

Chapter Twenty-Six: Freedom

The magical hum of complex magic cycled through the grove as Sora looked between the various creatures engaged in the spell that bridged two worlds together.

A few she recognized, shocked at the sight of a satyr, sphinx, devil, and unicorn, yet there were other humanoid people that had characteristics she'd never seen, such as jade barbs growing out of their back, condensing into wings, or half-elemental and human hybrids.

A golden-haired angel nearest to her had a gentle, encouraging smile on her face, and every one of them held a different type of mystical energy style that collected into the center of this web of power that wove into a perfectly stable bridge.

The diversity of beings reminded her that the Occult World Order was an amalgamation of every type of magical creature. The Black Queen may hold significant weight in the organization to be seen as its leader, but, in essence, it was a coalition rather than a solidified singular government.

Following Cora into the middle of the swirling vortex, she took one last look at the closed door, where the Moon Wizard's door had been, yet nothing was there, and looking up, she was a little surprised to see Earth far in the distance. They were on the Lunar Base, which made sense since Pynerius' powers didn't extend far beyond the realm he personally kept stable.

Wendy took her hand, making Sora smile at the reassurance because her stomach was a mess right now. Kari even looked somewhat unsure, but Abby and Eyia were totally focused on the destination.

In the gentle hum of the incredible pulse of magic, Sora set her resolve to see this through. A month ago, she was a bullied teen, and now she was transcending worlds to fight a tyrannical yandere AI for the people she cared for and start a revolution.

The world is so much bigger than I thought... but it looks so small from up here. Her gaze fell to the spatial bridge as she walked forward, the others beside her. Whatever comes, HAREM doesn't want to hurt us, which is the reason this isn't that scary, but she does want to mind control and enslave us to give us her attention for all eternity. She has to be stopped.

A slight pressure condensed against her whole being as she stepped inside, and after a bright flash of white light, her vision cleared to a cosmic wave of colors. Blue sparkles lined a path through the dimensional layers that twisted and split or crashed together and fused. She felt both small and enormous inside the reforming space as Cora took the front to guide them.

"We are in the space between," she explained. "Here, the restructuring of our understanding of reality is reformed into whatever nature or some divine arbiter desires to branch out into infinity. Impossible to fully grasp or even attempt to control by any means beyond the hands of those in the greater dimensional spheres. To try and push against the natural order is like a speck of dust attempting to make a castle out of a hurricane..."

The dark-haired woman turned a small smile toward them, drawing their attention to the rainbow road they'd stepped onto. "Please, do not stray from the marked path, or you will be lost inside the multiverse."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Wendy mumbled, shivering as a giant shadow slithered beyond the misty energies before shrinking to nothing. "I can feel something watching us. Creepy..."

Sora squeezed her hand for support, Abby keeping close to her shoulder. "You're sure HAREM went to this world specifically out of... all of these branches and threads?"

“I am positive,” Cora confirmed without a shred of doubt. Their path now curving into a downward spiral that defied any sense of gravity or what constituted what direction was up. “She controls the vast majority of her host, which gives her the strongest spiritual presence, and we can follow her breadcrumbs to her location—which is here...”

They followed the blue sparkles until they stopped in front of a giant orange sphere, morphing into other shapes as it vibrated. Cora went straight through, prompting Sora to give a nervous look at the others before taking the plunge.

A chilly, mountainous breeze swept by her as Sora entered what appeared to be a back alley of a small town, where supplies were stored in sealed, thick wooden containers. A giant stack of firewood was in a covered, thatch-roofed structure beside them.

The other five were close on her heels, heads turning to view the dimly lit area. Above them was a gray sky, clouded and showing the faint outline of a colossal moon that must have been five times the size of Earth’s. Looking beyond the two-story roofs, Sora caught sight of towering black peaks, splotted with glistening white snow that illuminated part of the mountains.

