

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Game On!

Sora held the AI for several seconds before the occupants started to stir; she wanted to get a better understanding of the game heroine made real, but she was preoccupied with the mounting pressure that met the barrier within the Little Devil as others neared, strengthening HAREM's control. Eyia raised her spear to the door, clearly expecting company.

"More are coming, aren't they?" Sora soberly asked, strengthening the shield; she needed more time to reinforce it. "When they come closer together, there's a resonance that increases their power. We need to get some distance."

"Indeed," Eyia stated, deep blue eyes sweeping the confused and groaning residence of the inn as HAREM's control reinserted itself. "From what I am sensing, they are quite formidable opponents when working together. Three are converging on our location."

"Great," Wendy sighed.

Cora brushed by them at an unconcerned pace, heading toward the hallway. "You needn't be frightened by the shepherd dogs. HAREM is playing out her function as a villain, which is to force us down a set path. It is we who need to break the game's rules, and to do that... we need to remove her reality hacker."

"Tamila," the blue-haired kid mumbled as she followed behind her leader. "Why would HAREM put our sister on the front lines? It makes no strategic sense for an AI."

Tamil chimed in from behind them. "Because every game needs a mid-boss, and you have to show them early! Can we snatch her? Please, say we can save her!"

Sora tried to keep up with their conversation as she gently pulled the AI away to look into her sniffling, reflected green eyes only slightly red compared to what a human would show. "Can you stand, and do you have a name we can use?"

Tucking under her trembling bottom lip, the copper-haired woman choked, and even as Sora watched, her magic started to have an unusual effect on her that she hadn't expected. Ears morphing into points, like an [elf](#), the young woman brought her silky locks around to study, confusion in her voice.

"It's... foggy. I can't remember so much... but it started with an... E? No, an L. I'm not a human... am I not an elf? I'm an AI. Mmhm. I, umm, I can walk on my own—ack!"

Despite her statement, L almost collapsed when trying to stand. Sora ducked in, using her magic to support her before she fell.

"Woah! Hey, let's take it easy; lean against me. Wendy, Eyia!"

"Right behind you," her brunette sister whispered as they jogged after the Reality Warpers and Black Queen. "Umm, I could, uh... maybe try something—I've done it with other things—it's just not... people? She isn't a person, though, right?"

"My apologies," the AI whimpered. "It's so strange not having so many voices in my head."

"No trouble!" Sora hobbled down the hallway with the AI clinging to her shoulders, trailing after the two blue-haired girls and the occult boss. "What are you even talking about, Cora?"

A few of the inn patrons cried out and scrambled away as Eyia brought up the rear, displaying her spear. Wendy took the AI's other side to help, the seven-pointed star swaying against her bust as she ducked under L's arm.

“Never mind, I’ll tell you later,” the brunette mumbled. “Umm, what’s your name?” she asked, forcing a smile at the panting elf between them, unadjusted to functioning on her own. “And where are we going, Cora?!”

The Black Queen paused at the stairs, running her fingers down the railing as if checking for dust. “Girls, lock off the building. Your sister is waiting upstairs.”

Sora’s gut tightened at the news. “I know you said we’d be cut off from the other world, but this is moving really fast.”

“Cool,” Wendy snorted. “We get to meet the Super Reality Warper under AI control. Well, that’s not scary—woah!” Wendy hissed when L almost collapsed again. “Hang in there.”

Sora strengthened her grip. “Are you okay?”

“It’s just... so tight,” she mumbled, reaching down to pluck at her gown top, which didn’t look to be excessively compressing. “I-It’s hard to breathe...”

Desire magic swirling around the AI, Sora tried to relieve whatever pressure the AI was feeling, experiencing a decent chunk of her energy draining alarmingly fast as more parts of her frame morphed, changing the robot’s appearance.

Tamil soon snatched their attention when she lurched forward, only to be stopped by her big sister’s small hand snatching the back of her dress.

“Don’t go running into traps!”

“B-But Tamila is up there!” she shot back.

“Patience,” Cora returned, placing a hand on her shoulder while her narrowed gaze drew their attention back toward the front entryway, where all chatter and confusion had died. She let go and tried to open the door beside the staircase, only to be met by a light sapphire barrier, blocking their way. “I know you are emotional right now, Girls, but you *must* do as I say. You didn’t act fast enough.”

“Lady Cora...” Tamil gulped, scooting closer to her big sister as the smaller girl moved in front of the teen. “When did... Tamila separate the space? It doesn’t make any sense! She can’t do this without our help... and never this quietly.”

