









KING'S PROPOSAL

Volume 5

→ The Crimson Sage →

Koushi Tachibana

Illustration by **Tsunako**



Copyright



Vol. 5

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The Crimson Sage

In health and in sickness.

In hunger and in satiety.

Whether naked or clothed.

Well, things will work themselves out.

Just surrender yourself to me.

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue: The Witch Purgeth Evil

Chapter 1: Dropout on a Desert Island

Chapter 2: Swirling Ambitions and Water Spirits

Chapter 3: A Girl Dyed in Color

Chapter 4: A Fleeting Honeymoon

Chapter 5: A Great Red God

Chapter 6: From Past to Future

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

→ The Witch Purgeth Evil →

"The creation of all things. Heaven and earth alike reside in the palm of my hand," Mushiki Kuga chanted in the voice of Saika Kuozaki.

The next moment, a four-layered world crest unfolded above his head, which rapidly extended outward to repaint the scenery around him.

This unbelievably surreal sight—an endless expanse of azure sky with countless skyscrapers protruding like fangs from heaven and earth—engulfed the giants rampaging through the city below.

His fourth substantiation.

Transcending *phenomena*, past *matter*, beyond even *assimilation*, was the fourth class of substantiation techniques—*domain*.

It was the pinnacle of all magic, and no foe, no matter how monstrous, could hope to resist it.

"Pledge obedience—for I will make of you my bride," he intoned calmly as he lowered his hand.

In response to that command, the multitude of skyscrapers towering over land and sky buried the area they encompassed, as if pulverizing the swarms of cyclopes—war-grade annihilation factors—into dust.

With horrific cries of agony, the giants vanished along with the debris littering the city streets. Then the cluster of skyscrapers seemed to shimmer and glow as the surrounding scenery returned to its original state.

Spread out before Mushiki was a city laid waste by the cyclopes, filled with people running for safety while mages raced to respond to the situation as quickly as possible.

It was a tragic sight—but now that Mushiki had purged the city of the

annihilation factors, all this destruction would be rendered as if it had never been, as would the memories of all those innocent bystanders.

"Is that...Madam Witch?!"

"It's Madam Witch! She's here!"

More voices joined in as the mages down below noticed Mushiki, still hovering in the sky overhead, and called out to him.

Some seemed to have suffered minor injuries, but on the whole, they were all okay. *There's nothing to worry about now*, Mushiki seemed to be telling them as he smiled gently and waved.

The call to action had come without warning, but thankfully, they had succeeded in eradicating the annihilation factors without any real trouble, keeping casualties on their side to a minimum. Mushiki breathed a sigh of relief. Really, this was probably the best outcome anyone could have hoped for.

The next moment, a thought flashed through his mind, and he tilted his head to one side.

"Huh? Didn't I have something planned for today...? What was it, though?"

He racked his brains for an answer, but it just wouldn't come to him.

Well, whatever it was, it could hardly be more important than stopping annihilation factors and saving the world. And so, he decided to bask in his success for the time being as he continued waving to the mages below.

Chapter 1

→ Dropout on a Desert Island →

Notice

The following students have received a failing grade on account of unsuccessfully completing the requisite courses:

Mushiki Kuga, Class 2-A

Mushiki Kuga stood in mute astonishment, staring at the notice posted on the bulletin board in front of the central school building at Void's Garden, the mage-training institute in Ohjoh City, Tokyo.

Beads of sweat coated his forehead, his face having turned paler even than his light-colored hair, and his strikingly clear eyes were filled with panic and fear.

"…"

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and took a deep breath in an effort to calm his nerves.

... Maybe he was reading it wrong?

Come to think of it, he'd had a hard time nodding off last night and was a little sleep-deprived, so maybe his mind was playing tricks on him. His eyes were tired, too, so there was every chance he was misreading similar-looking kanji characters.

"All right."

He held his hand to his chest and waited a full ten seconds. Then, once his

heartbeat was under control, he opened his eyes once more—yet the despair-inducing notice remained unchanged, staring him down in cold silence.

A failing grade. The opposite of passing. Basically, he had flunked an exam or an evaluation or something like that, so he wouldn't be able to graduate or proceed to the next grade.

That was...unless the words had a different meaning in the world of mages?

"...Mushiki?"

"What are you doing, standing around gawking like that?"

While busying himself with contemplating the vastness of the universe, hoping against hope to escape his present reality, Mushiki heard a pair of voices approaching from behind.

Flinching, he glanced over his shoulder, moving as rigidly as an unoiled piece of machinery.

"K-Kuroe... Ruri..."

There, just as he had expected, stood two young women in Void's Garden uniforms.

The first was his classmate Kuroe Karasuma, with her black hair tied up behind her head and her usual reserved expression.

The second was his sister, Ruri Fuyajoh, her confident countenance framed by her twin ponytails.

The two glanced at one another in surprise, then shifted their gazes to the bulletin board.

"Ah." They sighed under their breath.

The second Kuroe and Ruri saw the notice, they each raised quizzical eyebrows.

"Is that ...?"

"A fail notice?" Ruri asked. "You don't normally see them posted like that. They're usually sent by app or email or something."

"Perhaps this is to make an example of him," Kuroe suggested.

"Ah, I see... No, hold on!" Only then did Ruri seem to notice the name written on the document, her eyes widening in shock as she turned her gaze back to him. "Mushiki?! What's this about you flunking class...?!" she demanded.

"C-calm down, please. Honestly, I don't know what's going on here, either...," Mushiki tried to explain, hoping to quiet Ruri, who was now approaching him as if she wanted to throttle him.

Ignoring this squabble, Kuroe narrowed her eyes as she took in the bulletin notice. "Based on what it says here, you didn't meet the criteria for a passing grade on the mage aptitude test."

"The mage aptitude test?" Ruri repeated. "Wasn't that...?"

Kuroe gave her a small nod before continuing, "The exam all new students have to take upon entering any mage-training institute. It's normally only taken by first-years, but Mushiki was a special case—a midterm admission," she said, cupping her chin with one hand. "As the name implies, it's a test that measures one's suitability to becoming a mage. So long as you can sense the flow of magical energy, you should be able to receive a passing grade. Given that Mushiki can already activate his second substantiation, it's hard to think he would have failed. Unless..." She paused, her eyebrow twitching. "I assume you didn't miss the exam, did you? I do recall telling you how important it was—that you absolutely had to take it."

"...When was it again?" Mushiki asked.

"The Monday before last."

"Oh. That day..."

Sorting through his memories, Mushiki fell deathly silent.

Try as he might to fight it, he could feel sweat building on his forehead, trickling down his cheeks, and falling in droplets down to the ground.

Kuroe and Ruri furrowed their brows at his reaction.

"Mushiki...?" Kuroe murmured.

"You really skipped the exam?" Ruri pressed.

"It's not like that. Well, it's not not like that, but I didn't mean to," he

stammered.

"What, then?" Ruri demanded impatiently.

"There was an annihilation factor attack that day, and I had to leave the Garden to deal with it."

At last, both Kuroe and Ruri nodded along in understanding.

Annihilation factor was a collective term for entities capable of destroying the world that could take the form of monsters, disasters, diseases, and more. On average, at least one tended to strike approximately every three hundred hours.

Using magic to eliminate such threats was the sworn mission of every mage at the Garden, Mushiki included.

"I see. So that's what happened. That shouldn't be an issue, then, should it? Right, Kuroe?" Ruri asked.

"No. Defeating annihilation factors is the primary goal for any mage. Naturally, that takes precedence over the Garden's curriculum. Students who miss an exam as a result can make it up later after submitting a certificate proving their participation in the annihilation factor response."

"There you go. Lucky you, Mushiki," Ruri said in relief, patting him on the shoulder.

Mushiki's expression, however, remained fraught.

"...I was there as Saika."

"…"

At this, both girls' faces stiffened.

Kuroe and Ruri were both familiar with Mushiki's *situation*, no doubt realizing at once what he meant by that one sentence.

Four months ago, Mushiki, mortally wounded by a cruel twist of fate, had survived by merging with the world's most powerful mage, Saika Kuozaki.

Ever since then, he'd possessed two forms—his own, and that of Saika—living a double life as both.



"You're saying that since Madam Witch was the one who crushed the annihilation factors, there's no proof Mushiki was there...?" Ruri asked.

"That's about it."

"... What happens now, then?" Ruri's voice turned suddenly fearful.

"Good question...," Kuroe murmured, sinking deep into thought. "As any mage here at the Garden would know, our primary objective is to fight annihilation factors. This mission always carries with it a risk of death. The aptitude test is designed to determine whether someone has both the ability and the willpower to face annihilation factors. In other words, it's the final opportunity for people who don't wish to fight to reconsider their path in life. If you had simply missed an ordinary scheduled test, there might be ways around it. But to skip the aptitude test without prior permission, and without providing proof that you were doing something else at that time..."

"What then?"

"Worst-case scenario, they could kick you out. The possibility of you being expelled from the Garden isn't out of the question."

"What...?!" Mushiki and Ruri gasped in unison.

"H-hold on a sec, Kuroe. Mushiki was Madam Witch when he defeated the annihilation factors... So he was busy saving the world, right?"

"Yes. But unless he can prove it, that won't serve as a useful defense. Or do you expect him to undergo a state change in front of everyone's eyes, to prove that he and Lady Saika are one and the same?"

"Ugh...!" Ruri grimaced.

It was true that Mushiki would probably be able to free himself from this disgrace if he transformed into Saika in public. However, revealing that Saika Kuozaki, the world's strongest mage and headmistress of the Garden, had fused with an inexperienced mage like him carried even greater risks.

"Th-there has to be a way, right? Kuroe?" Ruri pleaded. "If Mushiki gets expelled, that'll cause problems for Madam Witch, seeing as they're sharing the same body and all. Wouldn't it?"

"Oh? I thought you wanted to drive him out of the Garden. This could be rather convenient for you, no?"

"Th-that's all in the past!" Ruri shouted, her face turning bright red.

"Ah. So it is," Kuroe answered flatly.

It was hard to imagine her forgetting something like that; most likely she'd just wanted to get a reaction from Ruri. Kuroe was normally cool and composed, but every now and then, she would let this more playful side show. It was kind of cute.

After feigning a cough to clear her throat, Kuroe continued. "Anyway, let's talk to the academic affairs office. I'm sure they don't mean to expel Mushiki from the Garden. This notice is probably just a formality, so I'm sure they'll understand once we explain you missed the exam due to unavoidable circumstances."

"Y-yeah. There's never enough manpower around here, so there's no way they'd expel someone who's already using their second substantiation." Ruri nodded in agreement.

"Precisely. The Garden's staff aren't blindly rigid. They know when to bend the rules... Let's go, Mushiki."

"R-right!" He nodded, still visibly nervous.

With that, the three of them set off to the central administrative building and the academic affairs office.

"Yeah... Looks like you're outta luck," muttered the disinterested, glasseswearing office clerk at the consultation window. They had found the academic affairs office on the first floor of the central administrative building.

As the name implied, the central administrative building was located in Void's Garden's central precinct, and it was where most of the staff responsible for the campus's continued operation were based.

Though primarily a school, the Garden also functioned as a community for

mages and as a major base for defending against annihilation factors, which meant that a wide range of departments and offices were crammed into this towering twenty-story building.

There would usually be light streaming from the windows, especially on the upper floors, well after everyone else had gone to bed. For that reason, students at the Garden had taken to nicknaming the building "the Torch" out of a mixture of awe, respect, and concern that it might one day burn out.

Indeed, the attitude of the female clerk sitting behind the desk called to mind nothing if not the cold, emotionless ashes left behind after a burned-out fire.

"If you miss the aptitude test, that counts as failing," she answered listlessly.

Incensed by this lackluster response, Ruri slammed her palm down on the counter. "Hold on a minute! Didn't you hear what I just said?! Mushiki couldn't sit the test because he was helping destroy the annihilation factors! There's gotta be some kind of relief measure!"

"Ah. If you could give us an official certificate..."

"I told you, it's complicated! We haven't got one...!"

"Well, looks like it's a no-go then," the clerk said without even bothering to fix her glasses, which had slid partway down her nose.

Ruri, her hands quivering in rage, leaned over the counter. "Do you realize that Mushiki can already use his second substantiation?! He shouldn't even have to take some stupid aptitude test in the first place!"

"Well, any absence is counted as a fail, I'm afraid."

"Can't you hear what I'm saying?! Do you understand how valuable a mage who's reached their second substantiation is?! Can't you see how insane it is to fail someone who's a vital asset on the battlefield just like that?!"

"He didn't take the test, though," the clerk replied indifferently.

"You aren't listening to me!" Ruri cried out in anger.

Kuroe, watching on from behind, breathed an exasperated sigh. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

"...It doesn't look like it." Mushiki chuckled, forcing a nervous grin.

He was well aware that this was no laughing matter, but some part of him just couldn't help finding Ruri's exchange with the clerk amusing.

Kuroe placed a hand on her chin in contemplation. "It seems we don't have much choice. I'm not too keen on it, but we'll have to try our next move."

"You have another idea?"

"Yes. Allow me to explain in private," she said, beckoning to him.

With a subtle nod, he left Ruri to her ongoing battle with the clerk and followed after Kuroe.

"This way."

Kuroe led him into the back of the central administrative building—then, without warning, pushed him hard against the wall.

"Huh? Uh, Kuroe...?" he stammered, realizing at once what she meant to do. "Um, this isn't that *next move* you mentioned, is it...?"

Her lips puckered in a grin. "How perceptive of you. That's *exactly* what I'm planning," she answered in a decidedly un-Kuroe-like tone of voice.

Mushiki, however, recognized it immediately. This was Kuroe's true personality—or more precisely, the personality of the individual dwelling within the body of Kuroe Karasuma.

Yes. The real Saika Kuozaki—the true master of the body that Mushiki had merged with.

"I don't want this to look like we're strong-arming them, but we can't afford for you to be expelled."

"Y-yeah...I know. Still..." Before he knew it, Mushiki felt his cheeks growing hot.

To go along with Kuroe's plan, they first had to do a certain something.

"You should be used to it by now. It's not like this is your first time, right?"

"Wait-"

But Kuroe paid him no heed as she pressed her lips up against his own.

"Whaaaaat?!" Ruri cried out at the top of her lungs when Mushiki and Kuroe returned to the consultation window on the first floor of the central administrative building. A growing crowd of students and staff looked on in wide-eyed surprise.

But that was unavoidable.

After all, Mushiki, who'd been standing quietly behind her until just a brief moment ago, had now been replaced by a woman of unsurpassed beauty.

Her hair, the color of sunshine, sparkled in the light, while her iridescent eyes reflected a fantastical array of colors.

There wasn't a soul in the Garden who didn't know that face or her name.

Yes. This was none other than Saika Kuozaki, headmistress of Void's Garden and the world's most powerful mage.

Mushiki, through an infusion of magical power delivered in the form of a kiss from Kuroe, had transformed into this most captivating of figures.

"Kuroooe! What are you doing?!" Ruri bellowed.

"Calm down, Knight Fuyajoh. You're making a scene," Kuroe replied coolly.

Although Ruri was aware that Mushiki and Saika were fused together, she didn't know that Kuroe was the real Saika in disguise. Of course, she would hardly have addressed her this way if she'd known the truth.

...If she ever learned Kuroe's true identity, she might very well explode in remorse and shame. And so, with renewed determination, Mushiki vowed to ensure that their secrets were never exposed.

"Please calm down, Ruri," he said to soothe her. "Kuroe means well."

"M-Madam Witch...," she whispered, her fury subsiding.

After patting her gently on the head, he turned to the clerk at the consultation window with a soft smile.

"Now then, Ruri has explained the situation, I presume? With regard to Mushiki Kuga's aptitude test...?"

"Ah, yes! Normally, a failure due to absence from an exam is final and cannot be reversed without proper justification. However, in exceptional circumstances, students can apply to take a makeup exam or take an alternative assignment with written approval from three or more teachers. Please fill out the fields on this form!" the clerk said, her crisp, professional demeanor a complete one-eighty from her previous attitude.

"Hold on, now!" Ruri shouted in annoyance. "That isn't what you told me a minute ago!"

"She was somewhat half-hearted, but please lower your voice, Knight Fuyajoh," Kuroe said. "After all, Lady Saika is her employer."

"Ngh..." Ruri crossed her arms, looking unconvinced, and swallowed her words.

Kuroe, however, seemed to have her own thoughts about the clerk's attitude, muttering under her breath, "I'll see she's given proper guidance later."

Mushiki couldn't help wondering what sort of *guidance* she had in mind, but right now, there were more important matters that demanded his attention. He glanced down at the application form.

Below the fields for writing his name, his student ID number, and the reason he wanted special consideration was a space for the signatures of three teachers.

"Hmm," he murmured, narrowing his eyes. "Although I'm also enrolled as a student, would my signature be considered valid here?"

"Of course," the clerk answered with an obsequious smile. "Ah. You can use this pen."

He would be lying if he said he didn't feel guilty falling back on Saika's authority, but all things considered, he simply couldn't afford to be expelled from the Garden. Making up his mind, he took the pen and signed Saika's name on the form.

Mushiki had already taken the time to master Saika's handwriting. Tiny irregularities might come up if the form were scrutinized by an expert, but to the general eye, the signature was perfect. Even Kuroe had given her seal of approval— "It's almost frighteningly accurate," she had said one night, leaving Mushiki unable to sleep out of a mixture of shock and excitement.

"Okay... There. Now he just needs two more."

As far as he was concerned, Saika's signature alone ought to be worth three trillion others, but rules were rules. He would just have to find two other teachers willing to sign it for him.

While standing there pondering whom he should turn to for help, a familiar voice called out behind his back.

"...Huh? What the hell are you guys doin' here?"

"Oh. Anviet," Mushiki replied, turning to look over his shoulder.

Glaring at them a short distance away stood a tall man in a well-tailored shirt and slacks, his hair tied back in a braid and his tanned skin adorned with flashy golden jewelry.

Anviet Svarner—Knight of the Garden and a member of its teaching staff.

"Don't go causin' any trouble for the academic office, you hear? ... Especially you, Kuozaki. When are you gonna realize your words carry more weight than you think?"

"Of course I realize."

"Really?"

"I'm well aware of what I'm doing."

"Tch. You're even more connivin' than I thought." Anviet choked in a nervous sweat.

As if on cue, a small figure popped out from his shadow.

"Hello, everyone. Has something happened?" a blond girl dressed in a middle school uniform asked with a gentle smile.

Appearance-wise, she appeared to be around ten years old, but her calm

demeanor and facial expressions made her seem like a fully grown woman.

But that only made sense. Her name was Sara Svarner, and she was the reincarnation of Anviet's beloved wife, who'd passed away close to a century ago.

"Sara."

"As a matter of fact...," Kuroe began, briefly explaining the situation.

Sara nodded in understanding. "I see. And Madam Witch was there at the time...?"

"She went to destroy the annihilation factors."

"Ah..." Quickly catching on, she flashed them all a sympathetic smile.

That was only to be expected. Sara was one of few individuals who was aware that Mushiki and Saika had been merged together.

Sinking deep into thought, she folded her arms, and after a few moments, she opened her eyes wide as if hitting on an idea. "The application you mentioned —it will only be accepted after receiving approval from three teachers, correct?"

"Yes. Lady Saika has already signed it, so we need two more."

"You heard her... An? Sign it."

"Eh?" Anviet growled, arching an eyebrow. "What the hell are you talkin' about? I can't do somethin' like that without knowin' the whole damn story."

