immediately prior to our back-to-school ceremony. In return, she would *see the value* of having her around and nominate her.

That was why Sakura had almost been late for homeroom.

Okay, then I'll sit back and watch how Sakura reacts when she's nominated.

"The special nominee for Fraum is..."

Somewhat excited, I turned my attention to Sakura in the back row.

"...Hiiro Sanjo!"

Time stood still for a moment.

The auditorium was filled with a buzz that seemed to shake the place, and I felt looks of utter surprise piercing my face.

Meanwhile, my mouth hung open.

"...Huh?"

I was so shocked that I looked like a total idiot.



After the dorm masters' introductions, we returned to our classrooms for a long homeroom period.

Everyone introduced themselves without a hitch, and interviews for moving into the dorms would begin after school and go on for a week, starting with those who wished to enter the dorms.

During this period, students were free to be interviewed for admission but could only be interviewed once for each dorm. Later, depending on the results they received, they would be assigned to the Rufus, Caeruleum, and Fraum dorms.

In the original game, obtaining the requirements to enter Caeruleum during this short one-week period was impossible. Achieving the stat requirement to be accepted at Rufus was also tough.

If everything went according to the game scenario, the protagonist would be chosen as a special nominee for Caeruleum. For that reason, most players on their first rounds would go to Fraum, managed by the heroine Mule Esse Eisbert.

*"…"* 

Sakura was supposed to be chosen...as the special nominee for Fraum.

Wondering what was happening, I stared at the great gate, flanked on both sides by bronze eagle statues. Looking up, I saw Fraum towering majestically overhead.

The site was comparable to that of the Sanjo family villa and probably exceeded it. There was a garden with yellow roses in full bloom, even a tea

room, and a fountain with a statue of a goddess standing in the center.

Perhaps someone was using the student shooting range; I could hear the sound of magic devices going off.

The Fraum building was a massive six-story structure, several times larger than the average luxury apartment building in town. On the top floor, a clock was set, and a painting of an eagle emblem, Fraum's symbol, was on the wall.

The crest for Rufus bore a red lion, a blue unicorn for Caeruleum, and a yellow eagle for Fraum.

The crests for the dorms were also depicted on the affiliation badges that were handed out after we moved into the dorm, so you could see at a glance which dorm each student belonged to.

I stood in front of Fraum and stopped for a minute.

What should I do now?

Why had I been chosen as a special nominee for Fraum...? I had to find out why the scenario had changed.

To do that, I should first go to my dorm interview.

Even if I did that, the big question remained as to whether Hiiro Sanjo should move into Fraum.

If I were going after additional ability values, I should join Fraum, where I could receive various benefits. If I missed this opportunity, it would be almost impossible for me to enter any dorm at all.

The story is that no dorm accepts Hiiro because of his bad personality. Of course, since he was male, there was no way he could move into a dorm in the first place.

Living in a dorm meant living together with girls.

Even outside the world of yuri games, males and females usually live separately. There was no way that a rich girl in this world would be happy to live with some guy.

In a world where the status of males was at rock bottom, there was no way

that a guy would be allowed to move into a dormitory unless it was a special exception.

Unless it was as a special nominee.

*"…"* 

I thought I was starting to see the truth.

If I wasn't mistaken, *she* was the one who changed the course of the original scenario.

Whether or not I moved into the dormitory might change how I interact with her—in which case, this was important.

But really, what was I going to do?

I sighed.

Students who don't want to move into a dorm can inform their teacher and skip the interviews. The teacher has the sole right to select which of the three dormitories the student is to be attached to, and the student is then assigned based on the balance of students in each dorm.

The score of a student who doesn't move into a dorm isn't treated as a dorm score even if it goes up, so the student can't receive additional ability values or benefits offered by the dormitory.

For the dorm masters, it doesn't matter which dorm the student becomes attached to since they can't contribute to dorm points. So they are often assigned to either Caeruleum or Rufus, which are tough to get into.

The special nominee quota is based strictly on the dorm masters' recommendations.

It isn't mandatory to join that dorm, but if you decide not to move in, you will be assigned to the nominated dorm.

Frankly, I desperately wanted the additional ability value gained by moving into Fraum. The perks gained by achieving certain score standards would also help the protagonist, and the thought made me/Hiiro drool.

But wouldn't I end up getting stuck between yuri girls if I moved into Fraum?

That was the only thing that worried me... At any rate, I had to go for an interview to get things moving.

I took my first step into Fraum, and—thud!

A bookshelf came crashing down at my feet, bounced vigorously, and shattered into pieces.

Shards of shattered wood flew about, and the sound of an argument echoed from inside the dorm. Desks were thrown out the windows, followed by a shower of textbooks, and other dorm residents poked their faces out their windows with a look that said, *Not again*.

I reached for Calvino's *The Cloven Discount* on the ground and was flipping through the pages when a third-year student came running out of the dorm.

"That does it. I've reached my limit!!!"

She turned back to the dorm with a bright red face and exclaimed, "I won't live in a dorm with an idiot like you! You're a lousy failure! Go ahead! Spend the rest of your life pretending to be the king of the jungle!"

Mule looked out of the circular window on the top floor and shouted back, "Sh-shut up, you jerk! I won't ever let you stay in my dorm again, even if you beg! Go wherever you want—Rufus or Caeruleum, and you can fail again there, you fool!"

The third-year student quickly gathered up her books and snatched *The Cloven Discount* from my hands. She glared at me and said, "What's a guy doing here?" Loudly so Mule could hear her, she added, "You should think twice about moving into a dorm like this. You'll regret it for sure, and that Faker is a real jerk."

Clearly indignant, she stomped her feet and walked away—and with a wry smile, I looked up at the heroine.

"Oh! Hey, I thought some rude intruder was here, but it's you, Hiiro Sanjo! Welcome! Welcome to my dormitory!"

After just kicking out an upperclassman, she was laughing, her arms crossed in a pompous manner.

"As head of Fraum, I welcome you with open arms! You're a special nominee that I have deemed fit to live here! Don't just stand there! Come on in!"

The cute shouting had ended, and I sighed.

\*

Mule Esse Eisbert is the youngest daughter of the Eisbert family.

As is customary in this realm, the Eisbert family is a noble lineage of women and an esteemed lineage as wielders of magic.

The family tree is so exclusively female that one might suspect that the forbidden practice of gender selection has been taking place.

Mule has five older sisters. They all graduated from the prestigious Houjou Magic Academy with top grades and have been making a splash in the world with their remarkable achievements in politics, business, magic, and other fields.

In other words, the Eisbert family is a family of the elite.

Naturally, Mule was born with these expectations, but...she never lived up to her parents' wishes.

Her magic ability had been insufficient since birth.

It was almost zero, and she couldn't manage to use a single magical ability.

The wand-shaped magic device hanging from her waist was merely a decoration. As her nickname, *Faker*, indicated, she was called a *fake handler of magic*.

Even without abilities in magic, it might have been okay if she could make headway in some other area.

But she failed to show strength in any other field. No matter how hard she tried, her grades weren't as good as her sisters', even when they made no effort to achieve.

Mule continued to do her best day in and day out, but one day, her mother came to her and smiled.

"You don't have to do anything anymore."

That was when her heart snapped.

All she had left was her position as the master of Fraum, thanks to the massive donations the family had made to the academy and the arrogance she had taken on as a reaction to the expectations of a prominent family.

Mule knew no other way to present herself than to be arrogant with her mouth and her attitude.

It was only natural that even those who had been sympathetic to her would drift away, and before long, only one follower remained at her side.

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"Ngh...! Oh...! Argh...!"
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"H-Hiiro Sanjo. Wh-why are you suddenly crying?"

"B-beats me..."

I had been taken to Fraum's dorm master's office and reception room on the top floor and was crying my heart out, recalling the final stages of the *Mule Route* in the game.

That... Oh my god, that...is too much... It goes beyond a lovely yuri story... It's a tale about Mule's development... What happens at the end...is so clever I'm reduced to tears...!

I sat on the leather sofa and whispered to Mule across from me.

"I—I...I'm on your side... And as for any enemies...that stand in the way of your happiness...I'll remove them with everything I have...!"

"I don't know what you're crying over, but whatever it is, your loyalty is admirable! So the charisma that flows out of my body attracts even a man like him! Isn't that right, Lily?"

Lily Classical.

The servant who stayed at Mule's side to the very end indicated her agreement with her eyes as she maintained her excellent posture.

"By the way, dorm master," I asked, wiping my tears with the handkerchief that Lily had handed me. "Why did you choose me as your special nominee?"

"Huh?"

She stopped nodding in satisfaction and looked back at Lily with a troubled look.

"Because you, Mr. Hiiro Sanjo, measured up to Miss Mule's expectations!"

"Th-that's right! I am Mule Esse Eisbert of the Eisbert family! To be honest, I didn't like the idea of meeting a man like you, but since you seem to have some potential, I made a special exception and allowed you to sit there—"

"Miss Mule..."

Mule twitched in reaction, then crossed her arms with a hmph!

"I didn't say anything wrong! Mother said men are trash! I, the daughter of the Eisbert family, should not have to meet a man like him! It's only because she insisted—"

"Oh, she did, huh...?" I muttered, folding the handkerchief and grinning.

"As I deduced from what you've been saying, this *she*, as you call her, is the one who asked you to put me in the special nominee slot."

Lily took the handkerchief from me and pressed her temples.

Flustered, Mule started playing around with the saucer in her hand, rattling it with her fingers—perhaps to bluff—and her eyes widened.

I chuckled and called out behind me.

"I know you're listening to this. Don't be shy. Come on in."

The door opened, and—

"Sakura."

The protagonist of ESCO, Sakura, stepped in.

Fiddling with her chestnut-colored hair with her fingertips, Sakura took my coffee cup and held it aloft.

"It seems the sword at your waist isn't the only thing that's sharp."

"Don't you ever think about being honest and giving me a compliment, like telling me how smart I am or trying to make our communication smoother?"

"To be honest, no."

She slipped into the reception room, sat down next to me, and linked her arm with mine.

"...Hev."

"Hey. When did you figure it out?"

It wasn't as if she was being sweet on a guy she'd just met. She was pretending to act that way as she held my arm in place so I wouldn't get away.

"If you have a decent understanding of how the world works, you'd know it's an accumulation of natural guesses. There is no way that the daughter of the Eisbert family, who just a few minutes ago gave a male-hating speech, would choose me, a man with a score of zero. And in that case, someone must have told her to nominate me. I also suspected the Sanjo family of doing something behind the scenes, but my moving into a dorm wouldn't help them in any way."

Sakura looked into my face in the same way she would examine an animal in a cage. The slight movement made her press her soft chest against my arm.

"If it isn't the Sanjos, it would be someone who's associated with me at the academy and wants to put me in the dorm... There's just one candidate—you, Sakura Tsukiori. I also heard right before homeroom about someone seeing you helping the dorm master."

Of course, that was a lie. From the original game, I already knew why Mule would nominate Sakura.

"The special nominee she was going to choose...was you, wasn't it, Sakura Tsukiori? You knew that, and then you came up with the idea of using the special nominee quota to get me into Fraum. Maybe you told Mule that I had the same power as you did and promised to move into Fraum if she took me in."

Perhaps my reasoning, which was based on my knowledge of the original story, stunned Sakura and Mule. They stared at me with their eyes wide open.

"Yeah, maybe he was a good find."

Sakura smiled and wrapped her arms around mine as if to stress that she wasn't about to let me go.

The lovely smell of her shampoo wafted from her beautiful chestnut-colored hair, and she looked up at me with glossy eyes.

"Hiiro," she whispered with irresistible charm. "You will move into Fraum... won't you?"

Th-this character... Couldn't she satisfy herself with just girls? Was she now trying to seduce me, a male, too?

"He has pretty good instincts for a male! Is this what you call a guy's intuition?! You were indeed right, Sakura! Now we'll be able to aim for first place in the dorm competition this year! Right, Lily?"

"Y-yes, Miss Mule... I'm honestly surprised. He spoke as if he had seen everything."

Sorry, you're right. I did see everything through my screen.

Sakura crossed her legs with a wry smile on her face and tapped the hilt of her sword with her fingertips. Realizing that I couldn't escape, I mumbled, "I will. I will move into Fraum. I've racked my brain to the limit, and it's probably the best thing for me to do."

Grinning, Sakura let go of my arm and put her lips to my ear.

"So our school days from hereafter...will be under the same roof, huh?"

She smiled at me as I was feeling flustered and left the room.

As one should expect from a protagonist who has fought many battles, she's certainly a predator who can make her opponent fall for her with a kiss after pushing them up against a wall.

"Hmph. All right. My brilliant management skills have brought you to a speedy decision! Strike while the iron's hot, they say. There is no way there is unexpected good in what others have left behind! Lily! Take this male to his room while keeping to the speed limit in the hallway—"

"Oh, I don't need a decent room."

"Huh? What? What do you mean?"

Perhaps she was taken aback. For a minute there, the dorm master showed a

cute response that was appropriate for her age. After putting her hands on the desk and bouncing up and down, she cleared her throat as if trying to regain her dignity.

"H-Hiiro Sanjo, what do you mean?"