She sniffed the air, her sharp nose picking up the smell of freshly baked bread and soup, among some kind of meat and spiced potatoes. Her ears twitched, mirroring Wendy and Kari’s as the bustle of sparse discussions in a foreign, fluid language that strung together words like string pricked their minds.

Wendy forced a quiet laugh. “Uh. None of you would have magical translation abilities, right? Where are we?”

Abby shivered, floating up higher. “It’s... so cold. Brrrr. I’ll need to use magic to keep myself warm. We must be 3,000 meters above sea level.”

“Seems normal to me,” Kari muttered, narrowed eyes darting to the deep shadows of an adjacent alleyway. “No need to hide... unless you’re now puppets.”

Eyia summoned her spear, holding it against her back as she cautiously walked in a slow circle around them, keeping her focus outward. “It is only Tami and Tamil. I sense no hostile threats that wish us ill intent within a mile’s radius. Are you sure there will be an attack, Cora?”

“Sure,” Sora whispered as the pair silently exited the alley, wearing old-fashioned dresses that really set the Celtic Renaissance theme, “but we can’t be positive if HAREM hasn’t gotten to them. Why are they being so cautious?”

Cora kept her peace, evaluating the aquamarine-haired child and teen approach. However, after several seconds of staring at one another, the two girls released a relieved sigh, the middle sister jumping forward, keeping her voice down.

“Lady Cora, we didn’t know if you were one of Tamila’s traps. Hello, Sora!” the teen said, doing her best not to sound depressed by her strained expression; her totally normal, non-animal outfit spoke to how upset she was about her baby sister’s brainwashing, though. “It took you a bit to get—oh, and there she goes.”

Eyia jumped onto a nearby roof, landing so softly that it would have made Nilly proud as she crept further up to view their surroundings. Kari grunted, gave the two sisters an untrusting stare, and followed the Valkyrie up, being a *bit* more noisy. Abby was a lot more sociable, though, flying in to shake their finger with a bright chirp in her voice.

“It is a relief to see you safe, friends. I shall check the opposite direction for danger as plans are discussed.”

She zipped off, leaving Cora, Wendy, the two triplets, and her to talk.

Sora launched right into the heart of the topic. “Okay, give me the scoop in like... ten words or less. What’s the situation?”

Tamil grabbed her wrist behind her back and shifted to give her big sister the floor. The eight-year-old-looking girl sighed, arms crossed and nibbling on her lower lip.

"You can't tell me you can't sense it, Sora. Tamila is practically killing herself... Why is she doing this?"

Tamil swiftly shook her head. "No, no. Someone has to be enhancing Tamila, Tami—there's no way she can do this on her own, a-and HAREM doesn't hurt those she captures. So... someone is combining their power with Tamila's. It's the only explanation."

Completely lost, Sora broadened her senses, scanning for anything out of the ordinary, yet everything seemed ordinary. "I... don't feel anything."

"Wait, really?" Wendy asked, breaking her hand away to hug herself and shiver. "It's like... the whole place is rippling like water. There's something foreign overlaying it all."

A little perturbed that Wendy could sense something she couldn't, Sora gave the Black Queen a stare, asking her to explain. The woman's hands tightened against the handle of her cello case, dark eyes closing as she breathed a tired sigh.

"...What a clever trap. Our way back is void."

"Huh?!" Flipping around, she saw the gateway beginning to collapse as her senses fed back a collapse of normality, foreign energy, and unusual vibes cascading against her entire being, making her sway. "What... just happened?"

Eyia was beside her in an instant, looking disgruntled. "I should have expected as much with Reality Warpers... This world should not feel like Earth, and by making it appear totally normal to us, it has disrupted the stability of the wormhole. Our location has been thrown into obscurity."

"And that in English?" Sora growled, rubbing between her eyes as the nausea gradually faded. "Why did *nothing* change, but *everything* changed? I am so confused."

Cora set her case down to accept what appeared to be an amusement park access bracelets from the two Reality Warpers, Abby and Kari joining as she explained; the fairy was dizzy, but the wolf was totally unaffected.