"But if you don't, Mushiki might be thrown out of school..."

"I get that. But just 'cause we're acquainted don't mean I can do him any special favors. I've gotta investigate if his reasons are legit before I give him an answer."

"But what if there are circumstances that he can't share with other people...? Does that mean you won't give your approval?"

"...Well, I guess that's the way it's gonna be."

"Are you telling me you lost to a child with no aptitude for magic, Annie...?" Sara asked in a whisper.

"Ugh...!" Anviet let out a pained groan.

Indeed, close to a month ago, fate had deemed it that Mushiki and Anviet butted horns—and Mushiki was the one who had snatched victory, however barely.

Of course, he had been leaning on Saika's powers, and there were also other factors at play—but it was still undeniable that in that moment, Anviet had admitted defeat.

"Er, that, uh... That was 'cause of a combination of factors... It wasn't all about ability, you know...?"

"Hmm... So you're making excuses now?" Sara asked, unamused.

Anviet glanced at Mushiki, veins popping out on his forehead. "Hey, Kuozaki... Where the hell is that bastard...? Let's settle this once and for all..."

"Ah... Well." He hesitated, unsure how to answer—when Kuroe quickly interceded.

"That will not be permitted."

"Eh?!"

"Mushiki is currently suspended. In the worst-case scenario, he may be expelled—meaning he won't be qualified to act as a mage. Are you, Knight Anviet, saying you would pick a fight with an ordinary civilian?"

"Ngh..." Anviet grimaced, presumably realizing what she was doing.

Right. Though she hadn't said as much directly, Kuroe was essentially implying that if he gave his approval to the application, he might one day be able to face Mushiki again in a rematch.

And it was none other than Sara who had set that argument in motion.

"...Sorry, An. I do know how much you value adhering to the rules, but Mushiki and the others must have their reasons. Please, we owe them. Won't you help...?"

"...Tch!" Anviet made a show of clicking his tongue before marching over to the counter—and just like that, he scribbled his name on the application form. "Now you can quit pestering me. Right?" he growled.

Though his heart was racing, Mushiki feigned calm. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

Pleased, Sara took Anviet's hand. "Oh, An. Thank you. You really are a sweetheart."

"...Shuddup. I never said I wasn't gonna give my approval. Just because he didn't take some dumbass test doesn't mean he ain't got what it takes to be a mage. I'm just tryin' to follow the proper procedures, is all."

"Oh-ho. I do love that about you."

"Hey, don't get all lovey-dovey out in public. People are already spreadin' weird rumors."

"Oh? Let them." In a good mood, Sara rubbed her cheek against Anviet's arm.

Outward appearance meant little when it came to judging a mage's true years, but all the same, the sight of a tough-looking grown man flirting with a little girl was beyond precarious. It was no wonder the other students and staff were making a fuss.

Anviet looked dejected, no doubt sure that fresh stories would soon spread throughout the school, but unable to shake Sara off, he left with a resigned sigh.

"Hmm... That was lucky timing, but it worked out well. Now, we just need one more," Mushiki said as he watched the two leave.

"Indeed." Kuroe nodded. "Let's ask Ms. Kurieda. She *is* your homeroom teacher. And more importantly, I don't expect her to refuse a request coming straight from Lady Saika."

Mushiki nodded in understanding.

His homeroom teacher, Tomoe Kurieda, was normally like a hyperconfident leopardess. But when she came face-to-face with Saika, she transformed into a fawning Chihuahua.

If Mushiki asked her nicely in his Saika form, she would probably sign the form with a trembling hand and the submissive smirk of some evil henchman. He

could already hear her response. "Y-yes, of course. I'm at your service. He-he-he..."

"Um...," the office clerk called out hesitantly.

"Hmm? What is it?" Mushiki asked.

"Ms. Kurieda is on paid leave starting today, so I'm afraid she probably isn't at the Garden."

"Eh?" he exclaimed, eyes widening in alarm.

"...She's...on leave?" Kuroe replied in his place. Unusually, her brow was creased in a faint frown.

"Yes. I heard something about her going on vacation to an island in the south..."

"..." Kuroe lowered her eyes.

Paid leave was the right of any worker, and it was up to the individual in question when they chose to take it...but there was something about this that was hard to swallow.

"...Well, if she isn't here, we'll just have to try finding someone else," Kuroe said.

"But who else *is* there?" Ruri asked. "I mean, no one's going to say no to Madam Witch, but wouldn't it be a little strange asking someone whom Mushiki doesn't have much contact with?"

"Well..." Kuroe sank deep in thought.

"...Hmm? You want him to take remedial classes? All right. I can take care of that," came a voice from below.

"Huh?"

Looking down, Mushiki was startled to find a small girl with a young face standing right in front of him. She was dressed in a peculiar outfit consisting of a white robe draped over light innerwear.

No, maybe girl wasn't the right word.

She certainly looked like a young girl, but in truth, this was Erulka Flaera, one

of the oldest and most seasoned mages at the Garden, Saika's close ally, and a mainstay of the Garden's knights. She was also the director of the Garden's medical department.

"Knight Erulka, how long have you been standing there?" Kuroe asked.

"Oh, I was just passing by," she answered with a light wave of her sleeve. "Anyway, this is about that bulletin board notice, I take it? Oh-ho, what a surprise! It's not every day a student is failed for skipping the aptitude test."

"...My brother is such an embarrassment...," Ruri murmured.

"I don't think we've had a student do that since Tomoe."

"You mean Ms. Kurieda did the same thing?!" Ruri said, startled.

Erulka let out a dry laugh. "Oh-ho. To think that troublemaker is now a teacher... So? Do you want me to put my name down?"

"Are you sure, Knight Erulka?" Kuroe asked.

Erulka tilted her head to one side. "Hmm? Yes, I belong to the medical department, but I am a member of the teaching faculty. There shouldn't be any issues."

"No, we're more than happy for the help. It's just—"

"In return, you'll leave Mushiki's remedial classes to me," Erulka interrupted.

Kuroe arced an eyebrow. "And what, exactly, are you going to have him do?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm just going to take him on a nice camping trip for a few days."

"Camping...?" Kuroe repeated, as if sensing where this was leading. "Knight Erulka. Surely you don't mean to take him *there*..."

"Hmm. This is perfect. I needed an extra pair of hands," she answered cheerfully.

"...Kuroe? Where's she taking me?" Mushiki asked in a hushed voice.

"Somewhere...out of this world, so to speak."

"Out of this world?" he repeated wide-eyed.

"All right..."

Five days later, at four thirty in the morning—

Ready to go, Mushiki stepped out from the boys' dormitory hauling a large backpack filled to the brim with a week's worth of clothes, a tent, tools including a knife and a lighter, and various electronic devices and daily necessities. He had been told that food and water would be provided, but just in case, he'd hidden a little extra away.

He had tried to be as selective as possible, but it all added up. Not that it could be helped. He didn't have much experience even with ordinary camping, let alone whatever they were going to be doing on this trip. Considering the risk of something going wrong, it was only natural that he would have so much luggage.

Nonetheless, Mushiki was beyond grateful for this reprieve. He reminded himself that he shouldn't complain.

He wasn't dressed in typical outdoor gear, but in his usual Garden uniform. It might not have looked like suitable attire for this kind of outing, but as the everyday attire of a modern mage, his robe was both physically and magically durable. All things considered, it was the best choice, he reasoned.

"Good morning, Mushiki," Kuroe called out when he reached their designated meeting spot at the Garden's main gate.

"Morning, Kuroe. Did you come to see me off?"

"Yes. I won't be seeing you for a while."

"Thanks for coming out so early in the morning. I really appreciate it...," he said, almost moved to tears.

"Don't act like this is goodbye. It doesn't bode well," Kuroe replied with an upturned stare.

She was right. "Sorry," he apologized as he wiped his eyes. "By the way, Kuroe?"

"Yes?"

"What's Ruri doing?" he asked, glancing past her shoulder.

Indeed, Ruri, it seemed, had also come to see him off—holding a wooden bat in her hands and putting her whole body into swinging it with considerable force.

"...If I go around smashing windows in the central school building, can I be sent on this supplementary course, too?" she asked casually.

"You're more likely to be suspended from school. Please stop," Kuroe told her, and Ruri immediately stopped her practice swings.

"Then what should I smash? A teacher's head?"

"That would be grounds for expulsion. You've passed every exam, Ruri. No matter what you do, you won't be asked to take remedial classes. I understand you're anxious about sending Mushiki away on his own, but please give up on this idea."

"...You're right." Ruri exhaled in resignation, letting the bat fall to the ground and clatter against the pavement. "Morning, Mushiki. How are you feeling?"

"I'm good." He nodded in response.

Ruri turned her hollow gaze to the luggage he was shouldering on his back. "That's a pretty big backpack, you know?"

"Ah, yeah. I felt like I needed to bring a bunch of things."

"You could probably fit a whole person in there."

"Ruri," Kuroe called out in warning.

Mushiki found himself chuckling under his breath.

"...It's true, however, that you do seem to have packed too much," Kuroe said. "You wouldn't want to lack mobility if something unexpected were to happen. Perhaps you should put more thought into organizing your belongings."

"I only packed what I thought I needed, though..."

"May I look inside?"

"Sure," Mushiki said, lowering his backpack and opening it to show her the contents.

"Hmm... You have lots of changes of clothes and quite a bit of equipment. Let's reduce it by half. As for emergency food and drinking water, that can also be kept to a minimum..."

After spreading a plastic sheet on the ground, she started sorting his belongings into *necessary* and *unnecessary* piles, when her hand came to a stop.

Then, peeking again into his backpack with a confused look, she pulled out something huge—a cute, human-shaped stuffed toy, sewn from a material that was soft to the touch. With slightly exaggerated features, its gentle smile and beautiful iridescent eyes made from lamé fabric lent it a dignified and loving presence capable of calming the heart of anyone who saw it.

"Mushiki. What is this?"

"Ah. A two-fifths-scale plush Saika toy," he answered brightly.

"..." Kuroe fell deathly silent, then threw the soft toy in the unnecessary pile.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

"What exactly are you planning to use it for? It takes up more than half your luggage. It's a waste," Kuroe said coldly.

Ruri, however, cried out at the top of her lungs, "What are you doing?! I even made sure to get the texture right!"

"Are you behind this, Ruri?" Kuroe demanded flatly.

Ruri crossed her arms in an attempt to hide the blood rushing to her cheeks. "I-it's not like there's any deep meaning behind it. I just thought it might keep Mushiki from feeling lonely while he's away..."

"Wouldn't you have been better off making a doll version of yourself?"

"What...?! A-as if! I'd be too embarrassed... I mean...I'm a bit on the heavy side, you know?!"

"Do you think it's a normal thing to do, making stuffed toys of other people

and giving them away like that?" Kuroe responded with a sigh.

While the two were busy talking, Mushiki tried to furtively place the stuffed toy back in his bag. He was no match for Kuroe, however, who promptly returned it to the *unnecessary* pile.

"Don't try to capitalize on this confusion and put it back, please," she insisted, more strongly this time.

"Ah... A-at least let him take something small, then," Ruri begged.

"There isn't time to make a smaller version. Please, give up on this."

"Ngh. I'm sorry, Mushiki. Take this palm-size Madam Witch with you."

"...Why do you have that?"

All of a sudden—



"What are you all carrying on about at this hour?" an irritated voice called out.

Turning around, Mushiki saw a car stopped not far behind him, with Erulka peering out at them through an open window.

"Ah. Ms. Erulka. Good morning."

"We're leaving. Get in," she said, urging him into the vehicle.

With impeccable timing, Kuroe placed a much lighter backpack on Mushiki's shoulders—minus the giant Saika doll, of course, which watched him with a wistful look from atop the *unnecessary* pile.

"Have a safe trip, Mushiki," she told him.

"...Y-yeah. Ugh... It's hard to say good-bye..."

"It's just a stuffed toy. Don't let it worry you so much," Kuroe said, patting him lightly on the shoulder.

Good grief, she all but muttered under her breath before adding one last piece of advice. "...You're going to save the world with Lady Saika, no? Then you can't afford to stumble here. Come back to us after giving the remedial classes your all."

"...!"

Mushiki straightened his back at these whispered words of encouragement.

She was right, of course. He would be lying if he said he wasn't worried, and he would certainly miss being able to see Kuroe or Ruri for a few days, but the path he was aiming for was far more precarious than those small inconveniences. He couldn't afford to let them hold him back.

"...Right."

Slapping himself on the cheeks to wake himself up, he turned back to Kuroe and Ruri.

"Well, I'm off. See you both soon."

With that brief farewell, he made for the car—then stopped.

Kuroe had grabbed the hem of his uniform.

"Kuroe? What's wrong?" he asked.

She wasn't staring at him, however, but at Erulka. "Knight Erulka, may I have a moment to speak with Mushiki in private?"

"Hmm? I suppose I don't mind. But don't take too long, you hear?"

"...We'll only be a moment. I have to give him a good-luck charm, so he'll successfully complete his makeup classes."

"...?"

Mushiki tilted his head in confusion as Kuroe led him away by the hand.



The dim, flickering candlelight cast long shadows from the young woman and her visitor.

There was no particular significance to the use of an unreliable candle. This was neither a fancy Western-style house nor a dark cave, but an ordinary apartment. On top of that, the ceiling was fitted with LED lights that could brighten the room with the flick of a switch. No, there was no special reason for the candlestick—it was just something she'd ordered from an online retailer a few days ago.

To put it bluntly, it was simply to create a certain ambience.

The young woman behind this setup was obsessed with creating the right impression.

"Ah, thanks for dropping into my haunt. Honestly, the proper thing would have been for *me* to pay *you* a visit, but you know what it's like, being famous and all. Like, mages all over the country are chasing after me. It's tough being so popular, you know?" she said in a frivolous tone from her seat on the sofa.

Her appearance was in stark contrast to the tense atmosphere—hair dyed in garish pink and blue, canine teeth jutting prominently from her mouth, countless rings adorning her fingers, and more ear cuffs than you could count

jingling around her ears. If you passed her on the street, no doubt you would find yourself doing a double take at her appearance.

Her name—Clara Tokishima.

A former student of Shadow Tower, she was now fused with an annihilation factor, the Ouroboros.

"I don't mind," answered the shadow sitting across from her.

The flickering flame of the candle made it difficult to get a good look at their features, but from the tone of their voice, it was clear they had an overly serious—perhaps even inflexible—temperament.

"My only interest is in the information you have. As long as you can give me that, it doesn't matter to me where we meet."

"That's totally cool. By the way, dropping into my haunt sounds kinda scary when you say it like that, huh? Like, it could be from one of those horror video games or something. You know what I mean?" Clara joked.

"No," her visitor answered succinctly.

She couldn't detect even the faintest hint of irritation. Just as her visitor had said, they didn't seem to be interested in anything other than their professed objective.

"Phew. You're a tough nut, huh?" She sighed with a shrug of her shoulders.

She thought she might've betrayed a hint of boredom in her expression, though in this dim light, it had likely gone unnoticed. The candle, originally meant purely to set the mood, may actually have come in handy. If anyone ever asked her why she needed this sort of decor, she decided she'd use that as her answer.

"Let's skip the preamble," her visitor said quietly. "I only have one question—where is she now?"

Despite the flat tone, there was an unmistakable note of resentment in that voice.

Clara's lips twisted in a smirk. "Wow... You're saying we can do that? Talk about a relief."

"Enough chitchat," her visitor interrupted, the glint in their eyes sharpening even more.

"C'mon, don't give me that look, m'kay?" she said with a laugh. "I'm, like, a delicate little bunny here, scared stiff that I might get gobbled up," Clara joked again, placing an envelope on the table. "The information you want is in here. Be sure to dispose of it as soon as you've read it. Not just the letter—the envelope, too."

"..."

Despite this warning, her visitor didn't utter so much as a word in response, merely lowering their gaze to the envelope.

"Um, like, why aren't you saying anything? You're giving me the creeps, you know."

"Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you giving me this? What's your play?" her visitor asked matter-of-factly.

Clara gave a tired sigh. "Tickles your curiosity, does it? Well, I guess it totally would, right? Okay. I always like a good story." She chuckled before continuing, "Seeing how I'm famous for being suspicious and all, I'm not gonna feign innocence now. If you're asking whether I'm up to no good, I'm up to my waist in schemes. So, like, how should I put it? Basically, if you run riot like you want to, that'll work out great for me, too. But I'm not, like, forcing you or anything, you know?"

"..."

Her visitor folded their arms. After a brief moment, they seemed to make up their mind. "Very well. So long as I achieve my goal, nothing else matters. I'll dance for you. Just take care you don't get trampled." And with that, the figure took the envelope from the table and rose to their feet.

"Ah! Just, like, wait a second, would you? I want you to listen to the end, m'kay?" Clara called out, reaching behind the sofa to retrieve a small, ornate

box. "And take this with you. It'll be super helpful."

"I don't need it."

"Come on, don't say that! Or do you really think you can beat her fighting head-on? Then again, if you're into 'dying for a noble cause' and all that, I guess I won't stop you," Clara said with a provocative grin.

Her visitor hesitated for a moment, before letting out a short "Hmph," taking the small box, and leaving.

Within moments, they were gone without so much as a trace, as if the whole visit had been nothing but an illusion.

Clara stared at the empty chair, breathed a sigh, and blew out the candle on the table.

As soon as she did, the ceiling lights came back on.

The candlestick wasn't a switch, of course. Clara turned her gaze to the woman standing at the edge of the room.

"Thanks, Kiritan. Sorry for making you wait... But we're all good now."

"...I'd appreciate it if you didn't use my home to conduct your shady business dealings..." The apartment's true owner, a woman in thick glasses named Kiriko Araibe, pursed her lips in annoyance.

Kiriko was an illustrator in her mid-twenties who lived by herself in Ohjoh City—and an Immortal who had been made Clara's personal attendant to provide her with a safe place to hide.

"Hee-hee, sorry. This place was just, like, the most convenient choice at hand."

"...Is it really okay bringing outsiders to your hiding place?" Kiriko asked nervously. Perhaps she was genuinely concerned about Clara's well-being, or maybe she was considering not letting Clara use her apartment in the future to avoid this kind of worry. Both, in all likelihood.

"Just in case, I had a friend guide them here, and, like, I also did some simple magic so the moment anyone steps out of this room, they won't even know where they've been."

"...And if you're found out?" Kiriko asked, head tilted to one side.

"I could do with a three-bedroom apartment next time!" Clara answered with a wide grin. "A corner unit, if possible!"

"Can we please not talk about moving right now?!" Kiriko shouted shrilly. She'd gotten so panicked that Clara couldn't help but guffaw in amusement.

"Anyway," Kiriko continued with a sigh of resignation, "I've been meaning to ask, but what's with that getup?"

"Hmm? Ah..." Clara glanced down at what she was wearing—a black bunny girl outfit, complete with patent leather leotard and a rabbit-ear headband. "I was thinking of using this for today's shoot. It looks totally great on me, right?"

"Um... Well, you have a nice face, so I suppose it does..."

"Right? Thank god! Our visitor earlier didn't react at all, and here I was thinking it wasn't any good, you know?" Clara laughed as she whipped out her smartphone in its devil-wing case. "Anyways, let's start shooting already. And once the video is done, we can borrow another Immortal's account, and you know the drill..."

Kiriko blinked in surprise. "Huh? I thought your MagiTube account was supposed to have been restored?"