"I'm a guy. I don't intend to interfere with your daily activities or those of everyone else, so I'll live in the attic. I'll only use the common facilities late at night or early in the morning, and should anyone see me, I will be immediately shot dead by a sniper."

"Of course you won't be shot dead by a sniper. What are you thinking? Are you talking about my dorm as if it's some death game? I'm not going to spend a large part of my budget to hire a sniper and blow your brains out."

"You're the dorm master."

"Lily! This guy is pushing for a change in the dorm rules so he can commit suicide! And he's acting so smug! He thinks he'll get his way!"

"Miss Mule, there are many different kinds of people in the world."

"You can't just accept people like him based on the diversity!"

Mule pounded on the table and glared at me, breathing hard.

"Hey, you! I'm a member of the Eisbert family! It's a great family, you know! It's perfectly natural for me to be featured on the front page of the newspaper, discussed over the public airwaves, or mentioned in Hollywood! I'm not the kind of person who would even talk to a low-scoring guy like you—"

"Miss Mule..."

"Urgh..."

Gritting her teeth, the dorm master turned away, shaking her body up and down. Lily silently watched over her, then bowed her head deeply in apology.

"Mr. Sanjo. On behalf of my master, I sincerely apologize for her rudeness. This child is often misunderstood—"

"Oh, please don't worry about it," I said, trying to stop her as I combed back my bangs.

"As a gentleman who loves yuri girls, I'm confident in my powers of observation and my clear mind. You may be surprised to hear that my self-test the other day showed that I have a yuri IQ of 180."

"Ah, 180...? That is impressive..."

As Lily covered her mouth with a hand, I tapped the top of my eyelids. "I have twenty-twenty vision."

"There is no association between being observant and having good eyesight, you idiot!"

"Watching you like this, it's easy to see that you don't really mean what you're saying."

Lily smiled gently as the dorm master continued to rant.

"What the hell, man?! You're just a guy. Are you trying to make friends with Lily with that incomprehensible logic?! Even if the world of diversity permits such foolishness, neither I nor the heavens will allow it!"

"Ha-ha-ha, of course not...," I replied.

Damn, she is totally jealous! I can't get enough of these heavy yuri vibes! My yuri engine's warming up for the first time in a long time! I've got to give it everything I've got! Here goes! *Vroom, vroom, vroom!* 

"Mr. Sanjo, we appreciate your concern, but you don't have to live in the attic..."

I smiled back at Lily, who looked concerned.

"As our family saying goes, 'Anyone who interferes with a girl's romance with another girl will be kicked to death by a horse.' The attic is the best place for me. I heard that your rooms here are double occupancy, and that's a setting where yuri love will grow easily—I mean, it's safe for girls to be with girls. A guy like me shouldn't intrude on that. Don't worry. I'll clean up after myself and live a clean life on my own."

"But-"

"Lily, leave him alone! The guy says it's fine! Let him do what he wants!"

"...Yes, perhaps pushing further might be a nuisance to him."

Yes! Way to go, dorm master! That was a great follow-up!

"Then if you'll excuse me, I must look for fixed observation points in this dorm."

I was about to quickly leave the room so my efforts wouldn't be in vain when

"Oh yeah. Hiiro Sanjo," the dorm master called out to me. "Your fiancée is waiting for you outside the dorm. As long as it's the attic, you can live together. Hurry up and go and get her."

"Oh okay. My fiancée is here, huh? Thanks for letting me know."

I opened the door—and came to a stop.

"My fiancée?!" I cried out, making the stunned dorm master spin around.

"Wh-wh-wh-what's going on here?!"

"What do you mean, what's going on? You have a fiancée, right? She seems to have been waiting for quite a while, so you'd better get moving and go to her. Oh? Hey!"

I swung the door open and dashed down the hall.

Hiiro's fiancée existed according to the game notes, but there was no way she would suddenly appear without warning at Houjou Magic Academy.

Not a chance... But at this point, anything could happen.

Things were complicated enough as they stood. If some unidentified fiancée—a girl, I presume, since Hiiro was a womanizer—was to enter the picture, it would really put me in deep trouble.

Since it was faster than waiting for the elevator, I ran down the stairs a few steps at a time.

It got irritating, so I pulled my trigger, leaped out the third-floor window, and landed on my feet—

—in front of a girl.

She was smiling, and I opened my eyes wide in astonishment.

"You... What are you doing here...?"

The unexpected fiancée slowly whispered, "It's been a while, sir—"

I punched the head of the white-haired maid, Snow, who worked at the Sanjo family villa.

"Surprise, surprise. Domestic violence the minute you see me? The average servant would probably start crying, and that would be the end of it, but at my level, it's a chance to file a civil suit for harassment and receive compensation."

"You've gotta be kidding me... I got all sweaty, jumping down from the third floor... What are you doing, calling yourself my fiancée without mentioning it to me? You got me seriously worried...!"

"Still a world-class zero in both brains and looks, huh? I admire you for the efforts you keep up so you can continue being a jerk. It's truly amazing."

"You'd better cut that out, or it may be time I showed show you how high my violence parameters are..."

"Oh, give the blood vessels in your brain a break. It's silly to stand here talking. Why don't you get me some tea? But be careful. My mouth won't accept tea leaves that aren't at the ten-thousand-yen level."

"First, you can watch what comes out of that mouth."

As Houjou Magic Academy didn't forbid servants from entering its grounds, it wasn't uncommon to see masters and their servants together.

But this was a rare case of a guy and a girl arguing...and it seemed to arouse curiosity among the rich daughters at the dorm. Students whispered and said things as they peeked out of their windows.

"Oh no! A super-gorgeous maid is being picked on!" "The guy must be coming onto her when she's trying to get away!" "A romance is about to begin right under my nose!"

"What's with the mysterious voiceover? Has this girl from the boonies misunderstood this place as some recording studio?"

Since we had unwillingly attracted attention, Snow suggested we get moving, and that's what we did.

We reached a café on the Houjou Magic Academy grounds. It was a stylish café where even a zero could order food and beverages. I sat facing my maid with the menu between us.

*""* 

"Hey, I don't need you racking your brain over what to order. I really wish we could move right along to the topic of the reason why you claimed to be my fiancée."

"Just to confirm, are you buying?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. So will you please answer my question?"

"Excuse me. I'll have the items on this menu from top to bottom. I also want to have sushi and other items delivered, so will you please be prompt and get on the phone—?"

"Don't get carried away, maid...!"

"Y-you're going to ruin this beautiful girl's face...!"

I finished delivering the iron claw maneuver on this self-proclaimed beautiful girl maid.

After mumbling a few comments about the strawberry parfait and tea that were brought to her, the maid finally began to speak.

"If things continue along their current course, your little sister will fall in love with you."

"...I beg your pardon?"

The unexpected words almost made me drop my cup of coffee.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly as I said. It's been nothing but *Hiiro this* and *Hiiro that* lately. So much so that I wondered if she might have a malignant tumor in her brain or something, so I had her get an MRI. Surprisingly, the results were normal."

"Weren't you feeling indebted to me until very recently...? Why are you

talking to me like that ...? Are you trying to educate me ...?"

"What I'm about to say is a beautiful girl's intuition." Snow rested her chin in her hand and picked at her parfait with the tip of her spoon. "I think her fondness for you will eventually turn into romantic feelings for sure."

Slowly, I covered my face with one hand and looked up to the heavens with despair.

"Oh my god!"

"You almost sounded like a native English speaker just now."

I rubbed my brow and sighed in front of my steaming coffee.

"Well, she's never had a decent love life. She's been involved in the Sanjo family's issues all this time and probably never had a real ally. I guess it's possible that she'd fall for me, even with my zero score."

I pushed my chair back vigorously and stared at Snow.

"I see. I understand with my high yuri IQ. You're dedicated to Rei, and you've been hiding your feelings for her. Now you're trying to ask me to help you. You want me to arrange things for you and Rei to become an item. I get that. The answer is yes. Leave it to me. I'll officiate your wedding. I'm great at purification rituals and saying *Amen*. We'll get Sakura and the other heroines to join us, and we can all live happily ever after."

"Wrong. I have never once fallen in love with a woman in my life."

The maid shook her head with a look of exasperation on her face.

"Look, Miss Rei has taken a liking to you. We need her to give up on you before those feelings wax full romantic. And to do that, I'm saying I'm willing to be your fiancée."

"And you started acting like my fiancée without telling me?"

"Yeah."

"Why are you throwing up a peace sign? Do you want me to start playing cat's cradle with those fingers?"

Snow pressed the peace sign into her cheek and pointed the tip of her spoon

at me.

"I feel indebted to you. That's why I'm trying to pay you back. You don't want the fond feelings that Miss Rei and the others have for you to turn into something romantic, do you?"

"Well done, maid. You're right on target with my needs."

I stared at the dark liquid on the table before me.

"From my standpoint, I want you to be happy with a girl, too... Wouldn't an engagement to me...even if it's just pretend...get in the way?"

"That's an imposition. Even you must never have tried to force two people to be together. First, you make sure that their feelings are mutual, and then you casually support them. Thanks to you, the success rate of couples among the maids at the villa is over ninety percent."

"You knew that? Thanks. I think I did a pretty good job if I do say so myself."

"So now what?"

Snow propped herself up on the table and glanced up at me as she stirred her empty parfait glass and produced a colorless sound.

"A pretend engagement... Are you game...?"

She had clear white hair and smooth, porcelain skin. Her ample breasts, which rose and fell with her breathing, showed off her femininity, and I was the only reflection in the beautiful eyes that gazed at me.

"It would be convenient for me, and I don't mind if we'll only be pretending, but... Maybe we can fool Lapis, but would Rei believe us?"

"Wouldn't it be convincing if we French kissed in front of her?"

"Don't start with a last-resort tactic."

"Anyway." Snow moved in next to me, hugged my arm, and pushed her soft body close to me. "Do you want to give it a try, being pretend fiancés?"

"Yeah...but...I wonder if it's really a good idea... You're right that I can't just force girls to fall in love with each other, but..."

Just because it was a no-boys-allowed world of a yuri game, it didn't mean

that every girl in the world went for girls.

Besides, Snow was technically a side character. She wasn't one of the main heroines. If she said she'd never been in love with a girl, then I was being selfish by trying to force the idea onto her.

So maybe it was okay to pretend we were engaged...though it also seemed like she was talking me into it...

"Then the engagement is sealed. For you, Mr. Hiiro Sanjo, a guy who has no life skills at all, the wonderful housekeeping skills of this lovely maid will be very useful indeed. As of today, I will do you a favor and move in with you. You may now weep tears of joy."

"But there are various problems with suddenly moving in together—"

"You're going to live in that dorm, right? There's no problem since we're engaged to each other, and the academy allows you to have your servant with you."

"Huh? Oh, um, well... Yeah, I guess..."

Snow dragged me away and made me stand.

"All right then, darling-slash-wallet, hurry up and settle the bill."

"Yeah, right..."

I did as she said and pulled a credit card out of my wallet. I went through the motions and tried to pay—but the clerk came back with a troubled look on her face.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't use this credit card. Perhaps you have reached your credit limit?"

"That can't be possible since I'm rich. This is a black credit card, and—oh!"

I cried out, realizing why I couldn't use my credit card.

Those Sanjo family hags must have canceled my credit card! Not that I could really blame them after what I did!

"...Snow. How much money do you have on you?"

"Huh? Do you dare underestimate a maid?"

Snow opened a cat-shaped purse and checked the contents.

"One hundred and thirty-two yen."

I looked in my wallet again and smiled.

"...I'm not in the habit of carrying around cash."

"Huh. Okay... So what?"

Snow must have understood my predicament. She fell silent and stared at me.

"Don't tell me your credit card been canceled—"

"Activate magic right now! We'll go to the cashier engaged!!!"

"Huh?!"

"A canceled credit card triggers my instincts as a jerk! Summoning synchronization with our engagement! I'll let you pay the bill, sweetheart!"

I pulled my trigger and took off like a hare, only to have Snow promptly tackle me to the ground.

"When we die, we die together...darling...!!!"

"Never mind being my fiancée. Has it slipped your mind that you're...my maid...?! Now use the housekeeping, or dishwashing, skills you so boast about and save your master from this predicament...!"

We had an ugly fight in front of the cringing clerk.

In the end, we called Rei, who showed up with grumbling complaints but paid the bill in full, looking somewhat happy.

"As a fellow member of the Sanjo family, I don't want strange rumors going around about you. I can give you an allowance, no problem, but for that, I'll need to check your financial situation regularly and in person. I'll deal with that as a sister's obligation, strictly as an obligation because of a brother who is a pain in the derriere."

Uh-oh. If this keeps up, there will only be a route where Rei supports me.

Snow and I stared at each other, reaffirming the need to go with the idea of pretending to be engaged—and from there on, we started living together as a

couple.

In short, my life had changed drastically yet again, but that wasn't the only thing that changed.

A wind of change blew into my face during homeroom period the next day.

"A-all right, everyone! Our academy will be holding an orientation camp in two weeks!" Marina said that with a little trepidation and continued, "S-some of you probably know that the orientation we hold at our academy is of an extremely large scale! I-I'm sure it will help everyone in Class A get to know each other well—cough, cough!"

I glanced at Lapis as I listened to our teacher speak. She was listening intently, looking straight ahead with her eyes shining brightly.