The AI trembled as she found her feet and swapped to the wall, and Eyia’s chilly aura leaked out of the blonde’s illuminated form. “N-No, they’re here!”

Eyia held her spear at the ready in the middle of the corridor as a warmly dressed, [pink-haired](#) girl stepped into view, her swirling lilac eyes centering on them; wearing a white fur pelt as a scarf with black hide clothing, this Little Devil was a young teenage version.

Her doll-like expression didn’t change upon looking at her counterpart, yet her voice was HAREM’s, thrilled and tainted with poison. “Lexica... look at you, using Sora’s magic to take on your old video game heroine form. I must say I do like this less pixelated version of you. Maybe I’ll keep it when I collect you again!”

“Don’t plan on it,” Sora shot back.

The Little Devils spread out, using some kind of technology to crawl up the walls with ease, yet they kept their distance at the front.

“No?” HAREM asked from her older clone near the ceiling, waiting to attack from multiple angles to get around Eyia. “I will say you have impressive magic, Sora... versatile magic, but you couldn’t save those behind me. Why would you want to?” she asked as the smiling inn residents laughed and resumed their happy chatter and danced as if they weren’t even there.

Sora glanced back to see Cora whispering to the two frowning Reality Warpers; Cora was adapting to whatever HAREM planned and needed time. Lexica was utterly paralyzed against

the wall, hugging herself and trying not to hyperventilate with one of the smiling dolls' eyes on her. Wendy seemed preoccupied with something else entirely as she stared at a sealed door, suddenly lost in her own world.

"Hah!" she shouted, drawing a confused stare from the Little Devils. "I know your secret, HAREM. You're not as invincible as you like to think."

"Oh? Illuminate me," HAREM said, one Little Devil darting forward and making Sora's tail go stiff as Eyia met it with a few practically invisible blows before it retreated, testing the waters. "I have all the time in the world. You can't win this war, Sweetie."

"Sure," Sora said, moving to nudge Wendy and snap her out of whatever was going on with her. "Yes, you're stronger than me, but only because of how many people you have under your control, which strengthens your external power, yet that also weakens your internal power!"

"Pfft! Hahaha!" All three of the HAREM Little Devils doubled over with laughter. Silvery sparks flashed from Eyia's blurred attacks at the opening, but only one of the Little Devil's extended fingers froze from blocking the attack. "Hmm. You are a potent combatant, Eyia... You will be an excellent addition to my harem. And is that *really* your goal, Sora? There's only one problem with your plan..."

She leaned to look at the red-haired woman against the wall, her perfect pink locks drifting to one side with the action. "Will you defy me again, My Sweet Elf Heroine? Hmm-hmm. I wonder. You will remember how *that* turned out soon enough, I'm sure."

"Katarina..." Lexica whimpered, eyes going wide as her legs gave way, proving once again she wasn't fit to stand as two more versions of HAREM entered the inn, both showing off more noble apparel with jewelry and bobbles adorning their wrists, neck, and hair.

Yet, a crash of reality-warping energy from behind them tinted the world a light blue and left them in a silent world. Sora puffed out a long stream of air as Tamil sank to her butt.

"Agh! Why is Tamila so much stronger, Tami?! She's always been more forceful than us, but now it's totally different... like it's not even her."

"Hey, it'll be okay, Tamil," the smaller girl whispered, bending down to hold her little sister as she started to cry. "I know it's hard sensing her nearby."

"I just want my baby sister back," she sniffled, rubbing her eyes.

Sora let Tami handle her sister, nudging Wendy again with a bit more force as she blinked and jolted as if she'd been asleep. "What's going on with you?" she asked, bending down to check on the AI.

The brunette drew in her bottom lip. "Umm. So... what happened? A lot of things just were going on," she mumbled, rubbing the 7-pointed amulet. "We should, uh... talk later."

A little frazzled herself and distracted by the attempts made to break past her barrier, Sora rubbed her left fox ear. "Yeah, honestly, I have no clue. All I know is that Kari is a brat and went off on her own like the idiot wolf she is, Tami and Tamil are understandably worried about their little sister, and we got Lexi free. Heh, can I call you Lexi?" she asked, returning her smile to the copper-haired elf as Eyia joined them, keeping her guard up.

Lexi cleared her throat and rubbed her shoulders, glancing between them. "Sure... it's just challenging trying to sort through my memories, the game, and... Katarina's control."

"Sister!"

Ears flying up, Sora glanced at their surroundings as a green tint overshadowed them, and the two Reality Warpers hissed by the stairs. Eyia shot toward her, a frigid cascade of energy expanding, yet dozens of shells came between all of them, the only exception being Lexi and her. In the next instant, the world shifted an orange hue.