"Ah, right. Yeah. But get this...," Clara began with a frown.

MagiTube—a video-sharing website for mages—had frozen Clara's account after she declared war on humanity as the Ouroboros. Around a month ago, however, she had made a deal with the Garden to get it reactivated in exchange for information.

And yet—

"For sure, I did get it back. But as soon as I uploaded a new video, it got suspended again. Isn't that the worst? They unlock it, then boom, back to frozen. Then they're all, like, Well, we did unlock it, so technically we didn't lie, like a bunch of schoolkids."

"Oh dear... I suppose they never wanted you to keep your account after all... Maybe it was like one of those plea deals? Still, I'm surprised they were so blatant about it."

"Right? Seriously, I hate those guys," Clara said with a sigh.

"By the way," Kiriko continued. "What kind of video did you upload after the suspension was lifted?"

"It was called My Account Has Been Unfrozen: Let's Celebrate with Clara versus 100 Eels in a Slippery Wrestling Match with a Chance for a Wardrobe Malfunction!"

"...Doesn't that mean it might have been blocked just for breaking the regular moderation rules...?"

"Huh? Did you say something?" Clara asked, head cocked.

"...No, nothing...," Kiriko muttered under her breath.



How long had it been since they left the Garden?

"..."

Mushiki hugged his shoulders to keep himself from trembling.

Then again, his shivers weren't caused by anxiety or fear. Such psychological factors weren't completely absent, of course, but there was a much more significant reason he was quivering uncontrollably.

Wordlessly, Mushiki glanced around at his surroundings.

He was inside a huge machine, which was vibrating with a loud, engine-like din.

Yes. He was seated not in a passenger car, but in the cargo bay of a transport helicopter.

He had assumed they would be traveling all the way by car, but to his surprise, the vehicle had merely dropped them off at an airfield, where he was quickly ushered into this mysterious helicopter.

Now, looking slightly out of place, Mushiki and Erulka sat side by side in a

space that would normally be set aside for supplies and personnel. Erulka was engrossed in a paperback book, seemingly well accustomed to this mode of transportation. Mushiki, however, had been feeling restless since the minute they stepped inside.

"Um...Ms. Erulka? Where exactly are we headed?" he asked uneasily.

"Hmm?" she responded, glancing up from her book. "I told you—the place we'll be holding your supplementary course."

"Sure... But I mean, what sort of place is it?"

"I'm afraid that's confidential, so I can't give you a precise location. As for what it's like...well, you'll understand when we get there. As they say, seeing is believing," Erulka answered with a wave of her hand.

To Mushiki, it seemed more like she just didn't want to go to the trouble of explaining.

"By the way," she continued, turning her gaze to his bag. "I've been meaning to ask you—what is that?"

She wasn't referring to the luggage itself. No, Mushiki recognized the intent behind her question at once.

"It's a palm-size Saika doll. Ruri made it for me," he said with a broad grin.

Indeed, the small plush figure was currently affixed to his backpack with a strap.

"Hmm... A doll? It's well made."

"Yep. You can touch it if you want."

"...I'm fine," she declined point-blank. Just then, a voice sounded over the aircraft speakers.

"We've reached the target, Lady Erulka."

"Ah. So we've arrived. Then let's get right to it."

"Understood."

The next moment, Mushiki's vision suddenly brightened.

For a second, he thought the lights must have come on—but that wasn't it. In that instant, a violent wind rushed in, and he realized that the transport helicopter's hatch had been opened.

"Whoa..."

A dazzling landscape spread out below him. The sea glistened in the radiant sunlight, and in its center lay an island shaped like a crescent moon. It was beautiful, unreal—like a scene from a movie.

He sat there gaping in amazement. Reality, however, flooded back a moment later as Erulka gave his shoulder a playful tap.

"We're short on time. Let's go."

"Go...? Go-"

But he didn't have time to finish asking the question as his next words were swallowed up by a piercing scream.

That could hardly be helped. After all, Mushiki found himself receiving a sudden kick on his backside, sending him hurtling out through the open hatch.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaggghhh?!" he screamed as a floating sensation washed over him and he tumbled through the open sky.

Due to his unstable position, Mushiki found himself spinning out of control, his brain rattling around in his head until he felt like he was about to lose consciousness.

"...!"

Fortunately, several months of combat training kicked in, and he was able to regain his composure, stabilizing his fall by reorienting his arms and legs.

Nonetheless, nothing would change the fact that he was falling from an impossible height, without warning and without so much as a parachute. At this rate, he would inevitably make contact with the ground or the sea at incredible speed.

"What's with all that dancing?" came a sudden voice.

Still struggling, he glanced around to find Erulka watching him with a flat

stare.

For a moment, his brain couldn't process her eerie calm at their situation. After all, she, too, was plummeting headfirst toward the ground.

"M-Ms. Erulka...?! W-we're going to...!" He wheezed, struggling to raise his voice against the tremendous wind pressure.

Erulka, however, seemed to be in no hurry. "Don't fret. Now then..."

She placed her hands together in some sort of sign. Perhaps she was using magic to boost her voice, as it reached Mushiki easily in spite of the roaring wind.

"Second Substantiation: Kotankur."

A glowing red pattern engulfed her hands—a world crest, the telltale sign of a mage activating a substantiation technique.

The next moment, as if responding to her call, light flooded in from nowhere, slowly coalescing into the form of an owl, its body cloaked in a mysterious pattern.

The huge bird grabbed Erulka in one talon and the bag on Mushiki's back in the other, spreading its wings as it took flight.

"Guh...?!" Mushiki wheezed at the sudden shock.

His head snapped back with a jerk, and he almost blacked out for a moment.

He had escaped death by the narrowest of margins. The shimmering owl glided slowly toward the ground on its huge wings.

It wasn't long before they reached the island. No sooner had Mushiki's feet touched the ground than he jumped up and down in relief.

"Th-thank you, Ms. Erulka. You saved me...," he murmured with a small bow of his head, his voice still trembling faintly.

She may have been the one who had pushed him out of the helicopter in the first place, but he decided it would be in his best interests to show some gratitude here.

"Oh-ho. You should give your thanks to this one, not to me," Erulka replied,

falling right back into their regular rhythm. She motioned with her chin to the gigantic owl perched atop her arm that had brought them back down to land.

"Th-thanks."

The owl hooted in response before dissipating into thin air.

As he watched it disappear, a thought occurred to him.

"Huh? Ms. Erulka, your second substantiation... I thought it was a wolf?"

"I have an owl, too. There's no rule that says a mage can only have one type of substantiation technique."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Well, it's generally considered best to focus on mastering one particular technique. Substantiation spells are essentially structural magic formulas of oneself, so in my case, perhaps I have a somewhat fickle temperament. Hah!" she joked.

Mushiki, however, couldn't bring himself to force a smile. He could see she was trying to be self-deprecating, but even he understood the difficulty of mastering two—or possibly even more—second substantiation techniques.

The next moment—

"Hmm?" Erulka murmured, glanced around as if suddenly noticing something. "By the way, where did that Saika doll on your bag run off to?"

"Eh? Uh... Huh?!"

Mushiki's eyes widened in alarm. The palm-size Saika doll, which was supposed to have been watching over him from his side, had somehow vanished.

He looked all around him in a panic, but there was no sign of it. It must have come undone during his fall.

"Hmm... I suppose it fell off. My fault, perhaps?" Erulka said apologetically.

"No...," Mushiki answered in a faint, dejected voice, his shoulders slumping. "I should have packed it away properly... It's important to me, so is it okay if I go look for it later?"

"Hmm. I don't mind how you spend your free time. Anyway, let's head for base camp."

"...Base camp?" Mushiki repeated, looking up—and his mouth dropped open in shock.

That was only to be expected. After all, he had just noticed the vast forest around him, which exhibited an eclectic, unnatural mix of shapes and colors within its dense foliage.

There were a few faint remnants of past civilization—a sporadic paving stone here and there left over from what might have been roads, or the occasional crumbling brick wall—but the strange cries and roars echoing from the forest like distant thunder clearly signaled that this island was no longer the domain of humans.

"...What exactly is this place?" Mushiki asked in a nervous sweat.

He was well aware that the question lacked any real substance, but he didn't know how else to put it.

Erulka just nodded along as if having expected this question. "...Nirai Island. It's a special area jointly managed by Japan's mage-training institutes."

"A special area?"

"Indeed. This is where a certain annihilation factor was defeated. But as the window for reversible annihilation had already passed, its influence remains rather potent over the surrounding environment. As a result, this entire region has become somewhat *otherworldly*."

"Otherworldly...?" Mushiki was struck by this strange description.

"I'm not saying it was completely swapped out with somewhere from another world," Erulka continued with a shrug. "It's more that this area has become misaligned with the systems that govern the world. Things natural in other places may not be so here."

"Meaning...?"

"I'll explain in more detail at base camp, but to put it simply, there are materials and catalysts aplenty here that we can use in medicine and potions." With that, Mushiki finally nodded in understanding. Well, technically, there was still a lot he had yet to grasp, but at least he could see why she had brought him here.

"So my extra classes, then ...?"

"Hmm. Yes, you'll be collecting materials here," Erulka answered, her arms crossed.

Mushiki breathed a sigh of relief. He had been a little worried about what exactly she wanted him to do, but the answer was much more down-to-earth than he had feared.

Perhaps sensing his tension easing, Erulka stared back, her eyes wide. "Oh? You seem to be taking this very calmly. Feeling confident, are you?"

"Th-that's not what I meant... I just didn't know what I'd be doing until now."

"Oh-ho. Yes, I see." Erulka chuckled. "You'll be here for one week, along with four other participants."

"Huh? There are other people who need to take extra lessons? Mine was the only name on the bulletin board, though..."

"I told you, didn't I? This area is jointly administered by all of Japan's mage-training institutes."

"Ah..." Mushiki nodded in understanding.

In addition to Void's Garden, where Mushiki was enrolled, there were four other mage-training schools in Japan—Shadow Tower, Hollow Ark, Ember's Peak, and Twilight City.

Leaving out the Garden, of course, the only one Mushiki had visited was the Ark, though he had met with the headmasters of the other schools while pretending to be Saika.

"Ah. So you're saying all the students who have to do extra classes at each school come here?"

"To put it simply. They've all been assigned remedial classes, though the reasons vary."

"...Oh?"

"You're the only one who failed the aptitude test," Erulka said flatly.

"...Ah. Right..." Mushiki's shoulders slumped. "Um... So what exactly are we collecting?"

"All kinds of things. This is a coveted hunting ground for any mage. There are things here you can't find anywhere else—from native plants to buried ores. And, well..." She stopped there, looking up as if she'd suddenly noticed something.

At that moment, their surroundings were shrouded in shadow.

Rain clouds? Mushiki followed her gaze, when—

"...Huh?"

No sooner had he laid eyes on it than he let out a strangled squeak.

But that was understandable. No doubt the scene in front of him would have provoked a similar reaction from most anyone.

After all, a huge monster was staring right at him, its nostrils flaring.

Yes. Mushiki looked back stupefied. If he had to describe the creature in a single word, then *monster* was definitely it—its body was around the size of a two-story building, it had four burly legs as broad as tree trunks, and it cast a silhouette like that of a gigantic reptile. Its body, however, was covered not in scales but a rough, rock-like hide.

"Hmm. There are these things to deal with, too," Erulka said matter-of-factly. "This is a lindwurm. Its horns and hide are valuable materials—and if you find one with gallstones, all the better. We want to defeat them while keeping damage to a minimum."

As if in response to Erulka's explanation, the lindwurm let out a deafening roar.

"Aaauuuggghhh!"

The creature came barreling toward them, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake. Mushiki took off at a dash, screaming as if he was going to tear the

muscles in his throat.

"What are you doing? You have to defeat it to get the materials," Erulka called out.

She, too, was moving at full speed beside him, though she wasn't at all out of breath. Somehow, she had gotten atop a white wolf covered in distinctive red markings—her other second substantiation, Horkew.

"But I... How...?!" Mushiki croaked.

Unlike Erulka, he was running on his own two feet, and his overworked heart and lungs had to work double-time to summon up his voice.

"I mean... Th-that's an annihilation factor, right...?! Wh-what's it doing here now...?!"

"Hmm? Ah, yes. Under certain conditions, it might well be called that—a midranked calamity-grade annihilation factor, perhaps," she replied, unconcerned.

"...?!"

Mushiki stared at her in horror.

The next moment—

"Second Substantiation: Meteor Slash!"

"Blinding Blade."

With a tearing cry, twin figures burst out from the left and the right, sandwiching the lindwurm's neck between two arcs of brilliant light.

Closing in from above was a gleaming steel sword, while attacking from below was another consisting purely of roiling blue flame.

Those simultaneous attacks effortlessly decapitated the lindwurm.

Before the creature even had a chance to roar, its massive body convulsed as it collapsed hard on the ground.

"Wh-what was that ...?"

Mushiki, bathed in the fallen creature's blood, watched stupefied as two figures slowly approached.

"If a puny little annihilation factor like that scares him, I don't see what good he's going to be," remarked a petite girl, sighing. She looked around thirteen or fourteen years old, and she had distinctive, strong-willed eyebrows and fine, soft hair.

She was dressed in the red uniform of Shadow Tower's middle school. On her right arm hovered a two-layer world crest, while in her hands she gripped a sword-shaped second substantiation.

"You...," Mushiki began, his eyes widening in recognition. He had seen this girl before.

Her name was Rindoh Shionji—and she was a direct descendant of Gyousei Shionji, Shadow Tower's headmaster.

He stopped himself just in time.

The only time he had met Rindoh was at the special meeting of school heads held after the incident with Clara, which he had attended as Saika. He would only rouse suspicion if he said her name before receiving a proper introduction.

Yet Rindoh's suspicions may well have been stirred in any event, as she furrowed her brow.

"What?" she demanded.

"N-no, it's nothing. Thanks for the help just then," he answered, hoping to dodge the question.

Rindoh continued to wear a puzzled look, but she pursued the matter no further.

Then with perfect timing, the second figure stepped forward with a respectful bow.

"You aren't hurt, Master Mushiki?"

"Ah...!" He gawked with renewed astonishment.

The girl was wearing a haori over a white sailor outfit—the uniform of Hollow Ark. With her face hidden behind a fox-shaped mask, he couldn't hope to read her expression, but her tone of voice betrayed her concern.

"Asagi!" he cried out.

"I'm honored to see you've kept me in your thoughts," she said with another bow.

He couldn't help but break out into a broad grin at her excessive politeness.

"You don't need to stand on ceremony, really. Just Mushiki is fine," he said.

"I couldn't possibly act overly familiar to Lady Ruri's brother."

"But Master Mushiki...? I'm not really comfortable being called that..."

"I see... What about Young Master?"

"...That's not great, either," he said, feeling even more awkward. "Anyway, what are you two doing here...?" Midsentence, he'd suddenly remembered what Erulka had said earlier.

Right. There were four other students taking makeup classes on the island, just like he was.

"Did you flunk your classes, by any chance?" he asked as if it were nothing.

"N-no way! Don't lump me in with you!" Rindoh exclaimed, turning bright red.

"..." Asagi's face was masked, so there was no reading her emotions, but if Mushiki had to guess, she seemed to be trying to avoid eye contact.

Well, they both no doubt had their own circumstances.

"S-sorry...," he murmured, feeling pressured to apologize.

At that moment, Erulka entered the conversation with a disappointed shrug. "No matter your reasons, you're all attending this supplementary course to make up for one blunder or another."

"Ngh..." Rindoh gritted her teeth.

"...Indeed." Asagi nodded quietly.

Mushiki, flustered, shook his head. "Really, I owe you both. You're amazing, taking down such a huge—"

He'd been looking at the fallen creature's carcass as he spoke, and now he fell deathly silent.

Ah, right. Something had been bugging him for a little while now, and he'd just realized what it was.

The lindwurm, which until just a few moments ago had been pursuing him across the island, lay sprawled before him, vast quantities of blood gushing from its corpse and dyeing its surroundings red.

That wasn't odd, seeing as the monster was dead. Mushiki, however, couldn't help but feel a vague sense of unease.

"...The corpse is still here?"

That was it. Under normal circumstances, an annihilation factor destroyed by a mage would vanish from the world without a trace.

The corpse of the lindwurm, however, lay there exposed to the elements.

Erulka, perhaps sensing the gist of his question, gave him an exaggerated nod. "The world system recognizes annihilation factors and, upon their death, renders them as if they never were... But I told you, didn't I? This place exists outside the usual bounds of logic and reason. The world system has no effect here. Beings that would normally be classed as annihilation factors dwell here alive and well, so their existences cannot be erased."

"In other words," Erulka continued, "what this means is that we have a unique opportunity to harvest all the magical materials we want, without having to worry about them disappearing. I expect you to work hard over the coming week."

"...!"

Mushiki felt his eyes widening even farther. He'd never even imagined that such a place like this existed.

Much to his surprise, however, Rindoh and Asagi nodded along knowingly.

"That's fine. Monsters this level won't be an issue."

"Yes. Please leave them to us."

"Oh? How encouraging," Erulka replied with a grin. "Now then, shall we get started?"

"Huh?" Rindoh and Asagi asked in unison.

Only then did Mushiki notice it—the cloud of raw animosity wafting over from behind.

Yes. More lindwurms like the one Rindoh and Asagi had defeated just a moment ago were swarming by the dozen, fixing the group with virulent glares.

"Ah...," Rindoh said, when—

The swarm of monsters rushed forward to attack with an earth-shaking roar.

"Aaaaaaaaggghhh!"

Rindoh, Asagi, and Mushiki all took to their heels in flight.

"Hey, why are you running away? Weren't you boasting about how strong you were a moment ago?" Erulka grumbled, keeping pace with them on her Horkew wolf.

"You say that... But—!"

"There's too many of them...!"

"Hmph. Very well." Erulka snorted in annoyance, leaping from the back of her wolf and positioning herself in front of the oncoming horde.

"...! Ms. Erulka!"

Even for someone as strong as her, there was no way she would be able to avoid getting swallowed up by the oncoming wave. Mushiki ground to a halt and reached out to Erulka.

But then—

"...Begone," she said, her eyes emitting a sharp gleam.

Just like that, the horde of gigantic lindwurms, closing in at incredible speed, scrambled to a stop and scattered in fear, fleeing into the forest.

For a short while, they could hear the deafening roar of trees being crushed and monsters howling, but that, too, soon faded into the distance.

Watching Erulka silently from behind, Rindoh and Asagi stood frozen in admiration and fear.

"W-wow. Sh-she didn't even need to use magic. Just plain old intimidation..."

"That's Knight of the Garden Erulka Flaera for you..."

"Hmm..."

Erulka, however, merely stared up into the sky, neither taking pride in her own power nor complaining about the younger mages' lack of it. "It's unusual for lindwurms to form such large groups. Has something threatening appeared in the forest, perhaps...?"

A strong wind blew in, rustling the surrounding trees, as if in reply.

Chapter 2

→ Swirling Ambitions and Water Spirits →

"Now then, it looks like we're all here," Erulka said, glancing at the faces assembled around her. "I'm Erulka Flaera of Void's Garden, and I'll be supervising this supplementary course. Give it your best shot, all you troublesome students." Then she waved her hand, passing off what she'd said as a joke.

Mushiki nodded in understanding. He recognized that some of them might resist that characterization as troublemakers, but at the same time, he had to admit that it wasn't entirely incorrect.