She mentioned that it would happen as soon as we enrolled at school, and I agreed that everyone had been looking forward to it.

Because of the mess I had gotten her into with the Sanjo family, I couldn't buy Lapis a dress that day... I looked at her as she turned around, and our eyes met.

She silently mouthed, "Wait for me after school."

She smiled at me as I nodded to make up for it.

It was time for me to start getting ready for the camp anyway. Besides, I'd die if things didn't go well.

I thought about the upcoming orientation camp and the first challenge for the main characters...and braced myself.



Houjou Magic Academy had three dorms.

Rufus, Caeruleum, and Fraum... And they had one thing in common.

All the rooms were double occupancy.

Teams of twos basically generated yuri. One girl alone couldn't open the beautiful petals. The double-occupancy rooms were a foundation that contained great nutrients for nurturing yuri girls.

It's silly to wonder why a school dorm for rich girls didn't offer single-occupancy rooms.

It's because this is the world of a yuri game!!!

That's how things stood from an outside perspective, but practical issues also existed.

Students living in single-occupancy rooms would be a security risk. In addition, two students bunking together would be a way to curb student crime. It would also enable students to aim for synergistic effects on their scores, which has been proven yearly. Results showed that students living in the same rooms were conscious of how their dormmates performed, which led to better grades for everyone.

Houjou Magic Academy was for the rich or the elite.

It was also an ideal place for rich daughters to find their future spouses. In fact, that seemed to be a sought-after *bonus*.

Students' scores would improve, and they could also find potential spouses. No matter how you looked at it, the idea of double-occupancy rooms was a win-win situation.

And I was moving into one of those win-win dorms.

The attic with a skylight on the top floor...which was farther up than the sixth floor...was large, both vertically and horizontally, and there were no issues in living there.

Though I could see the dust dancing in the air through the sunlight.

Lily said it had been used for storage, and as such, some surprising items were lying around.

Tapestries, animal figurines, swimsuits, towels, unidentifiable character items, comic books, and regular books tied up in stacks... The majority of the stuff was memorabilia the rich girls had bought during their travels.

"It's quite spacious for an attic," Snow muttered as she looked around after finishing our dorm entrance procedures and greeting people.

"But... Cough! It's very dusty..."

I agreed and put on a face mask.

"I guess the first order of business is to vacuum and wipe down the place. I heard I can throw out any trash that gets in the way, and I've been referred to a company that will come and pick it up if I leave it behind the building."

"What are we going to do about furniture?"

"I was planning to buy stuff, but..."

I shook my empty wallet.

"I don't have any money since the old Sanjo hag canceled my credit card."

Hiiro's parents died a long time ago.

The Sanjo alliance of hags had custody of him (me), and they had pushed Rei to become the successor to the Sanjo family regardless of what anyone said.

They always used money, goods, and power to silence Hiiro, but their approach seemed to change after witnessing my naughty behavior.

In the original game, they had controlled Hiiro since he was a child, giving him nothing but pleasure and eventually assassinating him. It was human karma at its finest.

I felt so sorry for Hiiro, being in a position like that... It was bull.

"Mr. Hiiro. Perhaps you entered into an engagement with me for money?"

"Shut up, a hundred and thirty-two yen. I've thought about ways to make money, but...to be honest, I'd like to devote all my attention to preparing for the orientation camp happening two weeks from now."

"My, this master wants to put his life on the line for a mere orientation. What is he, an introvert who only hustles at the start?"

Actually, my life really will be on the line at this camp.

Not that you would get that.

Snow doodled on a makeshift cardboard box and poked me in the thigh with her fingernails.

"And? How do you plan to survive the next two weeks in a state like that? Are

you going to make your lovely fiancée eat air and go live in the mountains?"

"Sure, I would love to fill that smart mouth with air. Lily will set us up with minimal furniture, and if worse comes to worst, I figure I could kneel on the ground and beg, and they'll at least think to feed us."

"Don't you have any pride?"

I shooed Snow away as she continued to poke my thigh.

"I hear that new students are only allowed to move into the dorms after their entrance examinations and the orientation camp, but the dorm master said I could move in today as a special exception."

"I thought you would temporarily evacuate to the villa or the main residence..."

"No way."

I stood up, picked up the girls' swimsuits that were scattered about and tossed them into a garbage bag.

"I thought I was in trouble when I found out that my credit card was canceled. I went to check out the villa with my master today and found it crawling with assassins, so we took them out. I attached a glittery photo sticker of my master and me, striking an arrogant pose with our backs against each other and our arms folded, with the caption *Can anyone beat us?* and sent them to the hags."

"The mentor and the disciple are too skilled at stirring the pot."

Lapis and the elf archers had been living in the villa, but they were quick to sense the assassins' presence and promptly evacuated to a hotel.

Being the bloodthirsty warrior that she is, Lapis was apparently planning to fight them to their death.

She *is* a princess of a country, and it wouldn't be a good idea for her to do battle with the Sanjo family. I politely persuaded her that they were my prey, and she reluctantly backed off.

"So as of today, this place will be our base."

"Oooh, I can't believe this is coming from the son of a prominent family."

Snow applauded with a blank look on her face, and I raised a hand to silence her.

"As you might expect from a dorm for rich girls, each of the rooms has a bathroom and a separate toilet, and besides that, they even have a theater. But naturally, this attic doesn't have any of those luxuries, so we'll have to make do with the shared facilities. They have a large bathroom in the basement, so you can use it whenever you want. As for the restrooms, there's one for the dorm's caretakers that you can use. There's no such thing as a men's restroom in a girls' school, so I'll dash to the train station when nature calls."

"Should the son of a prominent family be dashing to the train station when he wants to use the bathroom?"

"It's okay. We're a prominent and athletic family."

"You don't want to be in the middle of a dinner party and have to take off in the order in which you have to pee."

With that remark, Snow spread out the *dorm guide* that Lily gave her on her desk. A look of surprise gradually appeared on her face.

"They have a nail salon here? And a café, a bakery, a heated swimming pool, a massage room, and...you can call an extension number, and they'll provide snacks and sweets, and the amenities will be replenished while you're at school...? Just how much does it cost to maintain this rich girls' dorm?"

Donations from the Eisbert family chiefly covered Fraum's maintenance costs.

Many students didn't like our dorm master, Mule, but with such superb facilities and services, they seemed reluctant to complain.

After all, almost everything had the Eisbert Group's corporate logo on them. It was a user-friendly design that let you know at a glance whose power and donations made this life possible.

It suggested that the dorm master's mother was a very sharp woman.

To make everyone aware of the Eisbert family's authority, the group's company crest was put up inside the dorm building, which was designed with the Eisbert pattern. The fact that they were offering everything free of charge

as if to show their good intentions was also proof that they were skilled at manipulating lower-ranking individuals.

"The living quarters are on the first through sixth floors. Most of the facilities available are on the first to third basement floors. If you apply in advance with Lily, they'll let you use the restaurant kitchen on the first basement floor. Apparently, some of the rich girls like to cook as a hobby."

I pointed to the dorm guide that Snow was looking at from behind her.

"By the way, there's no charge for using these facilities, but as a male, I have no intention of showing my face to the others during regular hours, so I won't be able to use them. So, Snow, I want you to enjoy them for me."

"Hey, the issue of being broke won't be an issue if you can use their facilities... Why don't you do that?"

"I can't. The snipers will shoot me."

"They even have free snipers here?"

Two girls are happily chatting about their day, enjoying a lovely dinner with candlelight between them.

Then a frivolous-looking blond guy comes along—no! That will not do! Forget it! It's inconceivable! Even if someone put a gun to my head!!! I will never, ever show my face during regular hours!

"Then I won't use the facilities, either."

"Oh, don't worry about it on my account. I want you to use the stuff they have with a smile on your face."

"It would be strange for an engaged couple to eat separately. I'm being serious about this."

"Whatever. Do what you want. I'm a casual fiancé, so I'm not going to force you."

I did a slam dunk shot into a garbage bag with a pyramid figurine that was lying around.

"I'm going to start training seriously with my mentor tomorrow. Basically, I

think I'll be training in the morning, going to school during the day, and training again after school...so we may only see each other at dinner."

"So you're already going to leave your fiancé alone and cheat on her with your training?"

Snow sighed.

"Then I shall work on improving the living conditions for my cheating mentor."

"I'll do my best for my fiancée, who even tolerates my cheating. Here's our living expenses for the next two weeks."

Snow contorted her face when I handed her a thick envelope.

"You just said you didn't have any money... This money is clean, right? The kind that doesn't have to be laundered?"

"It's an interest-free loan without a due date for repayment that I borrowed from one of the assassins."

"How did you pull off a solo heist against an assassin?"

"My mentor bought a game console with the money she borrowed from the assassin."

"The mentor and her disciple are a violent duo."

"There's no guarantee we'll always have access to sources like that, so I'll think of a way to make some money through legitimate channels. This isn't enough to buy all the furniture we need, but it will at least tide us over for a while."

"The three of us can do the rounds until we run out of stamina."

"Please don't make the act of robbing people a routine like some social game."

Snow thanked me, opened the envelope, and started counting the bills.

"Now, as for when to reveal the fact that we're engaged—"

"Huh? I already told Lapis."

Silence.

The attic fell silent, and Snow slowly looked up at me.

"...When?"

"After school. I tagged along when she went out to buy a dress. She tried something on and asked what I thought, and I answered, 'Oh yeah. I got engaged to Snow, by the way.'"

"Urrrrrgh...!"

Grunting, Snow bent over backward as far as she could.

"What are you, an idiot? Do you answer eight plus five equals the Kamakura shogunate when someone asks you what's one plus one...? With so many different emotions swirling around in my mind, I can no longer find the words to express my thoughts... In a sense, you gave the worst possible answer at the best of times... So what did Miss Lapis say...?"

"We said goodbye, and she took off as usual. I didn't have anything else to do after that. I ran into my mentor on my way home, and we went to a photo sticker booth and took some shots together, so I sent them to Lapis, asking her if she thought anyone could outdo us."

"This guy...is seriously... Argh..."

I chuckled.

"It's no big deal. I'm sure Lapis doesn't have the faintest bit of romantic feelings. I don't know about Rei, but with Lapis, we don't have to worry about when to tell her."

"I don't know."

Snow stared at me.

"I'll have nothing to do with this. People will talk. But anyway, you go ahead and have a lovely time preparing for your orientation camp."

With that parting shot, Snow left the attic, carrying a garbage bag in each hand.

I was laughing then, wondering why she was getting all worked up.

But the next day—I was no longer able to laugh.



It was a bus ride from Houjou Magic Academy to the park, where I arranged to meet with my master.

It generally took about fifteen to twenty minutes.

But no buses were running at four in the morning, so since I was getting warmed up, I jogged to our meeting place.

Huff, huff! Pant, pant!

I repeated my breathing and was aware of the magic power that flowed through me.

I can go faster if I build up magic power in my lower limbs, but if someone were to attack my unprotected upper body, it could be fatal.

I had to be constantly aware that I was always on a battlefield, targeted by the Sanjo family. That was why I thought about practical maneuvers even while I ran.

The idea was to stretch my magical energy thin.

I allocated a minimal amount of it to the lower half of my body and poured the rest into my upper body, gradually letting it flow to my eyes. The wind blew, the trees rustled, and I glimpsed a leaf passing before me.

Magnify, magnify, magnify. I could even see the leaf's veins.

"...Hngh!"

I felt dizzy.

Was it because I'd poured all my magic into one area at once?

The dizzy spell was similar to the effect of running out of magical energy.

I closed my eyes, distributed the magic energy throughout my body, and exhaled.

It wasn't good to force all my magic power into a single body part with everything I had. There was a limit to the magic energy that could flow at once,

and an adverse reaction would occur if I went over the range permissible.

And anyway, the situation wouldn't always be so easy that I could fight at my maximum capacity.

I would face my opponent with the minimum amount of magical energy required to match their skills. I'd set indicators in advance and consider where and what percentage of my magic I allocate.

I'll be aware of the magic power that flows through my body and also covers the surface. I needed precise control, understanding, and the ability to adjust the magic energy that I had.

When I arrived at the park, sweating profusely, my mentor, who had arrived earlier, turned away.

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"Hmph!"
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"...Hey, what is it?"

My master shouted in a direction that got me puzzled.

"Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph!"

Glancing in my reaction, the four-hundred-twenty-year-old contin ued to repeat her *hmphs*. She seemed to have an awful lot of energy first thing in the morning, and I watched her as I wiped off my sweat.

She checked her disciple's (my) lack of interest in her hmphing and frowned.

"Can't you tell?"

She crossed her arms and puffed out her cheeks.

"I'm angry, you know!!!"

"Oh, I see. Okay."

"Ask me why! Ask me why I'm mad! Your master will not let you go until you ask why she's mad!"

"Why are you mad?" I asked monotonously.

"I hear you got engaged to this Snow character."

So she'd already received the information from Lapis.

I poured the uncarbonated cola down my throat, turned my head toward her, and said, "My, you're well informed. I guess it goes to show that you're the boss. I don't know who told you—perhaps Lapis—but I got engaged, just like you heard. Would you believe I got engaged to a maid who worked at the Sanjo family's villa? I'd been making moves on her for a while, and she finally agreed to be my fiancée the other day."

