


Koushi
Tachibana
Illustration by
Tsunako

KING'S PROPOSAL

◀ The Golden Maiden ▶



“You’re the
only one for
me, An.
Now and
forever.”

4

King’s Proposal
The Golden Maiden



“Maybe you want to take Sue to the bathroom?”

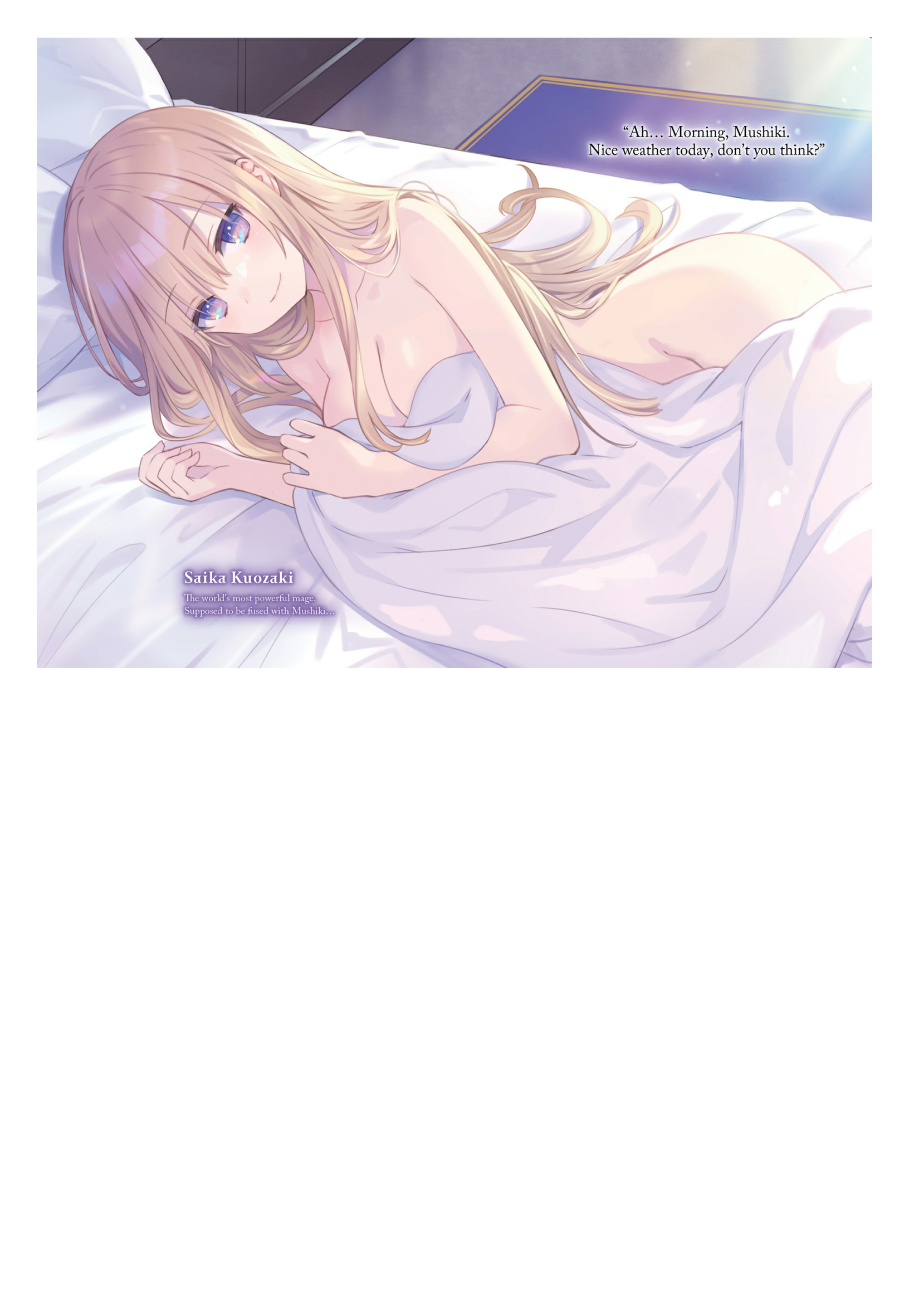
“I told you, she’s not my kid!”

Surya

A mysterious young girl who claims that Anviet is her father.

Anviet Svarner

S-class mage and instructor at the Garden. Rumored to have an illegitimate daughter.

A full-page illustration of a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes, lying in bed. She is wearing a light blue, strapless nightgown and is partially covered by a white sheet. She is looking towards the viewer with a gentle smile. The background is a soft, warm glow, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. In the top right corner, there is a speech bubble containing text. In the bottom left corner, there is a text box containing her name and a brief description.

“Ah... Morning, Mushiki.
Nice weather today, don't you think?”

Saika Kuozaki

The world's most powerful mage.
Supposed to be fused with Mushiki...

“You’re
saying
our clothes
are *strange*?”

Kuroe Karasuma

Saika’s attendant. Carefully
guarding a major secret.

“...What’s
wrong?
Is there
something
on my
face?”

“Of course
they’re
the same.
This is our
uniform.”

Ruri Fuyajoh

A mage with an obsessive
fondness for her brother,
Mushiki, and Saika.



“Sue will save you, Mama.”

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KING'S PROPOSAL

Volume 4

◁ The Golden Maiden ▷

Koushi Tachibana

Illustration by Tsunako


NEW YORK

Copyright



Vol. 4

Koushi Tachibana

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by Tsunako

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

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KING'S PROPOSAL

The Golden Maiden

In health and in sickness.

In times of joy and in times of grief.

In wealth and in poverty.

You always want to be together, right? Mama, Papa?

So Sue's gonna do her best.

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Yen Newsletter

Prologue

➤ Is This a Dream? ➤

“Ah... Morning, Mushiki. Nice weather today, don’t you think?”

If...

And only if...

There was someone you found yourself deeply and uncontrollably attracted to...

If just thinking about them was enough to make your heart all but leap from your chest, make the world shine in the most exquisite of colors. *If* there was someone like that...

A simple smile might be enough to melt your brain and send it oozing out through your ears. The softest touch of a fingertip might have you trembling with ecstasy and liquefy in sheer bliss. You would let out the most joyful sigh, feeling like all your time in the world had been building up to this very moment.

No, this isn’t about illicit drugs. It isn’t.

Anyway, back to the main topic. This is where it gets real.

Let’s say you had a crush on someone who made you feel that way...

What on earth would you do if you woke up one morning to find them lying next to you in bed?

And as naked as the day they first came into this world at that?

“...”

That was the situation Mushiki Kuga found himself in.

He could only lie there, completely paralyzed, eyes opened as wide as they could go.

A deluge of information and raw data was coursing through his retinas, his

eardrums, his nasal cavities.

Her sun-colored hair positively glistened in the morning light streaming through the window.

Hers was a beauty that could be described as none other than *divine*; her vivid, iridescent eyes looked like they had been carved by the gods themselves.

Then came the smooth ridge extending from just below her neck to— “Ah...”

Right. There could be no doubt about it. Not one little bit.

This was the woman he had long yearned for and long sought after—whom in a normal world, he would never, *ever*, have been able to reach.

Saika Kuozaki—the strongest mage in the world.

That morning, Mushiki was at last reunited with her.

Chapter 1

◀ Were You Waiting for Sue? ▶

There are moments when one's awareness and powers of concentration are razor-sharp.

For instance, when you are totally absorbed in something you love.

Or when you are pushing yourself toward a distant goal.

Or...when your life is exposed to mortal danger.

“ ... ”

In the midst of that moment of tension, each second stretching out to impossible lengths, Mushiki Kuga clasped his hands tightly around the hilt of his transparent sword as his breathing went ragged.

The sheer level of danger one faced when going up against an opponent wielding a weapon was beyond description. It would be impossible for anyone to truly understand what he was going through without experiencing it for themselves.

That went double when facing off against one of the highest-ranking mages at Void's Garden.

“ ... ”

Mushiki and his opponent were in the training grounds located in the middle of the Garden's western precinct.

Across from him was a girl wearing the most determined expression, her hair bundled in pigtails.

Her name was Ruri Fuyajoh, and she was Mushiki's younger sister and classmate. And a Knight of the Garden to boot.

Atop her head hovered a two-part world crest reminiscent of a demon's horned visage, and in her hands, she gripped a long-handled weapon with a blade like roiling flame.

Her world crest, along with her second substantiation. When a modern-day mage activated both of these, it meant that they were ready to wage war.

"Hmph..."

The next moment, Ruri burst into action. Though her speed was slower than usual, her single-minded enthusiasm was without fault.

Mushiki tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword and reflected on the advice he had received earlier as he readied his response.

"Haaah!"

With an ear-piercing cry, he swung his transparent blade, the Hollow Edge.

This was *his* second substantiation, capable of nullifying all others. When his transparent sword collided with Ruri's burning *naginata*, her Luminous Blade, it would erase its very existence.

And yet it didn't.

"Huh...?" Ruri gasped in surprise.

Since she was aware of his abilities, she had undoubtedly gone into this fight assuming that her second substantiation would be quickly obliterated.

But Mushiki had refrained from activating the Hollow Edge's trademark technique, simply using his sword to physically repel her *naginata*.

Ruri was clearly taken aback as the two of them exchanged a second, then a third strike in quick succession.

"I see... So that's your game plan." She broke into a fearless grin, resetting her fighting stance and deftly parrying Mushiki's attacks.

But he had seen that coming, too.

"Aaauuuggghhh!"

The next instant, Mushiki activated the Hollow Edge and expunged Ruri's Luminous Blade.

“Tch...!”

Ruri broke into a frown. It wasn't that she hadn't expected this move, but rather that she had failed to anticipate when exactly he would use it. Though slight, there was a noticeable shift in her battle stance.

“Now...!”

An opening. Without hesitation, Mushiki swung his blade at Ruri's undefended shoulder.

“Hmph...!”

But Ruri Fuyajoh was a knight. Despite being caught off guard, she leaped into the air to dodge his oncoming strike with nothing more than exquisite footwork. Then with equally fluid movements, she reactivated her second substantiation.

“Way to go. But this is the end.”

“...!”

Mushiki jumped backward, raised the Hollow Edge in front of him, and reinforced his defenses.

And yet—

“What...?!”

The next moment, Ruri let out a frenzied cry.

There was a simple reason for that. The moment their weapons made contact, Mushiki deactivated his second substantiation and extinguished his Hollow Edge.

“Ngh...!”

The Luminous Blade grazed his arm; if not for his sturdy Garden uniform, it might well have drawn blood.

But in exchange for taking that light hit, he gained his greatest chance yet.

Focusing, he activated his second substantiation once again and launched into the decisive blow—

“Ow...”

Just then, a soft popping sound reverberated all around, and Mushiki fell to his knees.

Somehow, Ruri had struck even faster than he could reactivate his abilities.

“That does it. Ruri wins,” a calm voice announced from nearby.

Turning toward it, Mushiki laid eyes on a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl holding her right hand up in the air—Kuroe Karasuma, acting as referee.

Mushiki rubbed the back of his head and picked himself up, pounding his fist on the ground in frustration.

“Ugh... I was going to ask Saika for a pat on the head if I won...!”

“What *are* you talking about?” Kuroe asked, her eyes slightly narrowed.

Mushiki shot his head up. “Sorry. That was just how I got myself energized before the match.”

“Is that so?” Kuroe asked, evidently not amused.

Ruri let out a deep sigh. “You’ve got a ways to go, Mushiki. I was picturing Madam Witch giving me a lap pillow and cleaning my ears if I won.”

“What...?! No wonder you got promoted to knight!”

“Being a knight has nothing to do with it,” Kuroe interrupted. “Don’t go giving yourself any weird ideas, you two. Besides, Ruri hasn’t made any particular promises with Lady Saika. Have you now?”

“O-of course not! What are you even talking about?!” Mushiki stammered.

“I—I would never presume to...!” Ruri exclaimed in panic.

The look on Kuroe’s face all but declared, *I can’t believe this*.

“...Very well,” she said at last in an effort to change the topic. “In any case, I have no objections to your other suggestion, Mushiki.”

“Right.” He nodded. “I already knew this, but Ruri really is amazing. I couldn’t keep up with her.”

“...Don’t blame yourself for how it ended, Mushiki,” Ruri answered after

taking a moment to catch her breath. “You took out my substantiation, baited me into attacking you, and temporarily erased your own substantiation, too... Did I get that right? Yes, yes, I see... Simply by increasing your move pool, you’ve made it much harder to guess what you’re going to do next. This was your best show yet. If you had managed to reactivate your substantiation sooner, the outcome might have been completely different.”

“R-really?”

“Indeed.”

This time, it was Kuroe’s turn to answer. She was as expressionless as ever, but Mushiki sensed from her tone that she was secretly pleased with his performance.

“The ability to annul opposing substantiations makes you a formidable threat to most mages. No one wants to fall victim to a technique like that. If they can’t gauge when you’re going to put it into action, they’ll have to remain vigilant throughout, which will inevitably prompt them to leave themselves open at times.” Kuroe paused there, raising a hand in front of her. “Expanding your repertoire of moves is crucial in combat situations. Even if your opponent is aware of all your strategies, you won’t necessarily be at a disadvantage so long as you have the flexibility to respond with an optimal move for any given development. Think of it like rock-paper-scissors. No matter how powerful a *rock* move you might be keeping up your sleeve, it’s easily countered if your opponent uses *paper*,” she explained, making the matching hand gestures. “But if you have two moves available to pick from, *paper* or *scissors*, you can employ a much higher level of strategy.”

“I—I see...”

“In real-life battle, you have much more than just three moves at your disposal. You can make use of practically any kind of tactic—fox, firearms, village headman. Even frog, snake, or slug,” Kuroe said, listing the moves in two other old-fashioned games similar to rock-paper-scissors. She paused there for a moment before continuing. “First and foremost, it’s essential to master each and every one of your potential plays. Right now, we might say that your *scissors* move takes you too long to invoke.”

“...I guess I don’t have much of an excuse.” Mushiki averted his gaze.

Ruri, on the other hand, broke into a frown. “...You sound like a master schooling their disciple, Kuroe. Have you been giving him private lessons or something?”

“No, not at all. I’m merely conveying Lady Saika’s wisdom secondhand,” Kuroe answered nonchalantly.

“Hmm...,” Ruri grumbled, scratching her cheek.

From her expression, it was clear that she still harbored doubts about Kuroe’s true identity. Nevertheless, she had accepted that what Kuroe had just explained *was* something Madam Witch might teach...

“Fine. Anyway, you’d better work on improving yourself, Mushiki. I don’t want you holding me back,” Ruri declared before furrowing her brows as if suddenly remembering something. “Right, speaking of which. Madam Witch’s consciousness is basically dormant inside you, correct? So what do you do when you need to communicate with her?”

“Eh?” Mushiki’s eyes widened in response to this unexpected question.

“...? Why do you look so surprised just now?”

“S-sorry. I was just thinking, and you caught me off guard.”

“If you have a message for Lady Saika, I’ll handle it,” Kuroe said, taking over. “Isn’t that right, Mushiki?”

“Ah... Yeah.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Ruri said at last.

“...”

Kuroe fixed Mushiki with a probing stare, prompting him to break out into a cold sweat as he recalled their earlier exchange.



“Her skin’s luxurious texture.”

“Her gestures, so eloquent and refined.”

“The way she maintains perfect posture when she takes a seat.”

“Her handwriting, so neat and tidy.”

“The way she says *Achoo!* when she sneezes.”

“What the heck? That’s super cute...!”

“Heh. With this Magic Card, Madam Witch’s skill on the field rises to a full 4,500 points!”

“Ugh... Impressive, Ruri. But I’m just warming up... Time for a reverse card! The look of surprise on her face when she drinks a mug of black coffee thinking it has sugar in it!”

“What?! Madam Witch is supposed to be a tea person! How did you get your hands on such a rare card?!”

“...What are you two doing?”

Mushiki and Ruri were having a heated discussion in the headmistress’s office in the Garden’s central school building when Kuroe appeared, giving them both a humorless stare.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“We’re playing a Madam Witch card game.”

Clutching their handmade cards, the two of them responded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Kuroe arched a brow. “...And what exactly is this mysterious game you’re playing?”

“Heh. Do you want me to teach you how to play?” Ruri asked.

“No. I’m fine,” Kuroe answered flatly.

“Did *he* beat me to the punch?” Ruri pouted.

“...Don’t tell me *this* is what you wanted to discuss?”

Ruri’s shoulders trembled at the question. Then she caught herself, as if remembering something important. “Right... I’ll let you have this round, Mushiki. Why don’t we sit over there, Kuroe?” she asked, tidying up the cards on the table.

Taking a deep breath to regain her composure, she then looked at Mushiki and Kuroe once more. “I’m sure you know why I wanted to see you both. It’s about *that*. I want you to explain it all to me one more time.”

“...”

Mushiki and Kuroe exchanged furtive glances.

That being said, neither was particularly surprised. They had, to a certain extent, even anticipated something like this.

“...Sure, we’ll go over it again,” Mushiki answered. “Besides, you’ve got a right to know. But you have to keep it to yourself, and not just for my sake. This could have extremely serious ramifications for the Garden as a whole. You’ve got to promise me you won’t tell anyone, no matter what.”

“...Of course, I understand. My lips are sealed,” Ruri answered, nodding solemnly.

In response, Mushiki raised a hand to his chest.

“My body is currently in a state of *fusion* with Saika’s.”

Then, quietly but clearly, he told her the truth.

Yes. He gave voice to the secret he carried with him—that Saika Kuozaki, the Witch of Resplendent Color, headmistress of Void’s Garden and the most powerful mage in the whole world, had merged with his own body.

“Right now, mine is the dominant side, but when certain conditions are met, Saika’s qualities take over. To anyone who sees this, it might look like I’m actually transforming into Saika.”

“...”

Upon learning this shocking truth, Ruri betrayed no hint of astonishment or panic. All she did was furrow her brow.

But that was to be expected. After all, she had already seen him go through that transformation with her own eyes.

“Merged...? You’re saying Madam Witch used a fusion technique? Sure, that might explain what I saw... But *why*?” Ruri stroked her chin, her expression

stern. “Fusion techniques are incredibly dangerous, especially when they involve people. If the participants’ consciousnesses clash, the whole process can fall apart. Even with her skill, I can’t imagine Madam Witch using something like that lightly...”

“Well...,” Mushiki began. “She—”

“Madam Witch was facing a unique crisis,” Kuroe interrupted from the seat beside him.

“A crisis?”

“Yes. Do you remember when I reported that Madam Witch had been attacked?”

“Yes, of course. You said it back at the Garden’s regular meeting... Wait. Don’t tell me—”

“As you’ve no doubt surmised, both Lady Saika and Mushiki, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, were critically injured. Lady Saika willingly used the fusion technique in order to save their lives, despite knowing the risks involved.”

“...!”

Ruri widened her eyes as she leaned forward over the table.

“A-are you okay?!” Mushiki cried out, caught off guard by the sudden movement.

“Ah, yeah...” Ruri heaved a sigh. “I shouldn’t be surprised; Madam Witch has a superb mastery of advanced techniques... So does this mean you’ve been fused into a single person? Oh my God. Is this seriously *real*? It’s like someone specifically set out to make new material to feed my wildest fantasies... Like adding one to infinity...,” Ruri murmured under her breath, until at last, her eyebrows twitched. “So where’s Madam Witch’s consciousness? Is it lying dormant, like her physical body is? I mean, it would be difficult to control yourself properly if both consciousnesses were active at the same time...”

“Um. Well...”

“Yes. Lady Saika’s consciousness is lying dormant inside him. Isn’t that right,

Mushiki?” Kuroe answered on Mushiki’s behalf, her stare all but compelling him to nod in agreement.

“R-right. Yeah... I guess.”

“Which means that when Madam Witch comes out, Mushiki’s consciousness goes to sleep?” Ruri asked.

“...”

“...? What? Did I say something funny?”

“N-no, not at all.”

Just as Mushiki was racking his brain about how best to respond—

“Precisely,” Kuroe interrupted again.

Ruri seemed to have no difficulty accepting this response. “So...when can the two of them be separated?” she asked worriedly. “Surely they can’t stay like that forever. *Can* they?”

“Of course not.” Kuroe shook her head. “However, it takes considerable preparation to separate two entities who have been fused in this way. In the meantime, we would greatly appreciate your cooperation and assistance.”

“Of course! Anything for Madam Witch...! And Mushiki... just tell me what you need,” she declared, giving her chest a strong thump.

“Thank you,” Kuroe answered. “I do have one favor to ask you.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“We need your help training Mushiki.”

Ruri stared back, wide-eyed. “Training him...? *Me*...?”

“Yes. As you know, he’s very much a novice in his capacity as a mage. However, if something happened to him, it would affect Lady Saika in equal measure. We can’t allow that to transpire.”

“...No, we can’t,” Ruri repeated, nodding sternly.

“Therefore, it is in the best interests of the Garden that we raise his proficiency as quickly as possible,” Kuroe continued. “Not only are you, Ruri, the

only one strong enough to take on that task, but you're also the only other person who understands the situation we find ourselves in."

"But I..." Ruri wore a troubled look. While she understood the circumstances, she had gone through a great deal of effort to keep Mushiki out of harm's way and no doubt continued to have misgivings about dragging him further into mage society.

"Ruri..."

"Please. I understand that you care about Mushiki a great, great, *great* deal and that you don't want to see him come to harm, but this—"

"H-huh?! Who said anything like that?!" Ruri cried out, her face turning bright red.

(The fact that she didn't deny the charge certainly didn't go unnoticed.)

She stayed that way for a long time before eventually letting out a sigh of resignation. "...All right. I mean, I don't want to see anything bad happen to Madam Witch."

"...! Thank you, Ruri!" Mushiki rejoiced.

She looked away in embarrassment.

"Thank you for your understanding... Do you mind if we get started right away?"

"Huh?"

"I've already obtained permission to use the training grounds," Kuroe explained matter-of-factly.

"...You came here prepared, didn't you?" Ruri observed in a nervous sweat. "How did you know I would agree to do it?"

"I just thought it would be prudent."

Ruri continued to wear a suspicious frown, but she was ready to concede. "...Fine, whatever. I'll do it. I can take my frustration out on Mushiki."

"By all means. However, I will need a few minutes to prepare him. Would you mind going on ahead?"

“Yeah, yeah. See you soon,” Ruri said with a wave as she stepped out of the headmistress’s office.

Maybe half a minute later, once Ruri’s footsteps were completely out of earshot, Mushiki turned to Kuroe.

“...Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Sure about what?”

“About who we said was in charge while I’m in my Saika form. A-and about you, too.”

Kuroe exhaled softly. “It’s fine. Telling the whole truth isn’t always the best course of action.”

Now that Ruri had left, Kuroe’s tone of voice had undergone a noticeable change.

No, not just her voice. Even her facial expressions and physical mannerisms were completely different from how they had been a moment ago.

But that was only natural. After all, Kuroe Karasuma was merely the name of the artificial body in which Saika Kuozaki’s soul now resided.

“But—”

“I’m not saying I don’t trust her. But take a moment to think it over. How do you think she would feel if the *me* she’s been interacting with these past few months was actually her own brother?”

“...Ah...”

Mushiki made a sour face.

...Right, he could imagine how uncomfortable that would make everyone.

For the person Ruri respected and admired most to be replaced by Mushiki on the inside—in other words, knowing that her brother had seen everything she had said and done in front of Saika... Just thinking about it was enough to fill him with unending shame.

“On top of that, how would you explain the fact that you’ve been sneaking into the girls’ changing room and using the public baths in my body all this

time?”

“Ugh...”

Mushiki clammed up. The changing room stuff had all been out of his control, and he had only ever bathed with Kuroe’s assistance in order to protect Saika’s dignity... But that probably wouldn’t mean much if the truth reached Ruri’s ears.

“...I see. Thanks for your concern,” he said at last.

“Don’t mention it,” Kuroe said.

She turned her gaze to Mushiki’s cards on the table, which he hadn’t yet put away, then asked: “...So what’s so fun about this game of yours?”

“Ah. Are you interested?” Mushiki asked, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

Kuroe flashed him a forced smile. “...Later perhaps. Ruri is waiting.”



“Did we not agree to keep the matter of Lady Saika’s consciousness a secret from Ruri?” Kuroe demanded in a small voice, cornering Mushiki on the edge of the training grounds.

“...S-sorry. It was a slip of the tongue...,” he answered, shrinking back in fear.

“Hey. What are you two whispering about?” Ruri called out in irritation from a short distance away.

They both knew it wouldn’t look good if their private conversation dragged on too long, so Mushiki and Kuroe made their way back to her.

“Apologies. I had some advice for Mushiki in light of your sparring contest just now.”

“Hmm...? So if you’re keeping it a secret from me, that must mean you’re planning on doing something fancy next time, huh? It better be good,” Ruri joked with a swing of her Luminous Blade.

Mushiki broke out into a cold sweat. “T-take it easy on me, please...”

“That won’t do. You have to be more assertive, Mushiki,” Kuroe interjected. “The purpose of practical combat training is not only to master battle techniques, but also to get used to facing opponents who mean to do you real

harm. If you allow yourself to feel intimidated before you even begin, you won't be capable of winning against anyone... Clara Tokishima is no exception in that regard."

"..."

"...Right."

The second that name came up, both Mushiki's and Ruri's expressions turned stern.

Clara Tokishima—formerly from the mage-training institute Shadow Tower, now fused with the mythic-class annihilation factor known as the Ouroboros.

She was, in a very real sense, the archenemy of all mankind, and she had a history with Mushiki and company.

"Clara Tokishima has acquired four pieces of the Ouroboros, which means that her power is steadily increasing. You absolutely cannot afford to let down your guard around her."

"What was that?" Ruri asked, one eyebrow raised. "Four...? Hold on a second. Why are so many seals coming undone all at once? Shouldn't security at each of the facilities have been beefed up?"

"Yes. But there was an incident where the outer shell of several facilities sustained major damage recently... It primarily affected those located underwater and along the coast."

"—!"

Both Mushiki and Ruri were taken aback by this.

Of course, they both knew exactly what Kuroe was referring to.

"No way... Are you talking about the Leviathan? I mean, I do remember hearing that Clara was involved with that, but—"

"Indeed. I had my doubts as to why another Mythologia had been revived so soon, but it has since become quite clear that Clara Tokishima took advantage of the confusion to send her followers to raid several sealing facilities. I suspect that was her true goal from the very beginning."

“...Damn her,” Ruri growled, clenching her teeth in frustration.

Mushiki had little difficulty understanding how she must have felt.

Just a short time earlier, the three of them had only narrowly defeated the revived Leviathan in a life-or-death battle at the mage-training institute Hollow Ark.

And now they were finding out that that battle had all been a distraction from Clara’s true objective? Mushiki felt like venting his anger, too.

But that display of outrage didn’t suit Ruri.

Mushiki shook his head. “Still, by defeating the Leviathan, we *did* lift the curse on the Fuyajoh clan. So it definitely wasn’t pointless.”

“Mushiki...” Ruri sighed weakly.

Of course, not even he believed that meant all was well. There was no denying that the threat Clara posed had risen exponentially.

But it was better to take pride in what you had gained than to lament that which you had lost. That was how a mage ought to conduct themselves—or so he suspected Saika might say.

Ruri must have sensed his feelings. She lowered her eyes and gave him a brief nod. “...Right. What matters most is winning with the hand we’ve been dealt.”

“Precisely.” Kuroe nodded in agreement.

“In other words, even if Madam Witch is dressed in a school uniform and you only have a plain clothes card on hand, you can still find synergy depending on how you combine different elements.”

“Exac— What?” Kuroe craned her head to one side.

Mushiki, however, responded with a forceful nod. “I see... So that’s how it is.”

“What makes you so sure you follow?” Kuroe sighed wearily. “Anyway, for now, we have training to do. Once more, let’s—”

That was when it happened.

“Hey! You kids! Whaddaya doin’ over there?” a gruff voice called out from a short distance away.

“Ah...”

The three of them turned around to find a tall man approaching, his arms crossed. When did *he* show up?

The man was in his midtwenties and had tanned skin, and he wore his hair in a braid. His features were well defined, though they seemed to come across as somewhat stern.

He was dressed in a well-tailored shirt, slacks, and a vest, and his hands and neck were adorned with gold jewelry. One misstep and that outfit would have come across as tacky, but strangely, it didn't look half bad, thanks to his overall appearance and demeanor.

Anviet Svarner—a Knight of the Garden, just like Ruri, and a member of the teaching staff.

“Nice to see you, Knight Anviet.”

It was Kuroe who answered him, maintaining perfect composure as she lowered her eyes and offered a respectful bow.

“Knight Fuyajoh is currently conducting a special training session for our new student Mushiki Kuga,” she added.

“*Fuyajoh* is trainin' *Kuga*?” Anviet repeated, furrowing his brow as he walked right up to Mushiki. “...You know where the medical buildin' is, right? You'd better not waste any time if you need 'em to reattach a limb or somethin',” he added under his breath.

The look in his eyes remained as harsh as ever, and his manner of speech was equally unrefined, but he evidently did care about Mushiki's well-being.

Yes. Though he was often misunderstood on account of his appearance and attitude, Anviet Svarner was one of the most levelheaded and reliable individuals at the Garden.

“What makes you think I'm gonna hurt him?!” Ruri demanded at the top of her lungs, having apparently overheard.

Anviet fixed a glare on her. “Eh? You've been gearin' up to fight him since his first class! And you keep badgerin' him to give up on becomin' a mage every

chance you get. Sounds like you'll do whatever it takes, even if it means cuttin' off one or two limbs! Or have I got the wrong end of the stick here?"

"That's...true. But still!"

"Oh..." Mushiki sighed, deflated.

"I suspected as much," Kuroe added.

Ruri let out a defensive huff. "Th-that was a long time ago! And it would only have been a last resort...! I'd have put you back together right away!"

"You *were* willing to do it, though..."

"So you *would* have gone through with it. I see."

"I told you...! I mean, it's not *entirely* untrue, but it's not like that!" Indignant, Ruri raked a hand through her hair, only to shoot a glare at him. "Anyway! I'm not gonna do that now! I'm serious about training you! Okay?!"

"I don't think *okay* is gonna cut it this time," Anviet murmured awkwardly. "Well, if you've had a change of heart, that'll have to do. If Kuga's game, it ain't my place to butt in. And I guess with Kuozaki's attendant here, you won't be able to go *too* overboard, eh?" he said with a shrug.

Ruri pursed her lips disapprovingly.

"What brings you to the training grounds, Mr. Anviet?" Mushiki asked in an effort to change the topic.

"Hmm? Ah..." Anviet peered into each of their faces in turn, as if suddenly remembering something. "I guess you kids will do. You got a minute? I need to take care of a little business on the *outside*. I'm lookin' for someone to gimme some help."

"On the *outside*?" Kuroe repeated.

In short, he meant beyond the safety of the Garden.

"Yeah. That good-for-nothin' Erulka asked me to fetch the catalyst for some potion she ordered. Sounds like it's gotta be handled only by A-level mages or higher."

"For Ms. Erulka? I thought she got regular deliveries every month?" Ruri

asked suspiciously.

“Apparently, the only A-level mage runnin’ deliveries has been stealin’ goods behind everyone’s backs.”

“...Oh...”

“They’re lookin’ for a replacement, but we’re gonna have to pick up urgent items ourselves for a while. Talk about a pain in the ass.” Anviet murmured that last part under his breath, shrugging in resignation.

He was always one to grumble and complain, but it was very much in character for him that he had ultimately agreed to help out.

“I understand the situation. In that case, I’ll tag along. That okay with you, Mushiki, Kuroe?” Ruri asked, glancing across at them.

“Yes.” Kuroe nodded. “This will be a valuable experience for Mushiki and me.”

“Do whatever you want. But I’ve got one condition,” Anviet added.

“...A condition?” Mushiki repeated.

Anviet stared deep into his soul. “Do I have to spell it out...? You’ve gotta write a permission request form for off-campus activities.”

Yes, Anviet Svarner was nothing if not meticulous.



Whoever came up with the term *concrete jungle* had a true knack for language, the girl thought vaguely as she dashed through the dense collection of towering structures.

“Hah...hah...”

The asphalt roads were easier to run across than mud, but other than that, there was very little to distinguish city and forest. Buildings and trees seemed much the same when they drifted in and out of the corner of your vision, and as for dangerous animals and wildlife—well, they existed in both environments. There might have been a difference when it came to their overall numbers, but even here, she was still being relentlessly pursued.

“Over there!”

“The other side of the road!”

“After her! Don’t let her escape!”

Amid the hustle and bustle of the city, faint voices sounded behind her in the distance.

The girl sped onto the paved footpath, then bolted down a narrow side street.

“Hah...hah...hah...”

With her long blond hair trailing behind her and the hems of her dirt-stained clothes swaying with her every movement, she tore a clear, unwavering path ahead, kicking away plastic wrappers and garbage bags that she didn’t have the luxury of avoiding in her way.

Her lungs constricted with each step, forcing her breath raggedly from her throat. Her limbs creaked with every step, her chest felt numb, and to top it all off, her head was spinning.

It was like her life force was slowly ebbing away every time she exhaled.

But she couldn’t stop. She couldn’t stop. If she did, she knew that she would be incapacitated for the longest while.

Her pursuers wouldn’t kill her, or devour her, either. That she knew.

No. If they captured her, they would provide her with a warm room, offer her fine clothes and food, and treat her with every courtesy.

But in exchange, she would never see the outside world again. Her trackers would keep her under guard, boxed in and sheltered from the outside world in a very literal sense. In fact, this was the first time in months that she had even been able to catch a glimpse of the sky.

It was no exaggeration to say that this escape attempt would be her last chance. If she was captured again, she would no doubt be kept underground. That, or on some remote island.

“Hah...hah...”

She emerged from an alleyway onto a wide street, where the passersby gave her strange looks.

But the girl neither clung to these strangers nor begged them for help.

It wasn't out of pride or concern over endangering their lives. Simply put, it was pointless reaching out to normal people.