The group had reached the area Erulka had referred to as *base camp*, a clearing on the south side of the island. The space looked to be in frequent use by visiting mages and was complete with communal toilets, simple shower rooms, and a cooking area built out of stone. If Mushiki didn't know any better, he might have thought it was an ordinary campsite.

In the center of it all stood Erulka, with five students, Mushiki included, gathered around her.

"Some of you may know each other, but I'm sure there are also some new faces here, so let's do proper introductions... You first."

"...! O-of course!" Rindoh stepped forward with a nervous look. "My name is Rindoh Shionji. I'm a third-year student at Shadow Tower's middle school. It's very nice to meet you all," she said with a deep bow.

The other students started at her name, breaking into whispers.

"Shionji?"

"Like the headmaster ...?"

But that wasn't unwarranted. Rindoh shared her surname with the Tower's

headmaster, so anyone affiliated with one of the mage-training institutes ought to have heard it at least once.

u n

Rindoh, however, squirmed in discomfort.

She looked deeply ashamed to be participating in the supplementary class despite her esteemed ancestry, and she probably didn't want anyone to bring up the topic of her great-great-grandfather.

That was unsurprising. Gyousei Shionji, the Tower's current headmaster, had been transformed into an Immortal at the hands of the Ouroboros, Clara Tokishima, and was now imprisoned indefinitely beneath the Garden. The other students seemed to sense Rindoh's unease, carefully sidestepping any direct mention of this.

Amid this fraught atmosphere, Erulka spoke up in her usual unconcerned tone of voice: "You're here because you didn't turn in a report, yes?"

"Eh? Does everyone need to know that?!" Rindoh squeaked.

"You all have your own reasons for being here." Erulka nodded as if that were only natural. "It might be helpful to know what they are. Is there a problem?"

"...I-it's embarrassing..."

"In that case, make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Hmph..." Rindoh smothered her voice, her cheeks turning crimson in shame.

Erulka's warning left no room for rebuttal.

"Next. Going clockwise," she said, gesturing to the student on Rindoh's left.

"Okay."

"…"

A *mountain*. That was the first word that had popped into his mind when Mushiki laid eyes on the next person in the circle.

They had to be over a hundred and ninety centimeters tall, with arms and legs like the branches of a towering tree. It was clear they were a student like everyone else, but their dignified demeanor suggested they hailed from a most

extraordinary background.

One thing, however, had stuck out to Mushiki.

They were wearing a lovely pleated skirt.

Yes. The hypermuscular warrior in front of him was a female student.

"Nene Mushanokouji. First-year at Ember's Peak."

And she was younger than him to boot. Mushiki broke into a cold sweat. The others looked equally surprised, judging by their reactions.

Nene, however, paid them no notice. "I couldn't take an exam because I was given a suspension, so I'm here to make up for it. I'd appreciate your guidance and encouragement," she said in a quiet, calm tone of voice.

She possessed an air of maturity that seemed somehow at odds with her age.

But that only raised a more serious question.

"Suspended?" Mushiki asked uneasily.

"What on earth happened?" Asagi chimed in next to him.

It was Erulka who stepped in to answer. "She picked a fight with another student."

"Ah... Oh..."

Mushiki hated to admit it...but that explanation didn't surprise him. And yet—

"Apparently the altercation was with a student who trampled over the flowerbeds," Erulka added.

"Huh. That's girlier than I'd imagined," Mushiki murmured, surprised by this unexpected twist. "Hold on," he added after a moment. "What about the other student? Wouldn't they have to take a makeup class, too? Don't tell me it was only Mushanokouji who got suspended?"

"There were three of them," Erulka clarified. "Apparently, they all tried using their second substantiations but ended up in critical condition with broken necks. They're still in the hospital."

"Could you stop playing with my emotions for one second?" Mushiki

muttered, looking sullen.

"Well, they're mages. They won't die," Erulka added lightly. "Next."

At this, another student stepped out from behind Nene.

Laying eyes on her slight figure garbed in a dark-colored suit, the rest of them were at a loss for words.

But that couldn't be helped. The girl was stunningly beautiful, with long, silken hair framing a doll-like, flawlessly symmetrical face, complete with skin as white as porcelain and long eyelashes that fluttered as she blinked.

"Raimu Himemiya. First-year at Twilight City. Greetings."

"Lime?" Mushiki said, mishearing the name.

The girl scrunched up her face. "You're thinking of the fruit. It's *Raimu*. Anyway, we're the only two guys here, so let's try to get along."

Mushiki was taken aback, gaping wide-eyed in confusion.

"Um... You're...a boy...?"

"Hah? Of course I am. What's that supposed to mean?" Raimu frowned as if to say he didn't understand what Mushiki had meant, but even that made him look like a beautiful girl. On top of everything else, his voice was rather high-pitched, as if he hadn't hit puberty yet.

Mushiki felt like his brain was glitching out. Was this how other people would feel if he changed into his Saika form and went about acting like his usual self?

"...You haven't merged with anyone, have you?" he blurted out before he could stop himself.

"Huh? What the hell?"

"S-sorry. Ignore me... Anyway, why are you here?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"Hmm? No big reason. Just like her, I couldn't take an exam while suspended."

"You were suspended?"

"Yeah. I got caught betting on the interschool exhibition match."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"And I built a members-only app so other students could gamble on the results using cryptocurrency."

"...So it was a premeditated crime?"

...In that case, it was surprising he hadn't been expelled. Mage-training institutes were different from regular schools, though. Maybe the decision-makers considered it too great a loss to expel someone with such keen abilities, regardless of how he used them.

While Mushiki pondered all this, Raimu's lips curled in a faint grin. "I know all about you, Super Rookie."

"Huh? Really?"

"Oh yeah. I've made a tidy profit off of you," he said with a snicker and a flutter of his long eyelashes.

Huh? Mushiki felt like the conversation had taken a decidedly vulgar turn, yet the other man's finely sculpted facial features did wonders to hide it.

"Next. Your turn," Erulka called out.

"Right," Asagi answered, stepping forward. "I'm Asagi Shiranui, a second-year from Hollow Ark. Nice to meet you all."

She offered them all a graceful bow, like something taken straight from an etiquette instruction manual.

"...Shiranui?" Mushiki tilted his head to one side.

He had assumed, given her origins, that her surname would be Fuyajoh.

Asagi, overhearing, answered him in a hushed voice, "A branch of the Fuyajoh clan. Our given names are enough inside the Ark, but on the outside, it can be a bit of a hassle if we all go by the same family name."

"I see..." Mushiki nodded in understanding.

The Ark was a training institute operated by the Fuyajoh clan, the main branch of which Mushiki and Ruri's mother hailed from. It had several unique

characteristics that set it apart from the other mage schools.

Raimu raised a skeptical eyebrow as Asagi introduced herself. "Asagi... I've heard of you. You're the leader of the Azures, the Ark's disciplinary committee."

"You seem to know all of us," Mushiki observed.

"I have a decent amount of data on most prominent mages," Raimu answered with a nod. "Asagi here—her average odds are around three-point-five to one, depending on the opponent. Of course, the broker always holds on to a small piece of the pie."

"It kind of sounds like you haven't learned your lesson."

"Just so you know, the odds against you, Rookie, were nine hundred and eight to one in the match between the Garden and the Tower."

"…"

Perhaps that was to be expected, but they were some incredible odds. He really hadn't wanted to hear that.

"Oh. What about for Saika, then?"

"Saika... You mean the Witch of Resplendent Color? Zero-point-nine."

"So even if she wins, it's still a negative bet?"

"Of course. If the returns were any higher, everyone would bet on her."

"I guess so... So it didn't pay off that time?"

"Well, it isn't every day Saika Kuozaki herself enters the fray. You'd be surprised how many people bought a ticket just to keep as a memento."

"Ah..." Mushiki nodded in understanding.

He might very well have done just that himself, given the chance. Why hadn't anyone told him about this? Then again, given the betting was run through an app, there probably weren't any physical tickets, but he at least could have saved a screenshot.

While Mushiki zoned out, Raimu glanced again at Asagi. "So what's the deal with you? Why are you doing makeup classes? You're an Azure, so you're basically up there with the Ark's elite."

"...Well..." Asagi hesitated.

Once more, Erulka stepped in. "Ah... She's here for treason against the headmistress."

"Th-the headmistress...?"

"Treason...?"

"What on earth...?"

The other students broke out into restless murmurs.

It was understandable, given the circumstances. All the other reasons for having to join this so-called supplementary course made sense to one degree or another. But an actual crime?

"This was the first I'd heard about any of this, too." Erulka added. "Does the Ark really have a rule about that?"

"...Well, it's complicated," Asagi mumbled.

Though Mushiki couldn't read her expression beneath the mask, he guessed that she was wearing a troubled look.

So the details were being kept under wraps? Mushiki crossed his arms, picturing Ao Fuyajoh, the Ark's headmistress, in his mind... She certainly was the type to come up with all sorts of outrageous demands, so he could only imagine how difficult it must be for Asagi and the others to keep her satisfied.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Last one," Erulka said, ending the discussion there and looking at Mushiki. Perhaps she was concerned about interfering with the internal politics of another school, or (more likely) simply didn't want to get involved.

"R-right."

A little nervous, he stepped forward to introduce himself, following the others' leads.

"I'm Mushiki Kuga. Second-year at Void's Garden. I'm a recent transfer student, so I guess I should apologize in advance if I end up causing any problems," he said with a small bow.

The other students stared back at him with a wide range of emotions.

It wasn't unusual to be in the center of attention while introducing yourself, but their reactions still struck Mushiki as excessive.

"Um, what is it?" he asked nervously.

"...! N-nothing...," Rindoh deflected, her shoulders twitching as she averted her gaze.

The other three likewise feigned ignorance—though of what, he couldn't say.

"...Ahem. So why are you here?" Rindoh asked.

"Actually..." Mushiki scratched his cheek. "I missed the mage aptitude test."

"...Huh?!" the four other students exclaimed in disbelief.

"You missed the aptitude test...?"

"H-how did that happen? Does Lady Ruri know?"

"Huh? Are you okay? You weren't dragged here against your will or anything, were you?"

"A mage must risk their very life. The courage to persevere is essential."

A cacophony of concerned voices sounded all around him. He could understand why Rindoh, who'd failed to submit a required report, was shocked —but the other three? Apparently, missing the aptitude test was much more serious than he had thought.

"I-I'm fine. There was a lot going on at the time... It's not like I wanted to leave the Garden or anything. I chose to do this course to make up for it."

"I guess that's fine, then... But why did you skip the test in the first place?"

"I was out saving the—" Mushiki stopped himself there with a shake of his head. "N-never mind."

"Huh?" Raimu raised a quizzical eyebrow.

At that point, Erulka called a close to the introductions, crossing her arms as she looked them all over. "All right, let's begin this supplementary course. As you may or may not know, your task is to hunt and gather vital ingredients used in magic potions." She paused there for a moment, pulling her phone from her pocket. "This is your first day, so after setting up your tents, you should all take a look around to get a feel for the island. You can check the area of the task and the location of base camp on your devices, so you don't get lost. Refer to the app to find out how difficult different materials are to get your hands on and how valuable they are. Of course, the more you bring back, the higher your evaluation at the end, but don't push yourselves too hard. I can help with broken limbs and the like, but if you get yourselves killed...well, there's no turning back the clock," she said with a shrug.

That last part had no doubt been meant as a joke, but only Raimu responded with a faint grin. Catching on to everyone else's worried looks, he quickly wiped the smile from his face.

"Meet back here around noon for lunch. Ideally, I'd ask you to bring your own food...but I'll provide something today."

There was no hint of any joke this time around, so she must have meant every word of that. Mushiki forced a taut smile.

"Well, that's about it... You're dismissed. Good luck."

With that lackluster send-off, their supplementary course—or rather, camp—got underway.

"…"

Mushiki and the others exchanged uneasy glances.

The first item on their agenda, however, wasn't up for debate, so they each went their own way to set up a place to sleep.

"All right... I suppose I should pitch my tent."

He wanted to get an idea of his surroundings, but his immediate priority had to be to secure a place to rest. After settling on what looked like a suitable location, he pulled the small fold-up tent from his luggage.

He had never gone camping like this before, but according to Kuroe, the tents distributed to students at the Garden had been simplified and streamlined so

even a beginner could set them up without issue. He glanced down at the instruction manual and started reading.

"Um... So this goes here, and then that goes there...?"

Correction. It was actually surprisingly difficult. Mushiki furrowed his brow as he glanced back and forth between the instructions and the tent.

At that moment, a dark shadow fell over him.

For a second, he thought the weather must have turned—but no. The huge first-year girl, Nene Mushanokouji, had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"M-Mushanokouji...?"

"...You've got to press that button, then twist the shaft."

"Huh? This one here?"

Mushiki did as instructed, then—*Poof!*—the tent unfolded in the blink of an eye.

"Whoa! Th-that's amazing... Thanks so much!"

"Don't sweat it. I'd already finished setting mine up anyway," Nene responded with the utmost calm.

He looked around and soon spotted Nene's tent—pastel colored, complete with a floral pattern. It was strangely cute.

"Then just put this inside," she continued.

"What is it?"

"Incense. For keeping insects away and calming your nerves."

"Th-thanks."

A gentle, floral fragrance wafted through the air as she handed Mushiki a cute animal-shaped incense burner.

Nene nodded in satisfaction before marching off to help Rindoh, who was also struggling to set up her own tent.

...She had the air of a military commander, but it seemed she was a genuinely kind person at heart.

A pleasant breeze coursed through the trees with a sound eerily like the ebb and flow of the tides, while dappled sunlight shimmered over the ground, making for a truly fantastical sight.

"..."

After setting up their tents at base camp, they had all gone to explore the surrounding environment.

It had been several minutes now, and Rindoh Shionji hadn't betrayed the slightest hint of a reaction to the beautiful nature she was slowly making her way through.

It wasn't that she took no interest in the picturesque landscape—no, she was so preoccupied with another matter that she simply didn't have the capacity to take it in.

But it wasn't the dangerous creatures lurking nearby that had her on edge, nor the fact that she had dishonorably earned a stretch doing this remedial course despite being the headmaster's own flesh and blood.

"...Mushiki...Kuga...," she muttered, the name spilling from her lips.

Mushiki Kuga—a newbie mage who had just transferred to the Garden a few short months ago and one of her classmates during her stay here. She knew of him, of course—despite being a complete beginner, he had been selected as one of the Garden's representatives during the recent interschool demonstration match.

She had come across his name in the report on the Clara Tokishima incident.

It had been an unprecedented calamity—Clara Tokishima had risen up with her cadre of Immortals to lead a revolt in the Garden, snatched the corpse of the Ouroboros sealed away beneath the campus, and somehow fled to safety.

Amid all the details, the name of a mysterious student kept popping up—Mushiki Kuga.

Yet despite his significance, there was hardly any information on him. The

explanation given by the Garden was that he had only recently joined its ranks, but there was no way a mere transfer student would be selected to compete in an exhibition match without good reason.

In all likelihood, the Garden was hiding something...a secret deeply connected to the Clara Tokishima incident—that abominable turn of events that had turned her great-great-grandfather, Gyousei Shionji, into an Immortal.

"...Anyway, I've successfully infiltrated the camp," she murmured, resting her chin on her hand.

Indeed, a few days earlier, Rindoh had come across Mushiki Kuga's name on the list of students scheduled to attend this makeup course jointly run by the various mage-training institutes. She had deliberately ignored the deadline for her report in an effort to slip into this camp and make contact with him.

If the Garden was involved, it would be too risky trying to communicate with him while either of them was on campus grounds, making this remote island, isolated from the outside world, an ideal environment.

Rindoh was known for her honesty and diligence, so she had caused quite a commotion by failing to submit her report. "I'm sorry. I couldn't finish it. Please let me take supplementary classes instead," she had asked of her teachers—a request so unusual and unexpected as to send them into a stir... Though this, she reminded herself, wasn't the time to worry about such things.

"Anyway... Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

She had to know the truth about her great-great-grandfather. About Clara Tokishima.

...About what happened at the Garden.

And so, lifting her face, she changed course to follow after Mushiki.



"What a weird place...," Asagi Shiranui murmured beneath her mask as she made her way across the ground.

Nirai Island—a specially managed zone that existed beyond the influence of

the world system. She had heard rumors about it, and it was just as mysterious as people said.

Not only was it home to creatures that anywhere else would be classed as annihilation factors, like the ones they had encountered earlier, but there were also strange plants that she had never seen in the outside world.

There were flowers emitting soap-like bubbles, giant mushrooms shaped like chairs, and stones covered in clear, hard moss, which sparkled like crystals. Every last one of them no doubt had valuable properties for brewing potions.

It was like she had stumbled into a dream or a fairy tale. As someone with only a slight inclination for magic, she was endlessly fascinated.

"…"

Yet she breathed a deep sigh, scratching the back of her head.

Her goal coming here wasn't to study rare flora or fauna, nor to complete this remedial course. No—she had a secret mission.

Her mood souring, she thought back to the events of a few days prior.

"...How about it, Asagi?"

"Ma'am?"

In the headmistress's office aboard the mage-training institute Hollow Ark, Asagi responded with a troubled look to Ao Fuyajoh's irritating instructions.

The headmistress's office was laid out like an audience chamber, with a raised dais at the back of the room hidden behind a bamboo screen.

Even silhouetted behind that blind, however, Asagi had no trouble imagining the look on Ao's face.

"I haven't heard from any of them since the incident. Not Ruri, not Mushiki, not Saika."

"We have received reports on annihilation factors, an official letter of condolence for all the damage done to the Ark, and—"

"That is *not* what I'm talking about." The sound of Ao hitting her armrest rang out from behind the bamboo blind. "I want to know who Ruri is in love with!"

"..."

Asagi let out a deep sigh—by no means her first since being summoned here.

Yes. Lately, Ao had taken a keen interest in Ruri's love life.

"Now that the Leviathan's curse is lifted, Ruri is free. But should something happen to me, she's still first in line to take my place. As the head of the Fuyajoh Clan, it's my duty to make sure she chooses the right partner."

"...By that, you mean...?"

"Mushiki or Saika. Which one is it? Either option would pose difficulties, as Mushiki is her brother, and Saika is another woman. Yet for my part, I want to respect Ruri's feelings. If we push magic and science to the fullest, perhaps we can find a solution to the issue of children..."

"…"

Asagi maintained a stony silence, and Ao hit her armrest again, twice this time.

"And yet there's been no news!" she shouted, her silhouette moving violently behind the bamboo blind. "Do you realize that almost two whole months have passed? She can't have been doing nothing! I even went to the effort of learning to use a smartphone, but she won't even read my messages!"

"Please, calm yourself, ma'am," Asagi pleaded, looking troubled.

With that, Ao came to a sudden stop. Leaning forward, she said, "So I've devised a plan."

"... May I ask what kind of plan?" Asagi replied with a sense of foreboding.

Ao rose to her feet. At the same time, the bamboo blind retracted upward to reveal a figure remarkably similar—almost identical, in fact—to Asagi's own, albeit with a different hairstyle and expression.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't so much that Ao resembled Asagi, but that Asagi resembled Ao. In fact, every woman going by the name *Fuyajoh* bore the same

face.

"What ...?"

Asagi's breath caught as she laid eyes on the other woman's attire.

But that response was entirely reasonable.

After all, Ao was dressed not in her usual kimono, but rather a purplish-blue jacket and black pleated skirt—the uniform of a student from Void's Garden.