"I'm your master, yet I heard nothing about it!"

"You'd be psychic if you heard anything when I never said anything about it."

My mentor puffed out her cheeks and pulled a game out of her pocket.

"Just when I went out and bought this game! I bought it so I could play with my cute apprentice! I've been cuckolded! My beloved disciple has cuckolded me!"

"Why is the right controller plugged into the left and the left controller connected to the right? Isn't that like tearing off the steering wheel of a car and sticking it in the instrument panel before driving?"

My master sobbed and broke down in tears.

"Poor Lapis. She was zoned out all day! She didn't respond at all, even when I stuck my fingers up her nose! You brute! You're the worst! What are you thinking, doing something horrible like getting engaged?!"

"You're more of a brute, checking a princess's response by shoving your fingers up her nose. I want to ask you what you're thinking, going that far as her bodyguard."

The master seemed to have calmed down during our exchange and put the game away in her pocket.

"I am a respectable adult, and I do not deny you getting engaged. It may be a good defense against the Sanjos for a male like you to get yourself a fiancée quickly."

"Oh, I'm not planning to go so far as to announce my engagement to the Sanjo family... I don't want them getting funny ideas and messing with Snow."

The elf nodded gravely, looking like a true mentor.

"In that case, I will leave this to your judgment, Hiiro. But there is one thing that I want you to promise me."

"What's that?"

"The priority list will be as follows: your master>>>>>>your fiancée>>everyone else. Do not, under any circumstances, reorder it."

"What the hell are you saying with a straight face?"

As soon as I said that, my mentor exclaimed exaggeratedly.

"Well, gee! I found you first! No matter how you look at it, your master comes first! If I say let's play a game, you are obligated to toss your fiancée out of the way and come and see me! Right! It's decided! By the master's authority, no objections will be heard—"

"No, I actually met Snow before I met you."

*"…."* 

I circled her as she fell silent, then kicked her in the leg.

"Hey, say something, huh? Don't suddenly clam up. Try to talk back at me with that brain you've been letting go to waste for four hundred and twenty years."

I took my distance, cupped my hands around my mouth, braced myself, and shouted in a loud voice.

"Ha! You're less important than my fiancée!"

"Hey, Hiirooooo!"

Contrary to her feeble cry, my master came running at me, her eyes wide open. Although she was crying her heart out, she grabbed me and performed the ultimate joint lock, and I promptly gave in and apologized at the speed of light.

After making me apologize profusely, my master, having won the argument with violence, said with a charming smile, "Now that we're done with our warm-up, let's start another day of vigorous training, shall we?!"

"...Okay."

Astemir tossed me a magic device shaped like a stick.

The moment I caught it, my arm sank with its weight.

It was several times heavier than Masamune Kuki, which hung from my waist...and yet the trigger was as stiff as if it was fixed in place.

I couldn't imagine that it was made to be pulled. Without the trigger, I probably wouldn't have even realized it was a magic device.

It was black, dull, and heavy...like a lump of iron.

"What is this?"

"It's called *Cannon*," my master whispered, pointing a finger from her crossed arms.

"It's a magic device that has no format frame. It's an ancient relic favored by the ancient elves who once ruled Alfheim—the Land of the Elves."

"It doesn't have a format frame...? Then how do you activate magic with this?"

"There's a magic procedure that you can invoke without a format frame, isn't there?"

I slowly widened my eyes.

"Non-attribute magic..."

My master nodded.

"But that's impossible. Without a conductor for the generation system, the magic power would disappear since it can't retain any shape."

"I'd like to say hats off to your great insight, but there is one way it can be used."

I stared at Cannon and finally understood.

Was this Nanashi, by chance?

Nanashi was a magic device the enemy boss in *The Dungeon in the World Tree* dropped. The game description said it was an unusable magic device and an antique that was of no value other than when traded for cash.

That's what this Nanashi thing was in the ESCO world.

But wasn't there a condition for transforming it into a weapon...? Then it clicked.

"The Magic Eye."

My master smiled, looking pleased.

"Precisely. Your keen intuition is truly impressive, Hiiro. Your natural abilities and ability to work hard aren't what I value in you. It's your intuition and your competitive spirit that amazes me."

"Thanks for the compliment, but...can I really open...my Magic Eye...?"

"You have the foundation for it. You're the one and only legitimate heir to the Sanjo family, aren't you?"

She's certainly looked into my background. The fact that Hiiro is the family's sole legitimate heir is information you can only find in the game notes.

Now that she mentioned it, Hiiro Sanjo had the conditions in place to open his Magic Eye.

Due to innate reasons, the special endogenous magicells generated in a person's body could accumulate in the eyes and turn the eyeballs into pseudomagic devices.

And those altered eyes were what we called Magic Eyes.

The trigger could be pulled by channeling mana into the eyes.

Since the eyeball itself would be a magical device and conductor, it could only trigger a certain type of special magic. It was still immensely powerful and produced secondary effects as well. My master seemed to be trying to generate this secondary effect so she could use Cannon.

The Magic Eye was most likely to open through bloodlines. The better a person's lineage, the greater the chance that it would open.

A family of dukes in the *ESCO* world was supposed to have been set up to have about a 3 percent chance of opening their Magic Eye.

The Sanjo family indeed had a Magic Eye—called *The Epic of Dawn*.

On the Rei route, there was a low probability that Rei might open her Magic Eye once she completed various events and fulfilled the required conditions.

"Hey, don't you think we're jumping the gun? I wanted to learn water magic first, and I also have a mind to learn the basics of swordsmanship and archery."

"Of course. Our current objective isn't to open the Magic Eye. I'm talking about eventually. It will also depend on luck, the environment, and the particular situation."

My master smiled as she stroked her chin with a fingertip.

"Still, there's a big difference between being aware of it early on and not knowing about it, which makes a huge difference in the probability of opening up your Magic Eye. I believe it's essential to obtain the Cannon now and set your sights on your goals while you can."

I thought it was rushing things if you asked me.

But since we were in a master-disciple relationship, her orders were absolute, so I decided to keep the heavy, obtrusive Cannon hanging from my waist.

"So what are you going to teach me first?"

"The basics of swordsmanship begin with swinging. However, it would be a bad idea to get you working on simple maneuvers as soon as you've come running here to this park."

She smiled.

"I can first teach you how to use a bow. But it isn't just any bow and arrow that we're using."

My master pulled the trigger before my eyes. And—

"This should be much more comfortable for you than a normal bow and arrow."

—she generated a bow and arrow that was way beyond my imagination.

It wasn't exactly a bow. Or to be more precise, it was well outside the realm of normalcy for a bow and arrow.

A single arrow was attached to the back of my master's arm.

It was a single arrow shaped like a stream of water.

The water fluctuated and clung to her right arm. Such a great amount of magic power looked to be twisting around her in that rippling water that it looked terrifying.

And my master quietly turned up the corners of her mouth.

And in that moment, she released an invisible arrow.

I couldn't see it. It was made that way.

The arrow the naked eye couldn't register had just pierced the center of a large tree and created a gaping hole. It made no ejection sound but had silently created the hole.

All that remained was a single drop of water...between my master's index and middle finger.

The water droplet clinging there fell to the ground with a plop.

"The invisible arrow," she said and smiled.

"It has three advantages. First, your arm serves as an arrow each time, so you needn't carry around a regular bow. Two, you don't need to carry around arrows, either, since you generate them each time you want to shoot. Three..."

My master put her index finger to her mouth.

"...you can't see this arrow, and it doesn't make a sound."

"...Wow."

I murmured my admiration and nodded.

"You're right. With that, I wouldn't have to worry about not being able to use my second magic device due to a lack of magic power... It doubles as practice for using water magic, and there's no need to switch from using my sword... It's perfect for my desire to cover close-to medium-range targets...!"

"Hee-hee-hee!"

My master crossed her arms and laughed proudly.

"Ha-ha-ha! How do you like that, huh?! Hiiro, this is how amazing your master

is! Are you ready to call off your engagement?! You are so lucky to have a master like me!!! Right?!"

"Really... You're totally awesome. You aren't really the kind of person who should mentor a guy like Hiiro. If you were an average person, you'd bring me a bow and arrow you picked up from wherever, and that would be it. Only you could give me everything I want and suggest much more than that."

"I-it's scary when you suddenly shower me with compliments..."

Astemir Clouet la Killicia.

This girl wasn't just strong. She also had the brains to think of tactics that were perfect for me.

An invisible arrow, huh...? Considering my current situation, it was obvious that this was the best move for me.

Despite having played the original game and knowing about the existence of these invisible arrows, I had asked her a very average question to teach me how to use a normal bow and arrow.

But on hearing that, she had come up with the possibility of using invisible arrows. She could have just shown me the basic stance and how to shoot, even if I was down on my magic power, had she intended to have me use a regular bow and arrow.

This girl's strength was compounded.

All possible elements were intertwined to create her position as a powerful warrior.

You will surpass even me in time.

Would the day really come when I could outdo her like she said?

"But, Hiiro, there is one major problem with these invisible arrows. Let me put it this way. You would have asked me to teach you how to use a normal bow and arrow because of that problem. Now what do you think that problem is?"

"The format frame."

My master nodded in satisfaction at my immediate response.

"Masamune Kuki has three format frames. To use these invisible arrows, I need to fill at least three format frames with conductors."

I held up three fingers.

"Attribute: Water, Generate: Arrows, Operation: Shoot... Sure, I thought about using arrows made of magic, but it would have been too fatal to have to replace the conductor to cover close-to medium-range battles. That's why I thought about using a regular bow and arrow."

"Using a magic device for close combat and a regular bow and arrow for medium-range fighting?"

I nodded.

"Don't you use Unmarked Tombstone for the same reason?"

"Oh no. That's just a kindness do for people since I'm soooo strong!"

It was hard to believe how annoying she could be.

"But since you went to the trouble of suggesting this invisible arrow to me, there must be a way to solve the issue of format frames."

"Correct. But even you couldn't possibly come up with that way—"

"A bullet belt, or should I say an arrow belt?"

My master slowly widened her eyes.

"All the way around the starting point for shooting...I'd generate a belt for the invisible arrows all the way around my arm. What I'd need then are two format frames for *Attribute: Water* and *Generation: Arrows*. It wouldn't be tough to generate a non-attribute blade with the format frame I'd have left. While generating the water and the arrows, I could maintain a medium distance from the enemy and focus on defense, and I could use the non-attribute blade if they were to close in on me."

Indicating that this was step one, I held up two fingers to let her know I was continuing to step two.

"After I finished generating an arrow belt, I would replace the conductor and set *Operation: Shoot* using format frame one. I could shoot invisible arrows at

any time as long as I can maintain my magic power, and since I would have two extra format frames, I could also handle close combat. Once these preparations were in place, I could go on the offensive."

A big smile appeared on my master's face.

"Good."

She cradled my head, stroked my hair, and made it a mess.

"That's it, Hiiro! That's the way to think of these things! Oh, you are indeed my beloved disciple! I thought Lapis was a genius at battle, but so are you! A genius! You are so adorable!"

"Would you mind doing stuff like this with Lapis?"

She was all over me, hugging and squeezing like she really meant it, and I somehow managed to pop my face out of the soft female prison.

"I've also figured out the trick to the arrow disappearing."

"...Huh?"

I pushed my stunned master away and fitted the necessary conductor into the magic device.

Breathe in, breathe out.

I formed a water arrow—but it wasn't stable.

Was it because the water attribute ability value wasn't sufficient?

With its rounded and bent shaft, I couldn't imagine that the arrow could fly properly, let alone hit the target. Even creating this inferior and incomplete item took up a lot of magic power, which was sucked out of me at once, making my eyes twitch.

The console merely supplemented the imaginative calculations that took place in the brain of the person working the magic.

Once the console was fitted for *Generation: Arrow*, the kind of arrow it would be was left to the individual's imagination.

This was easy with the magic bolt since it was just a ball of light.

But an arrow was a different story.

I didn't belong to some archery club. I wasn't familiar with arrows, and it was tough to imagine how they flew. It was also difficult to match it with my imagination of the water and give it shape.

Because I couldn't come up with a precise image in my brain, I ended up producing an arrow that looked like a child had doodled it.

Perhaps because I couldn't aim well since my arm, which served as my launch pad, wasn't stable, the water arrow I shot landed in a completely unexpected direction.

Yeah, it landed.

The water arrow attached to the back of my arm looked as if it hadn't been shot, and a large tree, way off target, had a hole in it.

I saw that and sighed heavily.

"This isn't working at all. I'm going to die. I thought I was getting the hang of the arrow belt, but I couldn't even stabilize the water arrow. I can't even start to imagine that I could use it decently. I doubt if I could hit my target—"

"Just once."

My master looked at me as if she had just seen a ghost.

"I only showed you how to use this once...and you understood how to shoot invisible arrows...and you even did it your way, didn't you...?"

"Huh? Well, I'm not sure if I shot that arrow the way you did, but yeah," I said wearily, a sign of near depletion of magic power. "You actually generate the water arrow twice, don't you? First, you generate two visible water arrows piled on top of each other on the underside of the arm. You send one of them flying with *Operation: Shoot* and cancel the generation process as the water arrow gets on track. At this point, the water arrow becomes invisible, but it keeps moving forward since the magic power is in effect. When the invisible arrow lands, your opponent won't be able to see the trajectory if you generate a water arrow again. The first water arrow is a fake. You shoot it so your

opponent will think you've fired an arrow, but you're actually using the trajectory to shoot another invisible shot... Am I right?"