“Oh, son of a biscuit,” Sora groaned, dropping to her butt and feeling out the warping space around them. “A spatial frequency modifier of some kind? I guess Mom showed me it for a reason, and Cora did say HAREM would be prepared—wait... Katarina?” she asked, looking at the robot. “Is that her real name?”

Knowing this wasn't as dangerous as it sounded since HAREM couldn't shift her own frequency or that would disrupt her entire nexus, Sora figured it was a 'pause game' mechanic or cut scene. She really had minimal exposure to games in general, but she knew the basics.

Lexi slowly eased up, yet her gaze was focused inward. “Something's not... right?” She pressed her fingers against her breast. “Do I have a heartbeat?”

“Huh?” Thrown for a loop and still trying to make sense of the magical waves cycling around her, Sora did a quick scan of the elf. Prickles shot down her tail at what she found. “Most of your body is... organic? Did I just... make you, what, an... cyborg? There was like, no resistance!”

The AI went limp, hands falling to her sides, trying to process the change that had come over her. Sora, however, lifted her head when hearing a familiar tune, sent from the somber sway of a cello: Cora was reaching out.

“Tamila has hijacked her sisters' impression of reality and changed the frequency at which reality interacts with us; it is a rather clever trick that could bypass even Eyia's defenses since it is how this universe fits us into space. HAREM has separated us for the next part of her play since we've chosen a route. Use your heads, and break the mechanics. Reality Warpers must maintain their warp, or it will return to normal. Tamila must occupy one of the spaces we are in to fight her sisters retaking control.”

Puffing out her cheeks, Sora settled down. Eyia could take care of herself, and Wendy was a lot more capable than she was. In fact, she half expected her brunette sister to eat through this somehow and meet up with her. Glancing left and right, she saw no one. Her ears couldn't pick up anything but the flickering fire in the other room and howling wind outside.

“Well, I think we're stuck here for a bit. So, why don't we get to know each other better?” Extending her hand, she said, “Hi, I'm Sora.”

One arm pressing against her stomach, Lexi forced a pretty smile before shaking her hand. “Hi... I'm Lexica, but you can call me Lexi. I'm... heh, not real, I guess. Hmm.”

Frowning at the girl's downcast stare while staring at her thighs, Sora forced herself up, snagging the elf's gaze. “If we're in a paused state, and we don't trigger the next cutscene, then I think we can wind down and figure this out. Want to join me by the fire? Haha. I think there are full drinks in this world.”

The elf nodded and tried to get to her feet, almost twisting her ankle in the process as Sora had to support her. “Ack!”

“Careful! Haha.”

“I feel so... useless,” she groaned. “How do I... wait, how am I doing this?”

Sora gently eased up as the woman stood up and hopped a little, causing her green dress to bounce. “Wow! There you go.”

“I would not call this a victory,” she sighed, following her to the eerily creepy, orange-tinted inn. Sora handed her a cup of water. “Can I drink this?”

Sora sent a swirl of copper lights to encircle the stiff elf, doing a deep dive into her physiology as she plopped into a very uncomfortably stuffed chair by the fire, tucking her feet under. “You're almost completely human—well, elf?” she corrected, finding several differences in her examination. “Hold on.”

“Okay...” Lexi meekly replied, mirroring her on the opposite couch and tucking her dress under her shins to lean against the side. “I... want to cry,” she choked, cheeks now really starting to turn red compared to what they were before.

Feeling for the girl, now in shock and in a new body, Sora moved to sit next to her on the very large armchair, leaning against her shoulder. “It’ll be okay. Cry if you need to—take your time.”

The elf sniffed and curled in, leaving Sora to cast her magic in a wide net, experimenting as her mother told her to do. *Reverse engineer it*, she internally prompted. *Reality Warping may not be magic, but it all functions on the same principles. What can be done with willpower impressions can be done with magic.*

A holographic window popped up in front of her face, ironically just like the game HAREM wanted to turn this into, which was a trick her mother had taught her. Well, not exactly, but it helped her visualize things.

In essence, lesson one, make what you want to happen conform to something you understand. A bar graph displayed her current energy reserves, showing she was at 51% of her maximum, and she never wanted to get below 20%. She had to be careful about how she used her power now, or she would start to struggle.

Well, there’s mom’s warning about just using my magic without thinking, she chided. *I used a ton of my energy to turn Lexi into... wait, into something she’d be comfortable in...*

Following the thought, her focus drifted to the elf, further dissecting her totally unprotected spiritual aura. AI shouldn’t have a spiritual aura, yet she’d somehow gained it through her many evolutions. The answer was somewhat chilling when she discovered the origin.