"I plan to personally infiltrate the Garden as a student to gather information firsthand." She struck a confident pose, her skirt fluttering to reveal her pale thighs.

Asagi's eyes widened with shock, and a bead of sweat ran down her forehead.

"P-please reconsider, ma'am...!" she cried out, aghast. "Your safety is paramount!"

"What does that mean? I'm not going to do anything rash."

"...I hate to say this...but you have to consider your age, ma'am...!" Asagi said in a strained voice.

At this, Ao furrowed her brow, looking genuinely surprised. "What?! You're saying it doesn't suit me?! Saika is older, and she's perfectly fine wearing it! But I'm not?!"

"I—I... Uh..." Asagi clammed up.

"Fine," Ao said at last, her eyes narrowing. "Be honest with me. Whatever you say, you won't be punished for it. I swear."

Her tone was as calm as a placid lake, her demeanor every bit that of the great mage who had ruled over the Fuyajoh Clan for centuries.

"Forgive me for saying this...but despite your youthful appearance, there's an unmistakable aura of maturity that your uniform can't hide... And, well, we all have the same face, so it's rather embarrassing... I really wish you would stop..."

"You aren't holding back, girl!" Ao all but screamed, her composure instantly shattered.

That was when it happened—a knock at the door as a female student, her

face hidden behind a mask, peered in. Like Asagi, she was also a member of the Azures.

"Excuse me, ma'am. May I have a moment of your—"

"Not now. We're discussing a matter of the utmost significance," Ao fired back.

The Azure's eyes widened in surprise at seeing her headmistress sporting another school's uniform. "E-excuse me...," she stammered, tensing her shoulders. "But you asked me to share any news on Lady Ruri and Master Mushiki as soon as it came in..."

"...! Has something happened?" Ao called back with undisguised excitement.

The Azure stole a glance at Asagi before answering. "...Yes, Master Mushiki will be attending a remedial course on Nirai Island next week."

"A remedial course? Hmm... Without Ruri or Saika?"

"It appears that way."

Ao stroked her chin, her lips twisting in a smirk. "Interesting. Saika is always inscrutable, and Ruri is going through a bit of a rebellious phase, but Mushiki... he may be of use. I'll infiltrate the course as a student to see how things are going with Ruri—"

"L-let me go!" Asagi interrupted, her voice close to a shriek.

She was well aware just how grave an affront it was to cut the family head off midsentence, but even so, she had to say it.

"Ma'am! You're the headmistress of the Ark!" she pleaded, hoping to soften her words with a deep bow. "You're the central pillar of this academy, the guardian of the oceans! You can't afford to act rashly...!"

"...Hmm." Slowly, Ao knelt down on the floor. "You make a valid point... Just to be sure, you're not suggesting this because you don't want Mushiki to see me wearing a uniform?"

"...Of course not."

"What's with that weak response?!" Ao shouted at the top of her lungs.

"...Haah."

Somehow, Asagi had managed to bring Ao around to letting her attend the remedial course in her place. It still weighed on her mind, though.

In any event, she had to determine how Mushiki's relationship with Ruri was progressing.

Of course, she could hardly ask him directly. She didn't want to influence their relationship by intervening, and besides, she was too embarrassed to ask him point-blank.

Somehow, she had to find a way to gather information enough to satisfy Ao's curiosity, and she had to do it naturally and unobtrusively.

"...And I thought the hard part was over," she whispered with a heavy sigh.

Feeling as if the inside of her mask would fill with gloom, Asagi shook her head lightly to try to clear her worries.

Now that the students had all gone their separate ways, this was the perfect opportunity to make contact with Mushiki free from prying eyes.

And so, Asagi quickened her pace as she took off after him.



"Um, I'm here right now, so this area should be fine..."

Mushiki peered down at his phone screen as he carefully trudged ahead.

On the display was a map of the island divided into three colors—blue, yellow, and red—along with an icon indicating his current location. According to Erulka, the colors indicated the approximate level of danger in any given area.

The blue sections were relatively safe, good for going on a casual stroll. In the yellow ones, there was a high risk of coming under attack from creatures like those they had encountered earlier. As for the red areas—students weren't permitted to enter those except in emergencies.

Mushiki was currently right in the middle of a large blue section. He was taking every precaution to keep from wandering into a yellow area, let alone a red one.

That couldn't be avoided. His body may have been fused with Saika's, but he was still just a novice mage. He wanted to avoid danger as much as possible.

"Still..."

He glanced around at his surroundings.

It was a fantastical sight. Plants unlike anything he had ever seen in the outside world thrived in abundance, and he could hear strange cries off in the distance.

"Ah, right. I'm supposed to do this..."

Suddenly remembering Erulka's instructions, he tapped on his phone's screen to switch to a different mode in the app.

The trees in front of him popped up on the display, as if he were using a normal camera app.

No sooner had the device focused on a bunch of black fruits growing nearby than it emitted a loud beep.

Lakka Berries. Acquisition Difficulty: 1. Material Rating: 2. Used in magic-sensitive ink.

"Huh."

The item's name, difficulty of acquisition, value, and main usage all appeared on the screen. This app could prove useful, he thought with an excited nod. With this, he could figure out which materials to prioritize collecting.

Acquisition difficulty, as the term implied, referred to how challenging a given ingredient was to obtain. For example, a material sourced from a wild, temperamental beast would inevitably have a higher difficulty rating. Similarly, toxic plants or those that required special procedures to harvest would likewise rank more highly. The numbers were no doubt based on a wide variety of factors.

Importantly, any given item's difficulty of acquisition wasn't necessarily the same as its material rating. The important value, at least for his task, was the latter one. Even if he managed to defeat a powerful monster, it would be a waste of time and effort if the materials he harvested from it weren't worth much.

Hoping to find some promising materials, Mushiki scanned the vegetation around him.

Pinberries. Acquisition Difficulty: 1. Material Rating: 1. Used in dyes and pigments.

Cushion Mushroom. Acquisition Difficulty: 1. Material Rating: 1. Simple cushioning material.

Harull Leaves. Acquisition Difficulty: 1. Material Rating: 2. Used in voice-changing potions.

How odd. He knew he was here to make up for a missed exam, but this was actually kind of fun.

This new app was tickling his collector's itch. It kind of seemed like it was designed to feel like a video game; even the special effects when scanning a new material were strangely satisfying. Something told him that Hildegarde must have been involved in its development in some way.

In any event, it looked like easily harvested plants weren't ranked particularly highly.

"Hmm...," he murmured with a stroke of his chin. "So these are all level one, huh? That might be enough to pass the course, but maybe I should aim for something a little more challenging..."

The next moment—

"...?!"

He jerked back as the bushes in front of him started rustling.

It couldn't be a monster with a high difficulty rating, could it? With an audible

gulp, he braced himself, ready for the worst.

But—

"...Kuga! Can I bother you for a moment?!"

"...Mushiki. So this is where you were."

The next moment, a small girl with thick eyebrows and another wearing a fox mask jumped from the thicket.

"Eh...?"

Mushiki's eyes widened in alarm at this unexpected development.

The same went for his two visitors, as Rindoh and Asagi exchanged startled glances.

"Sh-Shiranui? What are you doing here?"

"...Call me Asagi. And what are you doing here, Rindoh?"

"Nothing. I was just passing by, you know?"

"I got the impression you were looking for Mushiki..."

"N-no. Well, I mean... Anyway. Weren't *you* looking for him, Asagi? Don't mind me, then. You go first."

"What? No, it's nothing urgent. You go ahead and talk to him."

For whatever reason, they both wanted to wait to be the last one to speak—no doubt neither wanted to be overheard.

"... What are you guys playing at?"

While Rindoh and Asagi were busy debating who would go first, a suspicious voice sounded from the forest on their left.

Glancing around, Mushiki spotted Raimu—and behind him, Nene, standing with her arms crossed.

"...! Himemiya...! And Mushanokouji!"

"...Is this supposed to be a coincidence?"

Rindoh looked startled. Asagi, meanwhile, averted her gaze as if unsure how

to respond. It was clear from both of their reactions that they wanted to change the subject.

Raimu had no difficulty reading the mood. "Oh well. Never mind," he said with a curious look. "Anyway, I have a small proposition for you."

"Wh-what?" Mushiki asked nervously.

"It's nothing to get too worked up about," Raimu continued with a wave of his hand. "Basically, I'm suggesting we work together during our time here."

"Work together?"

"Yeah. You tried the app, right? How did it go?"

"I did. It's amazing."

"No, not that. I mean, the grasses and rocks around here are all level one, right? Level two at best, yeah?"

"Ah... Right."

Indeed, every plant Mushiki had scanned had a material rating of either one or two. Seeing as this was a safe blue area, that wasn't surprising.

"If you wanna get over the line just with low-level materials, you'll need at least a thousand of them. I'd sooner focus on level three items—or level five, preferably. But I'd have to venture into the yellow area to do that, and there's only so much I can do by myself."

Mushiki found himself nodding along to Raimu's explanation.

Rindoh and Asagi, however, craned their necks in confusion.

"I'm fine, really..."

"I'm good on my own."

"Ugh. Damn fighters...," Raimu muttered with a sullen look before feigning a cough to regain his composure. "I get that you two are strong. But I don't think you appreciate the importance of logistical support, do you? Even if you manage to get your hands on valuable plants or monsters, how are you going to preserve them? Or transport them? Are you going to do everything by yourselves?"

At this, Rindoh and Asagi fell silent, no doubt realizing he had a point.

It was Nene who broke the silence, speaking up for the first time. "...You seem to know a lot about this place. Like you've been here before," she said in a thick, husky voice.

Raimu broke into a visible sweat.

"...Seriously, this is the first time my gambling operation has been exposed!" he insisted, diverting his gaze.

...In other words, he had attended this supplementary course before for other reasons.

Well, Mushiki wouldn't say he didn't have his concerns, but the choice was clear.

"I'm in," he said, raising his hand. "To be honest, I was kind of worried about going out on my own, so I appreciate it."

"All right!" Raimu exclaimed, clenching his fist. "I knew you'd get it, Rookie! I always took you for a smart one."

"R-right. Thanks."

With that, perhaps hoping to go along with him, Rindoh and Asagi also nodded in approval.

"...I'll help."

"I have no objections."

"Good." Raimu nodded, turning back to Mushiki. "I owe you, Romeo."

"...? I didn't do anything, though."

"Well, I guess we can leave it at that." Raimu chuckled.

Mushiki didn't quite follow, but in any event, he was grateful they were all ready to cooperate.

"By the way, if it would take thousands of items ranked one or two for us to pass, how many higher-level ones would we need?" Mushiki asked.

Raimu stroked his chin and looked up at the sky. "Hmm... It depends on the item, but say you had a level five material... Five or six per person ought to get us across the line."

"Huh. That's a big difference."

"It's a completely different ball game. And if you get something level eight or higher, that's an instant pass. You'll only find stuff like that in the red zones, though," Raimu said with a shrug. "I'm not going after anything crazy like that. But I do have a hunch about where we might hit the jackpot. I'll show you once we've explored a bit and had a bite to eat."

The others all nodded along to this suggestion.

"Huh...?"

Mushiki's eyebrow twitched as a chime-like sound effect rang from the phone in his hand. He must have left the app running.

On the screen was a picture of Raimu, along with a short message:

Human (Mage). Acquisition Difficulty: 8. Material Rating: 8. Various uses.

"..."

As his eyes took in the text, Mushiki felt himself breaking out into a cold sweat.

"Hmm? What's up?"

"N-nothing."

...Something told him he should keep this to himself.

Doing his utmost to remain calm, he quickly shoved his phone back into his pocket.

 \Diamond

"Oh? What's this? You've decided to band together?" Erulka called out when they returned to base camp at noon.

"Yes. We bumped into each other..."

"Hmm. Well, suit yourselves," she said offhandedly. "Working together is certainly more effective than going at it alone."

Mushiki and the others exchanged forced smiles. Clearly, she'd had no difficulty realizing they'd decided to team up.

"Anyway, it's lunchtime. I've brought some ingredients. Use them however you like, but I'd appreciate it if you could make something for me while you're at it," she said, opening the lid of a cooler box that Mushiki hadn't noticed until now.

Once the white mist had subsided, Mushiki's eyes widened at the abundance of ingredients inside—meat, seafood, vegetables, eggs, fruit, and more.

"Whoa. Hold on, how does this cooler work?" he wondered aloud. "It doesn't look like there's any ice."

"Look inside," Raimu answered. "It's a magical tool, inscribed with a formula. It slowly converts external magical power into cold air."

Mushiki nodded in appreciation. "A tool? Is that different from a magical device?"

"Hmm... Strictly speaking, magical devices are magical tools. Generally, though, objects inscribed with third-generation invocations are called tools, while electronic devices that use fourth-generation ones are called devices. It's like the difference between analog and digital. Devices are more advanced and have way more output, but the great thing about tools is how simple they are. They're a lot more durable, and you don't need electricity to run them."

"I see. It's pretty clear when you put it like that."

"Yeah, well, that's my forte," Raimu said, puffing out his chest.

"Even middle schoolers know that much," Rindoh said with an exasperated sigh as she peered into the cooler box. "So what are we going to make? It looks like we've got plenty of ingredients to choose from."

"Curry with rice would be good. There are some roux cubes in here we can use," Asagi said with a thoughtful look.

"Hmm..." Rindoh crossed her arms. "Curry? Seems a little too ordinary..."

"If you think you can whip up some extraordinary banquet for six people, be my guest."

"...Ugh," Rindoh muttered.

Asagi was right, of course. The huge variety of available ingredients meant nothing if Mushiki and the others didn't know how to cook them. It would be better to play it safe than to fail at whipping up something overly elaborate. Curry was one of the easiest dishes to cook and could easily accommodate a large group of people. That was why it was such a classic.

"...Fine. Is everyone else good with that?" Rindoh asked.

The rest of them nodded in agreement.

"Then let's divvy up the workload. Anyone have any preferences?"

"Ah! I'll cook the rice," Mushiki said, raising his hand. "I've always wanted to try cooking rice over a campfire."

Both Asagi's and Rindoh's eyebrows twitched.

"Then I'll help with the rice as well."

"Um... M-me too."

"Hold on a sec," Raimu interrupted. "There are five of us, and you want to have three people cook rice? The curry's the more involved part. I know you both want a chance to flirt with him, but we've gotta get a better ratio here..."

Asagi and Rindoh spun around, indignant.

"Don't misunderstand me. I swear on heaven and earth—I don't feel that way about Mushiki. Seriously, just stop it. I don't want to be responsible for conflict within the family..."

"M-me neither! Enough with those weird suggestions! I'm not interested in him at all!"

"O-oh... Okay. Sorry..." Raimu shirked at their intimidating auras.

...Huh. Having dedicated himself, body and soul, to Saika, Mushiki shouldn't have cared about those remarks. Yet it stung hearing them both so adamantly

turn him down.

"...You two are pretty determined, huh...? Sorry, Mushiki, but can I ask you to join the curry group?"

"Ah. Right." He nodded. "Of course."

He *did* want to cook the rice, but he could see that it would be more efficient to have him join the other group.

At this, both Asagi and Rindoh broke into stern frowns.

"Then I want to be in charge of the curry."

"Um... M-me too."

"What the hell, you guys...?" Raimu muttered in disbelief.

...In the end, it was decided that Mushiki, Asagi, and Rindoh would make the curry, Nene would cook the rice, and Raimu would gather firewood and keep the campfire burning.

And so, Mushiki placed a cutting board on the stone countertop to start chopping the washed vegetables.

"…"

Before he could begin, however, an inexplicable sense of discomfort fell over him, forcing him to step back.

The cause was obvious. Despite the countertop being spacious enough, for whatever reason, Asagi and Rindoh had both placed their chopping boards directly beside his, standing almost shoulder to shoulder with him as they set to work.

On top of that, they were both sending furtive glances his way at every opportunity. Mushiki broke into a cold sweat as he listened to the dull thumping sounds of their knives hitting the chopping board.

Unable to withstand the pressure of them standing so close, he hunched his shoulders and asked in a small voice, "U-um... Can I help you two?"

"...!"

Both Asagi and Rindoh flinched, awkwardly turning away.

"I-I'm fine. Do you need something from Mushiki, Rindoh?"

"Um... It's nothing important. Wasn't there something on *your* mind, though, Asagi?"

Once they were finished keeping each other in check, Asagi tried to sound casual (though it really didn't come off that way after she'd been acting so strange) and asked, "By the way, Mushiki, how's Ruri doing?"

"Huh? Ah, right. She's fine."

"Was she lonely, what with you leaving the Garden for this remedial course?"

"I don't know... Oh, she gave me a stuffed toy so I wouldn't get lonely, though," Mushiki answered.

Asagi's eyes lit up at this. "Oh? She did? A handmade plush toy?"

"Yeah. A two-fifths-size replica of Saika."

This last addition seemed to leave Asagi in a state of confusion. "...What sort of feeling is that supposed to convey?"

"Love... Right?" Mushiki said with a faint smile.

"...For who, though?" Asagi pulled a troubled face.

"Anyway, it was too big, and Kuroe confiscated it before I could leave the Garden. So Ruri gave me a palm-size toy I could bring instead, but—"

"Ahl"

At that moment, it wasn't Asagi who'd exclaimed in surprise, but Rindoh.

"What is it, Rindoh?" Asagi asked, turning her masked face her way.

"Oh, it's nothing..." Rindoh tried brushing the question aside, but she soon succumbed to Asagi's forceful presence. "Kuroe—he means Headmistress Kuozaki's attendant...right?"

"Of course. So?"

"Um, well... I don't want to say anything I shouldn't...but I *saw* her and Headmistress Kuozaki, completely by accident."

"You saw them? Doing what?"

"... They were holding each other close..."

"... What?!" Mushiki and Asagi blurted out in shock.

...Right. Come to think of it, Rindoh had walked in while Kuroe was helping him undergo a state change after the meeting with the other school principals. She clearly hadn't forgotten—and had, in fact, left with a very wrong impression.

"H-hold on. Are you sure that's what you saw?" Mushiki asked.

"Yes... So I was wondering if she took that plushie you mentioned out of jealousy or possessiveness...," Rindoh added, reinforcing her robust fantasy.

"No... Er... That's..." Mushiki found himself at a loss for words.

It was a complete misunderstanding, but there was no way to explain that without revealing the truth about his situation, or that Kuroe was, in fact, Saika herself.

On hearing this, Asagi clutched her head in despair, mumbling something behind her mask. "...This won't do. Not at all. If Ruri has her heart set on Headmistress Kuozaki, and if she gets rejected because of this... I can't begin to imagine how Lady Ao might react... Ngh..." She contorted her body, letting out a vulpine groan, before spinning around and pressing her face close to his. "Mushiki."

"Wh-what?"

"You're on good terms with Lady Ruri, I hope? I want to support your relationship as best I can. So please take good care of her. I mean it. I really do," she entreated him forcefully, her fox mask eerily intimidating.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" Raimu called out. "We're ready over here."

Glancing over his shoulder, Mushiki saw that Raimu and Nene had already started cooking the rice. They must have spent more time chatting than he thought.

"Uh. Sorry..."

Now wasn't the time for chatter, Mushiki thought, suggesting with a brief gesture that they return to this topic later. Asagi and Rindoh looked somewhat

disgruntled at the interruption but nonetheless went along with it.

It wasn't long before they had finished chopping the ingredients and brought them to a simmer in a pot. Then came the roux cubes, sending a delicious aroma wafting through the campsite.