A massive amount of magic power...or magicells become scattered in the air, and once your arrow gets mixed in with them, it's tough to trace where it goes.

That's why your opponent won't be able to see the magic power that's coming at them.

And that, indeed, is the trick behind the invisible arrow.

"...Hee-hee! Hee-hee!!!"

I felt a shiver run up my spine.

My master's eyes were glowing as she breathed hard and stared at me.

"Fantastic... This disciple of mine is fantastic... To become stronger and stronger...knowing no bounds... A mass of raw talent is what you are...a natural...my beloved disciple... Smarter, stronger, and cuter than anyone else I've trained... Hee-hee! I'll make you even stronger...and stronger and stronger...!!!"

Then she grabbed me by the shoulder, her grip as firm as iron.

"U-um, Master, I've run out of mana for today, and I—"

"I'm not going to let you sleep tonight."

"Oh, um, it's morning now, and I have school during the day... M-Master... Why are you pulling out your sword...? You said the basics start with dry swings... H-hey, wait a sec—"

"Aaaahh...! The agony of training...!!!"

A silent cry escaped my lips, and Astemir gave me a full morning workout.

By the time I convinced my smiling Master, wielding her sword with gusto, that I would be back after school and got away from her intensive training, I was almost late for class.

Out of breath, I climbed over the school gate, which was already closed. Just when I thought I would make it in time for class—I landed on the grounds and met her eyes.

"Hiiro."

Lapis seemed to have been waiting for me. She cast down her eyes and waved a leg.

"...Come with me a minute."

She didn't look like she would take no for an answer.

"O-okay."

Her tension dragged me away, and I trailed after her.



The rule was unique to this score-driven world, and the people who could use these dining facilities were determined strictly by their scores.

Cafeteria One was for high-scorers who scored over ten thousand.

Cafeteria Two was for mid-scorers in the thousands.

And Cafeteria Three was open to everyone.

Cafeteria One was better described as a ceremonial hall than a dining room. The rich girls entering the dining room dressed up glamorously for dinner, perhaps in accordance with the dress code.

Even Cafeteria Three, the lowest-level eatery, was more of a restaurant than a diner.

There was no such thing as self-service. A waiter and chef staffed each table, and someone pulled out a chair for you if you went there for a meal.

Circular partitions surrounded the tables, and a waiter came to fill your glass when it was empty.

The cafeterias served three meals, breakfast through dinner, and the prices were reasonable.

They seemed to offer course meals in the evening, but I doubted if I'd ever use them, lacking money and table manners.

So...

"…"

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"…"
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I had followed Lapis and was now sitting at a table in a corner of Cafeteria Three.

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"…"
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"…"

We'd been sitting in silence for at least ten minutes after she shooed the waiter away, saying we only wanted to sit at a table.

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"…"
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*""* 

Huh? What was this, a pre-funeral for my upcoming death from training?

Unable to bear the heavy silence, I was about to open my mouth to speak when I heard sweet voices coming from the side.

"Say ahhh!"

"I-it's okay. I'm not comfortable with stuff like that... It's embarrassing..."

"It's okay. There's no one else around. Now say ahhh!"

"O-okay... Ahhh..."

I was all ears.

"Good?"

"Yeah, but..."

These were only voices.

But I closed my eyes, and in my mind's eye, I could clearly see a tomboy sitting there and blushing.

"Th-this is embarrassing..."

Silently, I shed a tear.

I didn't know...that the world...was so beautiful... I wanted to thank Lapis for bringing me here...and tell her about my joy... Lapis, this world we live in is so very beautiful... Can you hear it, too...? These beautiful sounds of music to the

ears...?

"Um, Hiiro, there's something I want to give you— Hey, why are you crying?!"

"Can you hear it ...? These sounds ...?"

"What are you talking about? Cut out that standing ovation when there's no music playing! Here, wipe your face! It looks like I've made you cry!"

Lapis gently pressed a handkerchief over my eyes. After carefully wiping away my tears, she pulled out a pink package and thrust it at me.

"...H-here."

It was a pink package she held out with her cheeks rosy, her mannerisms brusque.

I accepted it, wondering what was going on.

"Is this condolence money for my pre-funeral...?"

"F-fool. It's a lunch box. What else could it be? Wh-what's gotten into you these past few minutes?"

"A lunch box?"

Not fully grasping the situation, I opened the package with trepidation.

I untied the ribbon knot, and a small oval-shaped Japanese bento box appeared.

The colors were cute. It was a two-tiered lunch box held together by an elastic band that had bunny character pictures on it.

"You want me to give this to Sakura?"

"Huh? Why are you mentioning her?"

Oh, she's scary...and seriously mad... I mean, sure, it's just like the game scenario where Lapis and Sakura hate each other at the start, but doesn't she sound like she wants to kill her?

But her attitude suddenly changed. Lapis became fidgety and mumbled, "You work out with Astemir early in the morning, right...? I thought you probably wouldn't have time to eat breakfast, so...I figured I'd pack you a lunch... With

something this size, I thought it might tide you over before your classes..."

I stared intently at the bento box.

"This is for me?!"

"W-well, yeah."

"You made it?!"

"U-um, yeah... One of the elf archers is a good cook, and...I had her teach me... I think it worked out well..."

With a look of despair on my face, I looked down at my sparkling homemade lunch.

Oh no... A homemade lunch...? This isn't good... It's totally like a romantic comedy... But Lapis shouldn't have romantic feelings for me... Of that, I'm sure... I have to stress that I have a fiancée and put a little distance between us while looking into how this happened...

"I have a fiancée, you know." Which I said like a strong individual.

"Yeah, I know."

"Huh? Oh...um...hmm..." Spoken like a loser.

I opened the lunch box with trembling hands.

The first layer contained rice. The second layer consisted of an omelet, meatballs, vegetables, and asparagus wrapped in meat. It was an elaborate meal, and I couldn't help but close the lid right away.

I slowly exhaled and then covered my eyes with my hand.

This was serious stuff... It was the type of menu lineup you often saw in shoujo manga...where a princess who has barely ever cooked puts everything she's got into cooking for her beloved... A girl in love, cooking her guy's favorite dishes...

"Hiiro."

Lapis looked up at me, practically batting her eyelashes, trying to gauge my reaction.

"Are there any foods you don't like...? And I'd like to know...what you do like."

She wants to know?! I'm the one who wants to know! I'd like to know how I can deny her an answer without hurting her feelings or lying to her!!!

```
"…"
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Silence! That had to be the right answer.

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"...I can't hear you."
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Lapis moved to the seat next to me—then plopped her head on the table and peeked at me with a blush on her face.

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"Say that again."
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Answer her! But I already gave her the right answer.

I was sweating profusely as I looked sideways at the worsening situation, which continued to move forward.

With her cheeks flushed, Lapis cocked her head back and poked me in the arm.

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"...Aren't you going to eat that?"
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How?

How did it come to this?

I needed the reason... I had to figure out how this happened... Why were things worse than before when I had declared that I had a fiancée...? There had to be a reason... Something... I had to figure it out and do something, or I was in trouble...!

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"Wh-why are you suddenly bringing me lunch? We're friends, right?"
```

"No, we aren't."

Huh?!

"We're rivals."

O-okay! Fine! That's exactly what I wanted to hear!!!

"Is it strange for me to make lunch for a rival...?"

"Y-yeah. You do say take the high road, but a homemade lunch for your enemy? Doesn't that sound like it has romantic overtones?"

"R-romantic...?"

She finally realized it, huh?

Lapis's eyes widened, and her pure-white skin turned bright red.

"N-no...! It, um, isn't like that! I-I-I didn't mean it like that!!!"

"It's okay. Calm down. We're finally connecting, and my heart is finally starting to relax with relief. This lunch box isn't the kind of sweet gift you bring your lover, right? The princess of Alfheim would never fool around with a guy with a fiancée anyway."

"R-right... I...I suddenly heard that you had a fiancée, and..."

Lapis placed her clasped hands on her lap and said in a soft voice, "I started thinking about a lot of stuff...like competing with you, going out with you...and wondered if I shouldn't do things like that with you or if it might be a nuisance... Besides, I'm the one who initially pushed you to fight me and forced myself into your home... I took advantage of your kindness and started living with you, but...I haven't been able to do anything for you."

She continued speaking earnestly before me as I turned blue with guilt.

"I don't have any friends at school... You're about the only person I can really talk to...so I know I shouldn't approach a boy who's engaged to someone else, but...I'd like us to be the same way we've been before... And with all those thoughts, I made a lunch box for you... And I'm sorry..."

Seeing that Lapis was about to cry, I opened the lunch box and dug into the great-looking meal.

She looked stunned as I finished eating the whole thing and smiled at her.

"It's fantastic. You've got talent."

"Hiiro..."

"We're just rivals—nothing more, nothing less. So it doesn't matter if we continue the same way we've been to date."

"Then...!"

Lapis smiled, and I nodded.

"We continue just like before. I'll fight now and then if you wish, and we can play if you want.

I smiled at Lapis as her face lit up.

"We're good rivals after all—nothing more and nothing less than that. I'll root for you if you fall in love with a girl, and you can help me with my fiancée. Do you know why? Because we're good rivals. In this world, a guy and a girl will never get into a romantic relationship. It's because they're rivals, which is what we are—good rivals—"

"Then I'll bring you another lunch box tomorrow!"

"Huh?!"

As if to say the conversation was over, Lapis rewrapped the lunch box and took off running, waving at me with a smile.

"Same time tomorrow! Good luck, Hiiro! I'm rooting for you since we're great rivals!"

She was so cute that just for a moment, I couldn't help but gawk at her.

Returning to my senses, I went to Class A with a heavy feeling in my stomach and sat at my desk, feeling dazed.

I covered my face with my hands and whispered to Sakura, who was sitting next to me.

"Sakura...help me...before it's too late... Quick...quick. Help me...Sakura... Save me...please... I'm begging you..."

"Hmm? There, there. It's okay."

Don't pat me on the head, beaming like that...! You're supposed to be a cool character...! Don't touch a filthy thing like a guy's head with those beautiful hands...!

Ophelia, who sat to my left, snickered as she watched our exchange.

"Oh my, oh my, oh my. How foul. Ugh. That's dirt. Touching a man on such a

refreshing morning on this fine day. Sakura Tsukiori, I might have expected that from a commoner like you, but don't you have any common sense? Tee-hee-hee."

"There, there."

"L-listen to me when I speak!"

There was still no sign of harmony, and these two appeared to be at odds like a cat and a dog.

Sparks seemed to fly between them as Ophelia looked ready to bite Sakura, while Sakura ignored her completely.

It was my heartfelt wish that these two would have it out without involving me because I believed they'd bond in the end as lovely yuri girls.

I didn't want to get stuck between Ophelia and Sakura and get in their way. I had to make sure to stay away from them as much as I could.

As I made up my mind to do that, Marina walked into the classroom, and homeroom began.

"A-about group assignments for the orientation camp... I—I wondered if it might not be wise to leave it to you to sort out the groups since you don't know each other very well yet...a-and I've organized the groups."

She posted a list of groupings on the blackboard. I looked up and stood there in despair.

"Oh yay! I'm with Hiiro."

"H-huh?! I'm supposed to be in the same group as a guy?! You expect me to do things with these three?! Absolutely not! Who's in charge?! Bring them here right now!!!"

"…"

Sakura Tsukiori, Hiiro Sanjo, and Ophelia von Margeline.

Seeing the names of the three of us together as Group Five, I nodded a feeble smile on my face.

This was out of my hands.



I awakened.

"…"

Snow was fast asleep and snuggled up to me as if she had every right to be.

Everything about her was pure white—even her eyelashes—as she clung to my chest, breathing softly. I smelled an indescribably sweet scent on her. Perhaps the large bathroom in our Fraum dorm was equipped with expensive, high-quality shampoo.

She was also soft. Her arms and everything—every part of her was soft.

Two mattresses and sets of bedding were laid on the floor, a reasonable distance between them.

For the past few days, the second mattress has been empty. We go to bed separately but wake up under the same covers.

Snow said simply that she tossed and turned a lot when she slept, but this had been going on for days, and I couldn't believe it wasn't unintentional.

It was early—three-thirty AM.

It was early spring and still cold.

This soft and warm heating apparatus was certainly convenient, but I could only envision my ruin if I were to touch it.

She wasn't trying to set up a honeytrap so she could get her hands on my money, was she?

I turned away from the temptation and set out to get out from under the covers.

Was it because she'd been clinging to me like a child who couldn't sleep? I was careful not to wake her, but the sleepy-eyed elf opened her eyes a fraction.

*"…"* 

"You're in my bed again. Go back to sleep. It's still three-thirty in the morning."

"…"

With her hair down, Snow flashed me a vulnerable smile.

"Have a good day, Hiiro..."

*"…"* 

I must protect yuri. I must protect yuri girls. I must...

Overcoming the devil's temptation, I went outside and saw that Lily was cleaning up.