"Put this on, and it should help. Essentially, Tamila was using her reality-warping powers to make this entire town *feel* like Earth in every way. It is our base state of normality, which is not true for this planet. She set it in place when we connected the wormhole, and now that she has collapsed the facade, the tether we used was snapped."

"Great," Kari muttered with a smirk. "So, she already knows we are here. So much for the element of surprise."

Eyia flipped her spear around to jab at the air, making another sweeping motion at seemingly nothing. "Tiny things buzz around us from the sky," she warned. "Are they bugs of this world?"

Tami shook her head as she got down on her knee to pick something up, showing them something the size of a pinhead. "Observation bots, disguised as insects. We're being watched."

"Wizardry," the blonde snarled. "I can hardly sense their presence."

"Not magic," Tamil giggled, holding up a finger, and a burst of electromagnetic fields pulsed through the area. Sora grimaced, knowing her phone inside her purse was probably dead now, but the teen looked proud of herself. "Technology! Tami and I have been in this world for the past three days getting the lay of the land. It's pretty primitive, but there are improvements. C'mon, we have reservations at an inn."

"Where did you get the cash?" Kari asked as the pair led them toward the main street.

Tami snorted and held up her fingers, a crash of reality-warping power morphing the structure of the air between her fingernails to organize into a shiny black coin. “When you aren’t worried about the Foundation snatching up your tail, then it’s easy to live as a Reality Warper.”

She flipped the coin in the air, and Tamil caused another crash of energy to transform it into a paper airplane that she snatched out of the sky and threw to Wendy with a grin.

“Catch.” When the brunette snatched it out of the air, the bulky folded paper was gone, making them both blink as the girl snickered. “Slight of hand, Reality Warper style,” she said, flipping the black coin between her fingers. “Distract you with a big boom to cause a smaller reality ripple underneath it. Hungry?”

Shockingly, the moment she mentioned food, Sora’s stomach growled, making her hands press against her belly before accepting the bracelet Cora handed her. “We... shouldn’t be since we just ate an hour or so ago. Wait, you haven’t explained the situation,” she mumbled, slapping the item on her wrist and suddenly having the fear that this was the trap.

Eyia’s sharp eyes darted everywhere, staying close to her. “Dimensional travel consumes a great deal of resources when—Sister?”

Sora came to a sudden stop. “I... can understand them?”

Enigmatic conversations turned English as they exited the alley onto a four-meter-across cobblestone road, so perfectly cut and aligned to each stone that it was almost seamless with a thin tar-like substance between the dividers. Warm lantern light provided a yellow glow across the well-lit interiors of the wooden houses, no one more than two stories tall.

In the distance, she saw how truly massive the jagged black mountains were, glittering snow making them sparkle in a magical way that demanded her attention for a moment. A second moon was rising out of its snowy valley, large and providing an alabaster radiance to light up the night as if an overcast day, and it was then she saw the foreboding castle attached to the highest rocky slope: that had to be where HAREM stayed.

“Hold up,” Wendy mumbled, left eye narrowing, “why are we getting an inn? Shouldn’t we be, I don’t know, camping until we find one of these robots?”

Tami and Tamil gave each other sober looks before pointing at a very wide building further down the empty street; the bustle of the interior cast shadows against the yellow lanterns.

“Because we already found a Little Devil,” the oldest stated. “And you won’t believe what they’re doing in this world.”

Tamil rubbed her forearm. “Yeah, and it’s about the right time, actually,” she said, nudging her head to the side to keep going. “We mentioned it in the letter we sent Lady Cora, but I’d still be on your guard.”

“Well, that would have been good to know,” Kari grumbled before walking in the opposite direction. “You guys have fun.”

Sora’s fur stood up. “Kari!” she hissed. “Where are you going? We’re supposed to keep as a team—HAREM wants to divide us.”

Flipping around to walk backward, the wolf shrugged. “The way I see it, HAREM’s too smart to outmaneuver, and I’m only here for two... maybe three things. You do your thing. I’ll do mine, and it may trip her up because we’re stupid teens.”