After all, her pursuers were anything but normal. No passerby, whether a pedestrian or an armed police officer, would be able to stand against them.

And so the girl ran.

Always following the soft voice in her head—forever yearning to reach her beloved's side.



After leaving the Garden, it was a thirty-minute drive to their destination.

Once they'd reached the sparsely populated area on the outskirts of the city, Anviet parked the car and cut the engine.

"We walk from here. Get out," he said, unbuckling his seat belt and stepping out from the driver's seat.

Mushiki, Ruri, and Kuroe followed suit.

The vehicle was the property of the Garden, a white hybrid car of the sort that could be found anywhere in Japan. It was so inconspicuous, in fact, that if they were to leave it in a busy parking lot, they might never see it again.

That, however, was precisely the point. Modern-day mages valued privacy more than anything, and the vehicle's design, which stood out as little as possible, was perfect cover.

Incidentally, Anviet's own car, parked at the edge of the Garden's parking lot, was a flashy open-top convertible that one could spot from a mile away. In their private lives, well, mages were free to do as they wished.

"This way," Anviet growled as he took the lead.

Mushiki and the others followed along behind him.

"There's someone *here* who sells potion catalysts?" he muttered to himself while inspecting his surroundings.

It was a remarkably ordinary town. Convenience stores, chain restaurants,

bookshops—not a single thing to raise one’s suspicions.

“Didn’t you hear me? Just keep walkin’. It ain’t like what you’re probably expectin’. It’s behind a ward to keep outsiders from wanderin’ in,” Anviet said as he strode confidently down a narrow alley.

“Have you been here before?” Mushiki asked.

“Eh? Ah... Well, Erulka seems to think I’m some kind of jack-of-all-trades or somethin’. Damn her. Always actin’ like I’ve got nothin’ better to do with my time...”

No doubt Erulka trusted Anviet to do whatever she asked of him, but even Mushiki knew better than to say as much out loud.

“...Never heard of a mage courier stealin’ goods before, though. Must’ve been pretty good, too, if they got to A-level. What an idiot.”

“Stealing goods...? Does that mean they’re selling them somewhere for profit?” Mushiki asked.

That question had been on his mind for a while now. He didn’t know exactly what a potion catalyst was, but surely only a mage would know its true value.

“Ain’t nobody told me what’s goin’ on... But my guess is it’d be those strays.”

“Strays?” Mushiki tilted his head to one side in confusion.

Ruri, walking alongside him, stepped in to explain, “People who have picked up some degree of magic skill at a mage-training school but who ended up dropping out, people who mastered magic outside one of the schools, mages who ran away from a fight with an annihilation factor—they come from all sorts of backgrounds, but they’re basically mages who don’t fight annihilation factors and don’t go back to living ordinary lives, either. They use the magic they’ve learned for their own personal gain.” She made no effort to conceal the disdain in her voice. “Some traditionalist mages devote themselves to study and learning...but most others are pretty much scum. They get up to all sorts of illegal stuff, and they can be a real headache,” she finished with a snort, crossing her arms in indignation.

Ruri, serious by nature, wasn’t one to mince words. Clearly, she couldn’t

tolerate the existence of people who had acquired powers beyond human understanding, as she had, yet didn't take on the same responsibilities to be a bulwark against evil.

"Well, it kinda sounds like you've got a bone to pick with 'em, but that's pretty much it. We're not actively huntin' 'em, but we've been authorized to take 'em down if we have to. So if we end up bumpin' into any..." Having said that much, Anviet suddenly trailed off.

Though this puzzled Mushiki for a moment, it didn't take him long to piece together why Anviet had gone quiet.

Just before the older man could round the next corner, a small shadow leaped out and sped forward to collide with him.

"Kyargh...!"

The figure cried out sharply, falling flat on their behind.

It was a small girl, probably around ten years old, with long golden hair glimmering in the sunlight.

"...Phew. Sorry 'bout that. You okay?" Anviet crouched down to reach out to her.

The girl, however, merely stared back wide-eyed in astonishment, her shoulders heaving as she peered into his face.

"Hey, you're scaring her, Anviet!" Ruri interrupted.

"It *was* rather ruthless of you to push her to the ground and then glare at her like that," Kuroe added.

"You lot...", Anviet growled.

He soon broke into a frown, however, narrowing his eyes.

He must have noticed it, too; the girl's appearance was clearly out of the ordinary.

Her beautiful blond hair was disheveled, and there were scratches on her hands and cheeks. Her clothes were unmistakably of the finest quality, but they were stained in places and riddled with holes, as though they had kept getting

snagged on obstacles.

On closer inspection, it didn't look like she was trembling out of fear of Anviet. No, she'd been quiet all this time because she was simply struggling to get her breathing under control.

And then there were her feet. She wasn't wearing any shoes, and the soles of her pale feet were stained with dirt and blood. All in all, she looked as if she'd been desperately trying to flee something.

"...!"

The next moment, another shadow appeared in the direction she had come from, prompting Mushiki to tense up.

There was a group of five men in black suits. They noticed Mushiki and the others, then stopped in their tracks and exchanged meaningful glances.

A few seconds later, one of them—their representative perhaps—stepped forward.

"Milady," he began in a gentle voice, holding out his hand. "Let us take you back to the estate. The master is worried about you."

Mushiki's eyes snapped open at this unexpected development.

"...Eh? Who the hell are you guys?" Anviet, no less suspicious than before, quickly rose to his feet.

In response, the group's leader offered a respectful bow. "My apologies for disturbing you. We are in the service of a certain gentleman and were chasing the young lady there after she ran away from home... If you're unhappy with something, milady, we can bring it up with the master on your behalf. Please, don't make a scene," he appealed to her, his expression troubled.

As if to gauge her reaction, Anviet stared down at the girl, who was still trembling at his feet.

"Help...me...," she begged in a gravelly voice, her shoulders heaving.

At this, Anviet turned his gaze back to the group of men while he rose to his feet, as if leaping to the girl's defense.

“Fuyajoh. Take care of her, wouldja?”

“Of course. Just don’t go overboard,” Ruri answered, crouching down next to the girl.

Like Anviet, she was also a Knight of the Garden—she knew what needed to be done.

“...Hmm.” The leader of the opposing group heaved a sigh of resignation at this latest development.

In a marked shift from his previous tone, his next words were filled with unbridled hostility: “Don’t try to be a hero. There’s no need for you to get hurt. All we want is the girl. So why don’t you just turn around and pretend you didn’t see anything?”

“Hah! So this is your true face? You’re happy to gang up on a little girl, but now that the grown-ups have come out to play, you’re scared stiff.”

“...What did you just say?” the man asked, visibly twitching.

The tension was palpable, and things were ready to blow at a moment’s notice.

“Sounds like we’re going to have to drum it into you...”

It was the man who moved first. He poured all his strength into his body and lashed out with his fists.

“Haaah!” he bellowed, a glowing pattern appearing over his hand and unleashing an invisible shockwave.

The blast ricocheted off the walls of the nearby buildings, sending debris all over the place.

“Eh...”

Anviet gazed dubiously at the wreckage.

Even Mushiki raised an eyebrow. “Kuroe? Was that—”

“Yes. Magic—a first substantiation,” she returned with serene composure.

The man across from them couldn’t possibly have overheard their conversation, but he broke into a triumphant laugh regardless.

“Ha-ha-ha! How’s *that*?! There are things in this world the likes of you can’t possibly hope to match! And next time, I won’t miss! I’ll drill it into that thick skull of yours. So be a good boy and back off, or we’ll—”

“Oh...? I’m guessin’ you all are strays, then?” Anviet interrupted, unperturbed. “That makes this a whole lot easier.”

The group’s leader pulled a disbelieving face, when...

“What—?”

The briefest possible flash of light crossed Mushiki’s vision, and the man collapsed right where he had been standing.

“...Huh?!”

“What the...?!”

A moment later, the other four men cried out in panic.

A few more seconds after that, they finally noticed it.

“That’s a world crest...!” one of them shouted, pointing across at Anviet. “Is that guy a mage?!”

Yes. A brilliantly radiant halo-like golden crest was now shining brightly atop Anviet’s back.

Then another man raised a trembling hand in further realization. “H-hold on. That halo on his back... Is that Anviet Svarner, the Thunder Emperor...?!”

“What...?!”

No sooner had they uttered that name than unease spread among the remaining men. Anviet, it seemed, had a reputation among stray mages.

The title also caught Mushiki’s attention. Before he knew it, he was looking at Anviet again.

“*Thunder Emperor*?” he repeated.

“So cool,” Ruri exclaimed.

“Did you come up with that yourself?” Kuroe asked flatly.

“Shuddup! Don’t get the wrong idea!” Anviet glared back at them, sounding

annoyed and embarrassed in equal measure.

All the while, the opposing men were contorting their faces in raw terror.

“Wh-what should we do...? We won’t stand a chance against an S-class opponent from the Garden...!”

“But you heard the boss! If we let his lucky charm run off, he’ll kill us...!”

“D-damn it... I’m gonna chance it! You—”

“Why don’t you give it a rest?” Anviet grumbled, before locking his fingers together.

The next moment, an electric spark shot out from his hand, knocking the four men out cold.

Only after making sure that they were well and truly unconscious did Anviet deactivate his world crest.

“They shouldn’t be wakin’ up for a while. Karasuma, call the Garden and get ‘em to send someone to pick these guys up.”

“Understood,” she answered, pulling out her cell phone.

Meanwhile, Anviet approached the girl. “...So? Who are you? Why were those guys chasin’ after you?”

“...Do you...,” the girl uttered in the smallest of voices. “Do you want to hug Sue...?”

“...Huh?” Anviet stared back, his eyes wide.

With that, the girl rose to her feet and wrapped her arms around his body.

“H-hey! Whaddaya doin’?” Anviet asked with a suspicious frown.

Deeply moved, the girl poured all her strength into the hug, before calling out in a faltering voice:

“You...you’ve been looking for Sue all this time, haven’t you...? Papa.”

Yes, that was what she said.

“Huh?”

“Hah?”

“What?”

“...Haaahhh?!”

All four of them cried out in surprise.



Chapter 2

You Really Wanted to Meet

◄ Madam Witch, Right? ►

“...”

Anviet Svarner wore a dour look as he made his way across the grounds of the Garden.

The reason was simple—the students and teachers passing him were all either staring curiously at him or whispering furtively among themselves.

“Hey, is that...?”

“Yep. Have you heard the rumors...?”

“Whoa... I’m floored.”

“I thought Mr. Anvi was proper about these things, you know?”

Stories about him were spreading like wildfire, especially among the female students. They were trying to keep their voices down, but Anviet could hear them all clearly enough.

“...Eeek?! ”

He fixed the nearest group with a stare, raising an eyebrow.

“Whoa...”

“Uh-oh...”

Trembling, the girls promptly spun around and fled the scene. The other students nearby similarly beat a quick escape, fearing that they, too, might become the subject of Anviet’s ire.

“Tch...”

Glaring at them, Anviet clicked his tongue in irritation.

He had no intention of chasing after them, nor of confronting them directly, either. He understood full well that they bore him no ill will. Besides, even if he did try setting the matter straight with them, he would have the same problem with other students unless he addressed the root cause.

“...”

He came to an abrupt halt, then spun around to face that very *root cause*.

There, standing close behind him, was a small girl.

She was petite with an adorable face. Though she had on a new outfit, and her hair was neatly tied up, there could be no mistaking that she was the same girl whom Anviet and the others had rescued on the *outside*.

On top of that—

“Huh? Are you...?”

The girl stared back into Anviet’s eyes, not the slightest bit intimidated.

“...Geez.”

“Do you want to pat Sue’s head, Papa...?”

“Eh...?”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to hold back... Sue understands. You want to show your long-lost daughter how much you love her. Because there’s a unique bond between parent and child.”

“I told you! I don’t know you or anyone like you!” he screamed, unable to hold back.

Yes. *This* was why Anviet had gotten a bad rap over the past few days.

The girl, however, merely stared back at him, dumbfounded.

She said nothing, but that didn’t stop a fresh round of whispers from kicking into gear all around them.

“Talk about low...”

“I feel sorry for his daughter...”

“I’m sure there’s a lot of kids like that out there...”

“I heard that, you punks!” Anviet shouted angrily, sending the next group of students scattering.

The girl watched this, and a hint of worry crept into her voice. “Are you okay...?”

“Whose fault do you think this is...?”

“You won’t pat Sue’s head...?” the girl asked, leaning forward to place herself within easy reach.

“...”

Gently ruffling her hair, Anviet thought back to the events of a few days ago—to the immediate aftermath of his encounter with the stray mages.

“...*Papa?*” Anviet repeated, grimacing in the face of the girl’s sudden remark.

It wasn’t that he was uncomfortable. He simply couldn’t wrap his head around what she was saying.

First of all, he didn’t have any children. Second, she was simply too different from him in terms of build and appearance to be his daughter. It was hard to imagine that they could share any genetic relationship.

...Or at least it should have been.

“Huh? I didn’t you know you had a daughter, Mr. Anviet.”

“You left her on the *outside*? If that’s not neglect, I don’t know what is.”

“I never thought you were the type to do something like this.”

Mushiki, Ruri, and Kuroe all spoke out against him in turn.

“You lot...,” he growled.

“We’re kidding,” Ruri responded for the three of them before crouching down until she could meet the girl at eye level. “Hello. You’re all right now. My name is Ruri Fuyajoh. What’s yours?”

“...Surya,” she answered in a small voice.

“Surya,” Ruri repeated with an understanding nod. “Do you know the people who were chasing after you?”

The girl—Surya—took one glance at the fallen men and then gave her head a strong shake. “No... But I’ve been locked inside for ages...”

“You were confined...?” Ruri asked with suspicion.

Surya gave her a weak nod. “Today...I heard we were moving, so they let me outside. I ran off while they weren’t looking...”

“...I see. You did great,” Ruri said, patting her on the head and glancing across at Kuroe. “What do you think?”

“...It’s too early to say for sure, but stray mages often engage in organized crime. Their objectives are seldom savory,” Kuroe answered in a roundabout manner.

“Right. I thought as much...” Ruri breathed a heavy sigh. “Well, Surya. Can you tell us where you live? Where are your mom and dad?”

“My home...? I don’t know... My papa...” She glanced up at Anviet.

“I told you, I’ve never seen you before.”

“...Does this man look like your papa?” Ruri asked.

Surya shook her head. “No, he doesn’t *look* like him... Sue’s name is Surya Svarner. Anviet Svarner is my papa. I’ve always... I’ve always wanted to meet him.”

“Hah...?! Whaaat?!” Anviet exclaimed, taken aback by the sincerity in the girl’s voice and gaze.

There was nothing to suggest that she was lying or trying to deceive them. No, by all appearances, she wholeheartedly believed that Anviet truly was her father.

Mushiki and the others must have come to the same conclusion, turning to him once more.

“Mr. Anviet...?”

“Are you *sure* you don’t remember?”

“This isn’t the result of a night on the town, is it?”

“I told you, no!” he cried out in response to their suspicious stares.

“But her name...”

“You heard how surprised those other guys were to see me, right?! Besides, look at her! It’s clear we’re not related!”

“Maybe she takes after her mother?”

“Ah...”

“A blond-haired beauty... The plot thickens.”

“Cut it out...!” Anviet growled, blood vessels throbbing on his forehead.

Kuroe brought her hands together with a loud clap. “In any event, we can’t stay here forever. For now, let’s leave the situation here to the Garden’s cleanup team and head back to base. I know it will be a hassle coming here twice, but Knight Erulka’s request can wait until after we see to Surya.”

“Ah... Wait a sec. You ain’t plannin’ on bringin’ her with us, are you?” Anviet asked, startled.

Kuroe tilted her head to one side as if the answer was obvious. “We must take her into our custody until we can definitively identify her. So long as we erase her memories afterward, there shouldn’t be a problem. Or are you suggesting that we simply leave her here?”

“Tch...” Anviet grimaced. “Have it your way. *I’m* opposed to this,” he declared, turning heel.

But at that moment, he felt a tug on his shirt. Glancing back, he found Surya clutching it tightly, her gaze unwavering.

“Papa, do you...”

“Eh?”

“Do you want to carry Sue in your arms...?”

“...Hah?” he stammered, at a loss for words.

Surya, however, continued to stare at him, not once breaking eye contact.

Seeing this, Ruri and Kuroe voiced their thoughts.

“So that’s it.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“Eh?! What’re you two blabberin’ about?!”

“...Oh. I’m sorry,” Surya apologized, shrinking back at his outburst.

For some reason, Anviet’s voice caught in his throat.

“No, I mean, I didn’t...”

And yet—

“Not in your arms... On your back, then?” Surya asked shyly.

“...”

He nearly flinched before her keen, pleading gaze.

Resigned to his fate, Anviet crouched down and let her climb onto his back.

Which brings us back to the present...

It had been decided that Surya would stay at the Garden temporarily until both her identity and her relationship with the stray mages who had been pursuing her could be confirmed.

The Garden was equipped with a shelter that was built specifically for victims of annihilation factors.

So long as an annihilation factor could be defeated within the window for reversible annihilation, the damage caused could be reversed, as though it had never happened. On the flip side, however, any effects that occurred outside that window were recorded permanently in the history of the world. In short, this meant that there was always a possibility that innocent bystanders might sustain injuries beyond the purview of traditional medicine and that children might lose their parents before their time.

The shelter’s purpose was to protect and treat such victims before finally wiping their memories of their stay in the Garden and returning them to the outside world. That being said, there were always cases when an individual possessed of outstanding talent might be discovered. In that case, they could be

brought into the Garden as a novice mage.

Regardless, the plan had been to put Surya in the care of the shelter and its staff. And yet—

“Huh...? Papa? Maybe you want to praise Sue...?”

Anviet had no idea how she had managed to get out, but the next thing he knew, Surya had popped up by his side and started following him around.

On the first few occasions this happened, he would contact the shelter and ask the staff to take her back—but no matter how many times she was returned to the facility, she kept reappearing when he least expected it. Eventually, it reached a point where even the employees at the shelter gave up, deciding to let Anviet take care of Surya himself.

If anything, the fact that she kept addressing him as *Papa* seemed to have convinced everyone that she really was his daughter. Whenever he called one of the staff to take her off his hands, they would shoot him a death glare, all but saying, *How could you abandon your own child? or Such an irresponsible parent or So cruel...*

As a result of all this, the Garden was now home to a teacher bringing a child to work.

But of course, Anviet could hardly *work* under these circumstances.

And so, as the bell tolled on the campus grounds, Anviet turned to face Surya.

“*Why* would I be praisin’ you...? It’s up to you whether or not you go back to the shelter, but don’t get in the way of my job.”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded in response.

“...Tch.”

He hadn’t done anything wrong, but for some reason, he was struck by a wave of gnawing guilt.

But he couldn’t dawdle forever. He had to prepare for his next class, which meant continuing on his way.

Naturally, Surya trailed behind him.

“I meant to say, *Don’t follow me!*” he bellowed, unable to take it anymore.



“There’s one other thing I’d like to check, Madam Witch,” Ruri began in a serious tone just before fifth period could get underway.

This course was practical training—in other words, a chance for students to use and develop their real-life magic skills. As such, the students had already changed into their tracksuits before gathering in the training area. Ruri and Mushiki were no exception.

As might be surmised from Ruri’s tone of voice, Mushiki was presently in his Saika Kuozaki form. He and Kuroe hadn’t decided on a set schedule as such, but they had agreed that he should attend class in both of his separate guises on a regular basis.

Simply put, it wouldn’t do for either Mushiki or Saika to remain out of sight for a long period of time. On top of that, Kuroe maintained that he had to learn how best to use both bodies...

“Hmm? Do tell, Ruri.” Mushiki gestured in Saika’s tone of voice.

Crucially, Ruri was convinced that when Mushiki was in his Saika form, she was actually talking to the real Saika. He couldn’t afford to let slip that he was still himself inside.

You might think that since he hadn’t been caught yet, he was in safe territory—but Mushiki wasn’t. After all, he was facing Ruri Fuyajoh here, the first member of the (unofficial) Saika Kuozaki fan club. Moreover, she knew that he and Saika had been fused into a single entity. Under these circumstances, even the slightest mistake could prove fatal.

As if grappling with the same concerns, Ruri continued in a hushed voice, “You *are* Madam Witch inside and out, aren’t you? Mushiki’s consciousness is, like, submerged, right?”

“...Why are you asking me that now?”

Though taken aback by this sudden question, Mushiki did his utmost to conceal his disquiet.

“I—I didn’t mean to...” Ruri shook her head in a fluster. “I don’t doubt you, I swear. It’s just...”

“Just?”

“If there’s even the slightest chance that he’s awake in there...he might have seen you getting changed, or even taking a bath... If that happened, I’d be so jealous that I could never forgive him.”

“...”

Mushiki broke into a cold sweat.

Thankfully, someone else answered Ruri’s question in his place.

“You needn’t worry about that. As Lady Saika’s attendant, I’ve made doubly sure.”

That someone, of course, was Kuroe. Like the other students, she was dressed in a sports tracksuit.

“R-right. That’s good, then.”

“Yes. If we weren’t one hundred percent confident, I would not be able to relax, either. Mushiki may be a levelheaded young man, but he is still a high schooler, with a high schooler’s appetites. This time of his life is no doubt the peak of his interest in the female form. If he happened to awaken inside Lady Saika’s body...”

“Yes...?”

“Well, he would undoubtedly fondle her breasts, at the very least.”

“Muuushiiikiii!” Ruri cried out in indignation, prompting her classmates a short distance away to flinch in shock.

“Um... Actually...”

Naturally, Mushiki wanted to stand up for himself—but all he could do was mince his words.

If he tried to defend himself, he might succeed only in arousing further suspicion. Besides, he guiltily recalled that he *had* fondled Saika’s breasts on one occasion, though only because he had woken up in her body without

comprehending how or what had happened to him.

That was the first and last time he had touched them, except when otherwise absolutely necessary. Since realizing that their bodies were fused, he had been doing his absolute best to respect her personal dignity...disregarding his sleeping posture, that was.

“Calm yourself, Ruri. I’m only talking about a hypothetical situation in the case that Mushiki was still partially conscious. Please be assured that you needn’t worry on that account. Isn’t that right, Lady Saika?” Kuroe asked, turning his way.

“...Of course.”

Her flat gaze was no doubt meant as a warning...but he couldn’t fail to notice a hint of amusement in her eyes.

It seemed she was teasing both Ruri *and* him. Frankly, that made him a little nervous.

A second later, the bell rang throughout to announce the beginning of their practice class.

“Oh? Is it already time?” Kuroe sat up straight.

She and the rest of the students quickly rose to their feet in preparation for the teacher’s arrival.

Then, with perfect timing, a tall figure appeared by the entrance to the training hall.

However—

“...Hmm?”

Mushiki broke into a surprised frown.

It wasn’t just him. Ruri and the rest of the students were similarly bewildered.

But that was to be expected. After all, a petite girl wearing a cute little backpack was tugging at Anviet’s hand.

“Mr. Anviet...is that...?”

“The girl everyone’s talking about...?”

“Huh? What girl?”

“You haven’t heard? Everyone’s saying Mr. Anvi has an illegitimate child, and —”

“Hmph!”

Anviet let out a loud, feigned cough to quiet the gossiping students as he shot them all a fierce glare.

“Shuddup, you hear...? I don’t want any chitchat, got it? If you’ve got that much energy to spare, I can whip up a special trainin’ regimen for you. You want that?!” Anviet’s voice dripped with menace.

Although he was renowned for his coarse language and aggressive behavior, today Anviet was even more intimidating than usual. Like a wounded beast, almost. He was single-mindedly determined not to let himself become the subject of any classroom conversation.

Presented with such a foreboding S-class mage, any regular student would have no choice but to fall silent. Naturally, everyone remained immensely curious about the girl, but they couldn’t risk expressing those thoughts out loud.

“Conversation is one thing, but just what kind of class do you think you’re bringing your daughter to here?”

Ruri, however, was also an S-class mage, so she was under no obligation to hold back, casually voicing a question that was undoubtedly on everyone’s mind.

“Ngh... I told you, she’s not my kid!”

“Then why did you bring her here...?”

“I didn’t! She followed me!”

“Then why are you holding her hand...?”

“Because if I didn’t, she would’ve fallen over, damn it!”

“What about the backpack, then...?”

“You think I can leave her in the trainin’ hall with nothin’ to do for a whole hour?!” Anviet shouted in exasperation.

With that, he pulled a vinyl picnic blanket with a cute character design on it from the backpack and laid it on the ground in a shady corner of the training grounds.

Then he sat Surya down, placed a hat on her head, and pulled a water bottle and a bag of snacks from her backpack, arranging them beside her.

Only then did he fix her with a menacing glower.

“Listen up, you little brat. Keep outta my way. Got that?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Drink plenty of water!”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’ve just had lunch, so don’t dive straight into your snacks, you hear?!”

“Mm-hmm.”

Surya nodded along to Anviet’s every word. She didn’t come across as afraid in the slightest—rather, she seemed somewhat pleased.

“...You’re *sure* she isn’t your daughter?” Ruri asked uncertainly.

“How many times do I gotta say it?!” Anviet roared—but as forceful as his voice was, it was completely unpersuasive.

As if to drive the impression home, Surya tugged softly on Anviet’s shirt.

“Papa? Papa?” she asked.

“...What? I thought I told you not to interrupt my class.”

“Maybe you want to take Sue to the bathroom?”

“...”

Anviet glanced across at the students, hesitation flickering through his eyes before he stamped it down and fixed them all with a powerful glare.

“...Get into pairs! Start your warm-ups! After that, three laps around the track! Well?! Get movin’!”

With those instructions, he took Surya under his arm and bolted back to the entrance.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Lady Saika?”

“Y-yes?”

Amid the group of thunderstruck students, Kuroe and Mushiki started their warm-up exercises.



Three days later, Surya was still following Anviet around, always calling out, “Papa! Papa!”

Despite his foul mouth, Anviet was earnest and considerate at heart. Unable to ignore her, he continued to reluctantly see to her every need, no matter how much trouble she caused him.

With the pair’s interactions occurring throughout the Garden in the public eye, people increasingly started to treat the suggestion that Surya really was Anviet’s illegitimate child less as rumor and more as established fact.

Then one day after school—

“Excuse me... Huh?!”

As Mushiki stepped into the central school building’s staff room alongside Kuroe, his eyes shot open.

Staff rooms in the Garden were larger and more spacious than those at normal schools, and they were equipped with partitions dividing them into smaller private spaces... One of them, namely the one belonging to Anviet Svarner, was a sight to behold.

On his desk, he had a desktop computer, various documents and folders, and his favorite mug...along with an array of cute stuffed animals and children’s characters. The computer monitor and mouse were covered in sparkling stickers, and a portrait of Anviet drawn in an immature scribble was pasted on one of the partition walls.

“Oh...? Kuga. Karasuma. Tch. Whaddaya want?”

Mushiki's exclamation must have alerted Anviet to their arrival. Haggardly, he glanced up from his computer monitor in irritation. Mushiki took a closer look at the man and noticed faint dark circles under his eyes.



Incidentally, there was a child's chair next to Anviet's, along with a small table, where Surya was sound asleep. She must have been in the middle of her next artistic endeavor, for she was holding a pencil in one hand, and a half-finished drawing rested under her cheek.

"Ah... Um...", Mushiki stammered, turning in Kuroe's direction. That was all it took to communicate his question.

Kuroe responded with a curt nod, "We're here to report what we've gleaned about Surya's background so far."

"...! Have you figured anythin' out?!" Anviet shouted, before quickly covering his mouth in panic.

After a timid look in Surya's direction to confirm she was still sound asleep, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"...That was close," he continued in a noticeably softer voice. "I finally managed to get her to doze off. Don't startle me like that, you hear?"

"I see you've settled into life as a full-fledged parent," Kuroe quipped.

"Shuddup. So what'd you find?" Anviet urged.

Kuroe pulled out a small tablet PC before continuing. "First of all, we've identified the stray mages who were chasing after her. They belong to the Salix group."

"...Huh?"

"Um, sorry. What's the Salix group...?" Mushiki asked softly.

"A medium-size organization made up of stray mages," Kuroe answered, staring down at the tablet screen. "Their leader is Doug Willows, a former A-class mage. Salix's primary activities involve dispatching personnel to various organized crime groups. In essence, they operate as hired muscle in the underworld. Even the most rudimentary magic is considered miracle working by those on the outside... Of course, we should hardly tolerate such activities, but the simple fact of the matter is that we don't have the resources to put a stop to them."

"I see...", Mushiki murmured.

Anviet wore a thoughtful look, his chin cupped in one hand.

Kuroe continued reading, “We interrogated the five men captured at the scene, but it seems they were unable to explain why they were chasing Surya. Or to be more precise, they apparently had no idea who our people were referring to.”

“Hah? How do you figure?”

“In all likelihood, they were conditioned to automatically erase all memory of their mission in the event of being captured.”

“Conditioned...? You mean brainwashed? Why would a bunch of strays go that far? Who the hell are we even dealin’ with here?” Anviet demanded, stealing another peek at the sleeping Surya.

“We’re still looking into that. We’re also still investigating her background. However...”

“However?”

“Genetic testing suggests that the probability of any blood relation between you two is extremely low.”

“...Well, yeah. Of course,” Anviet answered as he folded his arms.

With his having denied their relationship at every possible opportunity, he must have been expecting this result. There was no sign of surprise on his part.

But—and it was hard to fully describe—there was *something* about his expression that one would never glimpse in the usual Anviet.

“Mr. Anviet, are you—”

“*Disappointed?* Say the words, and I’ll electrify you from your brain to your toes.”

“...Hungry? Can I get you something to eat?” Mushiki asked, deftly redirecting the question.

Anviet clearly picked up on the clunkiness of that rejoinder, but he made no further mention of it. “...All right, I get it. Anythin’ else?”

“Not yet,” Kuroe answered. “We’ll leave you to it.”

“Ah...h-hold on a sec.”

Just before Mushiki and Kuroe could turn to leave, Anviet called out to them once more.

“Sorry 'bout this, but I'm up to my ears in work. Can you take Surya to nap in the duty room or somethin'?”

“Eh? Ah, okay. I guess so... Why not let her stay here, though?” Mushiki answered.

“Hah? Sleepin' on your desk is a surefire way to ruin your posture. Not to mention the risk of blood clots. You never heard of traveler's thrombosis? You'd better wisen up if you know what's good for you.”

“...R-right...”

Faced with such a sound argument, Mushiki could do little else but nod nervously in response.

“Um... Kuroe?” he asked, crouching down.

“Understood.”

As if sensing his implied request, Kuroe wrapped an arm under Surya's body, slowly lifted her up, and rested her on Mushiki's back.

“That's it...,” he whispered, praying that she wouldn't wake up.

Now that she was safe and secure, he rose back to his feet.

“We'll be off, then.”

“Yeah,” Anviet answered with a light wave of his hand.

Bowing their heads slightly, Mushiki and Kuroe left the staff room.

Mushiki made his way down the halls at a slow pace so as not to wake Surya. The duty room, if he remembered correctly, was at the far edge of the central school building.

It was six o'clock in the evening—several hours since classes had ended, so the building was mostly quiet. The setting sun flooded the corridor in orange, lending it an otherworldly atmosphere.

“Are you all right, Mushiki?” Kuroe asked all of a sudden.

“Huh?”

“Surya may be a child, but it always feels heavier carrying someone when they’re unconscious or sleeping.”

“Ah...”

Mushiki shook slightly, adjusting Surya’s position on his back.

“I can handle this much. Maybe all that training has been good for my physique?” he joked.

“Maybe,” Kuroe answered, eyes downcast. “It’s been nearly three months since you joined us here. How time flies... It hardly feels that long.”

“No, I guess it doesn’t.”

Mushiki let out a deep sigh.

Indeed, so much had happened since he had fused with Saika and enrolled at the Garden that he’d barely had any time to catch his breath. It all started when a mysterious assailant attacked him and Saika; then there was the rivalry between the Garden and the Tower along with Clara Tokishima’s scheming, followed by the commotion surrounding Ruri’s supposed engagement and the incident at the Ark. It was no exaggeration to say that he had been constantly involved in one potentially world-ending dilemma after another.

“But mages have been living like this behind the scenes for ages, right?” he asked.

“That’s certainly true, but the incidents we’ve seen these past few months are unprecedented in the history of the Garden. After all, several mythic-class annihilation factors have emerged in rapid succession.”

“Ah...”

Come to think of it, that was probably true as well. It seemed he had joined the Garden at an incredible time.

“I’m not exaggerating when I say that if not for Lady Saika, we would have been incapable of surmounting those crises. Once again, thank you.”

“I-it’s nothing...”

“Besides,” Kuroe continued, “I’ve had plenty of new experiences these past few months as well. I was never able to enjoy the Garden as a student before. It’s refreshing...fun, even. I would like to keep enjoying life like this for a little while longer yet.”

“Kuroe...,” Mushiki began.

“Please, rest assured,” she answered with a slight shake of her head. “I haven’t forgotten our promise. Nor, I expect, have you, Mushiki. No?”

“...No,” he confirmed. “My goal hasn’t changed, either. I want to separate myself from Saika and meet her again. Not through a mirror. Not through another body. As two separate individuals.”

“...”

The moment he uttered those words, Kuroe’s eyes seemed to flutter for a brief second. She furrowed her brow and averted her gaze.

“Ah...”

Mushiki’s breath caught in his throat as he watched on.

Even though it was after hours and the building was largely deserted, there was no guarantee that no one was listening in. Of course, he doubted that anyone would understand the exchange even if they did manage to overhear it, but that still didn’t mean they could discuss the matter so casually.

“Sorry. That was thoughtless of me.”

“...No, not that. Did you hear anything just now?”

“Huh?”

Mushiki blinked a few times.

“No, nothing...”

“I see.” Kuroe looked around once more, then breathed a shallow sigh. “My apologies. Perhaps I’m a little on edge.”

With that, she cleared her throat as if to set her thoughts in order.