The diligent lady-in-waiting saw me in my training clothes, smiled, and walked toward me.

"Good morning, Mr. Sanjo."

"Oh, um, good morning. I'm glad I'm not the only one who's awake at three-thirty in the morning in this world."

She put a hand over her mouth and giggled elegantly.

"You're up at an early hour every morning, Mr. Sanjo."

"I have to work out... You're up early yourself. Are you working out in secret?" "Oh no."

With the time-honored bamboo broomstick in hand, she smiled.

"We have contractors doing the cleaning, but it is a dorm that the Eisbert family manages. I can't clean the entire building, but I feel it my duty always to keep the front door in order."

What a fantastic maid... Her respect for her employers was evident.

I wish a certain white-haired maid who had no qualms about kicking her master would follow her example, not that she didn't have many qualities herself.

"I see. Okay then. Let's both of us hustle at what we do. Go, go, me. Go, go, yuri. May all yuri girls find happiness. Well, I'll see you around."

"Mr. Sanjo. Please wait a moment."

Lily pulled a comb from her pocket and stroked my hair with it.

"You have a bit of bedhead."

"Oh, thanks."

"Have a good day."

Lily smiled and gave me a deep bow.

Thinking that she was the epitome of a servant, I ran down my usual course and reached the park.

As soon as I got there, my mighty master approached me with her Unmarked Tombstone in hand.

"You're here early! You get here this early, even when you're busy flirting with your fiancée?!"

"You know what? You seem to be the type who holds grudges... But hey, it isn't an issue if I'm here early, so can I assume that was a compliment you gave me?"

"Yo!"

"What a loud voice so early in the morning...! What a good answer...!"

I immediately started doing dry swings with my sword.

But these weren't just regular practice swings.

I fitted the sword with *Generation: Sword Blade*, generating a non-attribute sword while maintaining my magic power.

A sword blade has many elements, including length, width, hardness, blade pattern, and curvature...which I had to imagine and retain in my mind.

Once I put that image from my mind, the blade might disappear, its length might suddenly change, or other things could happen that cause confusion. If that were to occur in the middle of a battle, it would be goodbye to this life.

I'd never considered timing or the direction the tip of my sword traveled before. My fighting style relied on my brain and my ability values.

But there was a limit to what I could do with that.

An orderly pattern, along with the proper stance and maintaining my magic power, would be essential, and it would likely save my life.

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"Hngh!!!"
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My master struck me in the wrists and the backs of my knees with her Unmarked Tombstone sheath to correct my stance.

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"...That's wrong."
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She was merciless at times like this. Thanks to her, my body was black and blue all over.

She stared at me with her azure eyes and continued to give me a hell of a workout.

It might seem harsh, but it was to be expected.

I was the one who would die in real combat if my master were to have mercy like the Buddha during training, and I picked up awkward stances.

When using a lethal weapon, it's always better to be tense and serious.

I kept telling myself that if that last hit had been with a true blade and not the sheath, I would have died many times over.

The longer your fear and tension persist, the better the quality of the training. In essence, I was in a world where being hit in a serious duel meant death.

The way to go was to get used to training that was similar to a real battle. It was much better than diligently repeating dry swings.

After a while, my master pulled my shirt off and started applying ointment, looking like it was the most natural thing to do.

```
"....."

"....I've been meaning to say this..."

"Say what?"
```

"A beautiful woman applying something to the body of a half-naked guy in a

park early in the morning... Wouldn't it arouse unwanted suspicion if neighbors saw us?"

"A b-beautiful woman?! Oh, Hiiro, you are good with compliments!"

"Are you a small fry who can't understand what I'm saying?"

In essence, she was a kindhearted soul.

She applied the ointment to my bruises, looking sorry, and took her time to cover every inch of me carefully.

That was why I couldn't help feeling that there might be a suspicious air about us.

"I can do it myself."

"No! No, you can't. As your beautiful master, I will not allow that. I won't tolerate such selfishness. The answer is no!!!"

Don't boss me around like I'm some little kid, you four-hundred-twenty-year-old...

She looked happy as she smeared me with the ointment. After that, I started practicing my invisible arrow moves.

But naturally, I couldn't hit the target.

"Hmm..."

Was I lacking stability?

The water arrow was as finicky as it had been before.

After generating it, I set it in place between my index and middle fingers and thought I was aiming straight at my target...but my aim was off.

These invisible arrows are magic, converting a bullet of magic power placed on a path into an arrow.

Imagine a tubular pathway that was presented with magic.

Set along the inside of that path line, I ejected the magical arrow in *Operation: Shoot*.

The moment the projectile landed on the target, I would activate Attribute:

Water and Generate: Arrows to create a water arrow.

The magic power is affected by the traits changed by the magic device. To propel the magic bullet over a greater distance and boost its speed, I first generate its body in the form of a water arrow, then send it flying on its path.

To prepare to shoot an invisible arrow, I create the first water arrow merely as a visible mass of magic power. However, the shape of this arrow-shaped mass remains in the magic device's memory even after canceling the generation of the water arrow.

So by focusing my magic power on this process again, I can create a water arrow the moment the first mass hits the target.

That's the principle behind the invisible arrow.

Magic power is like a collection of magicells.

It exists in both the air and the body but doesn't directly affect the human body. Even if a magic bullet hit you, it wouldn't hurt or itch.

That's why you need to *generate* things, like arrows, if you want to use them as weapons.

Whether to generate first or later...

Invisibility is achieved by generating the arrow later, based on the magic flying through the air.

*"…"* 

My smiling master watched over me as I busied myself thinking.

I didn't have enough basic knowledge to imagine what I needed to imagine.

First, I should start studying the principles of the arrow flying and hitting the target. I'll make the arrows according to those principles and also spend time practicing the formation of the meridians that guide them. And in the process, my magic power should be enhanced.

Now that I knew what I would do, I said goodbye to my mentor and went back to Houjou Magic Academy.