Wendy tilted her head, actually seemingly in agreeance. “I mean, she’s probably not wrong, Sora.”

“Oh, c’mon!” She threw up her arms. “When, in *any* show or book, is it a good idea to split up? Kari wants to be the first one to die in this horror flick. Ugh. Abby, make sure if something does happen, then you’re there to report back to us that Kari got her tail wolfnapped.”

Kari held a fist against her chest in a fake pained manner. “No trust, Foxy? It hurts.”

“Hey, if you want to be the one everyone in the audience yells at for being stupid, then be my guest.”

The wolf gave her a mocking salute. “Sounds like a plan. You don’t need my downer, sarcastic ass on your tail anyway. Hey, fairy girl, can you conjure up beef jerky?”

“No?” the little warrior questioned, glancing back at them.

“Pity. I guess I’ll have to settle for a spit-roasted fairy.”

“W-What?!”

“Hahaha. Kidding. Thanks for entrusting me with your cook, Sora. We’ll be sampling the local wildlife while I figure out what the hell I’m going to do because if I don’t know, the hell if HAREM or my brother will.”

Sora wanted to grab a stick and snap it in two as the pair split away. “What’s the plan? HAREM can’t split us up if we do it ourselves. Stupid.”

Cora stared after the wolf, a thoughtful look in her dark eyes. “In all honesty, it would be better to split up into *teams*, Sora. Of everything HAREM could predict, the level of invasive magic you possess is something she is bound to overlook as a principle of arrogance and the work of internal sabotage.”

Trying to keep up, they continued on their path, keeping their voices down in the creaky, old, and well-maintained town as the chilly mountain breeze swept by them. The woman was saying that the AI couldn’t picture herself being dethroned by her lesser, heroine personalities that she’d enslaved inside her internal network.

Eyia sucked in her cheek while observing the moving shadows behind the cloth-covered windows, and a sharp bust of frigid aura expelled from her, making all of them hug themselves due to the spiritually-biting atmosphere.

“I have neutralized the observers,” she stated, illuminated blue eyes drilling into Cora as she stopped them halfway to the inn. “Before we go further, it is best you tell us this plan you have.”

Grip tightening around her cello straps, Cora gently shook her head. “What Kari said is actually quite relevant. I have come into this without the intent of a solidified plan. HAREM is a *very* adaptable AI that can combine reason and emotion, making her one of the most deadly kinds, which humanity cannot solidly defeat by acting irrationally: she can account for that. Her weakness is within her hubris, as is with most arrogant megalomaniacs.”

Tami nodded, clearly the second brain of the operation, as the child elaborated on the Black Queen’s statement.

“Half-improvisation, half-planned. We adapt as we go by having multiple points of planning, but if that falls apart, it is best that you do not know the plan, therefore allowing you the wiggle room to each be the hidden dagger. You know HAREM’s weakness, her wants, and her method of drawing people into her cult: this moment, *right now*, is the plan,” she whispered, visually directing their gaze to the hotel.

Tamil gulped and held her hands against her breast, focus dropping to the street. “Plus, Tamila has laid so many subtle traps here that Tami and I couldn’t find them in a week, much less disarm them. HAREM knows us because Tamila knows her big sisters, but we don’t know HAREM... It’s scary.”

Eyia turned her gaze to the empty streets as the misty sky above them started to descend onto the town, thickening to dampen the large moon high in the heavens. “Hmm. If that is your reasoning, I can see it... I must fulfill a request made by Queen Mia. What do you say, Sister?”

“About splitting up?” Sora huffed. “It’s stupid. It’s always stupid. Let’s stick together for now. Okay?”

“If that is what you wish,” Eyia accepted, releasing her spear in a shimmer of light and aura dying. “We go to this inn for the reverse brain cleaning.”

Wendy snorted, chest shaking with mirth. “I love your phrases, Eyia! We’re not actually going to sleep, are we?”

Cora shook her head. “I do not plan on it since—and there it is.”