"Mm-hmm. I can't wait," Erulka exclaimed as she took a seat at the table before the meal was fully ready.

That was when Mushiki realized it. Not only were the plates for the curry on the table, but there were small bowls and cups, too.

"Wh-what are those for ...?"

"Mimosa salad. I had a little extra time," Nene answered, her arms folded against her chest.

"And the cups...?"

"Vegetable soup. It's simple but nourishing."

"…"

"And I've made pudding for dessert," she added, pulling the homemade sweets from the cooler box.

She was so industrious and accommodating that it made Mushiki feel slightly guilty.

The curry that he, Asagi, and Rindoh made was as tasty as he had hoped, but Nene's cooking was on an entirely different level.

The pudding, in particular, was spectacular—both Rindoh and Asagi asked Nene for the recipe once they'd finished dessert.



After lunch, Mushiki made his way to a lake in the northwestern corner of Nirai Island.

It was a large body of water, and from where he was standing, he could hardly see the far shore. Coniferous trees lined the banks, while mountains loomed behind, their image reflected upside down on the glassy surface.

At first glance, one might have mistaken it for a picturesque summer vacation spot, the sort that would be bustling with tourists during the warmer months. Assuming this was a normal place, that is.

Mushiki briefly glanced down at the smartphone in his hand.

The map was a solid yellow.

Yes. Despite the beautiful scenery, this lake was right in the middle of a danger zone.

In light of that, the tranquil water struck him as somewhat eerie. Naturally, he had no way of knowing how deep it was—but he would be surprised if there wasn't *something* lurking beneath.

"...I guess the others aren't ready yet," he murmured uneasily, glancing about.

Two makeshift tentlike structures had been hastily erected—improvised changing rooms. The plan was to conduct a survey of the lake, but it would be too difficult, not to mention risky, walking from base camp in swimsuits, so they had set up these tents using the materials they had on hand.

Mushiki had finished changing first and was now dressed in swim shorts and sandals, with his realizing device for deploying his manifestation techniques fastened to his waist on a short strap.

Just as he was beginning to feel lonely standing there all by himself—

"Sorry to keep you waiting," came a voice.

Glancing around, he spotted Asagi wearing a sporty white swimsuit with her hair tied up. Her slender, well-toned body reminded him of his sister, Ruri, which was only natural, given her background. Still, he couldn't help but stare.

"What?" she demanded.

"Uh, I mean... You're still wearing your mask," he deflected.

Asagi was showing much more skin than usual, but her face was indeed covered.

"Oh, well. That's because we all look so similar at work," she answered in all seriousness.

Mushiki hadn't been trying to crack a joke, but her response and the way she'd said it was strangely funny, and he felt his lips curling in a grin.

"We're not on the Ark. I think it should be fine to take it off, but it's up to you."

"Maybe, but still..." She shrugged her shoulders in embarrassment. "I usually never take my mask off in front of other people, so I guess I'm a bit shy."

"Really?"

"If I had to decide between taking it off and going completely naked from the neck down, I don't know which I'd choose..."

"That much?" Mushiki asked nervously.

...He had accidentally broken her mask and glimpsed her face underneath during his trip to the Ark a couple of months ago... Had that made her feel like she was being stripped naked? Once more, he felt a wave of guilt creeping up on him.

Well, he had done it only because of exceptional circumstances, and he had been in his Saika form at the time. Most importantly, Asagi herself had lost consciousness. But all the same, he felt it would be best not to make her relive the experience.

It was at that moment he noticed Rindoh stepping out of the women's changing tent.

"Huh? What are you doing?" he asked.

"...!"

Rindoh tensed up, then seemed to make up her mind and marched away from the tent.

Like Asagi, she was dressed in what looked like a school-designated swimsuit—hers, a two-piece outfit almost like a track and field uniform, in vibrant orange.

"So that's the Tower's uniform?" Mushiki remarked. "It's pretty cute."

"C-c-c-cute...?!" Rindoh stammered, her face turning so red, steam might

have erupted from her ears.

Mushiki could sense Asagi's gaze narrowing as she turned toward him. "...Are you always like this, Mushiki?"

"Like what?"

"I don't mind. But you haven't been complimenting other women on their looks in front of Ruri, I hope."

"I've often said Saika's beauty reigns supreme over all ages and locales..."

"…"

"I think Ruri's super strong, too, by the way."

"...I see." Asagi crossed her arms, avoiding his gaze.

He couldn't say for sure with her face hidden behind her mask, but he sensed she was sullenly glowering at him.

It didn't take long for her attitude to improve.

At that moment, the tent flapped open again as Nene stepped out in a jetblack bikini.

"Oh... Ooh..."

Mushiki, Asagi, and Rindoh each let out murmurs with equal parts shock and admiration.

He had guessed how she must look from the glimpses he'd gotten of her arms and legs in her regular uniform, but seeing Nene like this just proved to him how impoverished his imagination was. Her body was beautifully toned, trained to its utmost limits, with her lightly tanned skin accentuating the shadows of her muscles, turning her into a living work of art.

"What's the matter?" Nene asked as she approached her dumbfounded peers.

They trembled slightly, but it was Rindoh who answered, purposely looking away from Nene. "I—I... Um, that isn't your school's swimming uniform, is it...?"

Come to think of it, she was right. It wasn't. Strictly speaking, Mushiki had no idea what the Peak's swimsuits looked like, but he seriously doubted it was this

style of black bikini.

Nene hung her head, as if she'd been expecting the question. "They don't have any my size."

"Ah..."

That made sense. Mushiki and others were totally convinced, nodding in profound agreement.

At that moment, a faint voice sounded from the men's changing tent—Raimu, the last of them to finish getting ready.

"Eh? What's this? I didn't realize you're already here. Sorry, it took me a little longer than I expected."

"Ah, Raimu, you—"

Mushiki glanced around—and froze in place.

And it wasn't just him. Asagi, Rindoh, and even the preternaturally calm Nene stood there in wide-eyed shock.

The reason was simple—Raimu was wearing simple swimming trunks just like Mushiki's.

There was nothing unnatural about that, once you stopped to consider the situation: Raimu was a male student, dressed in male swimwear.

From the neck up, however, he was a beautiful young woman, causing everyone's brains to glitch out. Combine that face with his petite body, white skin, and slender limbs, and they all felt like they were laying eyes on something they weren't supposed to see.

"Huh...? Wh-wh-what's with that outfit?! Don't you have any shame?!"

"Don't look, Mushiki. Mushiki?"

"...I'll lend you some clothes."

"What gives, you guys?" Raimu demanded, breaking into a perplexed frown.

For the rest of them, though, the shock was staggering. In the end, they forced Raimu to return to the changing room and add a thin tank top, though he still looked rather unconvinced.

It was still a very provocative look...but at least it was better than before.

"Seriously, you guys are a pain in the ass," Raimu muttered, pulling at the collar of his tank top to let some air in. After regaining his composure, he turned back to the others. "Whatever. Let's get down to business. Our target, today, is a kelpie."

"A kelpie?" Mushiki repeated.

Asagi gave him a small nod. "They're water spirits that appear in lakes and springs. They kind of look like horses. It's dangerous for normal people to get close to one, but not so much if you know your way around magic."

"Right..." Mushiki nodded.

"The horns aren't just good for potions; they're used in making circuit boards for magical devices," Raimu continued, his lips forming a thin smile. "They've got a high material rating due to their difficulty of acquisition, so I figured we should start with these guys."

Mushiki was beginning to see why he had asked them all to come to the lake with their swimming gear.

At that moment, with seemingly perfect timing, a voice sounded up above.



"Oh-ho. You've found a good spot, I see. Well, seeing as we've come all this way, I might as well enjoy a little swim, too."

It was Erulka. She must have been keeping a close eye on them all.

Well, that was only natural. She was in charge of supervising this supplementary course, so it made sense for her to keep watch for any unforeseen circumstances.

And yet—

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaggghhh?!"

As they looked up, Mushiki and the others found themselves screaming at the top of their lungs.

But that response made perfect sense.

Erulka was standing atop a rocky outcrop, arms folded in an intimidating pose—stark naked.

She usually went about sporting a white lab coat over highly revealing underwear, but even that was gone. She was completely nude—prompting a commotion on an entirely different scale than the one caused by Raimu a moment ago.

Yet far from shrinking back in embarrassment, Erulka stood tall. The sun was behind her back, shining brilliantly between her legs.

"...Hmph!"

While the others stood frozen stiff, it was Nene who made the first move, taking off at blinding speed to grab a towel from the changing tent, run up the cliff face, and hurl it at Erulka.

"Eh?! What are you doing?" Erulka asked in annoyance.

"W-we should be saying that! Wh-why aren't you wearing any clothes?!" shrieked not Nene, but Rindoh, her face bright red.

"Why...? You're supposed to take your clothes off before going for a swim, no? None of you are wearing yours."

"A-at least put on a bathing suit! There are men here, too, you know?!"

"I don't mind."

"But we do!" Rindoh screamed. Her whole body was tense, back arched and clenched fists shaking uncontrollably.

"Hmm. You sound a lot like Ruri. Oh well..." Reluctantly, Erulka withdrew into the shadows behind a rocky outcrop and reappeared a moment later.



This time, she was wearing a plain one-piece swimsuit, navy blue in color with her name written in large letters on the chest—a classic school-style swimming outfit. Given her usual attire, it felt somewhat surreal seeing her so covered up.

"Will this do?" she asked.

"...Y-yes." Judging by her shaking fists, Rindoh looked like she still had more to say, but no doubt deciding this was better than nothing, she breathed a resigned sigh.

Erulka scratched her head in exasperation before sliding down the rocky cliff face. "I honestly don't like how they cling to your body when they get wet. I fail to understand how anyone can actually swim around in these things."

"...Why do you have one, then?"

"Ruri and Kuroe forced me to bring it before I left the Garden."

"..."

Mushiki couldn't help but clench his fist in gratitude for their nice save.

Asagi, no doubt thinking the exact same thing, put her hands together in silent prayer.

At that moment, someone tapped Mushiki on the arm—Raimu.

"...Hey. Did you get a good look?"

"...No. The sun was too bright."

"Right? What a shame!" Raimu said ruefully—only to whistle to himself when Asagi let out a feigned cough. "Well, whatever. Let's get started." With that, he pointed to the lake.

The others had no objections, nodding in agreement as they set out.

"Luckily, we have two boats. We'll split into two groups—one to lead the attack, the other to back them up from behind. Anyone here good at close combat?" Raimu asked.

Asagi, Rindoh, and Nene exchanged brief glances, all three quickly raising their hands.

After pausing to think for a moment, Mushiki likewise volunteered. It wasn't that he excelled at close quarters exactly, but he certainly wasn't very capable at long-range combat.

"I should have guessed," Raimu whistled, impressed. "Then the girls will take the lead from that boat there. Mushiki—you and me, we'll watch their backs from this one."

"Mushiki raised his hand, too, though," Asagi pointed out.

"Don't be dumb. You'd leave me by myself? I'm not exactly proud of it, but I'm pretty weak, you know."

"…"

Indeed, that wasn't something to boast about. Asagi was left scratching her head.

Raimu, however, continued as if nothing were amiss. "Anyway, let me explain the plan. First, the girls will head out into the center of the lake, then lure the kelpie out and take it down. We'll keep our distance so we can leap in if things go south."

"It sounds like we don't need a rearguard at all," Nene observed, crossing her arms.

Rindoh and Asagi nodded in emphatic agreement.

"You have no idea what's going to happen, do you? Splitting up your forces is a fundamental strategy. *Fundamental*."

"...Fine," Nene said bluntly before boarding the boat at the lake's edge. It seemed she still had more she wanted to say but had simply decided it would be faster and easier to hold her tongue.

"We'll head off first, then," Rindoh said, stepping in.

"Watch our backs, Mushiki," Asagi added.

Once the three of them were aboard, Nene untied the rope mooring the boat to the shore and grabbed the oars.

"Hmph!"

In an instant, her back muscles swelled and bulged, and the oars started spinning at high speed, kicking up strong waves and sending the boat skimming across the surface of the water.

They were moving incredibly fast. In no time at all, the boat was just a speck approaching the horizon, and Mushiki quickly pointed at the other boat.

"We should go, too, Raimu."

"Yeah. I don't think we can play catch-up with them, though..." At that, he fell silent, eyes widening as far as they would go.

Curious, Mushiki glanced where he was looking.

Only then did he notice the area around the other boat pulsating and thrashing as if it had a mind of its own.

"Uh... Is that the kelpie?"

"No. That's...!" Raimu screamed, when-

The surface of the lake expanded upward, throwing Nene, Rindoh, and Asagi's boat sky high.

"What ...?!"

Caught off guard, Mushiki watched what was happening in bewilderment, his breath catching in his throat.

The water continued to defy gravity as it extended upward, slowly changing shape like a clay sculpture coming to life.

It had a graceful figure, with an upper body that looked like a bathing maiden—though it was far too massive for that.

"An undine...?! What's that doing here?!" Raimu gawked.

Acting half on impulse, Mushiki pointed his phone at the huge water spirit, and a string of letters appeared on the screen complete with a sequence of gamelike sound effects:

Undine. Acquisition Difficulty: 8. Material Rating: 7. Used in crystal medicines.

"...?!"

Mushiki's eyes bulged at the high difficulty and material ratings. Clearly, they hadn't been expecting to run into a creature of this level on their hunt.

On top of that, the girls' boat had been thrown high into the air and was currently careening back down into a lake dominated by a massive water monster. The situation could hardly be any more desperate.

Yet while they may have been sent to attend this supplementary course, at the end of the day, they were mages. Despite the turmoil they found themselves in, they calmly assessed the situation and set to action.

"Meteor Slash!"

"Blinding Blade."

Rindoh and Asagi wasted no time before activating their second substantiations, kicking off in the air to right themselves.

Asagi's movements were aided by an aerial device, which wrapped a thin membrane of air around her body. Rindoh's, however, were a sight to behold—she moved as if gravity had no hold over her. Perhaps she had activated some kind of secret technique?

The two of them crossed paths, lashing out at the undine's huge body.

Rindoh slashed with her blade of steel from the right, while from the left came Asagi's sword of roiling blue flame, cutting through the huge body of water. Thrown back, the undine let out a high-pitched roar.

"First Substantiation: Fistruction."

But that was far from the end of the encounter. The undine turned its head to see Nene, who had landed atop the capsized boat, hunched low, her fists poised.

"Hya!"

With a loud battle cry, Nene unleashed a high-powered punch imbued with magical power.

The impact of her attack made the air itself tremble, shattering the undine's

head into thousands of tiny pieces.

"Whoa!" Raimu blurted out in excitement. "Who'd have guessed it?! That was a piece of cake!"

"No. It isn't over," Erulka said, scratching underneath her swimsuit with a squint.

The next moment, the surface of the water pulsed—and the scattered pieces of the undine came back together in their original form.

No, not quite its original form. It unleashed tendrils of water from the lake's surface, ensnaring Rindoh and Asagi in the air and Nene from her perch on the upturned boat.

The water clung to their bodies, layer upon layer. The three girls struggled to escape, to move, to activate their substantiations—but the water moved lithely in response, absorbing every impact.

It was a cage of water. Raimu's face, which had been buoyant a moment ago, turned pale with despair.

"Wh-what the hell?! There's no way we can take that on!"

"What should we—"

"Don't fret," Erulka interrupted calmly, cutting them both off.

She took a seat at the edge of the lake, her demeanor all but declaring that she had no intention of rushing to the girls' aid. "Stay calm and assess your opponent," she continued. "If you lose your composure, you won't stand a chance against a foe you ought to be able to beat... Haven't you learned anything from Saika?"

It was clear that last part was aimed at Mushiki, whose breath caught slightly at the sudden mention of Saika's name.

"What I've learned from Saika..."

He took a deep breath in an effort to clear his mind.

At last, he noticed something—a faint light around the watery cage that had

ensnared Asagi and the others.

There could be no mistaking it—it was weak, but that was the light of magical energy. The moment he recognized it, he realized the undine's body was charged with the same power. The water, he sensed, wasn't its true body.

No, it was simply manipulating the water around itself.

"...Let's go, Raimu. We might be able to save everyone."

"...Huh?!" he replied in alarm.

But as he sensed the determination in Mushiki's eyes, his nervous sweat gave way to a serious look. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Yes. But we'll have to get in as close as possible to pull it off," Mushiki said, staring at the boat. "We'll never row there in time, though."

Raimu gave his head a dramatic shake, then raised his hand up high.

"First Substantiation: Artista."

The moment he uttered those words, a radiant single-layer world crest took shape over his right index finger.

"I'm not proud of it or anything, but my first substantiation is this shoddy thing, good for nothing but leaving trails of light in the air. That said..." He crouched down, his glowing fingertip darting about to inscribe what looked like words around Mushiki's feet. "I am a mage. I can use it to compose third-generation spells on the spot!"

"...!*"*

Mushiki's eyes widened—and at that moment, the letters Raimu had traced around his feet lit up, and his legs were overcome with a surreal floating sensation.

"Run! Straight ahead!"

"Right!"

Mushiki kicked off his sandals and started running in the direction Raimu was pointing, straight for the three girls.

He stepped right out onto the lake—but strangely enough, he wasn't afraid.

The moment his feet touched the water's surface, the letters around his feet lit up, repelling him away from liquid with each step.

It almost felt as if he were sprinting over an elastic trampoline, and Mushiki quickly made his way across the surface.

The undine had clearly noticed him, cautiously wriggling its huge body and lashing out with more water tentacles.

As he bounded toward the creature, Mushiki focused his attention on a single point.

And he chanted. His other self. The name of his second substantiation, that of *matter*.

"Second Substantiation: Hollow Edge!"

In the blink of an eye, a two-stage world crest appeared over his head and a sword of translucent glass materialized in his right hand.

Taking full advantage of his newfound buoyancy, Mushiki leaped high into the air, twisting around as he lashed out at the oncoming plumes of water. With a violent midair splash, the tentacles dissipated.

Thus far, his actions had mirrored those of the three girls. Had the undine caught on to that fact? Mushiki waited for it to respond, but the tentacles failed to rematerialize.

Right. Mushiki himself didn't quite understand how it worked, but for whatever reason, his second substantiation had the power to cancel out any magical technique his blade came into contact with.

He had guessed—or hoped—that if it could counter techniques used by mages, it might work here against the water spirit, too.

And the effect was just as he had expected. The undine, realizing that something was amiss, shook its massive body as it launched its next attack.

But it was too late. Mushiki leaped up once more, and—

"Haaah!"

The transparent blade of his Hollow Edge sliced clean through the undine's

gigantic body.

The magical power holding the undine intact vanished, freeing vast quantities of water from their constraints and sending them cascading back into the lake, triggering violent waves across the water's surface.

Simultaneously, the watery prisons holding Rindoh, Asagi, and Nene burst apart. Rindoh, who had been forced to hold her breath, broke out in a fit of violent coughing.

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"Ack... Eck...!"
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"Are you okay, Rindoh?" Asagi asked, helping her to her feet. Using her aerial device, she had managed to keep her head above water while caught in the snare.

"...It's not over. Don't let your guard down," Nene warned, her gaze fixed on the spot where the undine had fallen just moments ago. Her breathing was as even as ever.

After he followed her line of sight, Mushiki's eyes widened in alarm.

He hadn't noticed it before because of the thick layer of liquid surrounding it, but there was a crystal-like object hovering above the water.

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"Is that ...?"
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"The undine's core, I'm guessing. It must have wrapped itself in water to make that huge body," Nene answered.