“Now then, a lot has happened today, but we must stick to our routine. Once we’ve left Surya in the duty room, we should pick up where we left off yesterday.”

“Right. Ruri and I have made some new cards, actually.”

“I wasn’t talking about your Lady Saika game.”

“Ah... Sorry,” Mushiki apologized.

Kuroe breathed a deep sigh. “...One round. After that, training.”

“Eh? Ah... Right!”

Making his way down the corridor dyed red by the setting sun, Mushiki could have jumped for joy, if not for the little girl resting on his back.



The following morning, Mushiki awoke a little earlier than usual to a feeling of mild discomfort.

“...”

In the haze of his still half-asleep consciousness, a shred of doubt popped into his mind.

It wasn’t something simple, like how one might feel after waking up from a bad dream, or when the sun coming in through the window was shining stronger than usual, or when the large-scale construction work was underway in the neighboring dormitory room. *Something* felt off, but he couldn’t put his finger on what exactly.

With time, that sensation began to solidify.

The first thing he noticed was the scent.

A sweet fragrance, like floral soap, tickled his nostrils... It certainly wasn’t the kind of aroma one would expect to find in a boys’ dormitory.

“Hmm...”

Like a bee lulled by the promise of honey, he slowly opened his eyes.

And then—

“...Huh?”

The next moment, he went as stiff as a rock.

But that was entirely reasonable.

After all, laid out before him was a most unbelievable sight—for two very different reasons.

Lying beside him on the cramped bed was a young woman, still sound asleep.

That alone would have been shocking enough to prompt his heart to leap right out of his chest; indeed, it was already beating wildly.

But that wasn't all. Yes, the sight had startled him, but if that was everything, it wouldn't have left him as overwhelmingly distressed as he presently found himself.

The issue was in confirming who, precisely, she was.

Trembling faintly with each heartbeat, Mushiki tried to examine her features in full.

Her hair was positively sparkling, no less radiant than the sun streaming in through the window.

Her face was immaculate and perfectly proportioned—the kind that could only be attributed to divine favor.

Her eyes were closed, so he had no way of deducing their color, but he could already readily imagine their hue.

There was a very simple reason for that. He had grown accustomed to seeing this face on an almost daily basis.

Yes. In other words—

“...Hmm...”

Just before his brain could reach a conclusion, the woman stirred slightly, then opened her eyes.

A pair of fantastical, iridescent irises—exactly as he had imagined—stared back at him at such close distance that his breath caught in his throat.

“Ah... Morning, Mushiki. Nice weather today, don’t you think?”

The woman—Saika Kuozaki—flashed him a faint smile.

“...”

Rendered mute with shock, Mushiki fell backward, sliding off the side of the bed.

“Argh...!”

“Oh?”

There was a dull thud, followed by a building pain in his back.

By all indications, this was no dream. He looked up at the ceiling in alarm, watching the dust thrown up into the air glisten in the morning sunlight.

“Are you okay, Mushiki?”

Saika peered down at him from atop the bed, looking for all the world like an angel emerging from the heavens.

“Saika...? H-how...?”

Mushiki stammered in the face of this unreal sight, his voice ebbing from his throat seemingly of its own accord.

But the question on the tip of his tongue was only natural.

“How are you *here*?!” he cried out as he stared into those brilliant, resplendent eyes.

He was well aware just how silly the question was, but he could think of no other way to phrase it.

Saika blinked several times, as if only just now realizing that she and Mushiki were both in the same room.

“Ah... I see. How strange.”

“S-so you don’t know what’s going on here, either...?”

“I’m quite at a loss... There seems to be a fog in my memories. My mind isn’t as clear as it should be,” she said, pressing a hand against her forehead.

She didn’t seem to have a headache. Rather, the gesture was no doubt more

to convey her sense of confusion.

“A-are you all right?!” Mushiki asked, jumping up in alarm.

He felt ashamed of himself. He had been so taken aback to find that he and Saika had somehow been separated that he hadn’t paused to consider how it might have affected her.

Yes, he and Saika were now disconnected; they both existed in the same place at the same time. This was the very outcome he had long dreamed of. Regardless of how this had come about, it was cause for celebration, not sorrow.

But he would be able to rejoice only if the separation had been performed cleanly, without causing any other issues.

“A-anyway, let’s make sure there’s nothing wrong with your body. How bad is your confusion?! Can you move your arms and legs?! You’re not in any pain, are you?!”

Having worked himself into a panic, Mushiki suddenly slammed his mouth shut.

Not because he had noticed anything unusual about Saika or himself.

No, there was a much simpler, more profound, more fundamental reason.

Yes. Up until this point, he hadn’t fully noticed it.

Saika was completely naked.

“A-a-ah...”

His eyes went as wide as they could possibly go, and his trembling voice leaked weakly from his throat.

Even he could tell that his cheeks had turned bright red. If anything, he felt like smoke must have been billowing out from the top of his head.

A slim neck. Alluring collarbones. Delicate shoulders...

For good or ill, a bed sheet was draped over the rest of Saika’s body, so that was all Mushiki could make out clearly. But that sight by itself was stimulating enough. Saika’s contours, emerging gracefully beneath the single layer of fabric,

sent his imagination into overdrive.

And it didn't end there.

"Hmm? Did I miss something funny?" Saika asked, puzzled by his reaction.

She began to scrutinize herself, lifting her arms into the air to take a closer look, when—

At that moment, the bed sheet barely obscuring her naked body dropped down, fully exposing her gorgeous pale skin.

"Ah..."

"...?!"

The second his brain processed this latest development, Mushiki spun around half on reflex, hitting his head with considerable force and passing out.

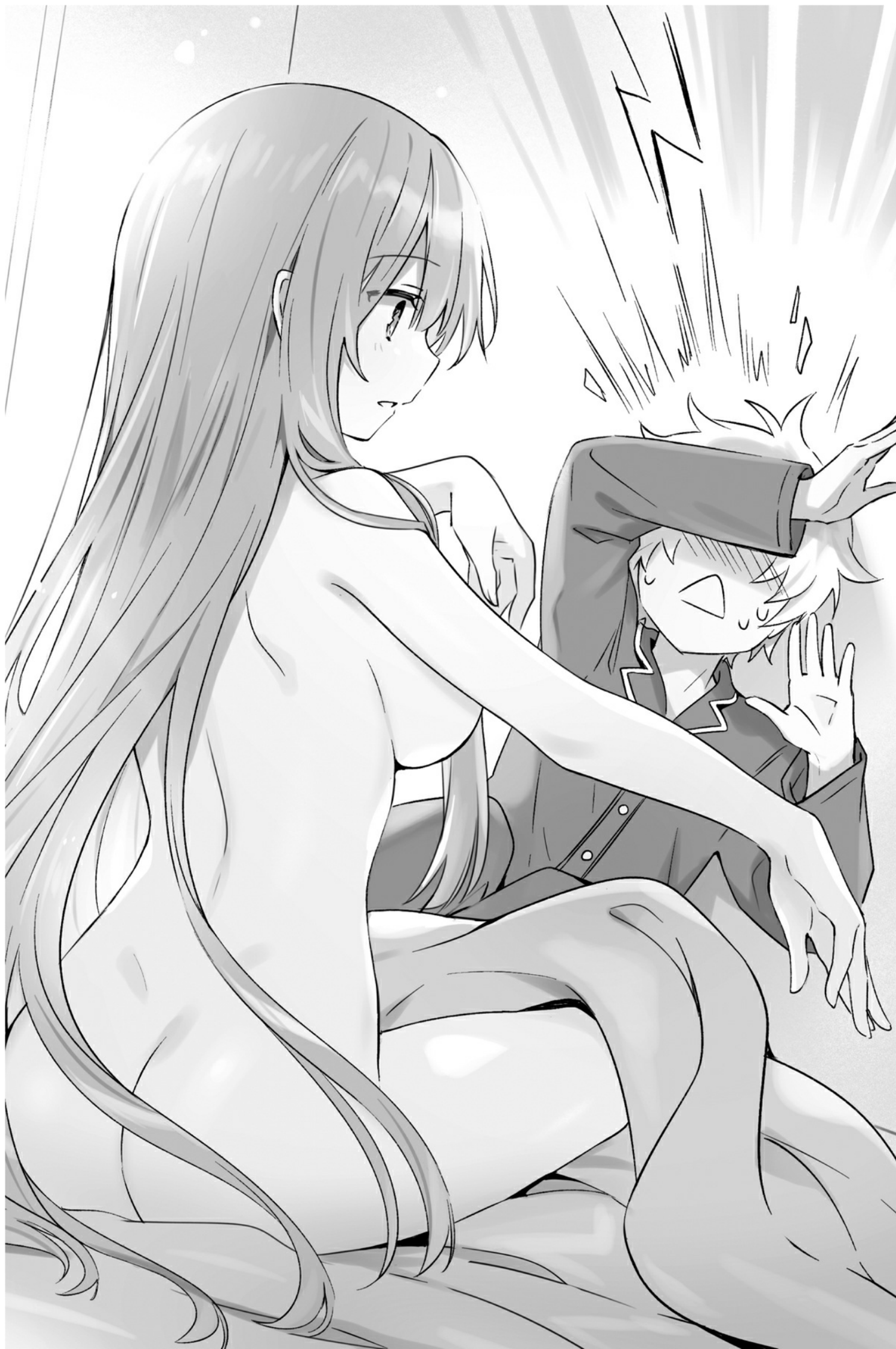


"Ruriii!"

Close to an hour after that early-morning commotion, Mushiki, having somehow managed to come back to his senses, found himself all but wailing at the top of his lungs while sprinting across the Garden grounds.

He was on the main street, which stretched from the southern precinct where the dorms were located all the way to the central school building. It may have been somewhat early in the day, but there were still students scattered around campus, many of them watching on either in amusement or with misgivings as Mushiki raced in front of them.

Mushiki, however, paid no attention to the odd looks that everyone was giving him—or to be more accurate, he didn't have the luxury of caring. All he could do was run desperately about, calling out at the top of his lungs.



Then, like his prayers were being answered, a familiar face came into view up ahead—Ruri Fuyajoh, his younger sister.

“...Quit shouting my name like that so early in the morning. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Ruri!”

No sooner had Mushiki recognized her than he all but pounced, grabbing her firmly by the shoulders.

“Thank goodness! I’ve been looking all over for you, Ruri!”

“Wh-what are you going on about...?” she responded.

She was clearly overwhelmed by his fervor, but at the same time, she didn’t seem entirely displeased.

“Ugh... If you wanted to go to class together, all you had to do was say so.”

“No, that isn’t it!”

“Then what is it?” she demanded, becoming noticeably annoyed.

Mushiki, however, was in no state to honey his words. “Sorry!” he apologized in a panic. “I—I don’t know what to do...!”

“...? What happened?” Ruri broke into a suspicious frown.

But Mushiki didn’t launch into an explanation.

The reason was simple—what happened next rendered any clarification unnecessary.

“Hey, Ruri. Good morning. You’re up early today. Impressive.”

Yes. Saika Kuozaki appeared behind Mushiki, waving to Ruri in casual greeting.

Of course, she was now properly dressed, having changed into her Garden uniform. It was a good thing they had prepared spares just in case.

“Ah! Madam Witch! Good morning!” No sooner had Ruri noticed her than she responded in kind. “...Huh?”

She must have realized that something was amiss partway through that greeting, as she looked back and forth between Mushiki and Saika.

The next moment—

“Whaaat?! M-Madam Witch?!”

As if having just seen a ghost, she let out a tremendous scream.

But that was only natural. After all, standing before her, side by side, were Mushiki and Saika, who were supposed to be merged into one.

Other students began picking up on her unusual behavior, pausing as they wandered by to ask what was going on.

“Eh? Huh? What happened?”

“Is Fuyajoh okay, you think?”

“Something’s definitely up with her.”

“Did Madam Witch get a haircut or something?”

“No, that energy... Maybe a hair accessory?”

The rest of the passing students quickly agreed with this assessment, and so they continued on their way to class. This kind of scene had all but become a regular occurrence at the Garden.

That being said, Mushiki didn’t want to attract too much attention, so he was grateful for his classmates’ misunderstanding. He motioned for the others to follow him into the shade of the trees off from the main path.

Having regained a modicum of composure, Ruri peered into his face with confusion. “D-don’t startle me like that... So what’s going on? Does this mean you and Madam Witch were able to separate yourselves, Mushiki...?”

“I don’t know what’s happening, either. We were like this when I woke up this morning...”

“Oh? So basically, when you rebooted, the bugs were fixed?” Ruri returned with a nervous frown.

Well, Mushiki couldn’t blame her for feeling confused. Even the parties directly involved couldn’t understand how it had happened. It was only natural that Ruri was at a loss.

“Sorry for surprising you,” Saika said, shaking her head in apology. “It’s my

responsibility to clarify how this may have occurred...but my memory is somewhat cloudy, I'm afraid. I've been like this since I woke up."

"...! Y-you've done nothing wrong, Madam Witch! Whatever the cause, isn't it a good thing that you're back to normal?!" Ruri replied in a fluster.

There could be no arguing with her on that point. One of Mushiki and Saika's main objectives had been separating their bodies.

But while their long-held wish had inexplicably come true, Mushiki found himself unable to rejoice.

After all, once two entities were merged, disconnecting them was no easy feat.

Saika herself had told him as much after they had become one.

It wasn't *impossible* per se, but even for someone as knowledgeable and as powerful as she, it couldn't be done without first meeting several preconditions.

That was why he had vowed to defend the world in her stead, to take on the mantle of serving as *Saika Kuozaiki* until she was fully prepared.

To think that it had now been accomplished, without them even knowing how...

"...What's the matter, Mushiki? You're back to normal, but you don't look happy about it."

His concerns, however, were quickly dispelled.

Wearing a mischievous smile, Saika gently stroked him beneath his chin, as if soothing a frightened puppy.

"Ah-ha-ha..."

Mushiki felt heat rise to his cheeks, overcome by her sweet touch.

Over the past few months, he had stared at this countenance in the mirror as if it were his very own.

But being face-to-face with her, experiencing her call to him and even reach out physically—that was an altogether different kind of stimulation.

Ruri turned a similar shade of bright red and covered her mouth with a hand. “W-whoa...,” she murmured under her breath, witnessing a beautiful exchange between the person she most admired and her own brother unfold.

“I certainly do have a few questions, but for now, let’s just rejoice in the fact that we can see each other again,” Saika said. “Or was I the only one looking forward to meeting you like this?”

“N-no... I’ve been waiting for this for so long...”

“Oh-ho. I’m honored. You’ve been a great help. If there’s anything you want from me, name it. It’s yours.”

“I—I...,” Mushiki stammered, his expression clouding over.

And yet—

“What are you doing out and about so early in the morning, Mushiki?”

At that moment, a voice sounded from behind, pulling his consciousness back from the brink before it could plunge headfirst into a mire of its own making.

“...!”

Startling, he stood up straight.

No, he wasn’t merely startled. He couldn’t possibly have failed to recognize who that voice belonged to.

He spun around in a panic, and there she was—Kuroe, watching on, unamused.

“D-don’t get the wrong idea, Kuroe...,” he began, before suddenly snapping his mouth shut.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t think of an excuse to extricate himself from this situation.

No, the source of his silence was much more straightforward. He had just realized how bizarre, how impossible, this scene ought to have been.

“K-Kuroe?! What are you doing here...?!” he cried out, his eyes opening as wide as humanly possible.

“What a thing to ask. I’m a student here at the Garden, on my way to class...,”

she answered in her usual matter-of-fact tone. She must have noticed the presence of the individual standing by his side, however, as she trailed off toward the end of her statement.

Saika offered her a cheerful wave. “Hi there.”

“Kuroe...? Is something wrong?” Ruri asked, watching all this from the sidelines.

But her reaction was understandable. After all, she believed that Saika and Kuroe were different people.

“...”

Kuroe, however, was under no such impression. Without saying a word, she peered intently into Saika’s eyes, then raised both hands to gently pat and pull at her cheeks.

“That tickles, Kuroe. Kuroe...?”

“...”

No, she wasn’t just touching. Gradually, Kuroe began to put more and more strength into her hands until she was all but kneading Saika’s cheeks with the precision of an udon noodle chef. From where Mushiki was standing, it looked like she was trying to unmask a cartoon villain.

“Ugh... Ngh...”

“K-Kuroe! What are you doing?!” Mushiki cried.

“You’ll tear Madam Witch’s cheeks off!” Ruri rushed in, pulling Kuroe away as if to stop her from ruining a culinary masterpiece.

But even after her hands were brought behind her back, Kuroe continued to twist and turn her fingers through the empty air.

“Mushiki, Ruri,” Kuroe murmured.

“Y-yes...?”

“What...?”

“What game are you playing this time? Make-believe with dolls that look just like Lady Saika?”

“Kuroe! She’s the real deal!”

“What’s going on with you?!”

Given how impeccably Kuroe normally maintained her calm and composed demeanor, her current behavior was simply unthinkable. Upon closer inspection, however, while her countenance remained the same as ever, her pupils were fully dilated, making for a terrifying sight.

But her reaction was entirely understandable.

Yes. Because both she and Saika were present in the same place at the same time.

They were both awake, both speaking.

Yes—for those in the know, this seemingly ordinary scene was utterly bizarre.

After all, Kuroe Karasuma was no more than an artificial body built to house Saika’s consciousness.

In other words, there were *two* Saikas here simultaneously.

“...Hmm.”

After a few minutes, Kuroe regained her composure. Once Ruri had let go of her again, she offered Saika a respectful bow. “Good morning, Lady Saika. I don’t believe I’ve seen you and Mushiki in each other’s company before.”

“Ah. Morning, Kuroe. I’ve kept you busy lately, it seems. Thank you,” Saika responded warmly.

At first glance, this was a truly uneventful sight. Indeed, to Ruri, who remained unaware of Kuroe’s true identity, it must have seemed like everything had returned to normal.

Mushiki, however, had been thrown into a state of utter confusion.

Not only were there inexplicably *two* Saikas here, but they were exchanging greetings with each other.

Could he still be dreaming? He pinched his cheek as hard as he could to wake himself up, wincing at the pain.

“...Mushiki. Can you tell me what happened?” Kuroe inquired. “Reversing the

fusion technique was supposed to be quite difficult, no?”

“Eh? Ah... Right. Actually...”

He explained the events of the morning as succinctly as he could.

Well, *explain* probably wasn’t quite the right word. *Summed up*, more like. When he woke up, he and Saika were lying next to each other. That was the whole story, that one sentence. He had no idea how it had happened.

“I see...” After hearing him out, Kuroe placed a hand under her chin and let out a low groan. “I think I get the gist of it. For now, let’s find Knight Erulka.”

“Knight Erulka?” Ruri repeated.

“Precisely.” Kuroe nodded. “Delightful though it is that Lady Saika and Mushiki have been separated, it’s quite impossible for a fusion technique to simply unravel by itself. No doubt some external force—a third party, perhaps—must have been involved. Since we don’t know what kind of impact the process might have had on them, it’s prudent to conduct a physical examination, at the very least. Of course, Knight Erulka doesn’t know that Lady Saika and Mushiki were, in fact, fused, so we will need to come up with some suitable pretext for this request.”

“...That’s true.” Ruri wore a bitter look. It was clear that she was ashamed of herself for not having realized this sooner. “I agree. What do you think, Madam Witch?”

“Yes, very well. I don’t feel like there’s anything physically wrong with me, but if you insist, I don’t see why not.” Saika nodded in response.

To this, Kuroe responded with an even deeper bow than she had a moment ago. “Thank you... But before we go any further, I would like to confirm one other thing.”

“Confirm?” Mushiki repeated. “Confirm what?”

“Yes.” Without answering, she took a quick step toward him.

“Eh?”

Then, in one swift, fluid motion, she grabbed him by the back of his head and pressed her lips up against his own.

“Wh-whaaat?!” Ruri screamed, wrenching the two of them apart. “Hey... where did *that* come from?!”

“Have you forgotten? This is how we initialize a state change,” Kuroe said as if the answer were obvious. “I’m merely checking if Lady Saika and Mushiki have been completely separated. Should nothing happen, so be it. But if Mushiki does change somehow in response to this stimulus, that may be a clue toward solving any outstanding issues.”

“...R-right. But still!” Ruri all but shouted.

However, she must have realized that Kuroe’s argument was a sound one, as she scratched the back of her head worriedly.

After a few moments, she looked up, her face filled with fresh resolve. “...O-okay. I’ll do it!”

“Even if someone other than me performs the procedure, I still have to activate the appropriate magic formula first. I don’t see the point in involving you unnecessarily—”

“C-come on! This isn’t about efficiency!”

At that moment, Saika spoke up with an amused look. “Hmm. In that case, maybe *I* should give it a try?”

“No!” Kuroe, Ruri, and Mushiki responded in perfect harmony.

Well, their words may have been identical, but their reasons for objecting were far from aligned.

“There’s no telling what might happen if you two exchange magical energy,” Kuroe explained.

“You can’t give yourself away so easily, Madam Witch!” Ruri burst out.

“I need a minute to prepare myself!” Mushiki stammered.

Just as the three of them were about to face off, Saika, wearing a cute smile, let out a light giggle.

At that moment—

An announcement sounded throughout the Garden over the campus’s PA

system.

“This is an urgent message for Headmistress Kuozaki. Please make your way immediately to the central command center. Erulka Flaera is waiting for you. I repeat...”

“Hmm...?”

The four of them each exchanged surprised glances at the strange timing of the call.

“Ah. Sorry for calling you over the PA system, Saika.”

Greeting them in the central command center was a petite girl dressed in a strange outfit: a white lab coat worn above light underwear.

Appearance-wise, she looked to be around thirteen or fourteen years old, but everyone in the Garden knew that was a far cry from her actual age.

Erulka Flaera—Knight of the Garden and a veteran mage second only to Saika.

“That’s okay. We were about to go and find you anyway.”

“Oh? Whatever for?”

“Let’s save that for now... First, tell me what’s going on here. Has something happened?”

“Ah...” Erulka looked their group over, twisting her lips into a forced smile. “I wasn’t expecting so many of you,” she said with a slight shrug.

Mushiki and the others shrank back.

“Ah... Sorry. We were on our way to class together,” he tried to explain.

“If we’re imposing, we can leave,” Ruri added.

“No, it doesn’t matter. Everyone will find out sooner or later. There’s no keeping *this* under wraps,” Erulka muttered, crossing her arms.

Mushiki sensed something ominous in her response, and his breath caught in his throat.

“Maybe you should just take a look for yourself, Sis?” Erulka called out into the empty air above.

“Got it!”

The next moment, a dainty girl appeared, floating over the huge table in the center of the room.

She had long, silvery-white hair and pale skin. A robe-like garment covered her astonishingly large bust.

“Silvelle...Sis,” Mushiki mouthed.

The girl spun gracefully through the air, giving him a joyous smile. *“Bingo! Way to go, Mukkie! It’s everyone’s favorite big sister, Silvelle!”* she said, pirouetting once more before landing softly before them.

Silvelle, the Garden’s administrative AI—or more accurately, the interface operated by the AI for interacting with students and staff. The incident with Clara had put her out of action for a while, but she had finally been reactivated just the other day.

Though she was a high-performance artificial intelligence in charge of the Garden’s security and administration, for some reason, she insisted on being treated as an elder sister figure. She wouldn’t even respond to users unless addressed as *Sis*. She was a far cry from what Mushiki might have expected from an AI.

“Play the video again, Sis,” Erulka instructed.

“Got it, Erulkie!” Silvelle answered with a dramatic flourish.

A sparkle effect filled the room as a three-dimensional image took shape over the table.

It was an image of the *outside*—a scene of craterlike marks scattered across the earth.

“...What is this?” Saika asked.

“A city in America,” Erulka answered, staring up at the projection. “In terms of location, roughly halfway between Baltimore and Philadelphia.”

“...Huh?”

Unable to grasp the implications of what he was seeing, Mushiki let out a low

squeak.

But one could hardly blame him for it. At the very least, the scene before them didn't resemble anything remotely like a city.

Perhaps having expected this response, Erulka launched into her explanation: "At oh four thirty hours this morning, an unknown magical reaction was detected in a city on the East Coast of the United States. This image was taken after we set out to investigate."

"Huh...?"

"What on earth...?"

Mushiki and the others stared up in disbelief.

"The whole city vanished in the blink of an eye," Erulka declared.

Chapter 3

You Wanted Everyone to ➤ Look like Maids, Right? ➤

“I like to think of myself as a tolerant and forgiving man... But there are three things in this world that I simply cannot abide.”

The mage Doug Willows leaned forward in his chair and flicked the metal lighter in his hand open and closed.

He appeared to be in his midthirties and was dressed in an expensive-looking dark-colored suit. His sharp eyes and sunken cheeks gave off a somewhat jittery impression.

“...!”

In front of him was another man, his mouth gagged and his hands and feet bound to a chair. Tears dripped endlessly down his cheeks, while from time to time, he squirmed about in his chair as if trying to communicate something with grunting, inarticulate cries.

Willows, however, was in no mood to listen to his pleas.

The interrogation was already over. The man was still here simply because he had failed to provide satisfactory answers. Willows saw no need to ask any him more questions at this point.

“The first is margarine on toast. The second, women reeking of overly pungent perfume. And the third...” Willows’s eyes sharpened like a razor’s edge as he snapped the lighter closed. “Incompetent subordinates who can’t even babysit a single child.”

The next moment, a single-layer world crest appeared at the tip of his hand, and thin threads of light extended from his fingertips, prompting the man

bound to the chair to recoil in horror.

“—!”

The man’s muffled screams echoed throughout the room, the legs of the chair beating violently against the floor in sync with his wild thrashing.

Willows’s first substantiation could inflict indescribable pain on a subject by damaging their nerve fibers, much like jamming a thorny stick directly into their body.

The mage, however, had no intention of killing this man.

He certainly had committed the gravest blunder, and yes, Willows was furious with him.

But Willows was a businessman first and a mage second. No matter how hot his blood was flowing through his veins, he never failed to consider the potential for profit and loss. While his subordinate needed to be punished to serve as an example, there was nothing to be gained by killing him in a fit of emotion. No, if Willows was going to take a life for his own temporary satisfaction, it would be more beneficial simply to work someone to death.

“...!”

At last, the man’s head slumped forward as he blacked out.

Willows was extremely fond of his ability—he could inflict pain worse than death, but so long as he didn’t push too hard, the subject wouldn’t expire.

Pain begot fear, and fear served as a potent leash. To maintain control over an organization like his, Willows firmly believed it was crucial to instill a sense of overpowering fear into his subordinates.

But that alone was insufficient. Slowly raising his head, Willows turned his gaze to his other lackeys waiting by the far wall.

“You still don’t know where my *lucky charm* has run off to?” he demanded.

“...W-we’re doing everything we can to find her...”

Willows detected a hint of terror in the voice of the man who’d stepped forward to answer him.

But that was to be expected. After all, they were the ones who had lost his lucky charm during the transfer—and she was of the utmost importance to Willows and his group.

To make matters worse, even the men he had sent to pursue her had vanished without a trace.

Had they been attacked? Spirited away? Or had they conspired to steal her for themselves? Whatever the case, the situation could hardly be any worse.

“Find her,” he growled, lowering his voice as he issued fresh instructions. “No one just *disappears*. Use any means necessary to locate her. The same goes for the traitor who tried to steal her away from me.”

“Y-yes...!” his subordinates replied in tense unison.

The next moment—

The door burst open, and a young underling leaped inside, visibly distressed.

“B-Boss! Emergency!”

“What happened?” Willows inquired in the coldest possible voice.

It would be a lie to say that he hadn’t been caught off guard, but he knew full well that if he let it show, it would serve only to chip away at his authority.

“We’ve found the lucky charm! And we know who attacked Jeff and the others...!”

“Oh. Good work... So where is she?”

The subordinate choked on his words for a moment before summoning up the courage to answer: “...The Garden...”

“What?”

“Void’s Garden...! Apparently, the knight Anviet Svarner whisked your lucky charm away...!”

“ ... ”

The room fell silent, as though it had been doused in icy water.

After a moment, a raspy chuckle emerged from deep in Willows’s throat. “...

The Garden, you say...?”

The mage-training institute Void’s Garden. If Willows and his stray mages were outlaws, then the Garden was essentially a police force—and the term *knight* referred to the highest-level mages in its ranks.

Most crucially, if the Garden had gotten involved, that meant *she* must have, too.

The headmistress of Void’s Garden, the world’s most powerful mage—the Witch of Resplendent Color, Saika Kuozaki.

“...”

His breath caught in the back of his throat just as that blighted name rose to the tip of his tongue.

At the same time, a dull murmur began to spread among his subordinates.

This wasn’t good. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then let out a feigned cough to get his underlings to focus. The men startled for a moment, straightening their backs as they snapped to attention.

So they were up against the Garden. To be honest, Willows would have very much preferred to steer clear of the likes of them.

But he couldn’t afford to back down in front of his men, no matter the adversary. Above all else, he couldn’t afford to lose his lucky charm now.

Staring down at his feet, Willows considered his next words carefully.

“Get me Zhu Yin.”

“...! Zhu Yin...?!” His underling’s eyes shot open in alarm.

But that, too, was unsurprising. Zhu Yin was the name of the infamous Taskmaster, a mage notorious among strays like these.

“You heard me. Tell her I don’t care how it’s done, so long she retrieves the lucky charm in one piece. I’ll give her whatever she wants in reward.”

“B-but she—”

“Are you going to make me repeat myself?” Willows warned with a piercing look.

“N-no...,” his subordinate groaned so softly as to be almost inaudible before rushing from the room.



“Let’s lay out all the facts,” Kuroe began quietly in the headmistress’s office on the top floor of the central school building.

There were only three individuals in the room: Mushiki, Saika, and Kuroe. Mushiki and Saika were facing each other on the sofas in the reception area, while Kuroe stood between them to the side.

A short time had passed since Erulka had filled them in on the events in America. By now, the students would be in the middle of class.

In light of the situation, it had been decided that Mushiki would take the rest of the day off.

Of course, he was well aware of the importance of daily lessons. There were simply too many things, however, that required his immediate attention.

Incidentally, seeing how there were topics that they simply couldn’t discuss in Ruri’s presence, they had urged her to return to class as usual... The mere thought of her brooding in the knowledge that the three of them were still together sent a chill down Mushiki’s spine.

“When you woke up in the morning, Lady Saika was lying next to you... Isn’t that right, Mushiki?” Kuroe asked.

“...Y-yes...,” he answered.

“You too, Lady Saika,” Kuroe asked, glancing in her direction. “Does anything seem out of the ordinary?”

“Hmm. When I woke up, I was in Mushiki’s bed. I’m afraid I don’t remember what I was doing before I fell asleep.”

“I see...”

Kuroe placed a hand under her chin and sank deep into thought. She looked to be having difficulty pinpointing any possible explanation.

Silence filled the office for a long, drawn-out moment. Mushiki, feeling somehow ill at ease, let his gaze wander.

“Oh?”

At that moment, his eyes met Saika’s, and she gave him a mischievous smile, winking across at him.

“...”

His heart seemed to skip a beat.

As if in a trance, he rose wordlessly from his seat and knelt before her.

“A-aaahhh, Saika...”

“What is it? Speak up.”

“W-will you—”

“That’s enough,” Kuroe interrupted, grabbing him firmly by the neck.

“Gah!” He wheezed at the unexpected shock. Furrowing his brow, he turned to face her. “What gives, Kuroe...?”

“That’s my line. What on earth were you about to do?”

“Fulfill my promise...of course,” he answered.

Kuroe kept her hand clamped on his neck, as if she had just found a pet cat up to no good.

Right. After learning that he and Saika had become one, Mushiki had made a request: *If we find a way to separate, give me the right to propose to you.*

Saika, he remembered, had answered him with a wry grin.

Ever since, that had been Mushiki’s ultimate goal.

“...”

Kuroe, perfectly aware of all this, heaved a deep sigh. “Of course I remember your promise, and I can’t say that the present situation doesn’t appear to meet our preconditions. However, we still haven’t gotten to the bottom of *how* you were separated, and we also have an ongoing crisis that must be addressed. Should we not take care of those matters first?”

“...!”

At this, Mushiki’s breath caught.

She was right, of course. Their agreement had simply been that he would have the right to propose to her—whether or not she accepted was a completely separate matter. Rushing ahead would be meaningless if it meant ignoring her feelings.

“Right. I guess I didn’t stop to think...”

“So you understand?”

“Yes. Besides, it would be rude to propose without getting a ring first, right...?”

“You *don’t* understand.” Kuroe let out a thin sigh. “Mushiki.”

“Yes. What is—”

Before he could finish speaking, Kuroe lifted his chin and planted a kiss on his lips.

“...?!”

Her movements were so natural that he froze in place, and his eyes widened the second he felt her skin against his own.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Saika, looking back and forth between the two of them with piqued interest. “Hmm...,” she murmured.

She must have found the sight curious, like watching on from the outside while she leaned in to kiss him herself.

But when it came to strange impressions, Mushiki was equally stupefied. Here he was, kissing the woman of his dreams while she looked on as an observer at the same time. Confusion, panic, and pleasure came together in his head, leaving him at a total loss as to what to do next.

“...Hmm.”

But soon Kuroe brought this to an end, pulling away with a low growl.

“Wh-what are you...?” he began, unable to get his words out clearly.

“Supplying you with additional magical energy, of course.” Kuroe nodded calmly. “The fact that you haven’t undergone a state change does indeed suggest that the two bodies have been separated... Although there is one more

thing for us to confirm,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“Assuming that the terms of our agreement have been met, to which of us do you intend to propose?”

Those last words came not from Kuroe Karasuma, but rather Saika Kuozaki.

“...”

Mushiki fell silent, at a loss for words.

That certainly was a conundrum. He mustn’t have been thinking straight in the face of Saika’s presence. But in actual fact, there were *two* Saikas here.

“...This *is* a very strange situation.”

Saika uttered those words, folding her arms as a grave expression came to her face.

“One possible explanation,” she continued, “is that when Mushiki and I were separated, my consciousness, stored inside the homunculus, was split in two. Although my gut feeling is that we’re dealing with something else here.”