She looked up as a somber violin played through the night, adding to the chill of Eyia’s dispersing frosty aura, snowflakes now beginning to fall around them. Not soon after, a simple piano strum mixed with the melancholy song as HAREM’s voice made her ear twitch.

“Highs and lows are all I know... I don’t want to be trapped in this cycle, but I can’t make something pretty when everybody’s listening. Therapy is good to me, but I can’t seem to fix this trauma, and now I’m terrified that you’re just out there... listening,” her voice quivered with the violin as the piano stopped, resuming shortly after.

“I thought I wanted to make this, but everything around me... is cast in blue. It’s like... bad milk on your nightstand... Something awful that you can’t let go to waste. An old soul you can’t let go... Ten fingers wrapped around your throat, and you say you get what you give... but I can’t make friends with my emotions... all they do is leave me broken, and my voice fails me.”

Curious, Sora crept forward with the others, stopping outside the window to use her magic to sweep the curtain over and peek inside. In the back of the warm, open room, near the lit fireplace, were dozens of people at tables, listening to a Little Devil sing and play the piano with a brown-haired woman.

The pink-haired young woman wore a green, Renaissance dress that looked designed for nobles, her thick locks pulled back into a curly ponytail, and wearing all sorts of accessories. The intricate dress was in stark contrast to the plain clothing and colors of the other occupants.

A pained smile moved her trembling lips, and if she could cry, Sora believed she would as she continued her tortured song. “Am I talking to myself? I need someone to hold me steady when my thoughts become too heavy. Who the hell have I become? Counting the hours in between moments of lucidity... a mind that left me on the floor and shaking... scared to death and suffocating, knowing I’m running out of time.”

The gentle sway of the violin wove with a shattered spirit, yet the magic she wove into the song captivated her enthralled audience, keeping them locked inside HAREM’s iron grip. It was weak enough that it couldn’t affect them, but she heard more songs coming from other buildings, all different, and most expressing their own internal strife.

Using the back of her hand to rub her dry cheek, the puppet cleared her throat. “I apologize for that tragic song. Allow me to adjust and present something grand befitting your new Queen’s wonderful rule... From the top, Hoska...”

“Wow...” Wendy whispered as she took a brighter song that got the occupants to get to their feet and dance happily. “That was pretty intense... Is that what you meant when they were calling for help?”

Cora’s mouth was a line as her gaze darted to the two Reality Warpers.

Tamil fidgeted with her skirt. “She’s the one that slips up the most, at least that we were able to find. The Little Devils have spread across the whole country, and there are only twelve in this town. HAREM is... practically invincible at this point with how many people she’s gathered. This is what you wanted.”

Her big sister sighed. “Yes, it could be a very obvious trap, Lady Cora, and you said HAREM wants this to be a game. She wouldn’t go full force at the start. I have another target if—”

Sora shook her head, tears coming to her eyes. She sniffed as a resurgence of emotion from her past three years overwhelmed her control, making her lungs spasm. She could feel the trauma, pain, and terror in every word the split personality expressed.

“It’s real,” she mumbled, rubbing at her eyes while envisioning this robot, trapped with someone even worse than how she’d seen Kari and without a release or safe place. “And I get that maybe HAREM knows *exactly* how to manipulate me since... since she has Mary, but what I’m feeling is *not* fake... Every day, she’s practically a living zombie, unable to fight what she hates. They’re suffering, but this one hasn’t given up hope.”

Sucking in her lips, she breathed out a hot stream of air. “Fine. We’ll start here. I know what I need to do... I need to put a block between her and the network. It’s the first move... and HAREM will respond. Let’s go make friends with an AI.”

Sora took the initiative, stepping up to the door and opening it, striding right past the dancing villagers, oblivious to them in their enthralled sway. Yet, the music stopped when the doll’s rose-pink eyes fixed on her.