Almost as if it had heard them, the crystal started falling down toward the lake.

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"Uh-oh. It's going to sink."
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"Ugh...!"
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With a frown, Mushiki braced himself and leaped into the air once more.

It was no exaggeration to say that his specialty when it came to magic lay in catching his opponents by surprise. He had no idea just how intelligent the undine was, but it would be a huge problem if it managed to form another body.

Or rather, there was every possibility it might try to escape. He had to settle this quickly, so he raised Hollow Edge overhead.

But he was too slow. Just before his sword could reach it, the undine's core dipped below the water's surface.

When-

"Huh?"

At the very last moment, an arrow-like beam of light flew toward the core from out of nowhere, piercing it clean through.

The core burst with a shrill, high-pitched crack, its crystalline body breaking apart into a rain of shattered fragments.

"Was that...?" Mushiki stammered in a daze, when a voice sounded from behind him—

"Jackpot!"

Glancing over his shoulder, he spotted Raimu standing atop the water just as he was, arms still raised as if just having fired an arrow. Around his hands was an intricate pattern of light-based glyphs. He must have constructed a long-range attack to strike the undine's core. It probably wasn't particularly powerful, but it was evidently enough to destroy the unprotected crystal.

"Aha!"

Erasing the light from his hands, Raimu bounced off the ground as if jumping on a trampoline and launched himself for Mushiki.

"Good one, Rookie! That thing has a material rating of seven! It's a massive win!"

"Ah! Th-thanks for the save at the end there."

"What are you going on about? *You're* the one who beat it!" Raimu exclaimed giddily, wrapping his legs around Mushiki's body and roughly stroking his hair.

Rindoh, watching on from the sidelines, cleared her throat. "Eh-hem...?"

"Hmm? What?"

"I mean... You shouldn't do that in public, you know ...?" She blushed, averting

her gaze.

"...I-it isn't good...," Asagi added.

"Mm...," Nene muttered in agreement.

They all looked equally uncomfortable.

Raimu stared back in bewilderment, before furrowing his brow in shocked understanding.

"Don't get the wrong idea! It's like scoring a goal in soccer! Right?! Right, Mushiki?!"

"...S-sure."

"...Come on, not you, too?!" Raimu all but wailed.

...Mushiki felt guilty admitting it, but whether he liked it or not, the feeling of Raimu pressing his soaked body up against him was incredibly sensual. Being held like this left him feeling more than a little embarrassed and flustered.

Raimu twisted his lips in a pout—when Erulka called out from the lake's shore.

"...Shouldn't one of you collect the undine core?"

"Ah...," Mushiki murmured, turning back to the lake's surface.

Pieces of the shattered crystal were bobbing up and down in the water. They were almost transparent, so if they had sunk below the surface, he might never have managed to locate them.

And so, with no time to bask in the afterglow of their victory, Mushiki and the others rushed to collect the shards.



"...This is a nice forest." Listening to the rustling of the trees beneath the night sky, the woman said this aloud to no one in particular.

She honestly felt that way. This was a most peculiar environment, replete with creatures and plants found nowhere else, yet the air was strangely

familiar. There was a sense of strength to it, as if the area were untouched by human hands. Well, strictly speaking, this forest *had* seen human habitation in an age long past, but it had since been swallowed up by the passage of time.

...If I feel this way, then she must as well.

That thought was enough to summon up both immense frustration and a strange feeling of nostalgia within the woman.

"Chief," a voice called out.

"What?" she answered curtly.

She didn't need to look around to sense several other individuals breathing nearby, all belonging to her faithful kinsfolk.

"We've confirmed the enemy's presence. Our information was accurate."

"I see."

The woman breathed a small sigh. That had been her biggest concern—what had brought them all the way to this remote island. Even if her interests were aligned with those of Clara Tokishima, there was no guarantee the other woman was telling the truth.

"I don't suppose they know we're here?"

"No."

The woman almost snorted in response to her compatriot's abundance of confidence. After all, if they had been able to spy on her, there was no way *she* would have failed to notice *them*.

"...What?"

"Nothing." The woman lowered her gaze and took a deep breath before continuing. "Very well. The time is ripe. This is our stage."

At her words, the scents of those around her took on an extra tinge of excitement.

"We move tomorrow. The moment we have waited so long for is finally here. Sharpen your fangs to feast on her flesh."

"Yes, Chief!" the clansfolk said as one.

The unified reaction was enough to convey they were still a perfectly coordinated unit.

"By the way, Chief."

"What?"

"What are you going to do with that small box she gave you?"

"The box...? Ah..."

The woman suddenly remembered the suspicious container and pulled it from her bag.

However, after a few moments—

"Ridiculous," she spat, letting it fall to the ground. "She is our prey. I don't know what that Clara girl is playing at, but she's nothing but scum."

"Ah...," her compatriot answered.

The woman sensed no displeasure in their voice. Rather, it seemed they had been hoping for exactly that answer.

"We're moving out. Follow me."

"As you command."

The woman and her kinsfolk took off through the shadowy forest.

In the dark, there was no light except for the stars and the moon.

Nobody at all noticed the shining particles leaking from the small, abandoned box.

Chapter 3 → A Girl Dyed in Color →

Total darkness stretched out before Mushiki.

""

For a moment, he was struck with a strange feeling—that of waking up outside his usual bedroom and being unable to move his arms and legs. But as he slowly returned to complete consciousness, he remembered where he was. Blinking a few times, he stretched his stiff body.

That's right. He had fallen asleep not in his dormitory room at the Garden, but in a tent on Nirai Island. The reason he couldn't freely move his arms and legs wasn't because he was restrained but because he was in a sleeping bag.

He pulled an arm out from his bedroll and blindly groped around for his phone, which he'd left under his pillow. Once he had it in his hand, he tapped the screen to switch it on.

It was two thirty in the morning—the witching hour, when even plants and trees were sound asleep.

He had gone to bed much earlier than usual, which perhaps explained why he had woken up. Then again, it might simply have been that his body wasn't accustomed to this new environment.

In any event, it was too early to get out of bed. He had to get some rest to be ready for the following day's activities—or more precisely, *today's* activities. So he tucked his arm back into his sleeping bag, when—

"...Hm?"

He stopped himself, eyebrows twitching.

The reason was simple—he'd heard a distinct rustling sound outside his tent.

Perhaps it was just the wind passing through the trees or grass, he thought—but no. The sound, whatever it was, was most assuredly approaching his tent.

"Wh-what...?" he muttered, furrowing his brow as he crawled out from his sleeping bag and rose to his feet.

Panic coursed through his brain, instantly restoring him to full alertness. What could be causing the sound outside?

Wild animals? Unlikely. The campsite was in the middle of a relatively safe blue area, and the tents had been equipped with barriers so they wouldn't be easily spotted. Of course, there was no guarantee that would keep every creature away, but the odds of that were low.

In which case, it could be one of the others using the campsite? Maybe one of them wanted to talk to him or needed to borrow something or... No. That wasn't particularly plausible, either.

He hesitated, gulping audibly before calling out in a timid voice, "Is someone there? Do you need anything...?"

He waited for an answer, but there was no response.

Yet whoever—whatever—was behind the sound didn't turn to flee. Nor did it seem upset that it had been detected, as it continued to approach the tent.

Unsure of the presence's intentions, Mushiki braced to defend himself with magic at the slightest provocation while lighting a lantern to brighten his surroundings.

At last, the sound reached the edge of his tent, and the zipper slowly opened.

"..."

His heart raced, all but pounding in his chest.

Who in the world was it? He could feel his breath growing more ragged by the second in anticipation of his unknown visitor.

And then—

"...Huh?!" he exclaimed hysterically.

But he couldn't be blamed for his response, given the circumstances.

After all, entering through the side of the tent was a delicate white hand...

The next thing he knew, a half-naked woman cloaked only in a white lab coat crawled into his tent.

"Uh... Huh...?!" He gawked, failing to comprehend the situation in which he now found himself.

She was stunningly beautiful—enough to send shivers down his spine—and looked to be in her mid-twenties. Her eyes bore a hint of wildness, while her lips were twisted in a mischievous grin.

Her arms and legs were long and supple, suggesting she was quite tall. If she wasn't crawling on all fours, she might very well be taller than he was himself. Her body was covered in well-toned muscle, but her torso didn't seem to be limited by it, and with each motion toward him, two voluptuous fruits swayed bewitchingly before his eyes.

However, it was two other parts of her anatomy that most caught his attention—her head and buttocks.

Yes. Atop her head were a pair of pointed wolf like ears, while a large tail protruded from her backside.

In other words—

A beautiful, half-naked, wolf-eared woman had just crept into his tent in the middle of the night.

"…"

Mushiki's head started throbbing as he slowly tried to put the pieces together.

...No matter how you looked at this, it was just too surreal. Had dormitory life left him with such pent-up frustrations that they were fueling some perverse dream? He reached out to pinch his cheek, sending a sharp pain through his skin.

But while he sat there puzzled, the beautiful woman licked her lips.

"Oh-ho, so you're awake. Just in time. I don't like attacking my prey in its sleep. It's rather dull when they don't have time to respond," she said, still edging toward him on all fours.

"Wha...?!" Mushiki jumped back in an effort to flee.

The tent, however, was far too narrow. With no escape route, she threw him down onto his back.

"Oh-ho, caught you. Now, what should I taste first...?"

The woman licked her lips as she crawled atop him. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing heavy. Her skin, illuminated by the light of the lantern, glistened with sweat.

Mushiki's breath caught in his throat at this indescribably lewd development. A palpitating sensation, altogether different from the one that had gripped him a moment ago, took hold of him from within.

But he couldn't stay this way forever. Extending his hand, he slowly pushed her away—taking care not to touch her breasts, of course.

"Wh-who are you?! Why are you barging into my tent all of a sudden...?!" he demanded, red-faced.

The woman looked puzzled. "Who am I? What a peculiar question. Or are you still half asleep? Don't tell me you're so ungrateful, you've already forgotten the face of the person who saved you from failing?"

"From failing...?" Mushiki stared back, wide-eyed.

Only then did the pieces click together. Her white coat. Her manner of speaking. The color of her hair. The way she licked her lips. And now, that last statement.

"...No way... Ms. Erulka?!"

"Why are you so surprised? Isn't it obvious?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"N-not at all!" Mushiki shrieked in response.

Her physique and age weren't at all those of the Erulka he knew. There was no way he could have recognized her at first glance.

"What's going on?! Wh-why are you...?!"

Erulka narrowed her eyes at this question as if suddenly recalling something. "Did you notice? It's a full moon tonight. Magnificent."

"I-it is?"

"Hmm. A most elegant moment, I thought. So I indulged myself with some moon viewing and a drink. But..."

"But ...?"

"I started feeling a little horny."

"You're jumping the gun a little, aren't you?!" he exclaimed.

He simply couldn't fathom her behavior right now, nor her changed appearance.

Yet Erulka, unconcerned, chortled with laughter. "Well, we can overlook the small details, can't we? More importantly..." She paused there, pressing down with her weight. "How about it? You don't seem *too* against the idea," she taunted him with a lewd grin, moving her face close to his.

"I—I can't!" Mushiki stammered, doing his utmost to resist. "Stop, please! I've given my heart to someone else!"

"Oh? Have you, now? Who?" she asked with a slight tilt of her head.

"...S-Saika...," he whispered after a moment's hesitation.

It wasn't that he felt ashamed to admit it. No, his hesitation was born from the worry that this might come back to have a negative impact on Saika, due to their close relationship.

Erulka's eyes widened in astonishment. "Saika? Saika, you said? That Saika?"

"Y-yes. I think we're talking about the same person."

"Oh-ho... You're gutsier than I thought. You won't have an easy time taming that horse."

"I-I know."

"I see, I see. Ha-ha! That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! Has the

springtime of youth finally dawned on her, perhaps?" Erulka stroked her chin in amusement. "Hmm, and yet... I see. Well, I feel bad for her, too...," she said with a sullen look.

Mushiki breathed a sigh of relief. She seemed to understand.

"...You know, Mushiki..."

"What?"

"I'm famously tight-lipped. I know how to keep a secret."

"...S-so...?"

"How far would you be willing to go?" she asked with a playful lick of her lips.

"What are you saying?!" Mushiki cried back, flailing his arms and legs.

"All right, all right. I won't do anything. I won't. So why don't you just take your clothes off? Hmm?" she asked, still not giving up.

"There's no way you mean that!" Mushiki shouted, resisting her with all his might.

 \Diamond

"...Aaaaaaaaaggghhh!"

In Room 314 of the first girls' dormitory building at the Garden, Ruri woke with a start in the middle of the night.

Carried by her momentum, she stormed to the door and leaped out into the hallway, laboring for breath like a guard dog hoping to intimidate an intruder.

All she could make out, however, was the familiar interior of her dormitory building. As her racing heart calmed down, her eyes widened in consternation.

"H-huh...? I'm...in my dorm?" she murmured in confusion as she wiped the sweat from her brow with her pajama sleeve.

...Not that it did any good. She was completely drenched with her own perspiration.

"... What are you doing awake at this hour, Ruri?"

She froze, standing motionless in the doorway as a voice called out from behind her.

Turning around, she laid eyes on Kuroe peeking through the ajar door two rooms down. She must have been asleep as well, as her hair, normally tied up in a ponytail, was hanging free around her shoulders, and she was wearing in a loose-fitting nightgown. Ruri had only ever seen Kuroe in her usual well-groomed state, so this struck her as a new look.

Kuroe's tone was as polite as usual, though her eyes burned with resentment. She must have woken her up, Ruri realized.

"Sorry, sorry," she muttered, trying to control her breathing. "I guess I just had a weird dream..."

"A dream?"

"Yeah. A super-perverted, vulgar woman was attacking my brother."

"A super-perverted, vulgar woman," Kuroe repeated in a flat voice.

"Yeah... If I had to describe it, it was like she was naked except for a lab coat, and she was approaching on all fours as her breasts swayed dangerously..."

"That does sound terribly perverted and vulgar."

"I know, right?"

As she said it out loud, the dream flashed before her eyes once again. Ruri twisted around, scratching at her throat.

"Ugh... It was just really unnerving. There are students from the other mage schools at Mushiki's supplementary course, right? I hope he'll be okay. I couldn't stand it if some no-good harlot tried to seduce him or something..."

"Perhaps you're overthinking it."

"I don't know. I mean, that's the kind of person who would be forced to do a supplementary course, right? They're not going to be the best-behaved people around. My dear brother is a sweet little lamb trapped with a pack of wolves... Eeep! He's perfect prey! They're gonna feast on him!"

"You're prejudiced." Kuroe frowned.

Ruri, however, didn't let up. "Don't you see?! These teenage boys and girls filled with nothing but sexual thoughts are being made to live together in isolation for a whole week, right?! And it's my brother we're talking about here! They've got no immunity to him! You really think they'll be able to withstand his enticing aura?!"

"Please calm down, Ruri. The supplementary course is simply that. Or are you suggesting you would lose your sense of self-control in the same situation?"

"Huh...? Oh... The tents—they're separate, right?"

"You needn't scrutinize everything." Kuroe exhaled, fixing her with a flat look. "Knight Erulka is overseeing the course to ensure those incidents don't happen, is she not?"

"R-right..." Ruri startled. "I'm sure Erulka will keep an eye on Mushiki," she said with a sigh of relief.

"Yes. You can rest assured," Kuroe answered tiredly. "Now then, it's time to get some rest, Ruri. If we keep talking out here, we might wake the other students. It would be a shame if we woke the dorm supervisor, Ms. Shishiyama."

"Uh... Yeah, right. Sorry, sorry."

"If you woke me up two rooms down, what about Hizumi? You do share the same room," Kuroe pointed out.

Chuckling, Ruri waved a hand in front of her face. "No way she'd wake up from something like that. She wouldn't be able to put up with me if she wasn't a heavy sleeper."

"...I see."

Kuroe looked like she had more to say, but perhaps judging that the conversation had already dragged on too long, she left it at that and returned to her room.



Mushiki heaved a heavy sigh as he saw the brightening sky through the fabric of his tent.

He had managed to expel Erulka after twenty or so minutes of struggle, but he hadn't managed to catch any sleep afterward out of concern she might return to attack him again. He felt like the main character in some horror movie, keeping a constant eye on the tent's entrance, waiting for the sun to dawn.

Once everyone else was out and about, Erulka wouldn't be able to act so recklessly. Breathing a sigh of relief, he relaxed his body and lay down in his sleeping bag.

"... What on earth was that all about ...?" he muttered to no one in particular.

Even now, with the sun coming up, he still didn't quite understand what had happened. He had no idea at all why Erulka had suddenly grown much older and taller, nor why she had wolf ears and a tail.

On top of that, she was one of the Garden's most experienced and trusted teachers, and here she was attempting to seduce him with a lascivious grin. Even now, he couldn't help but wonder if it had all been just a dream.

Dozing off due to his lack of sleep, Mushiki snapped back awake at the sound of his phone alarm.

It looked like it was time to get up. He honestly didn't feel like he had gotten much rest, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Sitting up with a yawn, he stumbled out of bed, got dressed, and stepped outside his tent.

"Hmm..."

As he stretched freely in the light of the morning sun bleeding over the mountains, his arms and legs, cramped from long hours constrained in his sleeping bag, all but cried out in joy.

It was five o'clock. Dawn had broken, but it was still dim outside. A gentle breeze filled the air, surprisingly cool compared to the daytime heat.

"I'd better wash my face before breakfast..."

He grabbed a towel and walked to the other side of the campsite.

Base camp appeared to lack proper plumbing, but at least there was a well at the edge of the site. Fortunately, the water was drinkable, so he and the others were all relying on it during their stay on the island.

"Huh?"

Just before he could reach the well, however, he stopped abruptly in his tracks.

Perhaps it was the sunlight, or some phenomenon unique to the island, but whatever the case, the morning mist around the well looked to be sparkling with a faint gold hue.

And standing in front of the well, enveloped by that brilliance, was a figure.

He could only see her from behind, but he recognized her at once—Rindoh. She must have just woken up, as her hair was hanging loose, and she was still wearing her pajamas.

Like him, she had probably come here to wash her face. After all, the only sources of water close to base camp were this well and the nearby river. It was inevitable that the students would bump into each other around both areas.

"Rin—"

But before Mushiki could finish calling out to her, he slammed his mouth shut.

The reason was simple—no sooner had she finished pumping water from the well and filled the wooden bucket than she lifted it into the air and poured it over her head.

Her thin pajamas were instantly soaked through, water dripping from the tips of her long hair.

This went far beyond merely washing her face. Mushiki broke into a frown at her bewildering behavior.

"Wh-what are you...?"

Rindoh, however, reached out to the pump and started filling the bucket once more—and the second she was finished, she poured the water over her head again.

For a brief moment, Mushiki wondered if this wasn't some kind of morning ritual, but that explanation didn't quite fit. There was no indication she was trying to purify herself or focus her mind. Rather, it looked more like she was desperately trying to cool off after overheating.

"Um... Are you okay?" he called out hesitantly.

"...!"

Finally noticing his presence, she flinched in alarm.

"U-ugh..."

Then, letting out a low wail, she turned to face him.

After one look at her expression, Mushiki gasped.

Her sodden hair clung to her cheeks, which were flushed with heat, and her eyes looked dazed and full of yearning...

Indeed, Rindoh's innocent face exuded an allure so strong, he could almost smell it.

"...I—I didn't..."