“Indeed,” Kuroe answered. “It’s also possible that a new self came into being within the separated Saika Kuozaki, or within the artificial body Kuroe Karasuma.”

“Yes, it is. I consider myself the true Saika Kuozaki, of course—but assuming your theory is true, that I only came into the world this very day, it would be extremely difficult to prove that I’m not a fake.”

“The opposite applies for me. My only claim to authenticity is my own memories.”

With that, Saika and Kuroe turned their gazes to Mushiki.

“Mushiki, I want to hear your thoughts.”

“What do you think of this situation?”

“What do *I* think...?” he asked, looking back and forth between the two of them.

There were *two* Saika Kuozakis, no doubt about it. And what a wonderful thing that was. The fact that they were both here with him struck Mushiki as

nothing short of miraculous.

“I—I...I love you both equally...!”

“...”

After a moment of silence, Saika and Kuroe broke out into fits of laughter.

“Good grief. You never change, do you?”

“It’s a relief, at least, to see you acting like yourself.”

The two shrugged as they exchanged exasperated glances.

“Well, for the time being at least, we seem to lack much in the way of leads on that matter.”

“Let’s wait until we have Erulka’s test results. We can take it up again then.”

“...In that case, shall we turn to the disappearance of the American city?”

“Let’s.”

With that agreement, the atmosphere in the room turned suddenly tense again after momentarily easing.

Erulka’s report had described an incredibly unusual situation—the disappearance of an entire city. The media was in a frenzy over it, of course, with commentators throwing out all manner of speculation on TV and social media. Some claimed it was the result of tectonic movements, others that an experimental superweapon had malfunctioned, while yet others insisted that it was the initial phase of an alien invasion...

This frenzy, however, was far from unreasonable. From the point of view of those on the *outside*, such anomalies were simply unheard of... Or to be more precise, they had no memories of anomalies that were resolved within the window for reversible annihilation.

“I knew it... It’s an annihilation factor, isn’t it?” Mushiki asked solemnly.

Saika and Kuroe nodded in unison.

“Correct. *Annihilation factor* is a general term for any entity capable of destroying the world. It doesn’t refer just to monsters.”

“Indeed. Whatever this phenomenon may be, given its enormous impact already, there’s no reason at all why it shouldn’t be classified as an annihilation factor. In fact, the world system has already determined the window for reversible annihilation.”

“The window for reversible annihilation...,” Mushiki repeated as he lapsed into thought.

Kuroe nodded before adding some remarks of her own. “When a large-scale anomaly takes place, the state of the world immediately prior to its occurrence is temporarily saved. If the cause of the disturbance can be eliminated before time runs out, the damage sustained will be rendered as if it never happened. Such is the power of my world... Once the countdown is activated, there can be no questioning that an annihilation factor has indeed reared its head. However...”

“...We still don’t know what it is,” Mushiki finished for her.

The two of them nodded and lowered their eyes.

Right. That was what was so strange about this incident. Normally, when an annihilation factor of this magnitude appeared, the cause was readily apparent.

This time, however, seemed to be an exception.

There was no trace—not a single clue—as to what exactly had erased the American city from the face of the earth.

“The window for reversible annihilation is two hundred and forty hours. In other words, if the annihilation factor is not found and destroyed within approximately ten days, that scene will be recorded in the history of the world as fact.”

“*That* is something that must be avoided at all costs. Do you understand?”

“...Yes.”

“The Garden has already dispatched a team to investigate. They’ll report back as soon as they learn anything. Depending on the circumstances, this could evolve into a large-scale operation. Be on your toes.”

Just before Saika could chime in, the bell sounded across the Garden’s

campus to announce the end of classes.

A few moments later, they heard a deep rumbling approach from the corridor outside.

Then the individual responsible for those footsteps ground to a halt, as if to stop themselves from overshooting their destination. Mushiki heard them take a few steps back before they knocked gently on the door.

“Ah,” he murmured in a small voice.

From the knock alone, he could tell the precise identity of this sudden visitor.

“Come in,” Kuroe answered calmly.

The door swung open slowly.

“Muushiiikiii!”

As expected, Ruri’s voice resounded coldly from the other side as she stormed through the doorway.

“You bailed on me, yooouuu!”

“R-Ruri...y-you’ve got it all wrong...” He gawked.

Faced with the depths of her resentment and fury, he could respond only in the unsettled manner of a man caught cheating by his wife.

Watching on from the sidelines, Saika breathed a weak sigh before finally forcing a smile. “We’ve been waiting for you, Ruri. Come now, don’t just stand there. Take a seat,” she said, patting the space next to her.

“...Eh?!” Ruri exclaimed, her eyes all but popping from their sockets.

Just like that, the indignant aura enveloping her body subsided.

“U-um... You’re too kind...”

“Oh? You don’t want to? I won’t force you, in that case...”

“Th-that isn’t what I meant! It’s an honor, truly...” Ruri drew her shoulders in and trembled uncontrollably, her cheeks turning bright red. Sure enough, Ruri was like a completely different person when she was dealing with Saika.

“Then shall we have some tea? Kuroe, do you mind?”

“Understood.”

With a graceful bow, Kuroe saw to her preparations. It was truly remarkable how quickly her speech and mannerisms had reverted to those of her attendant guise.

Saika turned back around.

“Mushiki. Since you’re here, would you mind fetching some snacks from the break room?” she asked with a wink.

“...! O-of course!”

Sensing her implied meaning at once, he stood up from his chair.

The headmistress’s office was already equipped with tea and snacks, so the fact that she had asked him to leave for the break room could only mean that she wanted to help calm Ruri’s nerves in private.

And so, with an unspoken word of thanks, he stepped out of the headmistress’s office.

“Now, Ruri. Please, come over here,” Saika beckoned after Mushiki had left the office.

“O-of course...!” Ruri responded, shuffling over to her awkwardly like a windup doll. “E-excuse me,” she squeaked, sitting down at the indicated spot.

Yet even after taking her seat on the sofa, she remained stiff with tension, her back stretched as straight as it would go, her muscles quivering. If anything, Ruri seemed to be only barely touching the chair, ready to spring back up again at a moment’s notice.

Saika flashed her a wry grin. “There’s no need to be so nervous. You’ll make me feel on edge, too.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry...!”

Despite her apology, Ruri still couldn’t bring herself to relax. Every time Saika shifted in her seat, however slightly, a faint floral scent filled the air, further addling Ruri’s already befuddled brain.

Saika chuckled once more, before continuing calmly, “Apologies. I’m the one who asked Mushiki to skip class. There was something I needed to make sure of with him. Please, try not to take it out on him too much.”

“Ah... Right...,” Ruri began, letting out a weak sigh. “...I understand. I’m a mage, so I get that the situation is complicated. I know you won’t harm him, but...er, how should I put it...?” She stopped there, unable to put the vague feeling in her heart into words, her fingertips trembling in her lap.

With a divine smile, Saika leaned over to pat her gently on her head.

“...! M-Madam Witch...?!”

“You really do love him, don’t you?”

“...”

She choked up, unable to look back into those eyes that had seen through her so clearly.

“...Yes.”

That one word was enough to open the floodgates of her heart.

“You’re right, it’s true... I thought I’d been able to put it behind me after everything that happened at the Ark... But, well, whenever I’m near him, I just can’t get my thoughts across properly,” she admitted in the smallest of voices. “I wish I could be more honest with myself...”

Just then, they heard the click of a lock.

Looking up in surprise, Ruri found Kuroe arranging a pair of teacups on the table. Had her hand slipped, perhaps, while setting them down?

But what really caught Ruri’s attention was Kuroe’s expression—she was looking around furtively, carefully scanning her surroundings.

“Kuroe? Is something wrong...?”

“...Perhaps I’m merely imagining things. My apologies,” she said with a polite bow before continuing to set out the tea.

Ruri blinked in suspicion for a moment—yet the sensation of Saika gently stroking her hair once again took hold of her.

“It’s all right. I’m sure Mushiki understands how you feel. With time, I hope, you’ll find a way to better express yourself to him.”

“Yes...”

Ruri trembled with emotion, overwhelmed by this show of kindness from the individual she admired most in the world.

“From this day forward, I’ll never wash my hair again...”

“That won’t do. Be sure to keep it clean, now,” Saika said with a warm smile.



The next morning, Mushiki awoke in his room in the boys’ dormitory. Only after checking himself over in the mirror to make sure that nothing was amiss did he reach for his cell phone.

The cause of his separation from Saika remained unknown. Given the possibility that abnormalities might yet present themselves, Kuroe had advised that both he and Saika check themselves over thoroughly each morning.

After recording his observations, Mushiki thought back to the events of the previous day.

By the time he had returned to the headmistress’s office with cakes and sweets, Ruri’s mood had completely recovered. He couldn’t have been more impressed by Saika’s ability to so deftly manage the situation.

Afterward, they had discussed the mysterious annihilation factor again, this time with Ruri. With that, the meeting was adjourned.

It was a worrisome predicament, but without knowing the underlying cause of the disappearance, there was nothing they could do at the moment. As such, their best course of action was to go about their lives as usual while they waited for the investigative team’s report.

And so Mushiki began the day in the boys’ dormitory, as per usual.

He readied himself for school the same way he always did, exchanged greetings with his fellow dorm mates, and set off for the central school building.

“Hmm...”

The moment he stepped outside, dazzling sunlight flooded his vision.

Squinting slightly, he followed the familiar path through the school grounds.

At that moment, he was struck by a peculiar thought.

He had already been merged with Saika when he first joined the Garden—and so this was his first time making his way to school purely as himself, Mushiki Kuga.

And at the same time, another matter came to mind.

“Oh. Morning, Mushiki.”

“...!”

Mushiki startled, grinding to a halt in response to the voice calling out to him on the main street.

He glanced over his shoulder to find exactly who he had suspected it was—Saika herself.

“Saika...”

Now that they were separated, encounters like this were all but inevitable. Nonetheless, the notion of going to school with a uniform-clad Saika was too much for his brain to handle.

The moment he laid eyes on her, he felt like dropping to his knees in supplication.

“That’s enough.”

Just before he could get carried away, Kuroe raised a hand to stop him.

Perhaps unsurprisingly (though Mushiki had failed to consider the possibility), Saika wasn’t alone.

“Were you planning on proposing to Lady Saika just now?”

“N-no? I mean, you stopped me, and...”

“Really?”

“It’s true. I was just going to ask her ring size; that’s all.”

“So you’re laying the groundwork, I take it?” Kuroe observed in a low voice.

A short distance behind her, Ruri and her roommate, Hizumi Nagekawa, came into view.

“Ah. Good morning, Madam Witch. You too, Kuga, Karasuma,” Hizumi said in greeting.

“...”

Mushiki responded with a light wave of his hand.

Ruri, however, fixed him with an impenetrable stare, not so much as uttering a word.

Then just like that, she approached at a leisurely pace.

“Ruri...?” Mushiki asked, tilting his head in confusion at this unusual display.

She continued to watch him with a vague look, squinting slightly like a predator picking up on the scent of potential prey. And then—

“You’re adorable today, Mushiki. Are you asking me out? I’m going to *devour* you. Grrr.”

“...Eh?” Mushiki gasped, unable to believe that she had said all that with a straight face.

He wasn’t alone. Hizumi, Saika, and even Kuroe reacted with wide-eyed astonishment.

Ruri, however, furrowed her brow in confusion, as if she couldn’t comprehend why everyone was gaping back at her.

“...What’s wrong? Is there something on my face?”

“No, that’s not it... Ruri? What was all that about?” Hizumi asked nervously, sweat all but dripping down her cheeks.

“What was what...?” Ruri repeated, her head cocked to one side. “I was just saying hello to my dear brother... Oh, maybe I wasn’t intimate enough? You’re probably right. You’re so perceptive about these things, Hizumi. Yes, I need to play it cool.”

With those words, she tugged at Mushiki’s arm, rubbing her cheek against him and burying her face in his clothes while breathing heavily. Her actions

were positively passionate—they could hardly be any less *cool*.

“R-Ruri...?! Hey... What are you...?!”

“Aaauuuggghhh! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushikiii!”

“Ruri?! C-calm down...!”

Having worked herself into a frenzy, she all but crushed him in a tight embrace, leaving him feeling as if he were at the mercy of a sheet of sandpaper.

The next moment—

“This is an urgent message for Headmistress Kuozaki and all Knights of the Garden. Please report to the central command center immediately. I repeat—”

“...!”

As if reenacting the events of the previous morning, an emergency summons sounded over the PA system.

“...Hah?”

Mushiki was greeted with Anviet’s dubious gaze when he entered the command center with Saika.

Then again, that could hardly be helped. After all, Ruri was clinging so tightly to him that she had practically become part of his outfit.

There was no other way to describe it. Her hands were wrapped around his shoulders as she sniffed his neck, letting out what sounded like an intoxicated whimper every now and then. Her legs were hanging limpy and had been scraping against the ground for a good few minutes now as he dragged her along. If they had crossed a sandy path, she would no doubt have left two long trails like a set of train tracks.



“What the hell, Fuyajoh...? Have you finally cracked?” Anviet demanded uneasily.

“How rude. Is that mouth of yours only good for insults and slander?” Ruri shot back. The discrepancy between her words and her body language was just too much.

Incidentally, only four of them—Saika, Kuroe, Mushiki, and Ruri—had responded to the PA announcement. Not wanting to interfere in official knight business, Hizumi had gone on to class as usual.

Technically, Mushiki should have been in much the same position, but since the cause of his separation from Saika remained unclear, Kuroe had advised them to stay close together, considering the risk of recombination... But perhaps more to the point, Ruri simply refused to let go of him, so in a way, he was being treated as little more than an accessory.

“...You ain’t s’posed to bring outsiders to an emergency meetin’,” Anviet continued, looking Mushiki over.

At this, Erulka, standing just a short distance away, gave an exaggerated shrug. “That goes for you, too, no?”

“Ugh...”

His response was understandable. After all, Surya was clinging to his back in much the same way Ruri was to Mushiki’s.

“I didn’t have much choice! I told her to wait, but she wouldn’t listen!”

“Papa? You said you wanted to be with Sue...”

“I did *not*!”

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a pair of midwife toads,” Erulka muttered in exasperation.

The next moment, a woman hiding in a corner of the room let out a raspy chuckle. “...Samba toads... Tee-hee-hee... I’d love to see that...” She laughed, her shoulders quivering slightly with each breath. Her voice was so soft that you might have missed it if you weren’t paying attention.

Then again, in terms of appearance, she didn't exactly blend in with her surroundings.

She was tall of stature, with long silver hair that almost reached the ground, and she was dressed in a tight black dress covering every square inch of her body. But while she might have been trying to hide her skin, she couldn't possibly conceal the sheer magnitude of her bust.

And that wasn't all. Though shrouded behind her long bangs and her thick-framed glasses, her dignified countenance was a mirror image of Silvelle's.

Knight Hildegarde Silvelle—the creator of the Garden's management AI (the other Silvelle), and also the model for its visual interface. She must have responded to the emergency announcement as well.

Crossing her arms, Erulka turned her attention to Hildegarde. "...The midwife toad is known for carrying its eggs on its back. Not for dancing."

"Eh? Oh... U-ugh...", Hildegarde stammered, her cheeks turning slightly pink as she slouched down even more than she already was.

She didn't seem embarrassed at being called out for making a mistake so much as being overheard talking to herself.

"Anyway, let's get started, Hilde. Come over here."

"Eh...? Um, I-I'm fine here..."

"Enough. Get over here."

"Eeep..."

Realizing that she couldn't refuse, Hildegarde did as instructed but promptly hid herself behind Saika because she was feeling self-conscious about everyone looking at her. And so the third samba toad made its grand entrance.

"Hey. Morning, Hilde."

"Good morning, Li'l Saika... You smell nice today...", Hildegarde returned with an awkward smile.

Though she probably wasn't trying to come across this way, her words, gestures, and even facial expressions couldn't have been more furtive.

She tended to be shy around strangers, but once she got to know someone, she didn't hesitate to fully open up. She even greeted Mushiki and the others, though she didn't make direct eye contact with them.

"Li'l Ruri, and Mushiki, too... Ah... You aren't wearing your maid outfit today, Kuroe?" She sighed, looking somewhat disappointed.

Kuroe was currently in her Garden uniform. Though there were some minor differences, such as her stockings and the realizing device at the end of one of her shoulder epaulets, her outfit was much the same as Saika's and Ruri's.

"I'm a student at the Garden, so naturally, I wear the uniform when attending classes."

"I—I see..." Hildegarde slumped.

"...? Do you like maid outfits, Hilde?" Mushiki asked vaguely.

Hildegarde averted her gaze. "...I-it's not that, not exactly... I know they're supposed to be a work uniform, but they're so frilly and cute. You can't deny they're the perfect intersection of functionality and style... Just looking at them makes my heart flutter... I like the cosplay aspect of them, too... But ultimately, nothing beats the classic monochrome style... Ah, I wish the girls' uniforms here were modeled after maid outfits..."

"Sounds like you *do* like them." Mushiki chuckled in response to this impassioned speech.

Only then did he notice that Kuroe was narrowing her eyes in a squint, her brow furrowed.

"Kuroe? You don't need to make that face..."

"No, that isn't it."

"Huh?" Mushiki blinked.

After a long moment, Kuroe shook her head. "...No. Don't mind me."

"Huh? Are you sure...?"

He tilted his head to one side in uncertainty, but Erulka took this as her cue to set the conversation back on track.

“Ahem. Shall we move on?”

“Ah...”

“Apologies. Continue,” Saika said.

Erulka heaved a weary sigh. “Sorry for calling you here day after day, Saika.”

“I don’t mind. More importantly, what’s happened? You didn’t summon our knights for no reason.”

“...Have you determined the cause of yesterday’s phenomenon?” Kuroe asked.

Mushiki caught his breath. At the same time, Ruri buried her face in his neck, breathed in with a thin, hiss-like inhale, and let out a long sigh. Mushiki could feel his neck growing warm.

“I’m afraid not... Sis?”

“Here I am!” answered a voice as the AI Silvelle appeared over the table.

Hildegarde, meanwhile, wore a look of marked displeasure. While she had designed the AI herself, she simply couldn’t stomach that it had chosen, entirely of its own accord, to model its appearance after her.

“Silvelle’s back, my cute brothers and sisters! Oh, and look! Anvi and Sue are here, too! And Hildegarde... Hi there.” Her tone turned more formal toward the end, and she bowed.

Hildegarde drew her eyebrows together in a frown and ran a hand through her hair. “I knew it! Why am I the only one who gets the cold shoulder...?!”

“I’m just kidding. You’re my creator, but I’m still your older sister. You’re an only child, so you learned how to develop AIs because you wanted an older sister of your own, right?”

“Why do I feel like you’re rewriting my past...?” Hildegarde murmured, but Silvelle didn’t seem to be listening.

The AI twisted her body through the air, extending her arms toward those gathered around. *“Now, let’s wrap up this sisterly chat and move on to the main affair. Take a look at this.”*

The next moment, a three-dimensional image was projected above the table.

“Is that...?”

Mushiki raised an eyebrow in consternation.

Before them was a scene of what must have been a foreign city—but just like the day before, it looked like entire sections of it had been wiped out.

“That doesn’t look like the same place as yesterday...”

“Hmm. Early this morning, we witnessed the same phenomenon we did yesterday in southern Australia,” Erulka explained. “The scale is considerably smaller than last time, but there’s no mistake that we’re dealing with the same kind of thing. Other institutions are making inquiries, too...but as of this moment, we haven’t been able to confirm the nature of the annihilation factor.”

“I see...,” Saika said with a worried groan.

“I don’t mean to take this lightly, but without any leads, there is no course of action for us to pursue,” Erulka continued, her expression grave. “The fact that this has occurred twice in as many days suggests that it may happen again tomorrow, and beyond that, too. We’re going to have to raise our alert level.”

“...How ironic. We have to wait for an annihilation factor to strike again in order to identify the root cause,” Kuroe observed.

Her expression remained as stoic as ever, but Mushiki detected a faint hint of regret in her tone of voice.

“There’s nothing else we can do,” Erulka muttered. “I’m not taking it easy thinking we can undo all this down the line, but our options are limited right now.”

“Yes, I know. Apologies for speaking out of turn.”

“Never mind. We’re on the same page.” Erulka shook her head before looking up to address them all.

“That’s all we have to report. There’s no telling what will happen next. Stay on your guard.”

“...Yes.”

Mushiki could do little more than nod.

Saika and the other knights were similarly frustrated at being unable to respond to the crisis, their expressions reflecting a quiet determination to sharpen their fangs in preparation for the coming battle.

“I guess we’re done here. I’m headin’ back,” Anviet declared. With a wave of his hand and a deliberate yawn, he turned to leave.

“Papa? Don’t you want to take a nap with Sue today?”

“I didn’t say nothin’. Besides, I’ve got a class to teach.”

...Well, with Surya clinging to his back, he didn’t exactly make an impressive exit.

“We should go. Daily training is a necessity for any mage,” Kuroe urged.

Mushiki gave a slight nod in response and left the command center with Saika and Kuroe, dragging Ruri behind him.

Likewise, Hildegard stuck close to Saika, trailing along in her wake.

“Hilde...?” Mushiki asked.

“There’s no need for you to come with us, Knight Hildegarde,” Kuroe pointed out.

“Oh... U-um... It’s kind of calming, being with Li’l Saika...,” she answered with an awkward smile.

Kuroe heaved a sigh of resignation. “I don’t mind per se, but Lady Saika has a lesson to attend, so please be on your way before we reach the classroom.”

“O-okay... But it’s nice...holding on to someone’s back... Maybe I should hire someone to hide behind...?”

“Be my guest. But, Knight Hildegarde, won’t you have difficulty hiding behind someone you don’t know?”

“...Ugh...,” she mumbled, unable to refute her. “Li’l Saika...won’t *you* be my wall? I’ll pay you ten thousand yen a day...”

“Please don’t solicit the headmistress for your odd jobs,” Kuroe shot back, unamused.



Then, the following morning—

“Hmm...”

A light electronic sound beeped repeatedly from Mushiki’s bedside, rousing him from his dream.

There could be no mistake—it was his cell phone. But that wasn’t his alarm.

“...!”

Slowly, as his mind cleared, he realized that his phone was ringing.

Sitting up in a hurry, he reached for the device to answer the call.

“H-hello...?”

“Good morning, Mushiki,” came Kuroe’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Morning. What’s up, Kuroe...? I didn’t oversleep, did I?”

“No. I’ve received an urgent message from Knight Erulka, and I thought it best to keep you informed.”

“A message?”

“Yes... It seems that our disappearing phenomenon has struck again.”

“...”

Mushiki’s breath caught in his throat.

The scenes that he had witnessed over the past two days flashed again before his eyes.

“...I see... Where was it this time...?” he asked warily.

Kuroe’s response was calm yet firm: *“Ohjoh City in Tokyo. In other words, right here.”*

“...Kuroe!”

Mushiki rushed out of the boys’ dormitory when he spotted Kuroe at their

arranged meeting place, calling out her name.

“Sorry I’m late!” he apologized, darting over while still buttoning up his uniform. He’d rushed to get dressed after their phone call, so his clothes were heavily disheveled, while his hair was similarly unkempt.

“No. I apologize for waking you so early. Saika and Ruri haven’t arrived yet, so please, take a moment to fix your appearance. Panicking won’t change anything.”

“S-sorry...,” he apologized again, straightening out his uniform.

“Hmm...?”

He blinked a few times as a vague sense of unease came over him.

In contrast to his own attire, Kuroe’s outfit was flawless—yet she was dressed not in her Garden uniform but rather the maid uniform she wore when attending Saika.

“So you’re wearing that today, Kuroe?”

“...? *Today?*” She cocked her head to one side as if failing to understand his point.

“Ah, no. It’s fine, really. If we’re facing an emergency, I suppose we wouldn’t be going to class anyway...”

He stopped himself there—or more precisely, he was interrupted.

All at once, a mysterious figure fell down from overhead, clinging tightly to his back while snuggling up to him in a passionate embrace.

“Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki! Mushiki—”

“Wha—?! R-Ruri?!” he cried out in alarm.

He might not have been able to see who had snuck up behind him, but that voice and unshakable grip were unmistakably his sister’s.

“Good morning, dearest brother. I’ve missed you so much these past twelve hours! You missed me, too, right? Admit it, you were lonely. If time apart nurtures love, then the moment we finally meet is like a charged burst of energy, wouldn’t you say? It’s so absurd how they keep the boys’ and girls’

dorms separate, don't you think? They should have a separate dorm for siblings in the middle."

Despite going on and on, the fact that her tone of voice was much the same as usual only added further fuel to Mushiki's sense of dismay.

"Huh...?" he murmured, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

Ruri's clothes fluttered into the corner of his vision; they were an altogether different color than her regular Garden uniform.

Or to be more precise—

"Ruri? Why are you dressed like Kuroe...?" he wondered aloud.

Yes. Ruri was presently wearing clothes in the exact same style as Kuroe's attendant uniform—in other words, a maid outfit.

"Huh?"

Ruri, however, responded to him with a vacant stare. "Of course they're the same. This is our uniform," she said, as if the answer was obvious.

After a short pause, she jumped up in mild surprise. "What's that? You don't want me to wear ready-made clothes? Are you saying you want to dye me in *your* colors? So you're secretly super possessive? You want to skip classes today to go shopping? Oh my gosh! You want to introduce me to the latest fashions...? A god-tier update? My bank account is ready!"

"C-calm down, Ruri. Y-you're strangling me..."

"Oops. All this power is just welling up in me!"

Mushiki tapped Ruri softly on the arm, and she loosened her grip with a wry laugh.

With his airways cleared, fresh oxygen poured into his lungs. He breathed a sigh of relief.

But his last question still weighed on his mind. After taking a moment to catch his breath, he continued, "...Ruri. Did you just call that a *uniform*?"

"Yes. So what?" she shot back.

She didn't seem to have the faintest shred of doubt about what she was

wearing.

That was when everything came together. Kuroe's reaction just before had been out of the ordinary, too. He had assumed that she had a specific reason for donning her attendant attire, but she didn't seem to consider her outfit in any way unusual.

At that moment, something inside him clicked. Yes, just yesterday a certain someone had mentioned maid clothes...

"Hey there. Morning, everyone. Sorry I'm late."

All at once, a fourth voice sounded from the direction of the girls' dormitory, interrupting his train of thought.

But he could be forgiven for his confused response. After all...

"S-Saika...?"

"Hmm? Ah, morning, Mushiki. What's the matter? Is there something on my face?"

Saika Kuozaki was dressed in the exact same style of maid outfit as Kuroe and Ruri.

"...Eh...?"

No sooner had his retinas locked on to her than he choked, nearly collapsing on the spot. The only reason he didn't fall flat on his face was that Ruri was still supporting him from behind.

"Whoa. Are you all right, Mushiki?" Ruri asked excitedly. "Does this mean you want to entrust me with your body and soul?"

Her words, however, flew in one ear and out the other.

A maid outfit—in other words, a servant's work clothes. That was hardly the kind of attire to grace the body of an individual of Saika's high status.

But for some inexplicable reason, these two circles—that by all rights, should never have overlapped—were perfectly united.

"Thank...you..., " he wheezed, tears of joy streaming from his eyes.

"...? Whatever for?" Saika asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

Overcome with gratitude, he was unable to respond.

“Who knows?” Kuroe answered.

“Tch... What the hell is all this?”

Having made his way to the western edge of the Garden after receiving Erulka’s report, Anviet contorted his face in horror at the sight laid out before him.

But that was only natural. After all, part of the wall encompassing the Garden had been sheared away, exposing a view of the outside world.

No. Technically, it was incorrect to describe all this as the *outside*. The cityscape that should have extended beyond the campus grounds was nowhere to be found, as if it had been erased from the face of its earth. For quite some time now, the sounds of ambulances and fire trucks and the propeller blasts of news helicopters flying overhead had been continuing nonstop.

“...”

His expression stern, Anviet walked right up to the gaping hole in the wall.

He traced his fingers over the cut—so smooth that the edge could have formed a razor-sharp blade.

The Garden’s outer walls were built to withstand extreme physical and magical assaults. Not even an annihilation factor launching a direct attack would have an easy time breaking through. And of course, even if the walls did get destroyed, it was hard to imagine how anything could do that so *cleanly*.

He had read the reports on the incidents in America and Australia, but seeing the damage up close really drove home the exceptional nature of whatever they were facing.

While it was most certainly an annihilation factor, it evidently wasn’t some rampaging monstrosity. Whatever it was, no one had caught direct sight of it. No, this was unmistakably a special type of annihilation factor.

“It’s so smooth...”

This comment, of course, came from Surya, gently stroking the cross-section of the wall. She hadn’t left Anviet’s side for days.

He'd gotten up early this morning to investigate the site, but the next thing he knew, she was already standing by the door, waiting for him.

"...Geez."

By now, he was used to the girl following him around, and he knew full well that there was no use complaining. That being said, her presence did help to ease the tension of the moment. Anviet let out a weak sigh, scratching the back of his head.

Come to think of it, so many uncanny occurrences had taken place over the past few days—all since he had helped rescue Surya.

There was Surya herself, who claimed to be his daughter, and the mysterious disappearance of cities the whole world over. Something was off with Saika, too; and on top of that, Ruri had been acting weird since the day before... Well, maybe he was overthinking that last one. She had always been more than a little out there.

"..."

This, however, was undeniably out of place.

Turning around, he scrutinized his surroundings with a dark glower.

A mass of teachers and students had gathered to see what was going on, just as he had.

The female students, however, were dressed not in the Garden's regular uniform, but fluttering apron-like dresses—the spitting image of what Saika's attendant liked to wear.

Perhaps noticing his gaze, a group of female students cautiously approached.

"Good morning, Mr. Svarner."

"...Hey. Whaddaya doin'?"

"We're here to help the teachers set up temporary wards to keep outsiders from accidentally wandering in."

"Ah..." He nodded in understanding.

The wards shielding the Garden were still active, so the campus was still

hidden from outside observers. If, however, someone was to wander blindly through the freshly carved gap in the wall, those protections would have little effect. Given the number of rescue teams, construction workers, and media reporters scouring the area outside, it made sense to take extra precautions.

Yes, *that* part he could understand.

He narrowed his eyes. "...So what's with those ridiculous getups? The cultural festival's still a ways off, you know?"

"...?"

The girls tilted their heads, looking down at their clothes.

Anviet sincerely doubted they needed to put on a fancy outfit just to set up and maintain a few wards. Yet judging by their reactions, they didn't have the faintest clue what he was talking about.

The boys, in contrast, were dressed in their normal uniforms and looked just as curious as Anviet. Seeing his reaction, they all seemed to breathe sighs of relief.

"I knew I wasn't crazy...," one of them murmured.

Anviet, however, pursued the matter no further—not because he decided it wasn't worth investigating, but because he had bigger fish to fry.

"Oh? And you are...?"

"Where did you come from? Not the *outside*...?"

The group of girls had spotted Surya, still running her hand across the gap in the wall.

"Ah. She's—"

But Anviet was soon interrupted by another girl: "Oh, so you're Surya? She's fine."

"Haven't you heard? She's Mr. Svarner's illegitimate daughter."

"Ah... Huh... So that's her."

"Sorry, Mr. Svarner. I didn't know."

The girls each gave him polite nods.

Anviet, however, shot them all a piercing glare.

“How many times do I gotta say it?! I ain’t got no illegitimate kid! I don’t have *any* kids!” he cried out in frustration.

He was sick of denying it, but if he said nothing, his silence would only sound like an admission.

A wave of sorrow washed over the girls’ faces.

“How awful... Even if you don’t want to acknowledge her, how can you say that right in front of her?!”

“That’s right! Maybe you just don’t remember?”

“I mean, Mr. Svarner *is* quite the ladies’ man, right?”

“Can you tell us your mother’s name, Surya?”

There was no end to it. Anviet could feel a vein throbbing on his forehead.

“You lot...,” he growled.

But he didn’t have a chance to say any more.

Why? Because Surya turned to the student who’d asked that last question.

“My mama’s name...is Sara,” she declared in a loud voice.

“...Eh?” Anviet moaned, feeling as if his heart had been crushed underfoot.

“Whoa... This is incredible.”

After Mushiki somehow managed to regain his composure, he, Saika, and Kuro made their way to the western edge of the garden, which looked over the missing city.

Walking with Ruri clinging tightly to his back was quite difficult, so Mushiki had asked her to let go. She had resisted at first, but when he told her that he couldn’t see her cute face, she shyly released him from her grasp. Now she gave him a wink each time their eyes met.

Several teachers, administrative staff, and students had already gathered at the western edge of the Garden where the outer wall had been neatly gouged

out. They were busily inspecting the damage and setting up fresh wards.

“...It looks like what we saw in the previous reports,” Kuroe observed.

“Indeed. This is clearly the same phenomenon we’ve seen the past few days.” Saika nodded.

“Yes. But how could it strike this close...? Just what’s going on here...?” Ruri added. “Mushiki! Mushiki! Look over here! Don’t you think I’m adorable?!”

All three of them, dressed in matching outfits, wore stony-faced looks, though Ruri struck a cute pose at the end.

“You’re adorable,” Mushiki answered in a strained voice.

“We’re dealing with an annihilation factor... One that clearly affects the laws of nature,” Kuroe said, narrowing her eyes. “Though the range of destruction is considerably more restricted than that of a havoc-wreaking dragon or kraken, annihilation factors like this one often exhibit *unique* effects when certain preconditions are satisfied. Without deciphering the rules that govern them, it’s impossible to grasp their true nature... This is a most vexing class of annihilation factor.”

She paused for a moment, her maid uniform fluttering as she turned to Mushiki. “Given its magnitude, the annihilation factor may well be exerting effects throughout the world as we speak. Even the smallest of details could prove vital, Mushiki. Does anything seem to you in any way out of the ordinary?”

“Ah... Well...I can think of one thing.”

Kuroe raised an eyebrow in surprise. “What is it? You’ve noticed something unusual?”