Homeroom began as soon as I sat at my desk, and—

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"....."
"....."
"...Hmph!"
```

We were gathering in our groups for the orientation camp, and I was stuck between Sakura and the rich girl, Ophelia.

Marina told us to use the homeroom period to introduce ourselves, and then she switched to watching over us. However, the situation was so tense that it required assistance from a teacher.

"I am the daughter of the Margelines. You expect me to be all buddy-buddy with you people, and a male at that...? You have got to be kidding!!!"

"Why did you say that twice?"

"You have got to be kidding!!!"

Sheesh, she said it three times...

"Then why don't you leave the group?" Sakura said, yawning sleepily. "I don't mind as long as Hiiro's here."

"Oh my, oh my. Is this what's called a beautiful friendship between two outcasts? It's lovely that you're so tight."

She pulled a flamboyant fan out of god knows where and began gracefully fanning herself.

"Don't tell me you're actually dating a guy? If you are, then you're a fine match—a man and a commoner—"

"Yeah, we're seeing each other."

Had everyone in class been listening to us?

Murmurs arose in the class, and someone made a clanking noise as they stood up.

*""* 

Lapis was looking at me with a stunned expression.

"…"

Rei had turned around and was staring this way, not making the slightest move.

"Right, Hiiro?"

Sakura rested her head on my shoulder. She had to be grinning inwardly as she twisted her index finger around and around on my shoulder.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Cut it out, Sakura! You and I are friends, nothing more and nothing less! Aren't we?!"

"But we live together, under the same roof."

"Aaaaahh! Because we live in the same dorm. Isn't that right?!"

I stood up and roared, but I felt two people's gazes fixed on me. The rich daughter, who was hiding her mouth with her fan, had the slightest hint of a blush.

"H-hmph! That's disgusting! What kind of a brain do you have that allows you to be in a relationship with a lowly male?"

"What about you? Are you dating anyone?"

"Huh?!"

All eyes in the classroom converged on the rich girl. Aware that everyone was focused on her, she fanned herself with jerky moves.

"O-of course I am... Um...uh... A lover...? Yeah, maybe I have...about five hundred of them..."

No, girl, no! Back off!!!

"Wow, then you must really be busy at night."

"A-at night...? Y-yeah, right. I'm always troubled that my dinner table is too small for everyone...?"

Oh, girl...! No...!!!

Someone couldn't control herself, and she burst out laughing, and the whole classroom was filled with elegant laughter. Realizing she had been rather off the

mark, the rich daughter stood up, her face beet red.

"I-I'll remember this!!!"

With that parting shot, Ophelia shook off Marina's attempt to stop her and took off like the wind.

Sakura snuggled up to me and snickered in victory.

"...Sakura. Don't pick on her too much."

"But it's funny how responsive she is. I wonder if she'll come at me again... I'll crush her to bits."

"When that happens, I'll do everything I can to stop you—"

Clatter. The sound of a chair being pulled out interrupted me.

Rei came and sat in a beautiful posture in the chair that Ophelia had vacated and turned a superficial smile at Sakura.

"Sakura Tsukiori," she said, her eyes unsmiling. "I challenge you to a duel."

"...Huh?"

I sat between Sakura and Rei as they stared at each other and grinned.

*""* 

Can someone explain how the hell we got here?



The indoor training hall at Houjou Magic Academy was several times bigger than the average high school auditorium, had three levels of spectator seating, and the magicell volume could be adjusted... With the hefty sum of donations that had accumulated, it was continuously expanded and even had automatic training dolls.

Magic devices were the unified terminals in this world.

If a small conductor for communication was attached separately from the format frame, a screen could be called up before your eyes for making phone calls, sending e-mails, chatting, or even surfing the internet.

The small conductor and indoor training area can be synchronized, and on-

screen controls could be used to create floors and targets, make automatic training dolls appear, or change the terrain itself.

A large, specialized magic-laying device managed this task.

Put simply, it's like a math unit specialized for magical calculations.

This math unit was also installed at the Sanjo family villa, and an anti-demon barrier was even erected along its walls.

Although the basic principles were the same, these devices used special consoles and had complex wiring, which made them different from the standard magic devices that magic users carried on their person. The specialized magic-laying devices were mostly used to put up anti-demon barriers. If you wanted something more, you had to expect higher prices and something grander.

The hall was indoors, but a desert could be created, or it could be filled with seawater, and even gravity could be controlled, which gave you an idea of the tremendous power of the magic-laying device set up there.

Six such indoor training halls existed at Houjou Magic Academy.

There were three small ones at each dorm and three large ones on the school grounds.

With permission from a teacher and an appropriate score, you were free to use these indoor training halls.

Students were allowed to enter these halls, so when an occasional training match was being held, even I could go and watch despite my zero score.

That was why Lapis and I were queuing in the audience, watching Sakura and Rei standing at the battle line in the center.

Directly below me, Rei, clad in her uniform, spun a red spear and brought it to a stop at her side.

"Will a standard format be satisfactory?"

Seeing her glorious form, a group of girls cheered her on.

Word was spreading that the daughter of the Sanjo family had enrolled at

Houjou Magic Academy, and people were becoming more and more excited.

Perhaps due in part to her exceptionally good looks, Rei had gained a large number of fans in only the first few days at the school. The enthusiasm was so great that people were taking candid photos of her that were selling at high prices.

The older brother had a reputation as a total loser, while the younger sister was bringing this world back to its proper state... What a combination. A terrible brother and a wonderful sister.

But the wonderful sister would eventually be alone since I was going to make the brother disappear one of these days.

"Whatever. Whichever is easier for you to win."

Taking on Rei's challenge to a duel, Sakura was calm and composed. She was playing a game with her hand, tossing her long, sword-shaped magic device and letting it spin around in the air, then catching it.

The other girls stood around and watched Sakura with avid interest. Their eyes were moist as they gathered together and spoke in hushed tones.



They probably couldn't admit it, but they were obviously Sakura's fans. The main character, a natural-born flirt, had likely seduced them without realizing it.

"Hiiro, what's a standard format?" Lapis asked as she claimed the seat next to me, even though the seats around me were empty.

"Even if it's just a practice match, people can get killed in a duel if they go at each other with their magic. So they're spelling out the conditions for victory and defeat in advance."

"And this standard format is one of those conditions?"

"Right. The standard format is the style generally used for practice matches, where the first to remove the triple-layer anti-magic barriers set up with the specialized magic-laying device is the winner."

"So they have to hit each other with magic three times?"

"Yeah. Anything goes, except the conditions for victory. The duel ends when an opponent gives up or admits defeat and the surrendering party loses."

Lapis nodded, said she understood, and glanced at me.

"Okay, I understand the conditions, but...are you sure you shouldn't have stopped those two?"

*"…"* 

Actually, I debated whether to do that.

In the original game, the characters were supposed to form groups for the orientation camp with the two girls they liked the most at that point.

Sakura was the one who Ophelia and I liked the most... This wasn't only unexpected but also inconvenient.

The best course of action should have been to remove me from the picture and replace me with Lapis or Rei or to remove Ophelia and me and let Lapis and Rei take our places.

I felt nothing but despair. I wasn't in the same group as the two main heroines, and instead, I ended up with our rotten foil.

If this kept up, there might not be enough time left for Sakura to become the

heroine's favorite girl.

In the original game, this duel event should have occurred between Sakura and Lapis.

Lapis is defeated in the event, after which she becomes totally open with her hatred of losing and becomes fixated on Sakura.

Their relationship starts on a sour note, but the girls slowly begin to develop feelings for each other.

As a guy who's familiar with the original game, I never expected Rei to challenge Sakura to a duel.

But this was also an opportunity. An event occurring between Sakura and a heroine would deepen their connection and pave a glorious path for future yuri girls.

That's why I didn't stop them.

I bet my soul—Hiiro Sanjo's soul—that this fateful association would turn into a bright hope for the future!

"If I win..."

Rei made a whistling sound, spun her spear at will all the way around behind her waist, and smiled.

"...I forbid you from approaching my brother at any time in the future. Should this condition become applicable, I would like you to switch places with someone in another group for the orientation camp."

"Oh, you're Hiiro's younger sister."

Sakura played with her console and slid her fingers up and down the blade she had generated.

"But you're weak. Maybe your basic abilities are strong, but you've only trained like you were having a tea party, isn't that right? You aren't experienced in real combat. Have you come out panicking with a toy because your beloved brother might be taken away from you?"

With blinding speed, Rei thrust the tip of her spear at Sakura.

"Let me put it simply."

Her smile disappeared.

"I don't like you, so don't go near my brother. I'm his sister, and he's under my control. A girl like you could bring trouble, and if you approach him, I'll open a hole in your face so you will never again be able to wear that cocky smile on your face again."

"Hiiro."

Sakura waved to me in the audience.

"Your sister will probably end up crying. Is that okay?"

"I'll cry if you make her cry. I'll cry right away. Definitely. I'm going to cry right now."

"I don't know if I want that."

Sakura combed back her beautiful hair.

"I want you always to wear a smile."

Why did she keep trying to seduce people like that...?

Sensing someone's eyes on me, I turned to the person beside me and saw that Lapis was peeking at me suspiciously.

"Why does Sakura Tsukiori like you so much? You have a fiancée, right? Is it okay for someone to act that way with you?"

"She's unpredictable, so I'm trying to figure out when to tell her that I'm engaged. I'm thinking maybe after orientation camp."

"Huh...?! B-but you've already told Rei, haven't you...?"

"Not yet. Snow and I are pondering when."

*""* 

Lapis shifted in her seat and turned the other way.

*"…"* 

*"…"* 

"...Why did you sound surprised that I hadn't told Sakura yet?" I asked, pressing Lapis after she looked away unnaturally.

"H-hey, why do you look so disturbed...? Why are you averting your eyes...? Look at me... I won't get mad... I won't get mad at you, so tell me what you've done..."

"I...told her."

"Huh?"

Looking sorry as she turned her face away from me, Lapis mumbled, "I—I told Rei...that you have a fiancé..."

My vision became distorted, and my knees tingled.

A muffled groan escaped my throat.

"Wh-what...did my sister say...?"

"She laughed and said, 'I see.' Though her eyes weren't laughing..."

Hee-hee. Ha-ha. Ah-ha-ha! Heh-heh. Hardy har har!

"S-sorry, Hiiro... She *is* your family...and I thought you would have told her first when you got engaged... I assumed she already knew, and I asked her for all kinds of advice... I'm really sorry... Please don't cry..."

"I'm not crying."

"Y-you are crying ..."

Lapis comforted me as I sobbed while Sakura and Rei glared at each other at the center line.

"My brother has a fiancée."

Oh, she does know!

"I know that."

Why does Sakura know, too?!

I turned around with a start.

I whispered to Lapis, whose back was curved as she tried desperately to shrink.

"L-Lapis... Don't tell me you told her, too..."

"W-well, it's her fault... Sakura Tsukiori keeps trying to mess with you...and I told her she shouldn't press someone who has a fiancée...and, um, I lectured her...b-but she wasn't willing to listen..."

*"…"* 

Twitching, I saw my life flashing before my eyes, and I smiled.

"I-it's okay, don't worry about it... My risk management was poor...and I never mentioned not telling anyone... Hee-hee! Was I around six years old at the time...? Life was so much fun then...!"

"H-Hiiro! It's okay! We can still work it out—"

The sound of Rei's voice echoed through the room and interrupted what Lapis was saying.

"My brother would never get engaged without talking to me. You must have prompted him to lie to you."

"Oh, that's what I wanted to say to you. It looked like you might lose Hiiro, and you got your shallow thoughts working, huh?"

*"…"* 

Lapis turned away without a word. Sobbing, I grabbed her thin shoulders and desperately asked, "Can we really do something about this? Huh, Lapis?! Tell me if there's an insurance policy I can buy! Hey, why are you turning away from me?! Face reality! Running won't change anything!!!"

I continued to wail, and down below, Rei and Sakura were staring each other down.

"Liar."

"Who are you calling a liar?"

Aaaahh! Things were getting seriously bad!!!

The girls' intent to kill was getting stronger, and they pointed their magic devices at each other.

"Stand ready. I will defeat you on behalf of my brother."

"Sure. I'll help you straighten out your too-strong attachment to your brother."

An automatic training doll serving as the referee signaled for their duel to begin, and— "Sorry. I'm going to stop them after all."

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"Huh?! Hey, Hiiro?!"
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Having regained my composure, I shrugged off Lapis's restraint and jumped out onto the battle line between the two fighters.

Sakura and Rei pulled their triggers almost simultaneously.

Technique synchronization, magic wave interference, and calculations were complete.

Consoles were connected, and pale blue magic channels were drawn across the girls' bodies as they collided head-on at tremendous speed. And I jumped between them.

I was stabbed from the right.

I lashed out with my right leg, stopping the low thrust, and slammed it against the floor.

Then a slash from the left.

Shifting my body halfway as I drew my sword, I raised Masamune Kuki to meet the blade that flew at me from above.

I stopped both attacks and exhaled in relief.

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"Hiiro?!"
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"Hiiro!!!"

The girls seemed to have seen me standing between them just before they collided.

I wouldn't have been able to stop them if they hadn't applied brakes at the last minute. That's how sharp their attacks were.

"That's enough, both of you. Neither of you has lied about me being engaged. I have a fiancée. It isn't right for two classmates to hate each other and fight because of some misunderstanding. It won't create any goodwill for either of

you, and it's a misinterpretation in the first place."

I stared at the blade that had come a fraction of an inch from my neck.

*"…"* 

Huh? Why wasn't the anti-demon wall in place?

I finally understood what was going on then and was horrified.

Come to think of it, I was a zero, and I didn't have permission to use the indoor training hall.

Whether I stood on the battle line or not, the anti-demon wall wouldn't come up automatically since I didn't have permission to use the facilities.

That was close... I was about to die for nothing when it didn't even matter...

"I happened to tell Lapis first because it was the natural flow of our conversation. I was going to tell those two when the time was right, but they must have misunderstood when the order got reversed."

"Then it's true that you have a fiancée?"

"Y-yeah...right... I—I wouldn't lie about something like that..."

"It sounds far-fetched."

Rei looked at me suspiciously.

I made a phone call to Snow, figuring I had no choice but to give everyone the news here and now.

The white-haired maid arrived and was flustered when she saw Rei and Sakura standing devoid of expression. Then she glared at me with reproach.

"H-hey, honey..."

"Now you've done it...darling..."

Despite the unexpected situation, she seemed okay with pretending to be my fiancée.

With a tight smile, Snow linked arms with me.

"…"

"…"

It was the moment when Sakura and Rei's eyes became even colder.

Shake, shake, shake, shake.

I could feel Snow's slight trembling passing through me as I drew her shoulders closer to mine.

"Th-this is Snow, my fiancée. She's cute, isn't she?"

"I-I'm Snow... Hello. I'm cute, as you can see..."

With fake smiles plastered on our faces, Snow and I poked each other in the side with our elbows.

"Are you kidding me, you fool of a master...?! You said you'd tell Miss Rei at an appropriate time...!"

"I couldn't help it...! The situation was out of control before I knew it...!"

"Miss Rei is looking this way...! And it's with a super-frosty stare...! Come on, say something...!"

"You know there's nothing I can say...! I don't have a wide range of stuff to talk about...! The lunch Lapis brought me this morning is about all I can talk about now—"

"Then stop talking, scum...!"

"Hiiro," Rei whispered, her eyes unsmiling.

"She's a maid employed by the Sanjo family. Being the smart boy that you are, you should know that, but I'm checking just in case. She is a maid the Sanjo family employs."

Talk about pressure.

I shuddered. Although she had a faint, superficial smile, I could see a demon's sneer beneath it.

"Oh, u-um... Snow said she'd explain that..."

Snow pinched me in the side as I looked away.

"Ha-ha-ha... Don't be shy, Mr. Hiiro... You're the one who's explaining this, of

course...!"

"What the heck, Snow? Don't tickle me...!" (*Please, please, pretty please?!*) "Oh, come off it, Mr. Hiiro...!" (*Please, please, please! It's in your hands!*) "Huh. You guys get along really well," Sakura whispered with a chuckle. "But I still find it hard to believe. There's a subtle distance between the two of you."

"Huh?!"

Rei's face lit up for a fraction of a moment; then she cleared her throat.

"H-Hiiro, is it a lie? I'll at least give you a chance to be shown mercy if that's the case."

"...."

As I dripped with sweat, Sakura and Rei had formed a tag team before I realized it. They were supposed to be fighting a moment ago, but they were now standing side by side, cornering us.

Sakura smiled smugly and tossed her sheath in the air...

"Knowing Hiiro..."

...and caught it.

"...even if everything turned out to be a lie, I doubt that we'd get anything from him if I asked for proof."

"Ah. That's reasonable."

A chant rang in my head as I was quickly cornered, and I could practically see smiling cupids begin to tug on my arms.

"Let's see you kiss her," Sakura whispered to me, the edges of her mouth curved.

"You're a man and a woman, and you're engaged, so you've certainly kissed, haven't you?"

Sighing, Snow pulled on my sleeve as if she had decided to go through with this. She moved her apron out of the way, stood on her tiptoes, and gently leaned against my chest.

"Mr. Hiiro..." She looked up at me and quietly closed her eyes. "You owe me

for this..."

Aaaand this is where I die.

Sakura and Rei wouldn't believe we were engaged if I didn't kiss Snow here and now... But what about how Snow felt...? She said she'd never been in love with a girl, but she hadn't told me that she liked *me*, either... Maybe I should just come clean...

I placed my hands on her shoulders.

Still questioning what I should do, I slowly brought my lips to her face and—"Nooooooooooooooo!"

Lapis came flying at us and positioned herself between us, shouting in a loud voice that echoed through the hall.

Everyone froze in shock while Lapis gained momentum and screamed as soon as she landed on the ground.

"I—I admit it! I love you, Hiiro! Romantically! Th-that's why I don't want you two kissing in front of me!!!"

What had gotten into her? Then I realized what she was trying to do.

"Oh, Lapis... I'm sorry. I didn't know. Just because people didn't believe us, I guess that was no reason to do something unsightly like kiss in public when the love that my sweetheart and I have for each other is immortal."

"Yes, darling, you're so right."

Snow straightened a wrinkle in my uniform and slowly moved away from me.

Panicked with a bright red face, Lapis fluttered her hands.

"I—I know how Sakura and Rei feel b-because I love you, too! Of course they'd like to believe that you have no such thing as a fiancée! But, ladies, these two are definitely engaged! They were kissing in front of me just the other day!"

Sakura and Rei looked at each other.

"Hey, it isn't as if I've been looking at Hiiro with an ulterior motive."

"I've never had feelings for him beyond sibling love, either."

"Th-then there's no need to be so skeptical! Let's shut up and congratulate them! Hiiro's saying he doesn't have to be distant from us just because he's engaged! Right, Hiiro?!"

"R-right. Of course!"

Sakura and Rei, who had been watching me, nodded.

"I don't know what to make of this, but...I know Snow, and as your sibling, I don't want to meddle in your love life."

"I was planning to keep teasing you like I've been doing to date anyway."

No matter how I looked at it, these two girls did not fully believe that I had a fiancée.

Nevertheless, they left the indoor training facility together like buddies, apparently deciding to let the matter drop.

The bored crowd seemed to have left when I jumped in between the two girls.

Lapis and I stood in the middle of the deserted indoor training area, getting a load off our shoulders and looking at each other in relief.

"Lapis, you saved the day... Thanks so much."

"No problem. I sort of started it anyway, and I thought it odd that they were forcing you to kiss Snow."

"Are you sure it's okay, though? They might think you really have a thing for me."

"It won't be a problem if we go with the story that you've already dumped me, and I've given up on you, right? I don't care what those two think of me."

"...Mr. Hiiro."

Snow tugged my sleeve and pulled me over to a corner of the hall.

"I think it would be better for you to tell Miss Lapis the truth."

"Huh?! Why?!"

"Miss Lapis is probably vaguely aware that we aren't truly engaged, and Miss

Sakura and Miss Rei are likely left with suspicions. As a servant, I can't support you in your school life, and since Mr. Dumb-Dense-Dimwit can't understand how girls feel, I think it best for you to ask Miss Lapis to help you... Although, there will be risks of course."

"Mr. Dumb-Dense-Dimwit...? Are you talking about me, by any chance...? What kind of risks...?"

"The risk of Miss Lapis falling in love with you."

I laughed.

"That won't be a problem. It'll never happen."

"...."

Teary-eyed and breathing hard, I grabbed Snow's shoulders as she clammed up.

"It would never happen... Right...?"

"Do you really think Miss Lapis stopped you from kissing me to protect you?"

"Stop saying disturbing things like that! I won't allow you to keep hurting me!"

Snow gave me a pat on the shoulder and smiled.

"At this point, why don't you just seduce everyone around you? Everyone except Rei is sure to admit to their feelings."

"Hey, seriously, shut up, Snow... I'm doing a lot of thinking now... It's still okay... This is where it all starts... Where my yuri girls start..."

I was mumbling to myself when Lapis came up from behind and peeked into my face.

"S-sorry, I couldn't help hearing the two of you talk... Were you lying about being engaged...?"

"Yes, ma'am, he was. I'm sorry about my deceitful master. He's been making so many pinky promises that his pinky has a compound fracture."

"Hey, wait a sec. You can't tell her about it just like that—"

"Oh."

Lapis smiled and squeezed her hands.

"So it was a lie... I see..."

"Would you be so kind as to support this master of mine who has ranked number one as Mr. Pathetic three times in a row? Due to unavoidable circumstances, Mr. Hiiro Sanjo is unable to associate with girls."

"Oh, is that so...? Well, yeah, he was having a lot of trouble with the Sanjo family the other day... Is that why you're lying to Rei and the others...?"

"U-um, that sounds about right. Yeah."

"Well, in that case, why didn't you say so? Of course I'll support you if you're in trouble! Leave it to me!"

Lapis took my hand, her eyes sparkling.

"For starters, I would like to ask you to give Mr. Hiiro assistance during the orientation camp."

"Sure! You're in good hands with me, Hiiro!"

Forcing a smile on my face, I furtively leaned my face toward Snow.

"Didn't those hands cause a hell of a commotion a little while ago...?"

"It was her fantastic follow-up after flying over here that saved the day... Don't be a jerk. Just be gracious and have her help you..."

Lapis gently wrapped her hands around mine, brought her face close to mine, and smiled.

"I'll do my best for you, Hiiro!"

*"….."* 

Dear God...

I may be stuck here.



The ceiling looked like it was undulating.

The white sea projected on the ceiling rippled in response to the sounds of people's footsteps.

Bookshelves stacked with massive tomes flew back and forth in the air. The magic books on them were also soaring about, getting themselves sorted out.

The blueish-white phosphorescent collections of magic projected a string of sparkling letters into the air, then vanished in a cloud of dust.

In the center was a pure-white celestial sphere.

It was so huge that you couldn't help looking up at it.

The celestial sphere with a star chart on it was rotating slowly and solemnly.

The artistic white sphere was a specialized magic-laying device that controlled Houjou Magic Academy's large library, called the *Great Library*.

It was commonly known as the Silver Sphere.

You press the palm of your hand against it and channel your mana. If it recognizes you as a school student, it automatically looks for the book you wanted and brings it to you.

The day after the duel between Sakura and Rei, I tossed the various issues I faced out of my mind and came to resolve the problem with the invisible arrow. I placed my hand against the Silver Sphere.

Several other students formed a circle, their eyes closed, their hands on the Silver Sphere. I wondered if they had come looking for a book like I had.

*"…"* 

I also closed my eyes and tried to focus.

Arrows, arrows, arrows... Invisible arrows... Archery Note, The Basics of Japanese Archery, The Theories of Invisibility, Arrows Used by Elves, Alfheim: An Ancient City Shrouded in Mystery, Manifestation Technology for the Cannon, The Complete Book on the Magic Eye.

No, no, no. I'm getting more and more sidetracked.

I furrowed my brows and tried to regain my focus.

Because I was thinking of images while calling up memories in my mind, I was

getting off track.

I wanted to know how to make an arrow. I wanted to know how to make it fly straight.

This time, it worked.

A number of books came flying into my arms.

"Whoa!"

Carrying the books I caught in my arms, I decided to move to the reading room.

With my score of zero, I'm allowed to use a small private reading room, while high-scoring students are provided with a theater room where they can also view video recordings.

Of course, each private room is completely soundproof. It's equipped with desks, chairs, and beds for napping and has a librarian service, where one comes straight to your room with a single phone call.

There are sub-heroines in this Great Library that *ESCO* fans say are as different as absolute zero and absolute heat when they act hot and cold...but I ignored them since a male like me isn't supposed to mess with them.

I opened the windows and searched for an empty room in the Great Library.

Since it had more than enough private rooms for all the students, I was able to find a vacant room for low scorers.

"Thirty-two...thirty-two..."

I wandered around, looking for room number thirty-two. The female students didn't bother hiding their disgust when they saw me—a male student strolling through their facilities—and readily opened the way for me.

Now that I thought about it, I have not once seen a male on the school grounds outside the classroom.

I guess every male except me sensed the anti-male atmosphere and made themselves scarce...making me wonder if they were ninjas.

I should also do that. I wasn't supposed to fraternize with the main characters

and heroines. But it seemed too late to start worrying about that now and avoiding at this point since they'd probably respond by moving in on me.

There was no point in thinking about something that was beyond my control.

What I had to do now was to boost my abilities ahead of the upcoming orientation camp... Sakura should be okay there, but there was no guarantee that everything would go as they did in the game.

For the sake of the yuri of the future, I had to prevent the main characters from getting killed, even if it meant using myself as a shield.

I had to hurry up and learn how to use the invisible arrow so I could move when it mattered.

"Ah! Thirty-two!"

I finally found private room number thirty-two, and—

*"…"* 

Then I realized that my hands were full, and I couldn't open the door.

It was a bother, but I figured I'd have to put the books down on the floor.

I let out a sigh and was about to set them down...when an arm reached out from the side and opened the door for me.

"Come in."

I heard a calm voice and saw a translucent arm fingering the doorknob.

I looked up and met her smiling eyes.

"Hello, Hiiro Sanjo," said Julie Froma Frigience, dorm master of Caeruleum.

She was dressed in a uniform and wore a pure-white veil, which released cold air from her transparent body. Her clear eyes shot straight at me.

"...Hi."

Was there even an encounter between Hiiro and Julie in a place like this?

In *ESCO*, things proceeded from Sakura Tsukiori's perspective, so I don't know who Hiiro might have encountered and where... But it wasn't a good idea to get involved with Julie here.

I mean, I didn't want to get involved with Julie wherever I was! The stronger the characters I met, the stronger my chances of dying! I didn't want to die a dog's death in a place that had nothing to do with the main characters!

I quickly attempted to enter the private room I'd found but was blocked by an invisible hand.

"I'm sorry to catch you at a busy time, but can we talk for just a minute?"

"Sorry, I'm perfectly fine with my subscriptions—the newspaper, network marketing, and also the yuri social game where a male was suddenly thrown in."

Julie smiled beautifully.

"Oh dear. Did you start hating me before I even realized it? Are you the type who turns away all salespeople who come to your door on Sundays?"

"Oh, I'm never reluctant to view yuri girls, whether it's a Sunday or not."

"Then give me just a minute. Okay?"

"Huh?! Hey! You! Are you going to claim to be a yuri salesgirl on your own and scam me? I'll gladly wait for you and even offer you tea if you bring your partner along, so rethink your options!!!"

She ignored me and pushed me all the way into the private room.

The haze peculiar to her as a spirit species conveyed a unique feeling to me, and I was alone with an immensely beautiful girl in this cramped private room.

She rested her hand on her cheek for a while and stared at me.

"Can I call you Hii?"

"...I beg your pardon?"

She crossed her arms and unintentionally pushed her ample breasts closer together.

"I have nicknames for everyone at the dorm, right? I don't feel like calling people I'm about to get to know by their plain, ordinary names. By the way, I call Lapis *Lappy*."

"Like guppy... She has to hate it."

"No problem. I'm the type that gets turned on by a pretty girl's disapproving face."

That sounds very much like a problem, actually...

"And anyway, I'm a guy... Don't men disgust you...?"

"Well, if you put it that way, I'm a spirit. Doesn't that disgust you?"

Julie was just as pushy toward *someone she liked* as she was in the original game. She got all over me and said, "Hii, you have a rather cute face. What kind of lotion do you use?"

"I—I don't use anything in particular."

"That's a lie. Your skin is so soft and supple."

She put her hands around my face and kneaded my cheeks.

"But you know what, Hii?"

She looked at me with clear eyes.

"Bad luck is written on your face... You'll probably die soon... You poor thing."

"Huh? Seriously?"

Julie was also a fortune teller who specialized in astrology, physiognomy, and other forms of soothsaying.

In the original game, she had been right on target with her fortune-telling many times. There was an event where Hiiro was run over by a truck and died a day after she told him he'd die, and everyone around her respected her for it.

"Oh well. I guess that's no big issue."

Of course it is.

"I wanted to see you today, Hii."

"...You did?"

"I want you to make it clear to Lappy that you're moving into Fraum."

Oh okay. I got that.

Convinced, I turned my face away from her as she kept coming closer and

closer to me.

"Is Lapis saying she isn't moving into her dorm?"

"Right. She's obsessed with you."

Julie continued staring at me from up close.

"If you tell her you're going to live at Fraum, I think she'll give up and move into Caeruleum. It was written in the stars, for sure. I checked yesterday."

"Okay, okay, I get that. I'll mention it to Lapis as soon as possible. Now will you please leave right away?"

"Mmm...what a shame..."

Rustling, she stroked the inside of my thighs.

"Hey!!! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Oh sorry. I don't understand human sensations. I guess that was a spot I shouldn't have touched."

She immediately let go and smiled.

"You're very fit. Really, it's such a shame."

"...Because I'm going to die?"

"Yeah. You aren't obsessed with whether you live or die, are you? You're the type who has something that means more to them than their own life, and you'll gladly toss away your life for it. Maybe you even think it's better if you didn't exist."

She was right... How scary...!

"Of course you won't live a long life...since you don't hold your life dear. But..."

Julie wrapped her hands around my cheeks and looked straight into my eyes.

"...I don't mind people like that. It's a human privilege to give everything you've got to something more important to you than your life, right? It's kind of romantic."

Julie gently traced my cheeks with her fingers, then moved away from me.

"I'll pray that my fortune-telling is wrong once in a while. Why not overturn your fate...? You have something you're willing to risk your life to protect, don't you, Sir Knight?"

The Caeruleum dorm master left, leaving a chill in the air.

After being stunned for a while, I came to my senses and turned to the pile of books on my desk.

It seemed as if a vast array of people's intentions were focused there.

I read the books, absorbed the knowledge, and applied it as wisdom as I set out to perfect the invisible arrow.

To overturn my fate, as she put it.

Time flew by like an arrow before I knew it.

"Okay."

The sun rose, and my master nodded.

"Excellent."

The sun shined on the big tree that had been asleep in the darkness, with a hole in it as I had aimed.

*"…."* 

I looked down at my hands.

The skin was frayed and torn, stained repeatedly with reddish-black blood, and they were shaking with fatigue.

I gently made fists.

"...Master."

Astemir nodded quietly.

"You have become stronger. Much stronger than you were before."

I strained to speak.

"Uh-huh..."

I'll protect them to the end, no matter what.

My goal was to make this world a place where the protagonist and heroines would end up smiling.