“No! You’re...” Vision widening with sudden panic, she tensed up before her half-smile lifted her lips, and her cadence changed in an instant. “The heroine arrives to combat the Demon Queen. And the Level 1 journey begins by confronting the villainess in her story, hmm?”

Setting her violin across her lap, a magical pulse made every villager present move into a perfect line, dancing to her strings as if puppets. Eyia kept close, ready to defend her at any moment, but Wendy seemed fairly comfortable for her first big villain meeting.

“What script will you write, Ms. Saintess? Are you going to break the spell on these people who are enjoying my rule, or would you like them to return to the muddy filth, disease, and horrendous behavior between the sexes? Hehe. Or... did you think people would change their culture at the drop of a hat without a stick to smack them into place? And if it isn’t two of my three collector pieces,” she added, tilting to the side to see Tami and Tamil.

The blue-haired middle sister stepped out from behind her, arms crossed and trying not to quiver. “What did you do to Tamila? I can feel her influence *everywhere*. What kind of reality changes did you make her do b-because if you hurt her...”

Sora took a deep breath as a tremor shook the building with a crash of angry energy that exploded from the sister, preparing her own desires as the AI monologued.

HAREM chuckled, reaching up to play with the ornate gold and emerald necklace the Little Devil wore. “Why would I harm those whom I protect? Your sister was utterly unruly when I obtained her, and now she is such an adorable little doll that has the privilege of my love, just as these former thieves, criminals, and murderers have my grace. You will join me in the end... because heroes *never* win.”

“I beg to differ,” Sora returned, stepping closer to offer a challenging grin. “You wanted me to be the heroine in this game? Fine. I will do things my way, though, and I want to learn more about the villainess!”

“Hmm?! Haha! How bold—”

The puppet’s eyes widened as Sora’s tail lit with magical fire that she slid two fingers down, collecting the spell to form a flaming, paper talisman. Slapping it on the doll’s forehead, she sent a warding and rejecting pulse through the Little Devil, severing the connection to leave the original occupant isolated from her host.

An explosion of purifying energy solidified into the seal, the flames collecting inside her pink hair and eyes, turning them copper and lime-green like Sora's, giving her a glimpse into the inner world that filled the HAREM Nexus: the poor, violin-clutching heroine knelt, acting as a throne to support her tyrannical queen, tears in her eyes.

The doll fell to the side, one of her dress straps slipping out of place on her hard collapse to the wooden floor, and all the humans in the inn fainted. Suddenly quivering, the doll's panic rising as she clutched at her chest; feeling the lack of mental clarity and the fragile chains holding her reality together snapped.

"Wha-What did you just—I... I can't feel t-them—I can't feel the others... I can't feel my heartbeat—I'm hollow..."

"Shhh!" Sora knelt down as the Little Devil scrambled away, a blade cutting through her hanging sleeve, ripping the whole piece, metal ring on her bicep, and all as it went for her throat, yet Eyia's blade stopped it long before it reached her. "Hey! Hey! It's okay," she soothed.

"What... am I with-without them?"

Looking into her shaky eyes, Sora knelt in front of her, showing an encouraging smile. "You're free. You can have your own name now and make your own music. You can be your own woman."

The Little Devil choked, blade arm reverting to touch her cheek as a real tear exited her watery eyes, her sky collapsing around her. "I... can cry? I can cry..."

Lump forming in her throat, Sora scooted closer to hug the doll, feeling unmuddled, real emotion from her, unlike before, when it was tainted by tens of thousands of minor personality impulses. "This is you," she repeated. "This is who you *really* are, and you're okay—you're going to be okay."

The AI's hands closed around her as she [wept](#). Somehow, the robot's body felt warm, as if flesh and blood—like she was a real person. No, she was a real person. And now she was free to make her own decisions.

Wendy smiled beside her, kneeling down. "So, we'll defeat the evil AI with the power of hugs?"

"If that's what it takes... I can't think of anything stronger," Sora whispered, holding the surprisingly vulnerable split AI in her arms. "I think she deserves plenty of hugs after what she went through... but she's strong. She'll be okay."