“I mean, it’s your clothes. Why are you all wearing those maid outfits?” he asked, pointing to each of them in turn.

Mushiki may have been absolutely floored by the destructive power of Saika in a maid costume (he still couldn’t look at her for long without losing his senses), but he was sure that it was out of place on her.

And it wasn’t just Saika and Ruri—all the female students were dressed

similarly. More importantly, *none* of them seemed to have the faintest doubt about what they were wearing.

“...You’re saying our clothes are *strange*?”

“Maybe not *strange* exactly... But up until yesterday, everyone was wearing normal uniforms, right? And now this? It’s like what Hilde said yesterday has come true.”

“Knight Hildegarde...” Kuroe broke into a slight frown.

But before she could utter another word—

“Kuoza^{kiiii}!”

A furious howl sounded from close to the gap in the outer wall.

“Mr. Anviet...?” Mushiki’s eyes widened in surprise.

Yes. Directly in front of them was Anviet, screaming at the top of his lungs.

The four of them gaped as he confidently marched over and then, without a moment’s hesitation, grabbed the collar of Saika’s blouse.

“You... How much do you know about all this?!” he snarled with a vicious glare.

“What—”

“Mr. Anviet...?!”

Ruri and Mushiki gawked at this aggressive display, but Anviet paid them no heed.

“What the hell is goin’ on here...?! How does she know about Sara?! Just what are you keepin’ from me?!” he screamed in anguish.

“...”

For a second, both Saika’s and Kuroe’s breaths caught.

But that lasted only for an instant.

“I’m sorry,” Saika responded, regaining her composure. “I don’t quite follow. Could you let me go?”

“Cut the crap... You think this is all some big coincidence?! If this is connected

to what happened back then, who am I s'posed to turn to other than you?!"

Far from letting go, Anviet tightened his grip around her collar, pulling her even closer. Given their differences in height, he was *this* close to lifting her off the ground.

But that was as far as he could go. Behind him, another figure tugged at the hem of his shirt.

"Papa...? You don't *really* want to do this, do you...?"

"...!"

It was Surya. Anviet glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, gritting his teeth and letting Saika drop back down to her feet.

"Saika!" Mushiki hurried over to support her.

"...Ah. Thank you. I'm okay," she answered, coughing faintly.

"...Damn it all to hell..."

Anviet continued to glare at her for a long moment, then spun around and stormed off. Surya offered them all a quick bow before chasing after him.

"...What was that about...?"

"Who does he think he is?! Showing such disrespect to Madam Witch...!"

In the aftermath of the altercation, Mushiki and Ruri fumed with shock and indignation.

Kuroe and Saika, however, wore troubled frowns, as if a fresh possibility had just come to mind.

"...Rewriting past events, manipulating people's memories and perceptions... granting their desires... Sara... It can't be..."

"Kuroe...? What is it?" Mushiki hazarded to ask.

After a long moment, she raised her face. "...There are a few things I need to look into. I can explain later."

"...Yes. Let's check it out." Saika nodded with the same degree of solemnity.

Mushiki and Ruri, not used to seeing them act so serious, exchanged

concerned glances.

“Um... Who is this Sara person...?” Mushiki tried asking.

“Sara Svarner,” Kuroe answered with a slow nod. “Knight Anviet’s late wife. She passed away close to a century ago.”

“Papa...?” Surya hesitated as they headed back into the Garden.

“...Shuddup,” Anviet responded brusquely.

He didn’t mean to be dismissive or cold, but his head was in such a mess that he couldn’t put his thoughts in order.

“Damn it all... What the hell is goin’ on...?” he spat, running a hand through his hair.

After a brief pause, he spun around, facing Surya.

“...Who the hell *are* you? I know we’re not related by blood... So how do you know Sara’s name?”

“Sara...is Sue’s mama. We were always together. She always talked about you, Papa...”

“Enough... I saw it with my own eyes... Sara’s gone. Dead... Or are you tellin’ me you came here from some other world?” he demanded with a piercing glare.

Surya, however, wasn’t in the slightest bit intimidated. “It’s okay. It will all make sense soon. That’s what you wished for, Papa...”

“Wished...?”

He scowled at her, unable to make heads or tails of anything she said.

The next moment, he was struck by a severe migraine.

“Gah...?! Huh...?!”

He keeled over, clutching his head in pain.

That was when he realized that something was off... This was no ordinary headache. No, it was more like an enormous amount of information was being injected into his mind.

“...—...”

Several minutes later, he slowly pulled himself up, his whole body coated in a thick layer of sweat.

“...What...the...?”

Then in utter confusion, his voice a wretched mess of rage and despair, he cried, “What the hell are all these memories...?!”



“...”

After the commotion at the western edge of the Garden, Kuroe made her way alone to the library’s underground archives.

This was where the Garden stored most of its prohibited books and important documents, and it was off-limits to students. It also comprised the uppermost level of the underground containment facility that Clara Tokishima had attacked two months ago, but it had since been restored to its original condition.

Fortunately, no materials were lost or damaged during that incident. However, the attack couldn’t have been brushed off, considering that Clara had stolen something of even greater importance—the heart of the Ouroboros.

Kuroe took a seat in the farthest corner of the archive and placed her hand on a computer terminal to log in.

“Authentication: Kuroe Karasuma.”

A small electronic tone resonated in response as a beam of light passed first through the palm of her hand, then scanned her eyes. Finally, after she’d finished entering a complicated password, a three-dimensional projection in the shape of a book appeared before her.

This terminal for viewing electronic materials was completely independent of any external network. Only Saika Kuozaki herself had access to it, along with her attendant, who, for official purposes, had been granted special permission.

Why? Because these records contained crucial information on the twelve mythic-class annihilation factors that Saika had subdued in ages past—information known only to her.

“Access data on Annihilation Factor No. 010,” she murmured.

With that command, the three-dimensional book projection flipped to the relevant page.

“...”

She spent a full ten minutes skimming through its contents. As she did, the vague possibility that had occurred to her just a short while ago was replaced with gut certainty.

“Could she have—”

But at that moment, her cell phone began to vibrate in her pocket.

Someone was calling her. She glanced down at the screen and saw that Erulka’s name had popped up.

“Hi, Karasuma here. How can I help?”

“Mm-hmm. We’ve just confirmed another disappearance, this time in Eastern Europe. It’s considerably smaller in scale compared to the previous three cases, but the phenomenon seems to be increasing in pace. It might only be coincidence that it struck once per day up till now.”

“...”

Kuroe gritted her teeth and furrowed her brow... As an attendant, she was supposed to maintain a calm demeanor at all times, but with everything going on, no one could blame her for letting her emotions show now.

There was still no hard evidence. But if her suspicions were correct, there was no time to waste. And so, in that split second, she made up her mind.

“I have a request, Knight Erulka.”

“Hmm? Go on.”

“...Please secure Surya, with all haste. Treat her with the utmost courtesy, and do not convey so much as a hint of hostility to her.”

“Surya... Ah, the girl. Why?” Erulka asked, her skepticism readily apparent.

But that was only natural.

Forcing herself to keep from letting the panic in her heart show, Kuroe continued, “She may be an annihilation factor... Or rather, there’s a possibility she may have fused with one, much like Clara Tokishima.”

“...What?” Erulka muttered in disbelief. *“Are you saying she pretended to be Anviet’s daughter to infiltrate the Garden?”*

“No. Her intentions may not be hostile. However, if my suspicions are correct, her actions could have a profound effect on the world, whether she wants to or not.”

“What do you mean? Which annihilation factor are we talking about?”

“The object-type annihilation factor Fortuna, the Wheel of Fate—a device for fulfilling wishes.”



“This is an urgent message for Knight Anviet Svarner and Sue Svarner. Please report to the central command center immediately. I repeat—”

For the umpteenth time, an emergency announcement blared over the Garden’s PA system.

Saika was busy scouring the Garden’s western area—and it wasn’t just her. Glancing around, she could see countless students searching to and fro, all of them searching for Anviet at Erulka’s instruction.

To be more precise, it was Surya whom they really needed to find, but only a select few individuals—such as Saika and Ruri—were aware of that.

At any rate, the Garden was essentially in the middle of a manhunt, and as a student herself, Saika was involved in the search. Mushiki and Ruri had wanted to accompany her, but after she told them it would be more efficient to split up, they reluctantly complied, albeit with a great many tears.

The fact that there was no end to the announcements over the PA system meant that neither Anviet nor Surya had yet been located.

Knowing Anviet, it was difficult to imagine him purposefully ignoring an urgent summons.

That being the case, it was likely that he was beyond the PA system’s reach...

unless he really was intentionally ignoring the summons for some reason.

If it was the former, they still had time. But if they were dealing with the latter scenario...

“Anviet...,” Saika murmured sorrowfully when she spotted a figure on the path farther ahead.

“Hmm...?”

She was struck by a sense of unease, which prompted her to look up.

The reason was simple—that figure was utterly out of place in its surrounding environment.

She was a tall-statured woman—probably over two meters, by Saika’s estimate—and though it wasn’t the season for it, she was dressed in a long coat and wide-brimmed hat pulled low over her eyes. From beneath her hat, tufts of long hair swayed in the wind.

At the very least, she wasn’t a student. But Saika had a hard time imagining anyone like her among the teaching or administrative staff, either.

Most peculiar of all, however, was that no one else seemed to be paying any attention to her.

“...Miss?” the woman called out as she strolled Saika’s way. “Do you have a moment? You wouldn’t happen to have seen a young girl, around ten years old, would you? She has beautiful blond hair, and her name... Yes, her name is Surya.”

“...How do you know about Surya?” Saika repeated, instantly entering a state of heightened vigilance.

Perhaps sensing her reaction, the woman let out a low growl. “Oh dear... Has the Garden already discovered her secret, then? Well, I suppose there’s no helping it. Plan B, it is.”

Lifting the brim of her hat with a gloved hand, the woman revealed her face.

“ ... ”

Saika lost herself in the sight of those poisonous crimson lips, of the eye

staring back at her from between the bandages wrapped around her head.

The search had been going on for nearly two hours.

“Did you find Mr. Anviet?!” Mushiki called out the moment he entered the central command center.

Erulka, Kuroe, and Hildegarde turned to face him, the last woman visibly flinching, startled by his volume.

“Not yet... Though in terms of location, perhaps we *do* know where he is,” Erulka said with a bitter frown.

Mushiki tilted his head to one side, not having expected such an evasive response.

While out looking for Anviet and Surya, he had received an urgent call from Kuroe, telling him to hurry to the command center. Naturally, he had expected them to have made some progress, but it seemed that Anviet’s whereabouts remained unknown.

Incidentally, Ruri was trailing along behind him. She wasn’t physically attached to his back this time, but she was so close that it made little difference.

At Saika’s insistence, the siblings had split up to look for Anviet—but that hadn’t stopped Ruri from bumping into him at the earliest opportunity.

“What a coincidence, dearest brother. Or is this fate? Destiny perhaps?” she had said when he pointed it out. He knew there was no use in pursuing the matter any further.

“Um... What do you mean, *in terms of location*?”

“Take a look,” Kuroe urged. “We just received a communication. Silvelle—Sis—if you would?”

“*On it!*” Silvelle’s voice rang out through the empty air as she appeared hovering over the table.

Next to her was an image of Anviet with Surya by his side.

“...! Is that—”

Mushiki startled as the Anviet in the video sharpened his gaze, as if to lock on to his target.

“I challenge you to a duel, Saika Kuozaki of the Garden... Let’s have us a fair and reasonable contest.”

“What—”

“The place will be the Mishiroyama Trainin’ Ground. No rules, anythin’ goes. The outcome’ll be decided by death or surrender. If you ignore this request...” He paused for a moment, glancing down at Surya. *“I’ll destroy the world with the annihilation factor Fortuna... You catch my drift?”*

“...”

Mushiki’s breath caught in his throat.

“...Destroy the world...? He can’t mean that, can he...? That’s the exact opposite of the Garden’s role. Besides, it can’t be that easy to just—”

“It is,” Kuroe interrupted with a shake of her head. “If indeed the Fortuna has been revived, it is certainly within the realm of possibility.”

“S-seriously...?”

Mushiki had no idea what exactly the Fortuna was or its potential for destruction, but Kuroe would never say something like that unless she absolutely meant it. He could feel his forehead breaking out into a cold sweat.

Erulka wore a troubled look as she stroked her chin. “...I can’t begin to imagine his motives, but if he has the Fortuna, we can’t *not* comply... Saika. You all heard him. We need her to strike him down without mercy.”

“Th-that’s right!” Ruri chimed in. “For someone with his losing streak, he really ought to know his place! We’ll just have to show him what’s what!”

Erulka, however, tilted her head to one side. “...And where *is* Saika? Wasn’t she with you?”

“Huh? We split up. I thought she had come back here...?” Mushiki answered. Just then, an alarm began to sound throughout the command center.

“What on earth is that?” Erulka demanded.

“We’ve received an external communication—from Saachie,” Silvelle said. As the self-proclaimed older sister of all humanity, she treated even Saika herself like a younger sibling.

“From Saika...? Pass it through, Sis,” Erulka instructed.

“Got it!”

The next moment, a grainy video started playing in the center of the room.

“...?!”

One look was enough for Mushiki to furrow his brows in worry.

And he wasn’t alone. Ruri, Erulka, Hildegard—even Kuroe—were visibly shocked.

But that was to be expected. After all, the image showed Saika tied to a chair with a rope.

“Greetings, people of the Garden. My name is Zhu Yin,” came a guttural voice as a woman Mushiki had never seen before entered the frame. *“Your compatriot is in my custody. If you want me to return her to you in one piece, you will give me the girl called Surya.”*



Chapter 4

You Want Sue to

◀ Stop, Right...? ▶

“...Excellent.”

After receiving the latest report on the operation, Willows looked up at the ceiling and put his hands together with a slow clap.

“Yes, there’s no virtue quite like being quick at your job. Life’s short. Wrapping things up pronto is basically an investment in life itself.”

His subordinates, waiting at the side of the room, offered up picture-perfect smiles.

“Exactly right.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“...”

...They understood nothing. Willows breathed a thin sigh as he turned to his dim-witted lackeys.

He wasn’t really angry. Loyal subordinates had their uses, no matter how dull. They had dedicated their lives to serving him, irreplaceable though they ought to have been. Any competent underling realized this sooner or later. They either left him, started asking for a higher wage, or sought to usurp his throne. Of course, any who tried that last option ended up biting the dust.

In any event, he had just received good news. There was no need to be so negative.

Yes. Just a few moments ago, Zhu Yin had sent word that she had taken a young woman at the Garden hostage.

“So where is Surya now?”

“I have the girl locked away underground.”

“I see. Smart thinking.”

Willows had set up base in a property owned by one of the many dummy companies affiliated with Salix. The ground floor was the same as any old building, but the basement served as a warehouse for storing illicit goods. Needless to say, security was extremely tight. If some powerless girl had been taken captive, there was no way she could hope to escape.

“But *locked away*...that’s a bit harsh. I love Surya like my own daughter. She’s my *lucky charm*. She brings enormous benefit to the organization.”

Willows twisted his lips into a smile.

Yes, Surya truly was a *lucky charm*. Since the moment she came into the world, she had possessed a unique magical property. She was extraordinary, bringing blessings and good fortune to those around her by her mere presence.

It was largely thanks to her that Salix, originally just a ragtag assemblage of low-level stray mages, had grown to its present size and scale.

“Now then, shall we? My beloved princess awaits.”

“Of course... This way,” one of his subordinates said, motioning down the corridor.

With a grandiose nod, Willows headed toward the elevator, taking it to the basement level.

“...Oh dear.”

No sooner had the doors slid open than a woman called out to him.

She was more than two meters tall, and the upper half of her face was covered in blood-soaked bandages. She left a haunting impression; that was for sure. In fact, several of Willows’s subordinates were so overwhelmed by her presence that they had been trembling since the moment they’d first laid eyes on her.

“Greetings, Mr. Willows. How can I help?”

“I’m not about to rest on my laurels if you’ve retrieved my overly spirited little girl.”

“Oh my. Aren’t we impatient?”

Zhu Yin’s crimson lips contorted in a smile as she pointed to the door at the end of the corridor.

Willows waved a hand in front of the authentication device installed in front of the door, waiting for it to unlock with an electronic beep.

Then he reached for the handle and opened the door.

“Long time no see, my sweet little Surya. Where have you been? I was so worried about you. I couldn’t sleep at night, always—”

He stopped midsentence.

The reason was simple—Surya wasn’t in the room.

“...Huh?”

For some reason, a young woman in a maid outfit was staring back at him.

He saw his reflection in the depths of her vivid iridescent eyes.

At that moment—

“Kyaaarrggghhh!”

Consumed by fear, Willows let out a bloodcurdling scream without hesitation or restraint.

“B-Boss...?” called one of his subordinates.

“Oh my. What’s this, all of a sudden?” Zhu Yin approached with an inquisitive glance.

All this, however, was to be expected. Up until now, Willows had always presented himself as his organization’s arrogant kingpin, but now here he was, wailing at the top of his voice as his legs quivered like a newborn fawn’s.

But Willows didn’t have the luxury of keeping his cool.

After all, standing right in front of him was—

“...S-Saika...Kuozaiki...!”

It was she, the Garden's very own Madam Witch, who was hailed as the strongest mage in the whole world.

"What...is *she* doing here...?!"

"Now that you mention it, I *have* seen her before...!" one of his subordinates murmured behind him.

Zhu Yin, however, seemed somehow puzzled. "Who? I feel like I've heard that name somewhere."

"Are you an idiot?! Have you been living under a rock?! It's Saika Kuozaki!" Willows wailed.

"Ah. Well. Aren't you a stray mage?" Zhu Yin shrugged, as if to ask what the big deal was.

This, however, was no time to get into an argument.

Willows stormed right up to Zhu Yin, sweat dripping all over his face. "She's the Garden's headmistress! The strongest mage in the whole damn world...! What is *she* doing *here*...?! I thought you brought Surya back?!"

"I never said that. I couldn't find the little girl, so I took a student hostage instead. Did your lackey not explain that to you?" Zhu Yin answered, motioning to one of his subordinates.

"Eh...?! Y-you did...?"

The underling in question averted his gaze, like a rat cornered in a dark alley. Willows fixed him with a piercing glare.

But now wasn't the time to dole out punishment, no matter what the level of incompetence. Fighting to keep his racing heart under control, he turned back to Zhu Yin.

"...Y-you haven't done anything else, have you...?"

"No."

"G-good..."

"Besides sending a threatening video message to the Garden a short while ago."

“Whaaat?!”

Willows fell to the floor, slamming his fists on the ground in despair.

“If this lady is as important as you say, perhaps this is a good thing? You *do* want your Surya back, I assume?”

“Of course I do! She’s like a magnet for good fortune! The whole group needs her! But do you know the lengths we went to trying to stay under the Garden’s radar?!” Willows howled in abject despair.

Zhu Yin, however, brushed off his concerns. “Calm down. I’m a professional. You’re paying me to do a job, and I’ll do it.”

“How many times do I have to say it?! We’re past that point now! Nggghhh...! That damn girl is eyeballing me...! We’re finished!”

The next instant, Willows fell silent—because Zhu Yin had reached out abruptly and grabbed him by the neck, tilting his face upward.

“And *I* told *you*. Leave it to me.” A single, bewitching eye peaked out from behind the bandages wrapped around Zhu Yin’s face.

“Ah...”

The moment Willows locked eyes with it, he froze, utterly petrified.

Only then did he realize his mistake. Yes, he had unraveled in front of Saika Kuozaki, but this other woman here also possessed supernatural abilities beyond the imagination.

“Be a good boy, now.”

Zhu Yin curled her crimson lips into a soft smile as she released Willows from her grip and closed her eye.

With that, he crumbled to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“Hah...hah...”

“B-Boss! Are you okay?!”

Supported by his men, Willows somehow managed to pull himself to his feet.

“...Y-you’ve sown the seeds of all this! You’d better make sure you’re the one who reaps it...!”

“I know.” Zhu Yin nodded.

Trying his best to look anywhere other than at her or Saika Kuozaki, Willows beat a hasty retreat.



The Garden’s central command center had descended into pandemonium.

But that was only natural. After all, Anviet Svarner, one of the Garden’s highest-ranking mages, had just demanded a duel with Saika.

To make matters worse, Saika herself had been kidnapped, and the culprit was demanding that they hand over Surya in exchange for her safe release.

They were facing not one crisis here but two, each with conflicting demands. Both sides wanted what the other had; the Garden, caught in the middle, could satisfy neither.

“Let’s calm down, everyone,” Kuroe declared, catching their attention with a clap of her hands. “There is nothing to be gained by panicking. Let’s address our problems one by one.”

“Kuroe is right.” Erulka stepped in. “Never forget the most important qualities of any good mage. No matter what happens, one can’t allow oneself to give in to hysteria.”

At this warning, the others all took a moment to calm themselves. For his part, Mushiki placed a hand on his chest to calm his racing heart.

Frankly, he had been unable to think straight ever since learning that Saika had been kidnapped. If, however, they were to react without thinking, they might end up exposing her to even greater danger.

“...What do we do now? We can’t respond to Mr. Anviet’s demands without Saika, and we can’t negotiate with Saika’s kidnapper without Surya, who’s with Mr. Anviet,” he pointed out.

Erulka lapsed into thought for a long moment. “...Our first priority should be dealing with Anviet.”

“May I ask why?” Kuroe asked.

“Simple process of elimination... Do you really believe Saika could be taken captive? She must be up to something. Of course, it’s imperative that we determine her whereabouts, but if we have to prioritize one of them, then Anviet must come first. He’s in possession of an annihilation factor, after all.”

“...I see. That is a good point.” Kuroe nodded.

Mushiki sensed, however, a faint trace of agitation behind her calm exterior. Perhaps he was the only one who had picked up on it.

“Then our first course of action should be to send a messenger to Knight Anviet,” Kuroe continued. “We must tell him that Lady Saika is willing to accept his challenge, while also buying us some more time.”

“Yes. But who will go?” Erulka asked. “There’s no guarantee he’ll be in a frame of mind to negotiate. It would be a dangerous task.”

“Yes. Leave that to Mushiki and me,” Kuroe declared.

“What...?! Wh-why you two?!” Ruri exclaimed.

“I am Lady Saika’s attendant, while Mushiki is on good terms with Knight Anviet. We are the best choice,” Kuroe explained matter-of-factly.

In truth, Mushiki wasn’t particularly close to Anviet...but, well, they could hardly tell everyone that he had been filling in for Saika these past few months.

As far as Ruri was concerned, however, that was neither here nor there.

“You can’t send Mushiki off without me!”

“Having a knight take part in any negotiations would risk complicating the situation even further,” Kuroe pointed out.

“But still...!”

Erulka raised a hand to silence her. “While the others are buying more time, we’ll need you to locate Saika...I take it?”

“Precisely,” Kuroe answered. “How about it?”

Erulka paused to size her up for a long moment, before nodding in agreement. “Very well. We’ll leave Anviet to you.”

“Very good. Then we’ll leave at once... Let’s go, Mushiki.”

“Right!”

“Ngh! Ugh!”

With Ruri’s muffled cries behind their back, Mushiki and Kuroe left the command center.

“...Is there any special significance to the Mishiroyama Training Ground?” Mushiki asked.

“It’s one of the Garden’s external training facilities,” Kuroe answered, taking the lead. “It has no shortage of different environments to fight in, and it’s equipped with various accommodation facilities, too. I can think of no better place to lie in wait for an approaching enemy.”

“I see... Then let’s get on our way.”

“Yes... Though I do have one concern.”

“What...?”

Kuroe checked to make sure no one was in earshot before he responded, “I worry that Lady Saika may truly have been taken captive.”

“What...?”

Mushiki was left at a loss for words.

Kuroe glanced over her shoulder at him. “Of course, under regular circumstances, it would be quite impossible for her to fall into an enemy’s hands. As Knight Erulka said, it would be natural to assume that she is merely feigning capture. However, in light of the current situation, I can think of no reason why she would allow herself to be taken willingly.”

“Th-then what are you suggesting? What kind of mage could snatch her and get away with it...?”

“A good question. There should be no one in this world so capable... Unless, of course, she cannot employ her magic to its fullest.”

“...She can’t use her magic?” Mushiki repeated dubiously, when all of a sudden, it dawned on him.

It had been several days since the two of them had been separated, but come to think of it, he had never actually seen her use any magic during that time.

Yes, she hadn't needed to use any spells in the course of her everyday life, but she had also sat out the practice classes claiming that she was feeling under the weather. Mushiki had put that down to the shock of their unexpected separation, but could it be that she was actually hiding her magical ineptitude...?

"...I should have considered this possibility. Your bodies have indeed been separated, probably as an unintended consequence of the Fortuna. However, there is no guarantee that Lady Saika has been returned to her prefusion state."

"But...but she never said anything!"

"That's what concerns me. Lady Saika was acting extremely normal...as if she herself didn't realize her situation to begin with."

"How could she not notice...?" Mushiki asked in doubt.

But Kuroe left it at that. Perhaps she wasn't entirely sure herself or had decided they simply didn't have the time to address that question.

"...In any event, there's nothing more we can do right now. We must find Knight Anviet and inform him that Lady Saika is currently unable to fight him. Our only option is to seek his help rescuing her...or at the very least, to convince him to wait until the other situation is resolved."

"Do you think he'll believe us...?"

"..."

Kuroe pulled a taut face.

Anviet was unaware that Mushiki and Saika had fused *and* that Saika wasn't in peak condition. There was a very real possibility he would think they were lying.

On top of that, there was something else bothering Mushiki—a problem lying at the very heart of their situation.

"...Why," he asked with a troubled frown, "would Mr. Anviet even do something like this?"

It was less of a question and more an expression of doubt. Even after everything he had seen, he couldn't bring himself to believe that Anviet was responsible for the present crisis.

But perhaps the only way they might learn his motives would be to ask him directly. Mushiki didn't expect Kuroe to actually respond to his question.

But to his surprise, she did precisely that after a long, heavy silence.

"...I can think of one reason Knight Anviet might go this far..."

"What...?" Mushiki asked.

Kuroe hesitated for a moment. "I mentioned earlier that his wife passed away a hundred years ago."

"Yes... So...?"

Kuroe took a deep breath. "...I'm the one who took her life," she said as Saika Kuozaki.

"What...?!"

Mushiki fell silent, dumbfounded.

"Why would you...?"

"..."

Kuroe averted her gaze.

Mushiki had to take a deep breath to calm his racing heart.

Her confession was completely shocking. But it was precisely at times like these that one had to keep their cool.

He had to trust her, as much as it was possible.

"...Can you tell me...? About what happened back then?"

"Yes..."

Kuroe let out a thin sigh to brace herself before unleashing the floodgates—and out came the root cause of the century-long grudge between Saika Kuozaki and Anviet Svarner.

"...And that's what happened."

“...”

After hearing Kuroe through to the end, Mushiki was left momentarily speechless. He had never imagined that Saika and Anviet could have such a complicated past.

“Initially, Anviet bore a strong grudge against me. I wouldn’t be surprised if he contemplated seeking revenge.”

“...So is he planning on using the Fortuna to kill you?”

“No... If that were the case, he would simply have to wish for my death with it. The fact that he’s gone to this extent must mean that he wants to defeat me with his own two hands... He’s challenged me to duels before, and I’ve brushed him off each time. He no doubt realized that by taking the world hostage with the Fortuna, he could force me to face him seriously.”

“...”

Mushiki remained silent, unsure how to respond.

“Anyway,” Kuroe continued, reorienting herself. “We need to find him as quickly as possible. Once he knows the person he wants to exact revenge on has been taken captive, he will no doubt shift his approach. Yes, he may have his doubts, but—”

At that moment, however—

“No,” Mushiki interrupted before he truly knew what he was doing.

“Mushiki...?” Kuroe called back uncertainly.

“S-sorry,” he said, pulling himself back together. “That came out of nowhere...”

“No. Let’s hear it,” Kuroe said, staring deep into his eyes.

There was an urgency to her voice, quite unlike her usual calm and composed demeanor. Perhaps she herself wasn’t entirely sure of Anviet’s intentions.

Nor could Mushiki be entirely certain.

But after learning of their past, he’d been struck by a vague suspicion.

“...I have an inkling,” he began, his eyes burning with determination. “Can you

let me handle it?”



“...”

Anviet stood with his arms crossed in a remote corner of the Garden’s Mishiroyama Training Ground, waiting impatiently for his opponent to show herself.

The training grounds occupied a vast area. They were much wider than the practice facilities in the Garden’s western precinct, and they bore a multitude of visible scars. Given that they were utterly deserted, they might even be mistaken for a ruin at first glance.

Despite the early summer season, the air here was cold, likely due to the high altitude. The wind racing through the mountains roared in the background.

Yes, this was the most fitting location for his showdown with Saika.

Anviet had politely instructed the local administrative staff and the students visiting the site on an intensive training camp to leave. Now, only he and Surya remained.

“Papa...?” She spoke up nervously.

A faint crack tore through his composure as he turned his gaze to face her.

“...What? If you’re hungry, go back to your room.”

But Surya shook her head. “Maybe you want Sue to stop...?”

“...”

He fell silent, unable to respond immediately to her quiet appeal.

“...Sorry,” he said at last. “I didn’t wanna drag you into this...”

He gritted his teeth, his forehead creasing in a deep line. He realized he was clenching his fists so tightly that his nails were digging into the palms of his hands.

“...That’s one thing I can’t ask. I won’t be satisfied till I beat the crap outta her...”

“...Papa...,” Surya called out mournfully.

The next moment, two familiar faces appeared in the far entrance—Saika's attendant, Kuroe Karasuma, and the new transfer student, Mushiki Kuga.

Anviet looked them over one at a time, letting out a dismissive snort.

"So you came. And? Where's Kuozaki? She's low, but she ain't the kind to sneak up on an enemy, is she?"

The two new arrivals exchanged silent glances. After a short pause, Mushiki alone stepped forward.

"...Whaddaya playin' at? Just so we're clear, I ain't gonna answer your questions. And I'm not here to negotiate. If you wanna stop me, you'd better send Kuozaki to finish me off."

"..."

Mushiki took a long, deep breath, then opened his eyes.

"I'll face you."

"...Hah?" Anviet couldn't believe his ears.

Mushiki took another deep breath, then—

"I'll defeat you in Saika's place!" he declared at the top of his voice.

"...Do you realize what you're sayin'?" Anviet growled, staring daggers at Mushiki.

Any weak-willed individual would have fallen to their knees at the intensity of his stare. And indeed, Mushiki's heart was racing, and sweat was trickling down his forehead and back.

But then he clenched his fists so hard, they were practically shaking, and he returned Anviet's fierce gaze.

"Yes. If you want to fight Saika, you'll have to beat me first."

"You've gotta be kiddin' me," Anviet barked in indignation.

Mushiki, however, poured all his strength into his voice, declaring, "Because I'm in love with her!"

“...Hah?”

Anviet’s jaw dropped.

Maybe Mushiki was imagining things, but for a second, Kuroe seemed to fidget in mild discomfort a step behind him.

A few seconds later, Anviet grimaced in confusion.

“...What the hell are you blabberin’ about, Kuga? Did you hit your head or somethin’?”

“Only during my training.”

“You did, then?”

His spirits dampened, Anviet scratched the back of his head and heaved a tired sigh.

“Just get the hell outta here. I mean it. I ain’t got time for your jokes.”

“What would you do...?”

“Eh...?”

“What would you do if I challenged someone *you* cared about to a duel...? Say, Sara?”

“...What did you just say?” Anviet growled, his brow creasing in suspicion.

Judging by his expression, he was struggling to gauge Mushiki’s true intentions—and was no doubt taken aback to hear Mushiki uttering the name of his late wife.

“What do you think you’re playin’ at?”

“...I know that was rude of me. But there’s no other way to say it.”

“What’s your point?”

“If *you* were in that situation, would you be able to stand by and watch?”

“...”

Anviet’s breath caught.

“You couldn’t, right? Neither can I... There are things I can’t give up, just like

you can't!" Mushiki declared.

Anviet's expression twisted in rage. "You're out of your mind! Kuozaki's infinitely stronger than you!"

"You're saying if I'm not strong enough, I shouldn't try to protect the person I love?" Mushiki shouted back.

"...Tch!" Anviet's face contorted in indignation.

"...Haah."

After a long moment, he breathed a resigned sigh. "...I ain't gonna hold back," he muttered with a sharp look.

Mushiki had expected no less.

Among the teachers at the Garden, Knight Anviet Svarner might have come across as the most intimidating and foulmouthed—but in truth, he was the kindest of them all.

There was no way he could make light of someone's determination and resolve to stand firm in defense of the people they loved.

"Of course. You wouldn't be able to beat me if you did."

"...Haah..."

Anviet responded to this provocation not with mockery or scorn but with a long, tired exhale.

And so marked the beginning of their duel.

All at once, an enormous amount of magical energy began to swirl around Anviet, flashes of blinding lightning crackling through the air.

"Fine. I'll make this quick. Stay on your toes, unless you wanna end up a charred piece of nothin'."

Anviet dropped low, twisting his body as if drawing an invisible bow.

"Third Substantiation: Vasaras!"

With those words, a beautiful golden world crest, a radiant three-layered halo, unfolded behind his back.

At the same time, boundless magical energy enveloped his body, coalescing into a suit of golden armor... This was his third substantiation, with the rank of assimilation, in which a mage armored themselves in their own substantiation magic. Only truly experienced mages were capable of pulling off such techniques.

In the face of Anviet's godlike presence, Mushiki instantly realized that he was facing an all-powerful behemoth.

The next moment—

“...Here goes.”

It took only a split second. Probably not even that.

“Huh...?”

Anviet was more than ten meters away—and then he was right in front of Mushiki in the blink of an eye.

Clad in this third substantiation, the man looked as though he had transformed into a bolt of lightning.

“Vajdola: Deva Sarya!”

Before Mushiki could possibly hope to respond, four trident vajras appeared before him, unleashing simultaneous lightning attacks.