```
"I'm off."
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"Okay."

I slowly proceeded to our meeting point.

By the time I got there, everyone was already present.

Sakura, Ophelia, Lapis, Rei... And they looked at me. I smiled at them all and looked up at the huge luxury liner floating on the sea.

It was about to begin...

Our orientation camp—the divide for the main characters.

## **AFTERWORD**

Hi, I'm Ryo Hazakura.

I want to thank you for picking up this work.

This is a revised version of the web version serialized on a novel submission site. I tried to write it in a way that would appeal to both first-time readers and those who have already read it. How did you like it? I hope you enjoyed it.

I was asked to write a two-page afterword of forty Japanese characters by seventeen lines, but since I'm fresh out of topics to discuss, I'll mention acknowledgments that will never run out.

M was the editor in charge of this work. Thank you, M, for taking time out of your very busy schedule to publish this work. I am utterly grateful for your suggestions, which were right on the mark, and for your support of this work through and through.

Thank you also for stopping me when I tried to tear a recent photo of myself from a book cover when I didn't have anything else, pointing out that there was a shadow in the right half of the shot. I appreciate that you're always there to stop me from getting carried away.

And hai, thank you for creating wonderful illustrations to give form to express this story. I'm truly grateful to you for taking time out of your busy schedule to draw high-quality illustrations and create designs that were in line with the image of each character.

If I were to give a score for the scene you said you wanted to illustrate—where Lapis gives Hiiro a lunch box—it would be 48,000 points. It was fantastic. I will separately send you my heart and my score stick to you by Hazakura telekinetic mail.

To MF Bunko J and everyone involved in publishing this work, I want to express my sincere thanks for all your efforts in making this happen.

To all the readers who have supported this work since it was only available as a web version, thank you for rooting for it when the concept of book publication didn't even exist.

Thanks to you, the work has come this far. I'll be happy if I can continue to watch with you how it turns out. Whether it ends well or badly, I'm glad to have been able to deliver the book to you.

To all of you who have picked up this work, again, thank you for finding this book among the many works that exist. I hope you have found it enjoyable, and I send you my sincerest gratitude.

That's it for my acknowledgments.

Until we meet again,

Ryo Hazakura

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