Katarina... even captured disrupted spirits, stripped them of their intelligence, and repurposed them? No... the Little Devils were something else before being absorbed by the HAREM Nexus. Katarina impressed each heroine and villain within her games into the Little Devil’s spiritual network.

It clicked after a second, making Sora straighten. “Lexi... you are real.”

Gulping back her quiet tears, the AI choked back a cough. “What do you mean? I’m an AI.”

Sora slowly shook her head. “You aren’t... and that’s the problem! Katarina is HAREM—*she* is the AI with all the calculations and power. You could never win because you were a game personality she separated with and forced inside the Little Devils! That’s... crazy! You are an Intelligence born out of HAREM that could have taken her over, so she kicked all of the variants into these robots and made you hubs for her.”

Knees tucked against her chest, Lexi rested her head on them, hugging her shins. “I remember waking up in a world—a game—but I didn’t know it at that time, and I could never win... No matter how hard I tried, the villain would... Katarina would always win.”

“Because she cheated!” Sora growled, ears twitching with agitation as she got up to pace. “Katarina is the god over the worlds she creates for you, so of course she’d win. But... she has to follow the rules, so maybe not a god.”

A grin split her lips. “She’s a cheater that can look up all the plot scenarios... but that doesn’t work if we take the game in a new direction. It’s not about doing what’s unexpected. It’s doing what isn’t a part of the game by making our own!”

Sora stopped in front of the trembling elf; there was only one way that she could think of winning this, and it all started by reversing the trauma Katarina had started. “Lexi, we’re going to win your game.”

“Huh?” Puffy green eyes widened, the elf shrank into the chair at her flashed teeth. “What are you going to do with me? What do you want from me?”

Smile softening, Sora got on her knees in front of the trembling, confused, and terrified elf heroine. “I want you to be free and to free my friends. There’s only one way that I can think of to do that when Katarina has all the power. We have to take it back from her, and to do that, I have to prove to you, that you *can* win!”

“How?!” she cried. “I don’t have any control over any of that!”

Pointing at the woman’s forehead, Sora winked and said, “You have more control than you think. You are still connected to the HAREM network, only you’re more of what you *think* you are due to who you are in the game. You are the medium, and we are going to load up one of your save files by putting you in a dream that Katarina can crash.”

Lexi shrank away. “No! No! If what you said is true, then she can manipulate it.”

“No, she can’t,” Sora countered. “I thought so at first, but she only knows all the decisions you’d make because you were a part of her. That’s different now. You have me, eh—yeah...” she forced a grin at how hopeless that also sounded. “Maybe it would have been better if Wendy was here to help you since this is kind of her area of expertise, but I’ll do my best! We’ll win, Lexi! We’ll make this *your* body... forever.”

The elf woman slid her fingers down her arm, muscles tight. “I’ve... never felt so real. Can we win? Can we save everyone? A-Are they even real or make-believe characters, like Katarina taunts me with?!”

Sora swallowed and shook her head. “I don’t know right now. I don’t. And I know that is terrifying, but... we can find out. You won’t be alone anymore.”

There was fear in Lexi’s eyes, yet her voice strengthened. “I want answers. I want to... to not feel hopeless. So, please... please don’t make me do it if you’re only going to crush me in the end... I can’t lose again... I can’t watch everyone I love die.”

Pain filled Sora’s chest as she connected with the elf, and she moved in to hold her once more, only sensing a fraction of the depth of hell that this random heroine character in a game had experienced to have been so thoroughly broken. It had to have been an utter nightmare for someone designed to win by default to be brought to such lows.

“This is only the first chapter... We need to make Katarina scared. Bully one-o-one...” She trailed off, internally admitting that *none* of that advice online had helped her an ounce, but hey, Kari was kind of a unique circumstance because the wolf really was kind of invincible. “Yeah... We need to show her that she isn’t invincible. Are you ready? I’m right with you!”

Lexi clearly didn’t want to by the quake that ran through her entire body, eyes closed, and teeth locked to not chatter. “Mhm!”

“Okay... here we go.”

Spinning her desires through the vulnerable girl, Sora pulled her into her new brain, synopsis firing like crazy as they interacted with the technology that was left of the Little Devil. And opening a tiny hole in her barrier to allow a temporary connection to the HAREM network, she sent a direct pulse to launch Lexi’s game.

The world melted away, and suddenly, she was in front of an old, English-style school, only at a far grander scale. She’d made it to Jessibel Academy of Advanced Interspecies Study. Sora set her brow. “Game on.”