“...”

A tremendous burst of electricity exploded in the center of the training arena.

Kuroe furrowed her brow as she watched from the sidelines.

With perfect timing, Anviet emerged from the blast, clad in his suit of golden armor.

“...He ain't dead. Still, get him to the infirmary. I tossed the doctors out, but you should be able to patch him up yourself, at least,” Anviet said, his voice tinged with guilt.

Despite both parties having agreed to the duel, he wasn't the kind to take pleasure in beating down a weaker opponent.

Kuroe, however, narrowed her eyes. “...What is the meaning of this, Knight

Anviet?”

“Hah? Kuga strutted out here himself. He ain’t got no right to complain.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” she continued with a shake of her head. “It’s unbecoming of a mage to turn their back on an opponent when the battle is still ongoing.”

“What...?”

Anviet raised a brow in suspicion, when—

A beam of light shot through the cloud of dust in the center of the arena, aimed straight for his head.

“—?!”

Anviet quickly dived out of the way, his armored body shimmering.

The attack, however, was more than enough to send a shiver down his spine. Anviet spun around in shock.

A moment later, someone emerged from the settling dust.

“Kuga...what have you done...?” he murmured, unable to believe his eyes.

He couldn’t fathom how Mushiki had managed to survive what should have been a fatal blow. But he was even more taken aback by the boy’s appearance.

That response made perfect sense.

After all, Mushiki was now clothed in what looked like a sorcerer’s robe and was holding a huge staff topped with an orb in the shape of the earth.

Above his head, three world crests combined in the shape of a witch’s hat shimmered in all the colors of the rainbow.

Yes. There were small differences here and there, but there could be no mistake—these second and third substantiations belonged to none other than Saika Kuozaki, the Witch of Resplendent Color.



“...Is your head on straight?”

A short time earlier, just before Mushiki and Kuroe reached the training

grounds...

After hearing Mushiki's *idea*, Kuroe stared back at him in disbelief.

"*You're* going fight Knight Anviet in Lady Saika's stead...? You do realize you would be going up against an S-class mage, don't you? It wouldn't be a fair match," she pointed out bluntly.

Mushiki, however, flashed her a wry smile. "I know. But if I were Mr. Anviet...I wouldn't accept any attempt at negotiation or appeasement. I wouldn't be satisfied unless Saika confronted me head-on."



“But you are *not* presently Lady Saika.”

“...I know that.” Mushiki shook his head. “But something tells me he’ll still face me if he thinks I really mean it.”

“...And what basis do you have for saying that?”

“I mean, I don’t have any real evidence or anything. But...”

“But?”

“Maybe because we would both be fighting for those we love.”

“...”

“That hurts, Kuroe. Kuroe?” He squirmed as she tugged on his earlobe.

“This is no time for jokes.”

“I wasn’t joking,” he insisted. “...Besides, I don’t honestly think Mr. Anviet *wants* to harm the world.”

“Hmm...” Kuroe hesitated. She must have suspected as much, too.

“Mr. Anviet isn’t the kind of person to destroy the world if we don’t give in to his demands... Saika, though, she would see through his front and fight him anyway. Out of respect for his determination... Right?”

Indeed. That was precisely why this didn’t sit well with Mushiki. Despite everything, Anviet still believed in Saika Kuozaki.

“...”

Kuroe mulled this over before she finally heaved a sigh.

“...Assuming you’re correct, would that not make it even more prudent to negotiate? If he has no intention of using the Fortuna, there would be no need to go through the trouble of fighting.”

“That won’t work,” Mushiki insisted.

“Why not?”

“Because that isn’t how Saika would respond.”

“...”

Kuroe fell silent at this show of confidence.

Yes. Whatever the reason, Anviet wanted a one-on-one fight with Saika.

And Saika Kuozaki would never ignore a student's desperate wish.

At long last, Kuroe sighed weakly.

"...Good grief. I suppose I wouldn't, no," she answered as her true self. "Yes, you're right. What a bind... In the time I've been without my body, it seems you've become a better me than me."

"Saika...", Mushiki called out sadly.

"Very well," Kuroe responded, wearing a soft smile. "Let's give it a shot."

"...Right!" He nodded forcefully.

"Well, our bodies have been separated," she continued with a playful shrug. "Even if you lose, it wouldn't physically affect *me*. If you kick the bucket, I'll arrange a proper funeral for you."

"I-I'll do my best to make sure that doesn't happen...!"

"Hmm. Maybe this *will* stand a chance...?"

"Huh?"

"No... If you're going to do it, you have to put in a proper showing, all right?"

"...Y-yes..."



"Lady Saika's techniques... Magnificent," Kuroe murmured as Mushiki emerged from the cloud of dust.

Her voice was as composed as ever, but a thin layer of sweat glistened on her cheeks, and her heart was racing with excitement.

But that was unsurprising. After all, Mushiki had just manifested Saika's second and third substantiations while he was still in his own body.

Unlike conventional magic, substantiation techniques used the human body itself as part of their formulas. For that reason, it wasn't enough to possess immense magical power; if your body, your cells, your genetic sequences

differed, it was impossible to replicate someone else's substantiation techniques without meeting a very specific set of conditions.

However—and this was only a small, nagging feeling—a faint *something* tugged at Saika's thoughts.

Indeed, her body and Mushiki's body were now separated.

And yet if Saika had actually been taken captive by some rogue criminal, where had her powers disappeared to?

The answer now stood before Kuroe in the most indisputable form.

If not for Mushiki and Saika's unnatural separation at the hands of the Fortuna, this contradictory state would have been well and truly impossible.

No. It wasn't quite so simple, Kuroe corrected herself.

For the past three months, Mushiki had been living *as* Saika, adopting her personality, using her abilities, and fighting her enemies—all of which made him uniquely capable of working this miracle.

"Mushiki..." Kuroe found herself clenching her fists as her beloved disciple emerged in spectacular fashion.

"...What kinda sick joke is this?" Anviet demanded uncertainly in the middle of the training ground.

His gaze contained a potent mix of hostility and wariness, along with a slight hint of curiosity.

"That's...Saika's..."

But no one was more surprised than Mushiki. Instinctively, he had raced to shield himself from Anviet's attack—and just like that, his body was shrouded with Saika's substantiations.

It was almost like Saika herself had swooped in to save him. He couldn't help trembling with emotion.

"..."

But he had to pull himself together... After all, Kuroe had drilled it into him that a good mage had to know how to accept phenomena as they occurred, know how to understand them, to use them.

And so Mushiki responded with a fearless smile.

“...Good work. You did an excellent job of dodging my attack. I was hoping to deal a decisive blow with that last one.”

This, of course, was merely a bluff. He didn't really understand how this had happened.

Before that, it had been a struggle just to maintain Saika's substantiations. He was simply standing firmly on the ground, and yet it felt like his magic, his physical strength, every last ounce of his energy were being sucked out of him. It was a far cry from when he used these powers in Saika's body.

But he feigned composure all the same, flashing his foe a graceful smile.

Why? Because Saika herself would have done just that.

“...Hmph.” Anviet stooped over, shooting Mushiki a piercing stare. “It's a copy...an illusion... I ain't clued in on your tricks, but you got any idea what that sight means to me?”

“A symbol of your defeat?”

“Hmph. Take this.”

No sooner had Anviet finished speaking than a lightning bolt crackled across the grounds as he vanished in the blink of an eye.

That same moment, several streaks of lightning struck down from above, aimed straight for Mushiki.

“Ngh...”

Catching his breath, Mushiki gently struck the butt of his staff against the ground.

It let out a faint glow, causing the earth to ripple. Then the ground itself reached up to shield him, blocking the thunderbolts bearing down from above.

This was Saika's second substantiation, Stellarium, capable of transforming

the world howsoever she pleased.

It seemed, however, that Mushiki wasn't quite able to unleash its full potential, as several lightning strikes tore through gaps in his makeshift shield.

Thankfully, the third substantiation in which his body was garbed, Animaclad, safely repelled them.

...No. That wasn't quite right.

Just before the bursts of electricity could reach him, they veered off in the opposite direction.

This was the result of the divine protection offered by Saika's techniques—the manipulation of chance itself. In short, her Animaclad robe bestowed its wearer with extraordinary luck.

Without these two substantiations, Mushiki would no doubt have been beaten by Anviet's first strike.

"They're the real deal...?!" Anviet cried, floating in the air with an explosive radiance like a thunder god incarnate.

"I ain't got no clue what the hell's goin' on here, but that's gotta be Kuozaki's doin'...! Fine, then! I ain't gonna show you no mercy! I'll smash you to bits, goddamn it!" he howled.

His voice and face were awash with intense fury, with boundless animosity. But in the distance beyond his hatred loomed something even greater—an overwhelming sense of grief.

"...Ugh...!"

Dodging and shielding himself from a hail of lightning strikes, Mushiki continued to wield Saika's Stellarium to transform the world around him as he launched a series of counterattacks.

"Mr. Anviet!" he screamed amid the dazzling barrage of light.

"Eh...?!" Anviet shot back.

"I'm sorry about Sara, I really am...! And if Saika was involved, I understand why you can't forgive her! But Saika—"

“Shuddup!” Anviet interrupted. “Actin’ like you know how it went down... What the hell could *you* possibly understand?! About how helpless you feel not bein’ able to protect your girl... Watchin’ her breathe her last in your arms...!”

“I...” Mushiki swallowed his next words, unable to respond.

Anviet was right. No matter what he said, he couldn’t possibly understand how that must have felt to someone who had experienced it all firsthand.

And yet... He gritted his teeth.

“I can’t say I know how you feel,” he began. “But I know what it’s like to be unable to save someone you care about.”

“...Hah?” Anviet broke into a dark scowl.

Yes. Mushiki couldn’t possibly share in Anviet’s sorrow and despair.

But he, too, had lost the love of his life on no less than two separate occasions.

The first time was in that urban labyrinth, when he’d brought a blood-soaked Saika into his arms.

The second was the other Saika, who had come back from the future.

“I...I was powerless. I can’t help but wonder if it might have been different if I had just been a little stronger... But I have to live on! I have to *become* stronger...! Because I have to carry on Saika’s mission...!”

“What are you blabberin’ about...?! She’s still kickin’ just fine!” Anviet fired back in bewilderment.

But that wasn’t unreasonable. After all, he didn’t know everything that had happened between Mushiki and Saika, let alone about the Saika from the future.

“And why the hell are you bringin’ Kuozaiki’s name up here?!”

“Because...because I’m going to marry her one day!” Mushiki shouted in his loudest voice yet.

“...How can he...? And so loudly...?”

Kuroe broke into a nervous sweat as she watched the intense battle unfold

before her.

But that was only natural. After all, Mushiki had shouted something absolutely preposterous in the heat of combat, and at the top of his lungs, no less.

“...You idiot.”

Yet in her heart, Kuroe breathed easy.

No one else had overheard him.

And more importantly, no one else could see her reaction.

“You’ve been off your rocker since you came out here! Just how insane are you?! Did you dope yourself to be able to use Kuozaki’s moves or somethin’?!”

“How rude! I’ll do anything for Saika! I’ll take any blow!”

“That ain’t my point!” Anviet cried as the two of them exchanged fresh strikes.

Mushiki stood his ground. “I’ll do anything for the woman I love! Even if it means fighting you, Mr. Anviet! You’d do the same, wouldn’t you?!”

“...”

Anviet’s voice caught in his throat. Ready for his next attack in midair, he let his body fill with raw power.

“I warned you. If you’re dead set on this, I’ll treat you like Kuozaki herself and knock you outta the park with everythin’ I’ve got...!”

“...”

There was a change in the air.

It was enough to make Mushiki’s skin crawl. Furrowing his brow, he poured his strength into his staff.

“Stellarium...!”

The ground beneath Anviet’s feet undulated, writhing in response to an invisible will as it lashed out.

Anviet, however, spread his palms wide to brush the attack away.

“...I command you,” he began, his four vajras circling above him like satellites. *“Construct my fortress in the golden garden where heaven and earth hold no sway, beyond even the reach of the gods.”*

With those words, the electric storm raging around him grew stronger and more intense.

“Fourth Substantiation: Aksara Nirsvana!”

A fourth layer to Anviet’s world crest unfurled behind his back, a radiant burst of light emanating from its outer edge.

At the same time, bolts of electricity coursed down his body, radically transforming the world around him.

“That’s...!”

A sea of clouds spread out around him as far as the eye could see, their surfaces aglow with a dreamlike radiance.

A golden palace peaked out between gaps in their movements, along with trident vajra after trident vajra in seemingly endless abundance.

It was like a cosmic paradise. Any nonmage might have concluded that they had suffered a fatal blow and been whisked up to heaven.

This was a fourth substantiation—a mage’s most potent and deeply kept technique, the pinnacle of substantiations, capable of repainting the space around themselves with a world of their own creation.



“Ngh...”

For a moment, Mushiki almost allowed the magnificence of this scene to distract him.

But being a fourth substantiation, it was much more than just a beautiful view. There was nothing more precarious than getting trapped in an opponent's fourth substantiation—it was like being caught in the belly of a whale.

If he was to break out, his only choice was to employ his own fourth substantiation. And so Mushiki reached out, grasping for Saika's powers now dormant in his body.

“Argh... Gah...?!”

But then he was struck by a sudden bout of agony and came to a standstill.

No. More precisely, his body refused to move, no matter how he tried to command it.

“...It's pointless,” called Anviet, appearing before Mushiki. “Livin' things ain't goin' nowhere without electricity. Your muscles only work 'cause of weak electric signals... Your body dances to the tune of 'em.”

Anviet pointed at him. “My Aksara Nirsvarna is a paradise of thunder and lightning. So anyone who gets sucked into this space falls right under my spell... You catch my drift? The moment this fourth substantiation kicks in, the game's already won.”

With a slightly pained look, he turned his back on Mushiki.

An instant later, an intense barrage of lightning was released from the countless vajras orbiting through the sky, exploding right into their immobilized target.

“Tch...”

Anviet clicked his tongue as a tremendous explosion sounded behind him, accompanied by a blinding flash and a pungent burning stench.

His fourth substantiation, Aksara Nirsvarna, was a cage of lightning from which no living being could hope to escape.

He had never intended to go this far. After all, his opponent was a pupil at the Garden—a new transfer student and a rookie mage, at that. Sure, he'd somehow found a way to replicate Saika's substantiation techniques, but there was no way he could withstand an electric barrage of such magnitude.

But Mushiki must have known all that. His eyes had burned with unmistakable determination and resolve. And that was precisely why Anviet had known he couldn't break this foe with half-hearted attacks. He owed it to Mushiki to meet him on the field of battle as an equal.

When two individuals opposed each other so directly, neither of them willing to yield, conflict was guaranteed. And since Anviet had no intention of retreating, this outcome was inevitable.

But that still didn't mean it sat well with him...

"...?!"

The next moment, he narrowed his eyes in a faint twitch.

The surrounding area was, so to speak, an extension of Anviet himself. Weak electric currents pervaded the space, and like a sixth sensory organ, they relayed in detail everything that took place within the bounds of his substantiation.

Which was how he knew that Mushiki Kuga was still standing.

"...Auuuggghhh!" came an ear-rending scream from behind his back.

Spinning around, Anviet laid eyes on Mushiki, who *should* have been utterly crushed by his last attack.

He was no longer clad in Saika's third substantiation, and her staff was likewise gone.

Instead, he was clutching a sword whose blade was translucent, like a sheet of crystal glass.

"...Huh...?"

Yes, he was taken aback by this unexpected development. But even more unbelievable was the fact that Mushiki was moving by his own volition inside Anviet's fourth substantiation.

Did this mean Mushiki had made better use of Saika's third substantiation than Anviet had expected? Or, Anviet asked himself, could it be that he had inadvertently gone easy on his young foe?

In any case, Mushiki remained undefeated. Resolve still burned brightly in his eyes.

Their duel was far from over. Refocusing his attention, Anviet adopted a fresh battle stance.

"Vajdola!"

His vajras unleashed a fresh lightning strike.

"—!"

However, Mushiki banished them with only a single swing of his blade.

"What...?"

Anviet gasped in shock.

Taking full advantage of that lapse in concentration, Mushiki closed in.

"...Hollow Edge...!"

"Ngh...!"

Anviet's instincts sounded the alarm—he needed to avoid coming into direct contact with that blade at all costs.

He tried to gauge the weapon's abilities, tracing it with his eyes for a long moment as it danced through the air.

"What...?"

By the time he realized what it was, Mushiki was already within range.

"Now...!"

Mushiki started to slam his blade against Anviet's chest.

But it never connected.

To distract Anviet, Mushiki tossed the sword to the side, where it fluttered through the air until it disappeared in a sea of clouds.

“...What was that about?”

“...That’s how I’m—how Saika—is going to win,” Mushiki said with the faintest of smiles as he launched into his follow-up attack.

Not that Anviet was going to give him a chance. Transforming himself into a supercharged thunderbolt to fall back in the blink of an eye, he caught the now-defenseless Mushiki in his sights.

“Deva Sarya...”

With those words, he unleashed an unbounded barrage of golden electricity, more than enough to lay his target low.

And yet—

“...?!”

For a moment, Anviet failed to understand what had happened.

Yes. By all rights, it ought to have been impossible.

...His lightning bombardment fell not on Mushiki, but on himself.

“...Hah...”

The world around Mushiki was wiped away in an explosive burst of electricity, delivering him back to the Mishiroyama Training Ground.

Landing on solid earth, he faltered for a moment before falling to his knees.

“Mushiki...,” Kuroe called out, rushing toward him.

He tried raising a hand to show that he was still conscious, but his body refused to obey. In the end, he needed Kuroe’s help to climb back to his feet.

“...I’m...I’m okay... More importantly...,” he rasped, looking up ahead.

In front of them was Anviet, who’d taken a direct hit from his own attack.

His body was scorched black, and his face was downturned—but unlike Mushiki, he was still on his feet. Mushiki gasped at the imposing sight.

“Mushiki...?” Kuroe murmured.

“...Yes,” he confirmed with a brief nod.

Back when Anviet's fourth substantiation had immobilized him, Mushiki had managed to activate his Hollow Edge by the slimmest margin.

He had hoped that the sword, with its power to dispel other substantiations, would be enough to neutralize the electric currents holding him in place.

It was no more than coincidence that the Hollow Edge had brushed his arm the moment it materialized. Perhaps the possibility-multiplying qualities of Saika's Animaclad were responsible for that.

And so, having regained his freedom of movement, Mushiki narrowly escaped the impending threat.

But that was all. His odds had simply gone from minus back to zero. His substantiation-nullifying Hollow Edge had canceled out not only Anviet's electric current but Saika's Stellarium and Animaclad, too. In a very real sense, he was worse off than before.

The only way he could possibly reverse the situation was to resort to a fourth substantiation.

"...You used Saika's fourth substantiation?" Kuroe asked in a muted voice.

No doubt she had already guessed as much.

"Yes... But I wasn't able to manifest it fully in my body," he answered, holding up his palm. "All I managed to pull off was the tiniest point, like the end of a needle."

Yes. It was a miniscule substantiation, a far cry from a fourth substantiation capable of transforming the world around oneself.

But it *was* Saika Kuozaki's fourth substantiation, her ultimate pride and joy.

Deploying the Hollow Edge as a decoy, Mushiki took advantage of the almost imperceptible change in the area to counter Anviet.

The power of Saika's fourth substantiation—Void's Garden—lay in its ability to observe and choose from myriad possibilities.

No mage with Anviet's level of skill would ever miscalculate while wielding his own magic.

But if there was any chance, even one in a billion, a trillion—a quintillion, if necessary...

So long as there was even the slightest possibility, Saika's fourth substantiation would bring it forth.

"...It's just like you told me," Mushiki said.

"Hmm?"

"Rock-paper-scissors. You need a wide range of moves if you want to win."

He flashed her a weak grin.

Kuroe's eyes widened slightly, the corners of her lips curling in a rare smile.

At that moment—

"...Sa...ra...", came a low, raspy voice.

Anviet, hunched forward with his head bowed like a guardian Nio statue, was shaking all over.



"...An..."

"..."

"Hey. An."

"...Hmm? Yeah, I hear you," Anviet Svarner answered, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

He was in a familiar palatial room, decorated with fine furnishings and a lush carpet.

"Really? Seemed to me you were sound asleep," answered the young woman as she gave his shoulder a playful shake.

She had well-defined features and the most beautiful black hair. Her skin was the same shade of brown as Anviet's, and she was wearing an exquisite traditional outfit, plus accessories.

She was Sara Svarner—Anviet's wife of less than a year.

"I'm up, seriously... And quit callin' me *An*."

"Oh? But it's so cute."

“That’s why.”

Sara stared at him with an amused look, prompting Anviet’s lips to twitch in annoyance.

“I ain’t a kid no more. You can’t keep callin’ me that forever.”

Anviet had reached the age of maturity according to his nation’s customs the previous year, wedding his wife and becoming an adult in both name and reality. But Sara, who was two years his senior, continued to call him by her pet name for him...

“Oh...I see. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it bothered you so much.” Sara slumped.

Guilt stabbed Anviet’s heart as he watched her despondent reaction.

“I...er...I don’t *dislike* it, you know? But if anyone overheard you sayin’ it...”

“...Then I can keep using it when it’s just the two of us?”

“Er... Ah...”

“So you *do* dislike it... I’m sorry I didn’t realize sooner... What a sad excuse for a wife I am...”

“...A-all right. Only when it’s just us, though,” he gave in.

Sara immediately perked up. “Yay! I love you, An.”

“Ah... Y-you tricked me...!”

“No I didn’t. I was saved by your kindness, that’s all,” she answered with a beaming smile.

Anviet heaved a deep sigh.

“Hey...,” Sara began, a twinkle in her eyes.

Across the room, a large pile of books and notepads were scattered across the desk.

“Were you studying?”

“...Ugh...”

He averted his gaze so she wouldn’t see the color rising to his cheeks. He had been hoping to keep it all under wraps.

Though Anviet was a prince, he was merely the third son in a collateral branch of the royal family, so his chances of succeeding to the throne were slim to none. As such, while he had received a proper education and been trained in etiquette from a young age, he had grown up in a relatively lenient environment compared to most other young royals.

Since he'd married Sara last year, however, every other prince higher than him in the royal pecking order had left the country, fleeing in disgrace on account of one ugly scandal or another. Before he knew it, he had been named heir to the throne.

Though Anviet himself had mixed feelings about his new status, his subjects seemed all but convinced that his wife, the future Queen Sara, was a physical embodiment of the goddess of fortune.

Even if that *were* true, he couldn't afford to rest on his laurels. There was a great deal indeed that he had to learn if he was to rule in his own right one day.

"...It ain't no big deal. But if I were one of the common folk, I wouldn't want some clueless dolt who doesn't know jack about politics callin' the shots."

"An..." Moved by his words, Sara held her hands to her chest. "Ah, how devoted you are. My dear An... Do you mind if I pet you?"

"Cut it out," Anviet responded bashfully before breaking into a frown. "Hmm?"

Several rings adorned Sara's fingers, but one of them with a unique design stood out.

"That ring..."

"Huh?"

"No. I just thought it looked a little strange."

"Ah, this one...? It's like a good luck charm," Sara murmured after a moment's hesitation, folding her hands to hide the item in question.

Concerned by her reaction, Anviet looked up with a troubled frown.

"...Did someone give it to you?"

“Huh?”

Sara’s eyes widened in surprise, but she soon flashed him a smug grin.

“Do you want to know? Maybe you’re wondering if another man offered it to me?”

“Sh-shuddup! I wasn’t thinkin’ that!” he shouted, his face turning bright red as he turned his back to her with a pout.

Sara let out a soft giggle, embracing him from behind.

“Don’t worry. You’re the only one for me, An. Now and forever.”

“...Yeah.”

Unsure how best to answer her and feeling his cheeks reddening even further, he simply nodded in response.

“But yes, you’re right,” Sara continued, tightening her embrace. “I suppose I ought to push myself to be the best I can as future queen.”

“Push yourself...?”

“Yes. For the time being, you need an heir.”

“Bah...!” he sputtered at this unexpected development. “Wh-where did *that* come from?!”

“Oh? But isn’t that a queen’s most important role?”

“Maybe, but still...!”

Sara paid his protests no heed and ran her fingers over his skin. “I know it’s not our first time, but it *always* feels new. Are you teasing me? You know my weaknesses, don’t you? You sneaky little thing...”

“What are you— H-hey!”

At that moment, there came a knock at the door as an attendant let himself in.

“Excuse me, Your Highness,” he began, coming to an abrupt stop. “I-I’m so sorry! P-please, don’t let me disturb you...!”

“Arrrggghhh! Hold it! Don’t go scramblin’ outta here with that sorta

misunderstandin'!"

Anviet hurriedly shook Sara off while calling after the attendant.

"What is it?! What's so urgent?!" he pressed.

The attendant offered Sara a polite bow before continuing. "A request for an audience. I know it's on short notice, but the minister is eager for you to meet this guest."

"An audience? Now? *Who?*"

"I'm afraid I don't know exactly. It seems they're a practitioner of sorcery, from somewhere in the Far East."

"Sorcery...?"

Suspicion colored Anviet's face. This individual had to be an important envoy indeed to have been granted an abrupt audience, but that description set off alarm bells.

"...Okay, fine. Let's go, Sara."

"Understood."

Though on edge, Anviet left the room. Sara followed a half step behind him.



The minister was far from incompetent, and he wouldn't permit a special audience without good reason. Whatever it was, it had to be important... Unless, of course, the minister was being manipulated by this sorcerer or poisoned with some kind of mind-altering drug.

With those possibilities in mind, Anviet and Sara arrived at the door to the audience chamber, preparing themselves.

"His Royal Highness, Prince Anviet Svarner, has arrived."

With those words, the doors swung open.

Anviet, holding his chest out with pride, slowly entered the chamber and seated himself on the throne. Sara, following suit, took her place by his side.

Behind the veil that separated the throne from the rest of the audience chamber knelt a figure in a dark robe. With their face shrouded by a hood, it was impossible to determine their age or even their gender.

"What is the meaning of this? To hide your face in front of His Royal Highness...," Sara admonished the figure.

She was like a completely different person compared to just a few short moments ago—in every sense the dignified and commanding crown princess.

"I beg your pardon. Please forgive my lack of courtesy," the visitor said, slowly slipping their hands out of their robe to pull back their hood.

"..."

Anviet gasped when he at last laid eyes on her.

Staring back at him was the beautiful visage of a woman with a set of mesmerizing, iridescent eyes.

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Royal Highness... My name is Saika Kuozaki. I'm a mage."

So said the woman—this Saika—with a thin smile.

"A mage...," Anviet murmured, repeating her dubious appellation.

"Yes," Saika answered with a grand nod. "It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

“Hmm...”

Her attitude was respectful enough, but there was no mistaking the stench of deception and falsehood emanating from her entire being.

“And what brings you here?” Anviet asked, his skepticism plain to see.

“Ah. Yes, to get straight to the point... I humbly ask that Princess Sara relinquish to me the object presently gracing her right ring finger.”

“...What?” Anviet growled, his expression turning stern at the gall of this self-proclaimed Far Eastern mage.

“Have you no shame, demandin’ my wife give you her treasures?! You’re bold for a beggar!”

“I know this is rude of me, but this is a matter of the utmost importance. If Princess Sara continues to wear it, that object will bring grave misfortune down on her.”

“What...?”

She carried herself with an air of mystery, but in the end, this Saika had turned out to be yet another smooth-talking swindler. Anviet motioned the guards to remove her from his presence.

“...?”

Yet he stopped in his tracks, craning his neck. Sara, it seemed, had turned deathly pale.

“Sara...?”

“How...how do you know about the ring...? Who are you?”

“That object is the Wheel of Fate, Fortuna. It’s a miraculous thing, known for granting the one who wears it whatever they so wish... You seem to have some understanding of its power already, don’t you, Princess Sara?”

“...!”

Sara gasped, covering the ring with her left hand as if to conceal it from the mage’s gaze.

“But it’s a double-edged sword. Excessive desires come at a grave price, and

that price must always be paid.”

“Someone! Remove her at once!” Sara cried out, the guards standing by on duty immediately surrounding Saika.

And yet—

“...Be good, now. Sleep.”

The moment Saika uttered those words, the guards collapsed to the ground one after the other.

“Eh...?” Sara breathed, rising to her feet with a tremble.

As if to chase after her, Saika slipped past the fallen guards and began to approach.

“I won’t let you have it...! No! If not for this, I would never have—”

“Sara!” Anviet cried in alarm. “What’s wrong? Calm down! What *is* that thing?”

“An...”

Sara turned to face him, looking for all the world like she was about to burst into tears. A moment later, however, her expression tightened with resolve.

“Ring! Heed my wish. Be forever mine! Don’t ever leave me...!”

A short moment later, the small piece of metal emitted a blinding light.

“...Uh-oh!” Saika exclaimed, raising her hands in the air.

A vibrant three-dimensional pattern formed above Saika’s head, and a beam of lighting shot out from her joined hands.

But before that ray of light could reach Sara, her body was enveloped in a radiant robe as a massive halo formed above her.

“A pseudo-substantiation...! You absorbed the annihilation factor?!” Saika shouted, her expression grim.

“...”

Shrouded in radiant light, Sara floated into the air in an attempt to flee and passed clean through the ceiling, disappearing into the sky above.

“I can’t let you escape,” Saika called out, narrowing her eyes as she, too, defied gravity in pursuit.

“Mage!” Anviet shouted, taken aback by the situation rapidly unfolding before him. “What’s goin’ on?! What happened to Sara?! You... What have you done with her?!”

“...”

Saika seemed to hesitate for a moment before answering him. “Princess Sara has been possessed by an evil influence. In her present state, she is no longer human... And I...I must destroy the annihilation factor.”

“...! Wait! What do you—”

Despite his desperate cries, Saika paid him no further heed as she leaped into the air and set off in chase.

“Haah... Haah...”

When Anviet and a handful of his attendants finally caught up to them a short time later, Saika was dressed in what could only be described as a witch’s robe—and Sara had been transformed into *something else*.

“Sara...!” Anviet cried, at a loss for all other words as he raced toward her.

Her body had been cleaved in two, with only the upper half remaining. Her skin continued to emanate a faint glow, but there was no blood or bones to be found.

Yet despite it all, she was still his beloved wife. Cradling what little remained of her, he desperately called out her name: “Sara! Sara...!”

“...An...,” she whispered in an almost imperceptibly small voice as she weakly opened her eyes. “I’m...sorry...”

With those last words, what remained of her body disappeared in a cloud of light.

“Nooo!”

Grief and bewilderment, anger and confusion—myriad emotions flooded Anviet’s mind. For the longest moment, he could only stare at his own hands,

the same hands that had cradled his wife just a short time ago, in a murky daze.

“...”

The mage who had stolen his wife slowly approached.

Once Saika had reached his side, she whispered, “I won’t try to excuse my role. I killed her. I understand if you resent me.”

Her tone was familiar—a far cry from her earlier deferential attitude.

Anviet, however, didn’t care about any of that.

“Sara... What did you do to her?” he demanded, fixing her with a baleful glare.

“She merged with the ring, becoming an annihilation factor.”

“Annihilation...factor...?” Anviet furrowed his brow at the unfamiliar term.

“A generic term for an existence capable of bringing the world to ruin,” Saika answered with a slight nod. “That ring granted its user’s wishes, even wishes for utter destruction, but only by exacting tremendous cost from the world itself...”

“Granting...wishes...?” Anviet muttered in disbelief.

Saika nodded once more. “So long as annihilation factors are destroyed during the window for reversible annihilation, their effects on the world can be rendered as if they had never occurred... But the same can’t be said for people who merge with the annihilation factor itself, I’m afraid... Normal people retain no memories of an annihilation factor. I’m sorry to say this, but you’ll soon lose all memory of your wife.”

“...What...?”

Anviet rose to his feet, horror etched into his face.

His mind was still in a state of utter turmoil. Nothing Saika had said made any sense.

But he simply couldn’t overlook that last remark.

“It ain’t enough to snatch her away from me?! You’re robbin’ me of my memories with her, too...?!”

“...It’s an unavoidable consequence of the world’s self-preservation system.

Only mages who successfully save the world from an annihilation factor retain any memories of it.”

“What...?”

Anviet slammed his fist into the ground... Something told him she wasn't lying.

“...”

Saika's face contorted with pain. After a long silence, she looked down on him in a way that made him feel like he was being ridiculed. “You poor thing...”

“...What...?” he growled, raising his face to glower back at her. “You... What did you just say...?!”

“I sympathize, truly. You're helpless. Unable to do anything but fall to the ground in despair as your wife is taken from you. It's a sorry sight, especially for a crown prince.”

“...Arrrggghhh!”

Pulling out a hidden dagger concealed at his chest, Anviet readied himself to charge at Saika.

But just before the blade could reach her, an invisible hand threw him hard against the ground.

“Gah... Huh...?!”

“Well, that *was* a surprise. I thought you'd been sapped of the will to live, but it seems you aren't entirely devoid of spirit.”

“I'll kill you... You'll pay...! You murdered Sara...!”

“Hmph,” Saika snorted, turning her back on him. “Me? You'll kill *me*? That isn't possible... Not for a mere human, one who isn't even a mage.”

“...”

Anviet's voice caught in his throat.

“...What did you say...? Earlier?”

“Hmm?”

“So if I become a mage...I can keep my memories of this annihilation factor... of Sara...alive?”

“Ah. Yes, that’s right,” Saika answered, her back still turned to him.

“Then make me one...! So I can remember her...! So one day, I can kill *you*...!” Anviet howled, clenching his fists so hard that blood seeped from the broken skin of his palms.



“...Sa...ra...I—I...”

Anviet stood there in a daze. His voice was muffled, as if he were trapped in a dream.

“...Papa!”

The next moment, Surya appeared by his side—not to cling to him, but rather to support him, or perhaps to keep him from falling to his knees.

“That’s enough, Papa... You can stop.”

“...Surya...”

Anviet, as if on the verge of an abyss, turned toward her as he slowly recovered.

With perfect timing, Kuroe likewise appeared before them.

“Knight Anviet Svarner. I am aware of the conflict between you and Lady Saika...”

“...”

Anviet remained silent for a long while before he finally acknowledged her, his words leaking out in small bursts. “I know...I know it ain’t Kuozaki’s fault. Even back then, when she took on the role of the bad guy...I knew it was all for my sake... But then I figured it out... It was all because of that damned Fortuna...”

“...Figured what out?” Kuroe asked.

Anviet raised his face to the heavens. “...Kuozaki and Sara spoke. They talked. Before I found them like that.”

“...”

Kuroe had no response to this assertion.



“...I’m sorry. If only we had been able to locate the annihilation factor before it came to this.”

One hundred years prior, Saika, adorned in her third substantiation, gritted her teeth in contrition, her eyes downcast.

“Why...are you...apologizing...?” responded Sara weakly, lying broken before the mage.

More than half her body had already disappeared following the outcome of their pitched battle. Having merged with the annihilation factor, it was only a matter of time before she ceased to exist entirely.

“This is all...my fault... I needed the ring... I needed its power... I was too weak... Because of me...you had to... You had to do this...,” she whispered, forcing a faint smile. “I have one last wish... If you would hear me out...”

“Please,” Saika urged. “If it’s something I can do...”

“Don’t...tell...An...,” Sara pleaded. “Don’t tell him...that he could have saved me...”

“...”

Saika was at a loss for words.

“Sara,” she murmured. “You—”

“The Fortuna...it’s me now... I finally understand...its true nature...”

Though she was fading away, her smile was unwavering.

Fortuna, the Wheel of Fate, was an annihilation factor that brought incredibly good luck to its wearer, granting their every wish. But now that Sara had merged with it, she was no longer capable of fulfilling her own wishes.

If, however, a third party had wished to separate her from it before her body was completely destroyed, then maybe, just maybe, she could have clung to life.

But of course, that wish would come at a price.

“If he’d wished for it... If he’d done that...he would become one with the Fortuna in my place...”

Yet here was a mage whose mission entailed destroying the annihilation factor.

Should anyone make that wish, they would be offering up their own life to save hers.

Yet Sara knew—Anviet would make that trade without a moment’s hesitation.

“Please... An...is a good person...”

“...I understand. It’s a promise,” Saika answered.

Contented, Sara’s eyes drifted closed.



“If I had died then...Sara might have survived... But for the longest time...I—I didn’t know...!” Anviet cried his eyes out.

Faced with this painful sight, Mushiki watched on with a frown.

“But Sara and Saika were only thinking of you, Mr. Anviet. They were only—”

“You think I don’t get that?!” Anviet interrupted, his mournful cry cutting deep.

In truth, Mushiki understood how he must have felt.

Sara had made that request of Saika out of consideration for Anviet, while Saika had granted it out of sympathy for them both.

But when you suddenly learned that what you had believed so long was nothing more than a lie...

How must Anviet have felt?

Mushiki knew the answer.

Anviet hadn’t set out to destroy the world out of desperation, nor was he hoping to exact revenge on Saika.

...He just couldn’t forgive himself for having been powerless when it could

have mattered.

Unable to come to terms with his feelings, unable to express them in any way other than anger, his only choice was to direct it all against Saika.

“...Don’t say that, Papa,” came a small voice. It was Surya’s.

“Surya...?”

“Mama’s happy, Papa. She’s so happy you’re still alive, that you haven’t forgotten her.”

“Huh...?” Anviet’s eyes opened wide.

But that was understandable. Given what she had just said, it sounded like Surya had actually spoken directly with Sara.

“...I see. I understand the situation now.” Kuroe broke her silence with a heavy sigh.

She stared deeply into Anviet’s eyes, speaking loud and clear. “This is a crisis, and we don’t have time for your pathetic whining. Get a grip, you moron.”

“...Hah...?”

Anviet’s jaw dropped in shock—and it wasn’t only him. Mushiki was equally taken aback by that outburst, so out of character for Kuroe.

Then she declared in an equally firm tone, “You’ve lost, Knight Anviet. You would be doing us all a favor if you surrendered quietly.”

...Well, from where Mushiki was standing, the outcome was far from clear, even if Anviet was battered and beaten while he himself was still standing. Of course, there was no need to point that out.

A battle between two mages was a battle between two souls, and it was undeniably true that Saika’s fourth substantiation had overwhelmingly shattered Anviet’s.

“...You...”

“No one who keeps wallowing in self-doubt *because* someone loves them can possibly defeat a foe who fights to *protect* their loved ones.”

“...”

Anviet fell deathly silent.

Then, after the longest of pauses—

“...Haah...”

Staring first at Surya then Kuroe and Mushiki one by one, he breathed a ragged sigh. It was like he was fully aware of what Kuroe was doing, yet he was going along with the gambit nonetheless.

“...You’ve got a point. It doesn’t matter how it happened; a rookie who’s been here all of a few months took down my fourth substantiation. I ain’t got no more pride to hold on to. Do whatever you want with me. Boil me, roast me, serve me up for supper—I don’t give a damn.”

He let out a deep breath, his golden armor dissipating to reveal his regular slacks and shirt.

“I have no intention of boiling or roasting you.”

“...Huh?”

“Assuming this was just an emergency preparedness drill, there would be no need for punishment or anything of the sort. You gave a very real performance, Knight Anviet. You had everyone at the Garden fooled,” Kuroe said, her voice implacably calm.

“...Huuuh?!” Anviet gawked. “Hold up. A *drill*? What the hell are you goin’ on about...?”

“Yes, a drill. A training exercise anticipating an external facility being taken over by rogue elements from within the Garden. Since only Saika, who came up with this idea, and you, Knight Anviet, chosen to play the role of the culprit on account of your villainous demeanor, were aware of the details, you were able to simulate the emergency with a remarkable degree of verisimilitude.”

...Of course, none of that was remotely true. Though her explanation was somewhat forced, Kuroe was essentially saying that she would overlook the matter.

“You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me! I meant every bit of it! I don’t need your pity. Or your charity, either.”

“Pity? Charity? You seem to have misunderstood, Knight Anviet.”

“Eh...”

“Don’t you get it? You have placed yourself in immense debt with Lady Saika. This is a collar. With this, you will dedicate yourself to the Garden in full.” She rested a hand on Anviet’s shoulder.

Mushiki, having quickly caught on, struck a provocative pose.

“That’s right, Mr. Anviet. From now on, you’ll be Saika’s faithful servant, even more than before... I’m kind of jealous. It isn’t fair, Mr. Anviet!”

“...What the hell are *you* blabberin’ about?!” Anviet shot back, before catching his breath in surrender. “...Fine. Do whatever you want.”

“...!”

Surya wrapped her arms around Anviet in a warm embrace.

Seeing just how relieved she looked, Mushiki felt his lips curling in a broad grin.

But they couldn’t stay this way forever.

“Then I will,” Kuroe continued. “I’m requesting your assistance, Knight Anviet. Immediately.”

“...Hah? *Now?*”

“Lady Saika has been abducted by a group believed to be Salix. The culprits have demanded we hand over Surya as a condition for her release.”

“What...?!” Anviet’s face twisted in a jaw-dropping mixture of shock and awe. “Kuozaiki got herself kidnapped...?! Ain’t no way in hell that happened!”

“I can explain later. For now, we must return to the Garden.”

“But we haven’t heard anything...,” Mushiki pointed out, worried. “That means we have no clue where Saika even is, right?”

“I have an idea to address that...,” Kuroe said, narrowing her eyes. “There is one issue, however.”

“What kind of issue?”

Kuroe's expression turned somewhat sullen. "We will have to rely on a rather *unreliable* partner."

Chapter 5

◀ I Stole the World? ▶

“Clara? Clara? Wake up, Clara!”

“...Hmm... What’s up, Kiritan?”

Having been roused from sleep by a rough shake, Clara Tokishima—her garish pink hair tied back in two ponytails, her ears positively swarming with piercings and ear cuffs, her fingernails painted in a myriad of colors—rubbed her eyes and sat up.

She was currently residing in an apartment located somewhere in Tokyo, and she’d been snoring loudly as she lay on the sofa with her legs spread. A small blanket covered her abdomen, but other than that, her underwear was completely exposed.

“*Yaaawn...* Not getting enough sleep totally wrecks your skin, you know? What am I s’posed to do if I end up with a major skin issue or something?”

“In that case, maybe you should consider removing your makeup before you take a nap? And forget skin problems—you’ve recovered from fatal wounds before. So I don’t think it will be too much of an issue.”

“Ugh. Those two things are, like, totally different topics. Did you forget your inner girly vibe somewhere?”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who sleeps with their underwear exposed...”

“Seriously, what’s up with you?” Clara asked with a pout.

Yes, Clara wasn’t just a flashy young woman—she was a mage and a streamer, too. But most important, she was also an immortal human being with part of the mythic-class annihilation factor the Ouroboros embedded inside her.

After her recent grand tour of the Garden, she was now a wanted fugitive, pursued by mages all over the world. Consequently, she had decided to lie low in this modest apartment for the time being.

“...So, like, did something happen?” she asked.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Take a look at this.” Kiriko Araibe, the owner of the apartment building, repositioned her thick glasses before passing Clara her smartphone. Incidentally, said smartphone was one of many Clara gave her followers in order to gather information, allowing them to access websites available only to mages.

While Kiriko might have come across as an ordinary human being at first glance, she was actually undead, an Immortal who couldn’t be killed. Clara had stolen her death from her, turning her into one of countless servants. She was an illustrator by trade, and the reason Clara had chosen her as her personal attendant was because Kiriko tended to hole herself up at home on weekdays.

“Look, see? The video. Isn’t that the guy you were talking about?”

“Hmm...? Is that Mushipi? Whoa. This is a *super* rare find!”

Indeed. Kiriko had just shown her a clip on MagiTube, a mage-exclusive video-sharing app, featuring her boyfriend, Mushiki Kuga.

He was in his usual Garden uniform, and there was a somewhat nervous cast to his face. Clara’s heart almost skipped a bit as she looked at his beautiful innocence up close.

But there was something else about the video that caught her attention.

Yes. It was titled *To Clara*.

“Hmm...? For *moi*...? I wonder what it could be. Oh my God, could it be a confession of love or something? This is *sooo* awkward!”

She squirmed on her chair before tapping the PLAY button.

Then, with a slight tremble to his voice, Mushiki began to speak: “*Second substantiation, first letter. Fourth substantiation, fourth letter. The level of the underground battle beneath the library...*”



He went on and on for a full thirty seconds, as if repeating a secret code. Then, it was over.

“...I wonder what it means,” Kiriko murmured.

“Oh-ho...?”

Clara scrolled down the screen to view the closed captions.

There, she spotted an unlabeled URL. She clicked on it and was taken to a white screen featuring nothing more than a text box.

“Got it. A password, huh? Looks like they wanna send a message only yours truly would get.”

“You got all that? The code?”

“Well, like, it’s not super complicated or anything. It’s just set up so only the people who were there at the time would get it. Um, let me think...,” Clara mumbled, before proceeding to enter the password.

“Eh?! Is that okay, doing it here?” Kiriko exclaimed in panic. “Won’t they be able to track your location?”

“All my phone stuff is routed through a bunch of overseas servers, so no one can see where any messages are coming from. Should be all good!”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

“To be totally honest, I don’t have the faintest clue how any of it works. I got one of those techie Immortals to do it for me. The communication speed is a bit slow, but with Silvie in the Garden and all, this is apparently the best we can do.”

After she’d typed the message in full and hit the SEND button, a brief message appeared on the screen.

“Oh?”

Clara’s eyebrows shot up. In short, the message stated that in exchange for certain information, the Garden was willing to restore Clara’s frozen MagiTube account.

“They wanna make a deal with yours truly? They’ve got guts, huh...? So they

want me to spill the beans on where the Salix headquarters is. Is Mushipi in trouble with some stray mage? Maybe he's only been playing innocent, but he's got a secret wild side? Hee-hee-hee! Seriously, this is gonna be too much fun!"

"...You don't think it seems rather fishy?"

"Hmm?" Clara answered nonchalantly as she dialed a number.

"*Hellooo?* Dougie? It's me, your good friend Clara... Wait, what? Who's accusing me of being an impostor? I'm, like, the hottest chick in the whole mage world right now. It's *me*, Clara Tokishima. Yeah. Remember when you asked me to join your crew? I wanna talk about that. So, like, what's the deal? I mean, I might have gone a little overboard here. I don't wanna join your squad, exactly, but if you could set up a chill hideout for me, I might, you know, be able to help out with some work. It's all about give-and-take, right...? Uh-huh. Yup. Sure, let's meet up. I'll swing by. Where are you now?"

After extracting the necessary information, Clara ended the call.

"All righty. It's in the bag. Get ready for another shoot, Kiritan," she instructed.

"C-Clara?" Kiriko stammered, stopping her. "Wh-who were you just talking to?"

"Dougie... You know, Salix's boss? We've been in touch before, so I didn't need to waste time sending anyone to track him down."

"Y-you're going to sell a friend out to the Garden?!"

"Huh?"

Clara tilted her head to one side in confusion, prompting Kiriko to break out into a cold sweat.

"Just because we're both lost souls doesn't automatically make us friends or anything. Anyway, being loose-lipped about where you're at—that's, like, super careless. It's a sweet deal, getting my MagiTube account back up. And besides..."

"...B-besides...?"

"Mushipi's more my type," she exclaimed with excitement.

Kiriko watched on in horror, her expression all but saying, *She's out of her mind...*



"Yippee! It's Clara Channel Time! Are you having a ca-razy day, my Claramates?"

In a car en route to the Garden, a bright and cheerful voice sounded from Kuroe's smartphone.

In the center of the screen was the video-streaming mage Clara Tokishima.

"Totally unexpected emergency livestream, you guys. Seriously, my schedule suddenly opened up, so today, I'm gonna reply to some of the comments that've come in... Let's see, what's this one? What are you playing at, annihilation factor? Ha-ha, oh my God, shut up! I'm gonna make you regret saying that!" Clara said with a laugh, giving the screen the middle finger. An instant later, her vulgar gesture was blurred out. Any editor would have a hard time keeping up with one of her live broadcasts.

Incidentally, the stream wasn't being hosted on Clara's account. No doubt it belonged to one of her reincarnated servants. Of course, with this being a spur-of-the-moment livestream from an unknown account, the number of viewers started off quite low. But as word spread across social media, her view count quickly picked up.

The actual contents, however, were of little importance. Disinterested in the video itself, Kuroe tapped on a URL listed in the description.

A page with a text input window appeared on the screen.

"Hmm... There are no instructions. Perhaps she reused the same password..." Kuroe murmured, typing it into the box and hitting the SUBMIT button.

A moment later, the website revealed an address.

"Is that...?" Mushiki asked from the seat beside her.

"...The location of Salix's hideout," Kuroe answered calmly.

"...! So this means..."

“...You’re tellin’ me that damn Ouroboros is lendin’ us a hand?” Anviet growled from the back seat, his expression one of true surprise. Like Mushiki, he was covered in injuries, his body bandaged up in several places.

“We’re hardly *cooperating*, as such,” Kuroe explained matter-of-factly. “This is an extraordinary transaction... Of course, we haven’t told Clara that Lady Saika is being held captive.”

Right. Clara regarded Saika with extreme hostility. If she had known that their true goal was to rescue Saika, Mushiki doubted whether even the promise of reactivating her MagiTube account would have been enough to enlist her help.

“Still, it’s kinda surprisin’ how easily she’s givin’ that info up. The Garden couldn’t get ahold of it.”

“We know that she must have established her own intelligence network, as evidenced by her previous attacks and the incident involving the Leviathan. By enlisting her victims as her own servants, she can place eyes and ears practically anywhere. That is, of course, highly concerning. But she may well have connections that we don’t. As they say, it takes a thief to catch a thief.”

“Ah. So this is something only the Ouroboros could do?” Mushiki asked.

“...”

“Ow. That hurts, Kuroe,” Mushiki shrieked as she pinched his cheek.

“However,” Kuroe continued with a disappointed sigh, “we cannot rule out the possibility that Clara Tokishima is in league with Salix. They are fellow stray mages, after all. Should that be the case, we may be walking into a trap.”

She was right, of course. It would be pretty low to leak information on a like-minded acquaintance to a common enemy...though it would align with Clara’s past actions.

“What do we do, then?” Mushiki asked.

“We will crush them with everything we have,” Kuroe answered without batting an eye.



“No word from the Garden?”

In the depths of the basement, Zhu Yin addressed a member of Salix in a suit.

“No... Nothing yet,” the man said, visibly distressed.

“Hmm...” Zhu Yin showed little interest in this response and rose gracefully to her feet.

Then, with slow, deliberate steps, she approached the restrained Saika.

“Are your comrades so heartless as to abandon you? Or do they believe you don’t *need* saving?”

“Ms. Zhu Yin...I wouldn’t get too close to her if I were you...,” the Salix member cautioned in a trembling voice.

Unfazed, Zhu Yin brought her face up to Saika’s.

“Are you *really* the world’s strongest mage?” she demanded, staring intently into the girl’s eyes.

“...”

Saika broke into a cold shiver but remained stoic and silent.

“Hmm... Something’s off. Willows was terrified of you, but I don’t sense much in the way of magical potential. Is it all just a bluff, a front? Or maybe there’s some hidden explanation...? You’ve caught my interest. And I do love a good mystery.”

A cold, lifeless eye peered out from beneath Zhu Yin’s long, dangling bangs and the bandages wrapped around her head.

“Now, look into my eye. Tell me—what are you hiding?”

The moment Zhu Yin twisted her lips into a sickly smile, her eye flashed with a mesmerizing shimmer.

“...”

That ominous light seemed to penetrate everything—even Saika’s thoughts.

She contorted in agony, overwhelmed by the sheer force of the glow.

“...Oh? I see...”

Zhu Yin’s brow creased in a dubious frown.

At that moment, a heavy thud came from upstairs as a deafening alarm began to ring.

“...What?”

Standing up straight, Zhu Yin turned back to the entrance.

The man waiting by the door hurriedly picked up a communication device. After exchanging a few brief words, his face took on a look of abject panic. “We’re under attack! It’s mages from the Garden...!”



Within moments, a mixed-use building located at the southern tip of Tokyo had been turned into the site of a pitched battle.

Flashes of light caused by the mages’ first and second substantiations, along with bullets fired from an assortment of handguns and heavier armaments, littered walls, shattered windows, and tore through floors and ceilings. A barrage of angry shouts and screams sounded amid the destruction.

There were approximately thirty Salix personnel within the building, facing off against a four-member infiltration team from the Garden (of which only three were actually combatants).

While the strike team had set up wards around the building to keep under the radar of any innocent bystanders, they still weren’t able to engage in large-scale combat right in the middle of a bustling city, which meant that they had to keep their numbers to a minimum.

In terms of manpower, it was ten against one.

The battle was completely one-sided—an effortless victory for the Garden.

But that, of course, should have gone without saying.

“Luminous Blade!”

“Vajdola!”

After all, the team included two of the Garden’s strongest knights.

Ruri twirled her *naginata* of roiling flame through the air, reducing the volley of bullets fired down the other end of the corridor to ash. At the same time,

Anviet unleashed a hail of lightning, instantly incapacitating the enemy group.

They were totally in sync, a perfect combo. Though the two individuals often found themselves at odds, they were nothing short of spectacular when they joined forces.

“W-wait! If you’re here for Saika Kuozaki—”

“Shuddup.”

Anviet cut off the last man standing midsentence before unleashing a final lightning strike.

“Gyargh!”

The man fell to the floor with a loud thud as he gave a final scream.

Mushiki, ostensibly a combatant himself, could only watch open-mouthed from the rear as the other two did all the work.

“Wow...”

“Ruri and Anviet are two of the Garden’s most capable mages. This outcome is to be expected,” explained Kuroe, the remaining member of their group. Her tone and disposition were the same as ever, but Mushiki sensed a hint of pride in her voice.

“Hmm. At least that’s one thing to breathe easy about. For a second, I thought you might have lost your edge, Anviet,” Ruri called from the front of the corridor.

“Hey. Don’t you start mouthin’ off at me,” he responded with a scowl.

“*You’re* the one who insisted on playing the bad guy in a drill in the middle of a major crisis.”

“Gah...”

Anviet let out a strained cough.

Having reluctantly gone along with Kuroe’s story, he was now being treated as the imbecile who had gone off alone on a training exercise against the backdrop of an actual crisis.

Unsurprisingly, Ruri didn’t fully buy this story, but she understood well

enough that Anviet wasn't about to admit to anything else. As such, she had been poking fun at him ever since she had rendezvoused with the group.

"By the way, Anviet...", she began.

"...What now?"

"Why were you so injured when you came back from the training grounds?"

"..."

"And not just you. Mushiki was covered in bandages, too. What happened? Did you two fight? Did you hurt each other? Hey. Are you listening to me?"

Ruri got closer and closer to Anviet, bombarding him with one question after another. From Mushiki's perspective, her behavior was more than a little scary. Anviet must have been desperate for an answer, as sweat was beading on his forehead.

"R-Ruri! Let's focus on rescuing Saika for now!" Mushiki interceded in a fluster.

"...Right!" she answered, her ears giving a visible twitch. "What Mushiki said. Yes, you're always so calm and levelheaded... Cute and invincible, too. Don't you think, Anviet?"

"...Heh."

"What was that? You'd better not be thinking of making a move on him. You think I'd let that slide? Huh?"

"...What do you want from me?" Anviet sighed in exasperation before giving his head a firm shake. "Anyway, where's Kuozaki? Are we gonna have to search the place?"

"That would take too long. Let's find whoever's in charge and make them talk," Ruri countered.

Kuroe stared down at her feet. "That would most likely be him," she said, pointing to the skeleton-thin man Anviet had just knocked out.

"Huh?"

"That's the head of Salix, Doug Willows."

“...Ah...”

Anviet scratched his cheek awkwardly.

“Seriously, what are you even doing?” Ruri demanded with a withering glare.

“They cross my path, I take ’em down.”

“Right.” Ruri nodded in approval, her attitude doing a complete one-eighty.

Looking over a nearby floor plan, Kuroe spoke up. “Kidnappers tend to keep hostages in places where they won’t be overheard. Let’s try looking underground.”

“Ah, right. Underground, huh?” Ruri nodded.

The four of them hurried to the emergency staircase.

“Whoa...!”

“Fire! Shoot!”

There were more Salix personnel in the basement, and they attacked Mushiki and the others on sight.

But they were no match for Ruri and Anviet. The pair subdued the Salix underlings in a matter of seconds.

No sooner had the team begun checking the basement floor than Ruri called out, “This room is the only one that’s locked. And it’s an electronic lock, too.”

“Lemme see,” Anviet said, placing a hand on the input panel.

The next moment, there was a burst of sparks and a loud bang as the door slid open.

“Talk about crude. Why not try a smarter approach? Like cutting through the door maybe?”

“That sounds even cruder to me.”

Arguing back and forth, the two of them entered the room. Mushiki and Kuroe followed just a few steps behind.

Glancing around inside, Mushiki spotted Saika near the far wall, gagged and bound to a chair.

“Saika!”

“Madam Witch!”

They rushed forward as soon as they laid eyes on her.

“...!”

Saika’s muffled voice rang out, as if she was trying to tell them something.

Taken aback by the unprecedented situation, Mushiki and the others removed her gag, when— “Watch out! There’s a mage! She can manipulate your vision!”

“Huh...?”

Mushiki’s eyes widened in shock.

“Heh-heh... Hee-hee-hee...”

A fey chuckle reached them from somewhere in the darkness—Zhu Yin.

“You must be the Garden’s knights. I see, yes... You’re terribly strong.”

“...!”

The four of them braced themselves.

Yet no matter where they looked, Zhu Yin was nowhere to be found. They could hear her voice, but it was impossible to tell where it was coming from since it was reverberating off the walls and ceiling.

“Oh...I’m so scared. I’m so terrified, I might just burst into tears here,” she continued mockingly. “I suppose I’m going to have to get serious.”

The next moment—

“Fourth Substantiation: Baimugui Yexing.”

Just as that unfamiliar phrase reverberated through the darkness—

The basement around them warped and was replaced by an altogether different world.

The walls, floor, and ceiling, all composed entirely of straight lines, gave way to a reddish-black fleshy mass, as if the room had been swapped out for the belly of a gargantuan beast.

No. That wasn't all. The fleshy walls were pulsating as eyeballs of every size imaginable came into being. It was a truly hellish sight, more than enough to make the faint of heart pass out on the spot.

"A fourth substantiation...?!"

"There's no way some runaway mage could do all this...?!"

With a grim look, Ruri summoned a seal with her finger—the world crest above her head burning intensely as it unfolded further.

Unless there was a significant power differential, only a fourth substantiation could counter another fourth substantiation. And since Anviet had exhausted himself in the previous battle and was in far from perfect shape, Ruri was the only one of them who could hope to resist this foe.

But Zhu Yin must have anticipated as much, as the moment Ruri tried to manifest her fourth substantiation, the eyeballs in the wall spun to face her.

A bolt of frigid ice ran down Mushiki's spine.

"Ruri!"

There was no telling what kind of power Zhu Yin's fourth substantiation possessed, but he knew in his bones that it wasn't going to be anything good.

The next moment—

"Anviet! Touch me!" As if sensing the dread chill, Saika, still bound to the chair, let out a piercing cry. "And make a wish! To overcome this crisis! To defeat that mage!"

"Hah?! What are you goin' on about?!" he shot back.

But that wasn't unreasonable. Anyone would have been caught off guard by her last statement.

And yet—

"Just do it! Quickly, An!"

"...?!"

Out of nowhere, Saika addressed him by a different name in an unrecognizable tone of voice.

As instructed, Anviet placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I have a wish! To see our enemy fall...!” he shouted in obvious bewilderment.

A short moment later—

“...Ah! Arrrggghhh?!”

Zhu Yin let out an ear-piercing shriek as cracks began to tear across the grotesque wall of flesh and eyeballs. The space collapsed with a dazzling burst of light.

Chunks of muscle rained down all around, dissolving and disappearing into the air.

Within seconds, they found themselves back in the dimly lit basement—only now a woman in a long trench coat lay helplessly on the ground before them.

“...”

She was barely breathing and seemed to have been knocked out cold. On closer inspection, her eyelids had slumped unnaturally, and blood was dripping from her empty eye sockets.

“...What...just happened...?” Mushiki gasped, turning to Saika.

No doubt the others were all wondering the same thing. Ruri and Kuroe likewise stood there, watching her.

Anviet’s astonishment, however, seemed to be the greatest of all—he was staring at Saika in abject shock, unable to believe his eyes.

But that was only natural.

It wasn’t just a matter of voice or word choice; Saika’s most recent words had clearly been spoken by someone else.

“...Sara...?” he murmured, incredulous.

“...Yes. It’s been a long time, An,” Saika answered with a touch of melancholy.

A long silence reigned in the dimly lit basement.

The four members of the infiltration team had been left speechless by Saika’s

explanation of what had just taken place.

“...I suspected as much.”

It was Kuroe who broke the eerie stillness.

“Kuroe...?” Mushiki began. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t have any concrete proof, and I only recently became aware that this was even a possibility,” she began, narrowing her eyes. “When it appeared a hundred years ago, the Wheel of Fate, Fortuna, was destroyed long after the window for reversible annihilation had already expired. Consequently, its effects on the world were recorded in the annals of history. In other words, the wishes granted by it at the time were never undone... With more phenomena, unmistakably the work of the Fortuna, taking place throughout the world, I began to wonder—could it be that one or more of Sara’s wishes had yet to be fulfilled?”

“...Oh-ho. I would expect no less from Madam Witch’s personal attendant.” Saika—or rather, Sara—smiled.

She must have known, of course, that Kuroe was, in fact, the real Saika. Nevertheless, she was willing to keep that a secret, likely out of consideration for Kuroe’s situation.

“What exactly did you wish for before you died...?” Ruri asked with a puzzled look.

“I had two unfulfilled wishes at the time of my death,” Sara answered with a slow nod. “The first was to be blessed with a child. The second was that An and I could meet again in our next lives.”

“...”

Anviet’s breath caught in his throat.

“Did those wishes...come true *after* Sara died...?”

It was Kuroe who answered him. “In all likelihood, yes. It seems to have taken a good deal of time, but rather than vanishing after death, Sara’s soul appears to have been reincarnated here in this world... There is one problem, however.”

“A problem...?”

“Yes. Sara merged with the Fortuna before being reborn. Inevitably, that means that its powers returned along with her.”

“What...?” Anviet almost jumped back in alarm. “Hold on. I thought Surya was the one wieldin’ the Fortuna’s powers?!”

“That’s right. In other words, *she* must be Sara’s reincarnation.”

“...?!”

“Wait a sec.” Anviet ran a hand through his hair in confusion. “This ain’t makin’ any sense. So why does Sara look like Kuozaki?”

After a few moments of thoughtful silence, Sara continued, “...It happened a few days ago. Madam Witch noticed me and offered me her body... It would be inconvenient for both involved, she said, for two consciousnesses to inhabit the one body.”

“What...?” Anviet murmured.

“...So that was it?” Mushiki asked in a small voice, turning to Kuroe.

“...No. I believe Sara is being mindful of our circumstances and trying to cover for us. Perhaps after you and Lady Saika separated, her body was in want of a soul—and so it attracted Sara’s to inhabit it,” Kuroe answered in a whisper.

“...Ah...” Mushiki nodded. “...No wonder she doesn’t walk like Saika...”

“Yes. Which is why—”

Kuroe stopped herself in midsentence.

“...Don’t tell me you knew she wasn’t the real Lady Saika?”

“Huh? No way. I had no idea at all she was Mr. Anviet’s wife. I was just so surprised, you know? I kind of panicked...” He paused to catch his breath. “But being around her as long we were, I couldn’t help but notice that her mannerisms were all subtly off.”

“...”

“Eh? Why are you hitting me, Kuroe? Ow. That hurts.”

“If you knew, you should have said something sooner.”

“S-sorry... I thought it might be rude to point it out...”

As Mushiki and Kuroe fidgeted and whispered between themselves, Anviet flashed them a fierce glare.

“...What are you two yappin’ about?”

“Nothing.”

“It isn’t important...”

Giving his head a vigorous scratch, Anviet turned away from them both, back to Sara.

“Two minds in one body? No, hold on a sec. What’s the story with Surya, then?”

But at that moment—

“...Papa!”

As if she’d been waiting for someone to mention her name, a small figure leaped from the entrance of the room to cling to Anviet’s leg.

“...S-Surya?! I told you to hang tight till I gave you the all clear!”

“...But you wanted Sue to come, didn’t you, Papa...?” she said, staring at him with upturned eyes.

Anviet heaved a sigh of resignation.

After watching this exchange, Sara called out to her, “Surya.”

“...!”

Surya’s shoulders shook in response to her voice.

“Is it okay now...?” she asked. “Mama?”

“...Yes. I’m sorry. I was discovered,” Sara said, sticking out her tongue.

The next moment, Surya trembled with an outpouring of emotion as she caught Sara in a hug.

“Mama...! Mama...!”

“...I’m so sorry, Surya. I haven’t even been able to hold you in my arms all this

time,” Sara whispered, embracing her.

A long moment later, Sara turned her gaze back to Anviet.

“Allow me to introduce her to you again. This is Surya—our daughter.”

“Eh...?”

Anviet’s eyes rounded in astonishment. But that was no surprise. After all, this girl claiming to be his daughter, whom he had zero recollection of, had turned out to be the real deal.

“Our daughter...? H-how?”

“It seems that when I died, a new life had already been conceived inside me.”

“...!”

Anviet froze in shock.

“The Fortuna faithfully granted my final wishes,” Sara continued quietly. “When I was reborn in this world, the child inside me was given new life, too... You see, there were two souls within the reincarnated body—hers and mine.”

“...Ah. That must have resulted in a state akin to dissociative identity disorder, no?” Kuroe asked. “Then, your consciousness was transferred to the empty vessel of Lady Saika’s body, while Surya’s continued to inhabit the original one?”

Sara responded with a solemn nod. “...To tell you the truth, after being reincarnated, the first thing I wanted to do was find An. But the power of the Fortuna prevented me from doing so... When I finally grew strong enough to venture out a few years later, a stray mage noticed my powers and took me from my foster home.” Her face clouded over.

Mushiki was almost taken aback by her strange expression, but after giving it further thought, it made perfect sense. Even if Sara was reincarnated, her body must still have biological parents... And from what he gathered, her home environment must have been far from ideal.

“...Well, the silver lining is that they never caught on to the Fortuna’s true potential,” Sara continued. “Simply having the Wheel of Fate nearby is enough to bring incredible fortune. Willows was so afraid of losing his *lucky charm* that

he wouldn't let anyone near me."

Kuroe's face twitched slightly. "Voicing a wish while in direct contact with you... That's the necessary condition for it to come true, isn't it?"

"...Yes. Originally, the Fortuna was a small trinket, an accessory."

"Ah..."

Mushiki's eyes widened in realization.

An event came to mind that matched those conditions perfectly.

Yes, the evening a few days ago. While carrying Surya on his back, Mushiki had wished aloud to separate his body from Saika's and meet her again in the flesh.

If the Fortuna had registered that as a wish, then that meant *he* was ultimately responsible for their separation.

And that wasn't all. Looking back, Mushiki realized that Hildegard had been touching Saika's shoulder when she remarked how nice it would be if the girls' uniform at the Garden was modeled on a maid outfit.

By then, Sara's soul was already residing in Saika's body. Assuming that the Fortuna had been transferred at the same time, it came as no surprise that Hilde's wish had come true.

"..."

Mushiki paused, noticing that Ruri had broken into a nervous sweat.

"Ruri?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

"I-it's nothing. Were you thinking about me? You're so sweet, dearest brother. I love—"

With a sudden jolt, she slammed her mouth shut.

Mushiki tilted his head to one side in bewilderment when Anviet cried out in a voice that could have been angry or sad: "...But still! Why—why didn't you say nothin'?! That you were Sara!"

"...I'm sorry, An." Sara lowered her eyes. "I'm a sinner, and a grave one at that. I might not have fully known what I was doing, but I still used the

annihilation factor's power to satisfy my own selfish desires, immensely damaging the world in the process... I felt like I didn't have the right to face you."

"No..."

"And also...", she continued, stroking Surya's head, "I wanted you to meet our precious daughter first."

"..."

Anviet glanced down at Surya, then fell to his knees and bowed his head.

"...Sorry. All that stuff I said about you not bein' my daughter..."

Surya, however, gave her head a firm shake. "It's okay, Papa. Sue understands."

"Huh...?"

"Mama told me so much about you... She said you can be a bit rough, but you're also the kindest person in the whole wide world."

"Surya...", Anviet murmured.

She opened her eyes slightly as if noticing something. "Huh? Do you...? Do you...?"

"Wh-what...?"

"Do you wanna give Sue a huge hug, Papa?" she asked, staring up into his eyes.

Anviet looked back in shock for a brief moment, then—

"...You know me too well, huh?" he said with a soft chuckle, wrapping his arms around her in a tight embrace.

Watching on from the sidelines, Mushiki and Ruri exchanged measured glances.

"...Mushiki?"

"...Yeah." He nodded, already knowing what she wanted to say.

They had rescued Saika—or rather, Sara—and reunited Anviet with his

daughter and late wife. By all means, this was a joyous occasion.

Yet despite all that, the damage inflicted by the Fortuna remained unresolved.

“...Ah...,” Mushiki said, coming to a realization.

There was a third reason Sara hadn’t revealed herself to Anviet.

“Kuroe. About Sara...”

“...”

Kuroe stared down at her feet, not answering Mushiki.

She must have realized it, too.

“...An,” Sara began. “Thank you... I’m glad we were able to meet again, one last time.”

“Huh...? What...?” He stopped himself there, no doubt grasping what she meant.

“Sara, you can’t...”

“...The window for reversible annihilation from the first wish hasn’t run out yet. If we destroy the Wheel of Fate now, it will be like those disappearances all over the world never happened.”

Destroying annihilation factors to save the world—such was the inevitable mission of any mage.

But at the same time, that meant that Sara, who’d merged with the Fortuna, would have to disappear as well.

Yes. That was the third reason why Sara hadn’t revealed herself until the last minute, despite longing to be reunited with her husband.

Simply put, she didn’t want to force Anviet to endure the pain of losing her all over again. That was how Mushiki saw it, at least.

“...No... You’re kiddin’, right...?” Anviet murmured, before he froze.

The reason was simple. Someone had grabbed Sara by the leg.

“Huh...?”

“What—”

Sara's eyes widened in shock, while Anviet's voice caught in his throat.

A second later, Mushiki and the others caught on to what had happened, too.

Zhu Yin, who should have been lying unconscious on the floor, had latched on to Sara's leg.

Then, staring up at them with empty eye sockets, she let out a hoarse cry: "I have a wish, Fortuna! This world should be mine...!"

The next moment—

"Gah... Ugh...?!"

All at once, an unfathomable physical force assailed Mushiki, sending him to his knees.

"Mushiki?! Are you okay?!" Ruri cried, gaping in panic.

Mushiki, however, couldn't so much as utter a word of thanks.

The reason was simple. Just as Zhu Yin's body started emitting a faint glow—

The basement was gripped by a massive earthquake, like the world itself was falling apart.

"Ahhh...! Arrrggghhh...!"

Amid those powerful tremors, Zhu Yin slowly rose to her feet.

No. To be more precise, her body seemed to be defying gravity, floating up into the air.

"Whaaat?! This, this power...! It's incredible...! Limitless might...!"

In an ecstatic trance, Zhu Yin turned her head to the heavens. At the same time, magical energy gathered in her sunken eye sockets to form radiant eyes of pure light—magic-based substantiations, no doubt.

"What...?! What just happened?!" Anviet cried in alarm.

"That much magic...?!" Ruri shouted in dismay.

Their responses were only natural. Zhu Yin, whom they had all thought to be incapacitated, was now floating in midair, enveloped in an impossibly dense shroud of raw energy.

“Th-that’s...”

Struck with impossible weariness, Mushiki somehow managed to find his voice.

Kuroe immediately knelt down beside him, lowering her head so he could whisper in her ear. “What is it, Mushiki?”

“I—I don’t know... It’s like a huge part of me was just torn out of my body...”

“...”

Kuroe’s expression turned sullen. “...Given this phenomenon, and Zhu Yin’s present state...she may have been speaking figuratively when she made that wish of hers...but I suspect she has usurped the throne of the World King.”

“What...?!” Mushiki’s eyes all but popped from their sockets.

World King—the title mentioned by the other Saika, the one from the future.

According to her, this world was merely a manifestation that Saika had modeled on the *real* world—a fifth substantiation.

The mage responsible for maintaining that substantiation took on the mantle of the World King. Indeed, the other Saika had come back from the future to wrest it from her past self.

Even now, the ensuing battle was etched in Mushiki’s memory.

“Gah...! Ugh...!”

Mushiki let out a pained moan as a searing agony welled up from deep within his chest.

But that was only natural.

The seat of the World King, which Saika had risked her life to protect, and which the future Saika had sought so desperately to acquire, had been wrested from his grasp with a single command from an unknown mage.

“Calm yourself, Mushiki.”

“How can I...stay calm here...?”

He struggled to suppress the debilitating vertigo that had taken hold of him,

pulling himself upright.

Then, fixing Sara in his sights, he muttered, “Right... If the Fortuna can take the world away, it should also be able to put it back...”

And yet—

“I don’t think so!”

Zhu Yin held up a hand to stop him.

With that—

He was launched backward like a feather in the wind, his vision turning stark white.

“Gah...!”

After a few brief moments of weightlessness, he slammed hard into the ground.

Yet in spite of the excruciating pain racking his entire being, a peculiar sense of unease crossed his mind.

Yes. They were all supposed to be in an underground basement, and while the room was relatively large, it still had its limits. Could he really have been thrown back so far?

“What...?”

He opened his eyes wide, his breath catching in his throat.

The space around him was now unrecognizable.

In the span of a few seconds, the sky had spread out overhead, the room had been replaced with a vast expanse, and all potential obstacles had been cleared away.

A fourth substantiation? No. He could see what looked like a townscape in the distance.

The view was a chaotic mess, as if someone had crushed a garden of clay sculptures and reshaped them according to their every whim.

“Oh dear, did I go a little overboard...? Do forgive me. I don’t yet know my

own strength.” Zhu Yin laughed, waltzing through the air with her lips contorted in a sinister smile.

A split second later—

“Rays of the Rising Sun!”

“Vasaras!”

A pair of shadows lunged for Zhu Yin’s blind spot, lashing out with weapons and unleashing electric blasts. It was Ruri and Anviet, both clad in their third substantiations.

“Oh...?”

Yet Zhu Yin effortlessly parried their attacks, without so much as moving a muscle.

No. *Parried* wasn’t entirely accurate.

Their attacks didn’t even reach her; the radiant glow enveloping her body had blocked them.

“You startled me. To think that you still have such energy! I should have expected no less from Knights of the Garden!”

Zhu Yin’s voice echoed around them, her dazzling glow intensifying and flinging both of them back.

“Gah...”

“Huh... What the...?!”

Thrown to the ground, Ruri and Anviet fixed Zhu Yin in a pair of baleful glares before resuming their assault. Yet none of those strikes succeeded in reaching her, either.

There seemed to be no point whatsoever to attacking—the power differential was simply too overwhelming.

But that was precisely so. After all, they were effectively fighting against the world itself.

There was no other option—they had to find some way to retrieve the mantle of the World King.

Yet Zhu Yin's earlier attack had scattered Mushiki, Kuroe, Sara, and Surya all over the battlefield, leaving each of them lying injured on the ground where they had fallen.

Sara couldn't use the Fortuna to make her own wishes come true, so someone else had to reach her to undo what Zhu Yin had done. But at this distance...

"...Sara!" Kuroe shouted from behind.

She, too, was badly wounded, barely able to stand up. But that didn't stop her from calling out at the top of her lungs.

"Can you return your consciousness to Surya's body?!"

"Huh...?"

Sara spun around, her surprise at this request writ large.

"If you can, do it now!" Kuroe cried.

"A-all right...!"

Sara closed her eyes and focused, before she collapsed to the ground like she had passed out. Saika's body, now devoid of a soul, lay utterly defenseless.

"..."

At the exact same moment, Kuroe toppled forward.

"Kuroe?! Are you all right?! Kuroe...?!" Mushiki called out to her.

But as much as he wanted to run over to her, his body refused to listen. It wasn't just a matter of damage or injury—from the moment Zhu Yin usurped the authority of the World King, a strange sensation had taken hold of him, rendering all movement impossible.

Dread filled his lungs. Abject fear. If Mushiki didn't act now, Kuroe and Saika would be in jeopardy.

That was when he heard it—

"Don't worry, Mushiki."

A voice echoed in his panic-stricken mind.

“...I-is that...?” he murmured in a daze.

But his surprise was entirely reasonable.

After all, that voice belonged to the woman he longed for most, who he continued to desire.

“Don’t worry about Kuroe. She probably just overexerted herself. Let her rest for a while.”

A figure slowly rose from the cloud of dust, swaying gently.

“Ah...”

Mushiki felt tears welling up from deep inside.

It made no sense, yet it made perfect sense in his heart.

She. It was she—the *true* Saika Kuozaki, body and soul as one.

“Saika...,” he called out, overwhelmed by emotion.

Ruri and Anviet, still fighting, had also clearly noticed her, as had Zhu Yin, who stretched out her hand once more.

“I said I won’t let *yooouuu*!”

In an effort to stop Saika from using the Fortuna, Zhu Yin warped the space between her and Surya, as if she were crushing it in her fist.

“Saika!” Mushiki shrieked in despair.

But at that moment—

“Hmm? Did you call me?” came the most matter-of-fact voice.

“Eh...?!”

“What...?”

Both Mushiki and Zhu Yin watched on, agape. Meanwhile, Saika broke into an amused laugh.

“Why are you acting so surprised? There may not be a lot of magic left in my body, but that won’t stop me from drawing on external energy. And as powerful as substantiation techniques are, it’s never a good idea to limit your available strategies.”

She paused for a moment, glaring at Zhu Yin.

“As for you... Your actions don’t even qualify as a substantiation technique. You have immense power, but you wield it blindly. Such a waste of potential... My world wasn’t made to be abused by the likes of you.”

“...So you say. But how are you going to measure up to me now?” Zhu Yin’s gaze sharpened as she readied herself to launch another attack.

But just before she could do so, Ruri and Anviet lunged toward her from either side.

“Hah!”

“Augh!”

“Tch... Get out of my way!” she spat, unleashing beams of raw magic at them both.

But Ruri and Anviet were Knights of the Garden. They weren’t about to fall for the same trick twice; they both spun around and dodged the strikes.

In that moment, Zhu Yin left herself open.

Saika dropped to her knees by Mushiki’s side.

“Hey, Mushiki... It’s been a while since we were last like this, huh?” she joked.

It should have gone without saying, but she was Saika Kuozaki in every possible way—her expression, her voice, her every movement.

“Saika...I—”

“Stop. Don’t try apologizing. You did great. Above and beyond my wildest expectations... And you were pretty cool in that fight against Anviet. Just don’t shout *that* kind of thing too loudly, okay?” she said with a small chuckle. “I’ll take it from here. Every now and then, it falls on the headmistress to step up.”

With those words, she leaned in and brought her lips against his own.

“Eh...? Ah...”

“...Close your eyes... It’s time for me to give it all back—the magical energy that resided in you.”



An indescribably soft sensation pressed up against Mushiki's lips—just as it had when he'd first met Saika on the verge of death three months ago.

“Auuuggghhh...!”

“Kyaa—”

“Gwah...!”

With a loud shriek, Zhu Yin waved her hands desperately in front of her.

The two Knights of the Garden, darting around at high speed, finally fell silent.

“Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha...! Have you come to your senses? With this...I have power over all...”

Her face was awash with bliss, yet her voice suddenly trailed off.

Zhu Yin felt amazing. She didn't know how or why, but her body was filled with a rush of power, near unlimited might. If there was such a thing as a god, this must have been what it felt like to be one. Omnipotence emanated from every fiber of her being. She felt like her very soul would melt into the fabric of reality if she lost concentration for even a moment.

“Oh? You seem to be enjoying yourself,” came a voice to dampen her spirits. “Shall we have this dance, Zhu Yin?”

“...”

Zhu Yin shifted her body slightly. Floating in the air like her mirror image was Saika Kuozaki.

“Ah, yes... I'm supposed to take you down... Aha-ha-ha... But why? Oh well. There you are, so I might as well...”

“...Your memories have begun to grow muddy. That isn't surprising. You usurped the world's stock of magic, using it as a weapon in battle rather than keeping it under control.”

“What now...? Are you *mocking* me...?”

“As if. I appreciate this feat of yours more than you can possibly imagine. You're a genius... I expected you to keel over within ten minutes.”

“What was that...?” Zhu Yin demanded.

At that moment, a warm sensation ran down her cheek.

“Ah...?”

For a second, she thought she was crying—but that wasn’t it.

She wiped the trickling feeling away, only to discover it was dyed bright red.

“Huh...? What...?”

It wasn’t just her eyes—blood was oozing from her nose, her mouth, and her ears.

Saika averted her gaze. “It’s a shame, really... With your ambition, you might even have become a knight if you had decided to join the Garden.”

“Bwa-ha-ha! What are talking about? There is *no one* stronger than me now! Why would I serve under—”

Just then, Zhu Yin fell silent.

After all, she had just realized that Saika Kuozaki, floating before her, was emitting an aura no less powerful than she herself was.

“Wh-what?! Where did you *get* that...?!” she cried, pouring every ounce of her magic into her next attack.

Saika, however, calmly deflected it.

“I strip you of the mantle of World King... Whether you live or die now depends entirely on your own potential.”

A four-layer world crest burst into being over her head as she raised her hand gracefully in front of her.

“Young mages truly do come up with the most fascinating ideas. I hadn’t considered such a creative application before,” Saika said, gathering an immense quantity of magic in the palm of her hand.

“The creation of all things. Heaven and earth alike reside in the palm of my hand.”

A dazzling resplendence of color flowed from her world crest.

“Pledge obedience...”

Faced with this fantastical sight, Zhu Yin let out a half-strangled cry: “... Beautiful...”

“...For I will make of you my bride.”

At the receiving end of that devastating blow, Zhu Yin sank into deepest darkness.



A burst of brilliant color filled the sky.

That told Mushiki everything he needed to know—Saika had won.

“Ugh...”

Groaning in pain, he pulled himself to his feet. His body still ached, but now that Saika had recovered her power, he at least seemed to be able to move a little. Perhaps after accommodating the magic of the world for so long, his body had come to depend on it. Then again, maybe Saika’s kiss had served to reinvigorate him.

“Mushiki...are you okay?”

Ruri limped up to him, clutching her shoulder. Her third substantiation was no longer in effect, leaving her in a tattered maid uniform.

“Yeah... I’ll manage.”

“You’re injured. Does it hurt? Are you really okay? Shall I lick your wounds better for you?”

“Er... R-really, I’m fine. Are you?”

“I guess so... Hold on, is that Kuroe? She isn’t moving...” Ruri cast her gaze to where Kuroe had fallen, her face contorted with worry.

Mushiki froze for a moment as he debated how best to answer her. Kuroe’s consciousness—in other words, *Saika’s* consciousness—had been transferred back to her original body, but there was no way he could tell Ruri that.

“...Don’t worry about Kuroe. I’ll take care of her.”

To Mushiki’s relief, a third voice entered the conversation from above.

“Saika!” Mushiki called out.

“A-are you okay?! You’re not hurt?!” Ruri shouted at the exact same moment.

Before they knew it, Saika had joined them, responding to their cries with a wry grin.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“Thank goodness...” Ruri breathed a sigh of relief.

Her concern for Kuroe seemed to have instantly abated, but that was no surprise. After all, Saika had just told her not to worry, and what better reassurance could there be than that?

“But what a surprise! It’s really you, Madam Witch! Does this mean your soul left Mushiki’s body for your own again...?”

“Ah, yes. Something like that.” Saika nodded.

Magnificent, Mushiki thought. From an outsider’s perspective, there was nothing at all to suggest that she wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“It seems that Zhu Yin has survived as well. She has an impressive life force, that one.”

“I see... But what was that at the end? Shouldn’t she have been able to conquer the world with that much power...?”

“That may be so. There’s still a great deal we don’t understand about annihilation factors,” Saika deflected, before breathing a tired sigh. “Now then... we have one final task before us.”

“Final task...?” Ruri repeated uncertainly.

Yes. There was still one more thing Saika had to do.

“Sara...,” Anviet called out as he approached her.

“...An,” Surya—or rather, Sara—answered.

Her mature tone of voice and the slightly melancholy cast to her face were at stark odds with her young, child-size body. Anviet had to remind himself that he

was addressing his beloved wife, Sara.

“...It’s all over,” he murmured softly.

“...Yes, it is,” she answered with a sad smile.

They spoke as if both had already accepted the future that fate had given them.

The Wheel of Fate, Fortuna—a mythic-class annihilation factor that had already caused immense destruction. Considering the extent of Anviet’s and Zhu Yin’s wishes, there was no doubt that calamities unknown to them had already taken place somewhere in the world.

“...The Fortuna is too dangerous. It has to be destroyed.”

“But—”

“Precisely,” sounded a third voice, interrupting him.

Anviet glanced over his shoulder and spotted Saika, accompanied by Mushiki and Ruri.

He didn’t want to admit it, but Saika came across to Anviet as nothing less than a god of death incarnate.

“Annihilation factors must be eradicated. Especially Mythologia.”

“...Yes.” Sara nodded, slowly rising to her feet. Then, after a short pause, she whispered, “I’m sorry, An...”

“...Why are you apologizin’?”

“You’ve figured it out, haven’t you? What I asked Madam Witch back then.”

“...Yeah.” He let out a deep sigh. “Don’t worry... I know you don’t want me to throw my life away.”

“Oh-ho... You’ve grown up, An.”

“I’ve been grown up since forever.” He blushed slightly, remembering his actions during the incident at the training grounds. “...But I guess I did kinda make a fuss, huh?”

“I love that part of you.”

“...Sure you do,” Anviet pouted.

Sara flashed him a serene smile. Then, after a long pause, she continued, “...I’ve...always been afraid.”

“Of what...?” Anviet asked.

“...Ever since I received the Fortuna, I was blessed,” she explained with a slight nod. “My father’s business thrived, our family grew ever more prosperous and happier, and my frail health made a remarkable turnaround... Then I got to marry the man of my dreams, the dashing Prince Svarner.”

“Huh...?”

“Hee-hee...” Sara flashed him a mischievous smile. “You never knew, did you? I was in love with you long before we ever met. So when we finally got married, I felt like I was on top of the world.”

She paused for a moment.

“But even surrounded by so much happiness, there was one fear I could never shake: maybe you only loved me because of the power of the ring... That’s why I ran when Madam Witch turned up all those years ago. I was afraid you wouldn’t love me anymore if I lost the Fortuna.”

“...That’s absurd...!” Anviet growled, his brow creased in a pained frown. “Ain’t no way in hell that would happen. Even if our meetin’ was a stroke of luck, nobody’s gonna deny my feelings for you!”

“An...” Still visibly anxious, Sara stared deep into his eyes.

Anviet took her in his arms, holding her in the tightest of hugs.

“...That Fortuna’s been gone a hundred years, and I haven’t forgotten you for a single goddamn day. You’re the woman I love, Sara. You’re the only one for me in this life...!”

“Ah...”

Overcome with emotion, Sara returned his embrace.

How long did they stay like that?

At long last, Sara pulled away, leaving Anviet’s shirt wet with tears.

“...Thank you, An. I have no more regrets.”

She turned to Saika. “Sorry I kept you waiting, Madam Witch... Please...”

“...Ah.” Saika nodded, uncrossing her arms. “Sara. Can you manifest the Fortuna’s powers like you did a hundred years ago?”

“...I’ll try.”

With those words, she lowered her gaze and focused.

Then a world crest-like pattern arose behind her and emitted a faint glow, like a white robe draping itself over her form. There could be no doubt about it —this was the same form she had adopted after assimilating the Wheel of Fate all those years ago.

“Is that...a third substantiation...?” Ruri whispered.

“Not exactly, though it’s very similar in nature,” Saika answered softly.

She held out a hand, her own world crest hovering above her head.

“Then let us begin.”

Saika reached out, her palm bathed in scintillating light.

“...?! Madam Witch?!”

Sara’s eyes widened in shock, A split second later, so did Anviet’s.

“Kuoazaki...?!”

Saika meant not to kill Sara but to save her.

Sweat trickled down Saika’s cheek.

She hadn’t conducted this kind of procedure in a very, very long time.

But that was only natural. After all, she was attempting to forcibly separate a human being who’d merged with an annihilation factor.

“...This was beyond me a hundred years ago...,” she wheezed, her voice overflowing with regret. “But now...just maybe...!”

She wasn’t referring only to her added strength or another hundred years of

life, or to the new experiences gained.

No. Right now, the key was none other than the fallen Zhu Yin, whom Saika had stripped of the mantle of World King.

That didn't mean, however, that Saika had resumed that responsibility for herself.

Right now, the throne was vacant—the world was without anyone to administer it.

Of course, there was no telling what might befall it in such a state. Saika would have to take it back as soon as possible.

But this crisis presented a certain opportunity.

Yes. Free from the need to dedicate her resources to maintaining the world's balance, she was, so to speak, in her absolute prime.

"Saika...!" Mushiki shouted behind her, clearly worried for her safety. "Let me use the Hollow Edge!"

"...No. That would cancel out everything I'm doing."

"...B-but...!"

From the corner of her eye, Saika watched as Mushiki's face twisted in frustration.

She felt her expression soften.

Was that it? Was he bothered by the fact that there was nothing he could do to help?

"...Don't look at me like that. You're the one who revealed this option to me."

"Huh...?"

Mushiki stared back, wide-eyed.

Yes. It wasn't just her overall strength and experience that differentiated her now from who she'd been one hundred years ago.

The old Saika believed that certain sacrifices had to be made for the world to be saved. Well, strictly speaking, she *still* believed that.

But it was Mushiki Kuga who had said it while facing off against a future version of herself whose powers were above and beyond those that she possessed even now.

Saika would never do that.

“You think too highly of me... I’m not the saint you think I am,” she murmured, clenching her teeth as she poured all her strength into her hands.

“Augh... Auuuggghhh...!”

Sara screamed in agony, but that was little wonder. Saika was trying to remove another existence that had become intertwined with her own, a process that entailed no ordinary level of pain.

“Be strong! External forces alone won’t be enough to separate you! You have to reject the Fortuna with all your being!”

“Sara...!” Anviet howled, gripping her hands in his own.

Sara tightened her grip as best she could. “...An...”

With that, her eyes turned vacant.

Saika grimaced. At this rate, Sara’s spirit wouldn’t be able to endure. There would be no point separating her from the Fortuna if it meant leaving her permanently comatose.

She needed something, *anything*, to overcome the annihilation factor’s hold on her.

“...It’s all right.”

“...?!”

At that very moment, another voice sounded from Sara’s mouth.

Saika and the others collectively gasped.

That tone, those words—they knew at once who it was.

“...Su...rya...?” Anviet gaped.

Then, with the gentlest of smiles, she said, “Sue will save you, Mama.”

“...!”

Saika startled as her magic instantly met a more pliant response.

Something had clearly changed from a moment ago. And now, she had firmly identified the true form of the Fortuna, enmeshed with Sara's soul. At last, she might finally be able to separate them.

But at that same moment—

“Stop, Surya! If you do that, you'll—”

“...! Surya!”

Anviet must have realized it, too. Holding Surya's small hand in his own, he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Yet she just shook her head weakly.

“Sue...was born a little too early... That's all...,” she said with a serene smile. “Papa... Mama... You'll have me again...”

With that, her voice faded into nothing.

“Ngh...!”

That last nudge was all Saika needed to materialize the annihilation factor and strip it from Sara's soul.

Then, summoning up a miniature fourth substantiation, she crushed it into oblivion.

Light filled the surrounding area.

After those spectacular developments, Mushiki helped Saika, overcome with exhaustion, back to the entrance.

“Saika...”

“...I'm sick of being labeled the world's strongest mage,” she muttered, staring down at her tattered palms. “In the end, I couldn't do anything on my own.”

As she spoke, tremendous earthquakes struck all about, as if the world itself were seeking out its new master.

“...Looks like we’re running out of time.”

She breathed a thin sigh, turning to stare at Mushiki.

“...Do you resent me?”

“Huh?”

“The Wheel of Fate is destroyed. It won’t be long before all the damage it caused will be returned to its original state—along with the wishes it granted,” she said with a faraway look.

It didn’t take much guesswork to figure out what she meant.

In other words, they would soon be merged into one again.

“...The way I was a moment ago, I could probably have done it. I could have separated us for real. But now—”

“Saika.” Mushiki stopped her there. “You were busy saving Sara. And I wanted to help you do it.”

“...Hmm.”

Staring down at the ground, she breathed a weak sigh. It would be extremely gauche, she knew, to make any further show of self-doubt.

“Then it’s time for us to part ways for a while... Give my best to Kuroe.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes?”

A cloud of light engulfed them as she spoke her final words: “My ring size. It’s an eight.”

Chapter 6

You Can't Wait to See

◀ What Comes Next, Right? ▶

"There you are, Sara," Anviet called out.

Sara was standing on the balcony outside his quarters in the Garden, watching the night sky. More stars than the eye could count shone overhead, while the lights of the city below were no less numerous.

"An..."

Sara turned to face him, her eyes swollen with tears.

The annihilation factor—the Fortuna—had been successfully destroyed, and Sara, with whom it had merged, had somehow managed to survive. It was an extraordinary outcome, unthinkable under normal circumstances.

But as a result, Sara had lost her beloved daughter, with whom she had shared life's joys and sorrows for so very long. Her tears had flowed nonstop from the moment she came back to her senses.

"...I'm sorry. I'm so distraught."

"...I know..."

Anviet shook his head. He had known his daughter for only a few days, but her loss had torn a gaping hole in his heart. It wasn't hard to imagine how Sara must have been taking it.

After a long silence, she spoke up. "Madam Witch said something, before... That maybe Surya was an identity, a personality state, created by my wish a hundred years ago..." She turned her face back to the night sky. "So long as her memories are engraved into my soul, she isn't truly gone... Someday, I have to give birth to her for real. So I can't despair forever."

“...Yeah.” Anviet nodded.

Sara approached on light footsteps, wrapping her arms around him in a hug.

“So please...let me hold you until dawn. Once morning comes, I’ll be okay.”

“...Ah.”

Anviet bowed his head in response, holding her small body in turn.



In room 2-A of the Garden’s central school building, Mushiki was using a ruler to draw lines on a piece of paper.

“Forty-eight millimeters by two millimeters...”

After carefully cutting a long, narrow strip, he rolled it up and glued the tips together.

Then, like a craftsman admiring his handiwork, he peered down at the ring-shaped object.

“I see...”

“What are you doing?” a voice called out from behind him.

“Whoa...!”

Mushiki jumped upright, the paper ring falling onto his desk.

“Kuroe...don’t startle me like that.”

Unfazed, she glanced at the ring quizzically.

“And what is *that*?”

“Ah, I tried making a ring for a size eight finger.”

“...And why would you do that?”

“I wanted something I could feel in my hands to help stimulate the imagination,” he declared.

Kuroe looked on in a half squint. “I’m glad to see you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Ah, right. Sorry.”

“Are you familiar with the word *sarcasm*?”

“Eh? Sure.” He nodded.

“...”

Kuroe breathed a tired sigh.

Several days had passed since the destruction of the Fortuna, and the Garden had returned to normal.

The damage wreaked by the annihilation factor had been rendered as if it had never occurred, which meant that the wishes it had granted were undone, too. Mushiki’s body was once again fused with Saika’s, while Saika’s soul had returned to the homunculus Kuroe Karasuma. And of course, the girls had all gone back to wearing their regular uniforms instead of those frilly maid outfits.

...Incidentally, Hildegard, the one who had wished for the Garden to adopt maid outfits as its official uniform in the first place, had been holed up in her workshop since that fateful meeting, so she hadn’t been able to see those outfits with her own eyes. Mushiki kind of felt sorry for her.

“Hmm?” He raised a brow.

Ruri was hiding at the back of the classroom, watching their every move.

“...? Ruri? What are you doing there?”

“...!”

Jerking backward, she hastily pointed a finger at him. “D-don’t get the wrong idea, Mushiki! I was only acting weird the other day because of the Fortuna...! Th-that’s all!”

“...? R-right.”

Overwhelmed, Mushiki nodded in agreement.

To be perfectly honest, he wasn’t entirely sure what she was talking about, but in any event, she seemed to accept his response at face value. Ruri came up to him, still looking somewhat uneasy.

“...Your body went back to the way it was, didn’t it?” she asked softly so the other students wouldn’t overhear.

“Yeah. Unfortunately.”

“...I wonder if this was really for the best...”

“What do you mean...?”

“It’s not like you cheated or anything to make it happen, you know? I mean, sure, it’s dangerous, but used properly, I can see how it could have positive results...”

“Ruri...”

He could sympathize with her on that account. She hadn’t honestly been contemplating using the annihilation factor, but with it all behind them and the option no longer on the table, it was understandable that she might wonder whether they had really done the right thing.

As if to dismiss their concerns, Kuroe shook her head firmly. “Of course, we did everything we could at the time.”

“Kuroe...” Ruri sighed, before finally nodding in response. “Yes, you’re right.”

“What happened to Sara, by the way?” Mushiki asked.

“We aren’t about to throw her out, so Knight Anviet has been appointed as her guardian,” Kuroe explained. “If I recall correctly, she’ll be starting at the Garden’s middle school today.”

“Ah, right... Is that okay, though? Being merged with an annihilation factor is one thing, but does she actually have an aptitude for magic?”

“If you’re curious, why don’t we look in on her?”

“Huh?”

Mushiki and Ruri exchanged uncertain glances.



“...Hmm?”

When the three of them arrived at the Garden’s middle school building, they found that they weren’t the only visitors.

“Mr. Anviet...?”

“...!”

Anviet was peering into the room through a gap in the door, and he jumped slightly when Mushiki called out his name. For some reason, his actions called to mind Ruri's behavior a few minutes ago.

"Y-you lot... Whaddaya doin' here?!"

"We should be the ones saying that."

"Did you come to check on Sara, Knight Anviet?" Kuroe asked.

"E-eh?!" he stammered. "Who said anythin' like that?! I was just out for a little stroll, that's all...!"

The middle school building and its adjoining facilities were located in the Garden's eastern area—making it a somewhat unexpected place for Anviet, a teacher in the high school precinct, to wander into by chance.

"You aren't being entirely truthful, are you?" Kuroe insisted.

"Were you worried Sara might be a hit with the boys in her class?" Ruri teased.

"Ah..." Mushiki nodded.

"You...!" A throbbing blue vein had emerged by Anviet's temple.

At that moment, the teacher's voice sounded from within the classroom: "All right, now, quiet down, everyone. I'd like to introduce you to a new friend who will be joining us today."

"...!"

Anviet shot his gaze back to the gap in the door, and Mushiki and the others followed suit. It was a bit cramped with all four of them there, but that was unavoidable.

Inside, at the front of the classroom and dressed in the Garden's middle school uniform, stood Sara, a shy smile on her face.

"I'm Sara Svarner. It's nice to meet you all," she said with a bow of her head.

Her appearance, her name—everything about her had her fellow students in a buzz.

"Svarner...?"

“Does that mean you’re...?”

“The girl everyone’s been talking about...?”

Hushed whispers spread throughout the room. Apparently, word of the teacher newly responsible for looking after his illegitimate daughter had spread to the lower grades.

Eventually, a female student raised her hand into the air with a question.

“Yes! Sara! Are you Mr. Anviet’s daughter?”

“No, I’m not,” she answered decisively.

“Oh...”

“So it was just a rumor...”

Her fellow students responded with a mix of acceptance and disappointment.

And yet—

“Not his daughter. His wife,” she said with a slight blush.

The classroom was thrown into an uproar, while Anviet was overcome by a violent fit of coughing.

It seemed that life was about to become even more hectic for him.

⚡ Afterword ⚡

Long time no see. Koushi Tachibana here.

How did you find Volume 4 of *King's Proposal, The Golden Maiden*? I hope you enjoyed it.

We have a new character, Surya, on the cover this time around. If you ask me, her white-and-red outfit is super cute. I wanted her hair to be braided to match Anviet's, but you wouldn't believe my shock when I saw this version of the picture! My editor and I were thrown for a loop. I mean, who knew this kind of hairstyle even existed?!

I was really torn having to decide on a theme for her outfit, but after playing an association game based on the motif of a *wheel*, I ultimately arrived at something like the costumes worn by promotional models at motorsports events. The second the idea came to me, I knew at once it was the way to go!

I have to admit, though, I wanted to see Anviet on the cover. I mean, take a look at the inner illustration of his third substantiation. It's just too cool. We'll have to find a way to highlight his ripped pecs another time.

Finally, the manga adaptation that I first announced in Volume 3 has kicked off on Gangan Online.

Nemo Kurio is the illustrator and Shishitoh the layout artist. They've done an amazing job, so please check it out!

Now then, it's time to show my thanks to everyone involved in producing this volume.

Tsunako, you've outdone yourself again with your wonderful illustrations. Surya's hairstyle truly is a work of imagination. And to Kusano, thank you again for another cool cover design. I'm always thrilled to see how the volume numbers take center stage on the cover art. To my editor, I really do appreciate your unfailing help.

Everyone on the editorial team, all those involved in publication, distribution, and sales, and you, holding this book in your hands—you have my heartfelt thanks.

I can't wait to see you again in Volume 5.

March 2023, Koushi Tachibana

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