Mushiki shook his head in an effort to rid himself of his impure thoughts. After all, she was still a middle school student. What on earth was he thinking?

"Kuga...?" she called out in a voice that made his chest tighten.

"Y-yeah," he responded, fighting to still his racing heart. "What's the matter? Do you have a fever? If you're not feeling well, maybe you should get some more rest...?"

Concerned, he tried stepping toward her, when—

"D-don't come any closer!" she shouted in alarm. "Please, don't touch me...!"

"Eh? Oh... Sure. Sorry..."

He stopped in his tracks. He didn't *think* he had done anything wrong, but with her crying out like that, he was struck by a pang of guilt.

"...Sorry." Rindoh must have sensed his mood, as she frowned apologetically and wrapped her arms around herself. "It's not your fault. It's me... There's

been something wrong with my body ever since I woke up this morning..."

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"Wrong...? In what way?"
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"I... Uh..."
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At this question, Rindoh's face turned an even deeper shade of red.

"It's fine if you don't want to go into detail. Anyway, if you're not feeling well, I'll go call Ms. Erulka. Will you be okay by yourself for a little while?" he asked in a soothing voice.

He didn't know what exactly was wrong, but clearly something was affecting Rindoh. There might not be much he could do for her, but who better to turn to than the head of the Garden's medical department?

...Well, it would no doubt be difficult facing her after what had happened last night, but now wasn't the time for such scruples.

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"...Yes... I'm sorry... Thank—"
```

"Watch out!"

In her dazed state, Rindow suddenly stumbled, nearly toppling over.

Mushiki raced forward to catch her as she fell listlessly into his arms. Because of that, he ended up physically touching her...but he couldn't see how that could have been avoided.

"Are you okay?! I'll take you to see Ms. Erulka. Can you hold on to my back?!"

```
"Ah... Aaah...!"
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Rindoh arched her body as she let out a high-pitched, almost provocative squeal, and Mushiki felt twitching pulsations through his arm supporting her body.

"Rindoh! Hang in there!" he called out, shaking her shoulders.

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""
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Breathing heavily, she turned her drowsy gaze his way. "Kuga... I... My chest feels tight..."

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"G-got it. Let's hurry to tell—"
```

But before he could finish speaking, Rindoh suddenly spread her arms to grab him in an embrace.

"R-Rindoh?" he asked, bewildered.

In a sweet, gentle voice at complete odds with how she had been just moments ago, she whispered, "I need you...to make me feel better."

Then, with a bewitching hand, she reached out to caress his cheek and brought her lips close to his.

"Huh?!" Mushiki shrieked at the suddenness of it, accidentally letting go of her and sending her crashing flat on the ground.

"Eeek! Ngh... You're so mean, Kuga." She glared up at him, puffing out her cheeks.

Weighed down by his immense discomfort, Mushiki broke out into a cold sweat.

"Ah... S-sorry. But what came over you all of a sudden? This isn't like you, Rindoh."

In fact, he'd never even imagined her doing something like this, given her overly serious and inflexible personality. He doubted a simple fever could explain such a drastic change.

Yet she rose smoothly to her feet with a dissatisfied snort. Gone was her previous unsteadiness, replaced now by a subtle allure radiating from her every movement.

"Not like me...? What does *that* mean? How well do you know me exactly, Kuga?"

"...Not very, I admit," he murmured.

Rindoh, meanwhile, approached again, a sultry look in her eyes. "Well, why don't you *get* to know me? *Everything* about me..."

"E-everything...?"

"Yes. I'm the headmaster's great-great-granddaughter. I'm serious. I've got great grades. Everyone expects huge things from me and tells me I'm not like

the other students. People think I'm devoted solely to the pursuit of magic, without a care in the world for normal pursuits. But I'm curious about men and love, just like any other woman..." Her voice reached him in a sweet, tantalizing whisper. "I'll show you everything. So please...I want to know *your* everything, too, Kuga. Even the parts you don't know yourself...," she pleaded, extending her hand.

Unable to shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right, Mushiki instinctively backed away.

"...!"

The next moment, however, his breath caught in his throat.

He'd felt something soft press up against his back.

"...Asagi?!" he exclaimed, looking behind him.

Indeed. He had no idea when she'd turned up, yet there she was, her face hidden behind the fox mask.

She must have wanted to use the well just as Mushiki and Rindoh had.

"Y-you got here just in time," he cried out. "We've got a huge problem! Rindoh is—"

But before he could even finish his sentence, the words died in his mouth.

The reason was simple: Asagi had torn off her fox mask without the slightest hesitation, something she hadn't done even when going out on the lake.

Determined eyes, a well-formed nose, shapely lips—features identical to Ruri's stared back at him.

Yet Mushiki couldn't possibly mistake her for his own sister.

After all, Asagi's expression was far from normal.

Her eyes were unfocused, and her mouth hung slightly open, drool dripping down her chin. On top of that, her cheeks were flushed, and her body shook with each ragged breath.

To put it plainly, she was in much the same state as Rindoh.

At the very least, this was a rare look for Ruri—the only time Mushiki had

seen anywhere close to this on Ruri was after she'd gotten her hands on a rare photograph of Saika. No, Asagi was clearly out of sorts.

"...Asagi...?" he asked, dumbfounded.

Her response, however, was utter gibberish. "Ah, ah... Forgive me, Lady Ao. Lady Ruri. I—I... I can't stand it any longer..."

The next moment, she grabbed Mushiki's clothes, exposed his neck, and launched into a barrage of tender kisses.

"Huuuh?!"

She set on him like a vampire, leaving him flailing in panic. Finally managing to pull himself away, Mushiki retreated to a safe distance from both young women.

"...Wh-what are you doing, Asagi?!" he demanded in confusion.

Asagi, however, continued to stare at him with her eyes glazed over, sucking on her finger. "I...I'm sorry, Mushiki. I'll accept whatever punishment I deserve... Just...just show mercy on this wretched woman... Your scent—it makes my head feel like it's going to explode..." With that, she moved her finger away from her lips, leaving an obscene trail of glistening saliva.

"...Wh-what's with you two...?" Mushiki said with a stern expression, sweat beading on his face.

There was no telling why they were both acting this way, but it clearly wasn't normal. He needed to report the situation to Erulka right away.

But with that thought, the events of the previous night replayed in the back of his mind... Could it be that she was already afflicted by whatever had come over these two?

In which case, the other two might also be—

"...!*"*

A sound interrupted his thoughts, and he turned in the direction he'd heard it.

Standing there was Nene, chest puffed out, making for an incredibly imposing figure.

"U-um... Mushanokouji? You're—"

But before he could ask how she was feeling, she darted toward him at blinding speed.

"Bear my children!"

"Eh...?!"

With that, she tried to wrap her massive, log-like arms around him in a passionate embrace. At a loss for words, Mushiki pulled away and jumped to a safe distance, leaving her to catch hold of the tree behind him. The trunk, easily more than thirty centimeters in diameter, snapped with a resounding crack.



"E-eeep?!" Mushiki cried in horror as he watched the tree crash to the ground.

Nene clenched and unclenched her fists as if testing her own strength, then turned back to Mushiki.

"...I misspoke. I'm the one who will bear the children. Give me your seed!"

"That's just as scary!"

Mushiki blanched, tears welling in his eyes. Rindoh's and Asagi's transformations were terrifying, of course, but the physical threat posed by Nene here was simply too much to contemplate.

Standing there trembling in fear, he heard the faint rustling sound of someone wading toward them through the grass.

"..."

The next moment, Raimu appeared, prompting Mushiki's breath to catch in his throat.

That was only natural. Rindoh, Asagi, and Nene were all out of their minds. If their target wasn't him specifically, but simply members of the opposite sex, then Raimu was also in grave danger.

"R-Raimu! Get out of here! They've all gone crazy!" he screeched, when—
"Mushiki... My crotch feels kind of hot and itchy...," he said, standing pigeontoed for some reason. His big eyes glistened as he looked at Mushiki.

He'd well and truly transformed into a beautiful maiden.

"You're completely out of character! And you're on their side now?!" Mushiki wailed.

None of them, however, seemed put off by his cries. The four of them, Raimu included, fanned out to surround him on all sides.

"Ngh...!"

As they surrounded him, Mushiki grimaced.

It was one against four. Not only was he at a significant disadvantage in terms of numbers, but they also had him caught in a vise. And to make matters worse,

all four of them were higher-caliber mages than he was. If they jumped him as a group, he would have no hope of escape.

From the way they were acting, it seemed like they all wanted his body. Though they probably wouldn't kill him (with one exception) if they could get their hands on him, they would undoubtedly rob him of his chastity. Given that he had devoted himself to Saika, that would be tantamount to death.

But his would-be assailants didn't care about any of that. Like ravenous beasts, they continued to close in on him.

```
And then—
"Mushiki...!"
"Mushiki, I—"
"Kuga!"
"Mushikiii!"
```

With perfect coordination, they pounced on him all at once.

"...Saika...!" Stiffening, he squeezed his eyes shut in prayer, calling out her name while waiting for the inevitable impact.

But it never came.

```
"Eh...?!"
```

The next moment, a shocked sound escaped from his mouth.

It felt like something had lifted him up, and now a strange, floating sensation surrounded his body.

Opening his eyes, he scanned his surroundings—only then realizing that he was no longer in front of the well but hovering in the sky above.

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"Wh-what the...?" he squawked, stunned.
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"...That was a close call," he heard a voice say.

It was then that he finally realized he was being carried by a familiar face, who was holding him like a prince carrying a princess.

"Ms. Erulka...?!" he called out, wide-eyed.

Yes. There, in adult form, complete with wolf like ears and tail, was Erulka Flaera, held aloft herself by an owl covered in red markings.



Thankfully, she was wearing more than just the white lab coat she had been sporting last night—this time, she also had on her usual underwear. Though they were still the same size as usual, so her tube top and tights were close to bursting...

Mushiki almost allowed himself to believe he had escaped danger, but something told him that was a little naive, and he struggled furiously to escape Erulka's grasp.

"N-no! I've given my soul to Saika...!"

"Settle down. If you keep that up, you'll fall. Now isn't the time to lose your head," she said with the utmost calm.

His eyes bulged in astonishment. "Y-you're...okay?"

"Okay?"

"I mean, you seemed a little strange last night. Er... You've settled down, then?"

"Hmm? If you'd let me, I'd have you this very instant, to be honest."

"Definitely not!" Mushiki shrieked.

Erulka let out a loud laugh. "No matter how much passion burns within me, I can suppress it. So there's no problem. Would you not wish to embrace Saika if you could?"

"I—I think people should wait until they're married before doing that sort of thing."

"Ha-ha! You're awfully serious, aren't you... Assuming you were married, then. If you were being driven wild with lust, would you force yourself on someone if they didn't want it?"

"O-of course not."

"My point exactly." Erulka smiled, before glancing down at the ground below. "Those four, though—they're off their rocker. We can't leave them like that. We'll have to do something about it quickly."

"...! Do you have any ideas?"

"Perhaps. But I doubt what's affecting them is native to this island. Ideally, I'd like to get more detailed information from them, but that doesn't seem likely, given the current situation."

Something about what she'd said struck Mushiki as odd, and he cocked his head in confusion.

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"Um, I thought you were affected by the same thing they are..."

"I'm just in heat."

"..."
```

Mushiki fell into a stunned silence at this matter-of-fact admission.

...He was relieved, at least, to hear that Erulka hadn't fallen into the same state as the others, but now he was questioning her actions last night for an altogether different reason.

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"Um... Is that why you look different now?"

"Different?"

"I mean, you're older now, right? And you've got those ears and tail."

"Ah, these. These are merely—"
```

Just as she was about to answer his question, the wings of the owl ferrying them through the air burst apart like a balloon popping.

```
"Eh...?"

"What?!"
```

Both student and teacher cried out in shock.

The next instant, the owl, Erulka's second substantiation, disappeared into a haze of light, sending its two passengers plummeting toward the ground.

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"Aaagh?!"
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Suddenly weightless and feeling as if he was reliving his arrival on the island, Mushiki screamed at the top of his lungs.

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"Hmm!"
```

Erulka, however, didn't betray the slightest hint of panic as she grabbed

Mushiki in one arm, adjusted her posture in midair, and hooked her feet on the branches of a tall tree, using them to cushion her fall so she could land firmly on the ground.

"Are you okay, Mushiki?" she asked.

"Y-yes... Um, what about you?"

"Hmm. A fall from that height is nothing to worry about," she said, unconcerned, before setting him on the ground.

Thanks to her quick thinking, it looked like they were safe for the time being. Yet they couldn't afford to let down their guard. His cheeks drenched with sweat, Mushiki took in their surroundings.

"Just now...someone attacked us, right? Did Asagi and the others follow us?"

"Not likely. I suspect we're dealing with something else. That wasn't a manifestation technique."

"Then what—"

Mushiki stopped midsentence, sensing a wave of hostile intent all around him.

"Wh-"

The second his breath left his throat, several beasts clad in a hazy golden glow slowly emerged from amid the grass and trees.

Wolves—as large as people, snarling, baring their fangs, with their ferocious gazes fixed on him and Erulka.

If he betrayed so much as a hint of weakness, Mushiki knew they would pounce on him immediately. His whole body tensed up, and he swallowed hard.

"Ms. Erulka, these wolves...," he began, keeping both eyes on his surroundings.

Erulka, however, said nothing. She merely folded her arms calmly, letting out a sigh of resignation—almost as if she had somehow anticipated this very situation.

"...So it is you, Iseseri," she said.

```
"Huh...?"
```

As if in response, a particularly large wolf emerged from the depths of the pack.

Its body was covered all over in scars and wounds, and its left ear was torn in half. Yet far from exuding weakness or pain, it carried itself like a seasoned warrior—one who had emerged victorious time and time again, always coming back from the brink of death to overwhelm its adversaries with its indomitable presence.

"…"

At the sight of the wolf, Erulka raised her eyebrows slightly, the expression a combination of shock at seeing her prediction come true and pity for its countless wounds.

Remorse and affection. Or perhaps regret and longing. A complex mix of conflicting emotions. The only thing Mushiki could say with certainty was that, while the wolves clearly had hostile intent, Erulka cared about them deeply.

"...Ms. Erulka? Do you know that...wolf?" Mushiki asked.

"Hmm, yeah," she answered, keeping her gaze locked forward. "She's my wife."

"Oh..."

A pause, then—

"...Huh?" Mushiki cried out in a dumb voice. "What did you just say, Ms. Erulka?"

"She's my wife."

"…"

He failed to comprehend her answer, which was so far from what he'd expected.

Not only did they possess a far deeper relationship that he ever would have assumed, but Erulka was female, and the other party clearly wasn't even human. Sure, she currently had similar ears and a tail, but they were

unmistakably different species.

Then, as if to add to the confusion—

"...None of your games. Who would recognize *you* as their mate?" the scarridden wolf grunted in distaste.

"Eh...?!"

It was indeed human speech, though somewhat difficult to understand due to the creature's bestial vocal cords. Mushiki's eyes almost burst from their sockets in shock.

Erulka, however, seemed unfazed. "Hmm. I see," she replied simply. "Sorry, Mushiki. I misspoke. She's my ex-wife."

"Huh. I see... Wait, hold on. That wasn't the confusing part, though!" he stammered.

Still appearing unconcerned, Erulka called out to the lead wolf, "What brings you here? Something tells me you're not in the mood to rekindle old ties."

"Of course not," Iseseri snarled. Erulka's words had only fueled her anger, and she seemed to take the question as an insult. "Don't tell me you've forgotten. I've spent years sharpening my fangs, dedicating myself to revenge."

"Revenge...?" Mushiki broke into a worried frown at that unsettling word.

"..."

Erulka, on the other hand, didn't even flinch.

Clearly, she'd expected Iseseri to respond like that.

"So many of our kinsfolk have perished," she howled. "You betrayed us, the People of the Forest. You will pay for that sin."

"...I see." Erulka let out a thin sigh, her eyes downcast. Slowly, she looked back up. "So what will it be? What do you want from me to satisfy your revenge? Shall I crawl on my knees and beg for forgiveness? Or would you rather see my head on a spike?"

"You ask me that? As if you don't already know..." Iseseri's eyes narrowed as she adopted a low stance, ready to pounce.

Then, with a deep howl, her whole body emitted a faint light.

"Huh...?" Mushiki gasped.

But his surprise was more than justified. Before his very eyes, the wolf's silhouette warped, slowly transforming into human shape.

Before him stood a young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties. She wasn't wearing any makeup as far as Mushiki could tell, but her facial features were well defined. If she were to walk through town in stylish clothes, no doubt men would turn their heads for a second look. Yet the countless scars adorning her body and her sharp, blade-like eyes exuded an unapproachable aura.

Nonetheless, it wasn't those features that left the strongest impression.

No, those would have to be the wolf ears atop her head and the fur-covered tail peeking out from behind her buttocks.

That's right. They were just like Erulka's.

Upon closer inspection, the strange patterns adorning Iseseri's clothes were also similar to those of his teacher's.

A moment later, the other wolves similarly began to glow as they changed into their human forms.

They were all women, though of different ages and physiques, all dressed the same as Iseseri, and all breathing heavily with excitement.

"Wh-what's going on...?" Mushiki murmured, a wave of unease washing over him.

For whatever reason, the women were staring not at Erulka, but at him.

"...Huh?"

He glanced about in confusion when Iseseri raised a finger to direct her comrades—not at Erulka, but at him.

"We'll take your paramour!"

"Grrraaaaaaauuuggghhh!"

Showing no hesitation at these baffling orders, the women surrounding him unleashed an earth-shattering battle cry as they rushed forward.

"Huuuuuuhh...?!" Mushiki gawked, his eyes popping in alarm.

For a moment, he thought this might just be an odd family custom—but probably not.

The eyes of the women charging right for him were glazed over, like they were all in the grips of a fever.

Yes. This was exactly the same state he had found Rindoh and the others in earlier. He had no idea how, but he guessed these wolf-women were all affected by the same *something* that had possessed them.

But that didn't make the threat any less potent. If anything, this meant he was in even more danger.

Erulka must have come to the same conclusion, as she interlocked her fingers to form a symbol and chanted, "Second Substantiation: Horkew!"

The next moment, a world crest in the shape of claws illuminated her hands as a pack of silver-maned wolves came into being to answer her call.

This was one of her second substantiations, Horkew—a technique for creating wolves of various shapes and sizes. Though this ability was originally meant for healing wounds and restoring stamina, it seemed she could also use it when facing off against a large group of adversaries.

However—

"Grrraugh!"

Following Iseseri's lead, the women began to howl—and with that, the wind changed.

A second later, a loud popping sound rang out, and the wolves shielding Mushiki were crushed under some invisible weight or else burst into clouds of light.

"Th-they're mages...?!" Mushiki shrieked in dismay.

There could be no doubt about it—that was the same technique that had destroyed Erulka's owl earlier when they were flying.

Yet even though he had witnessed it with his own eyes, he couldn't grasp the

true nature of the attack. It almost looked like a substantiation technique, but he couldn't spot any world crests on the women.

"We call it *tusu*," Erulka said in answer to his unasked question. "Techniques that control *ramat*—life force, or magical energy. You might rank them among second-generation spells and the like."

She spoke as though giving a lecture. Her own substantiations had been forcefully dispelled, yet Mushiki sensed a hint of admiration in her voice.

"They seem to have honed their skills. It won't be easy for me to take them on alone while keeping you safe... I'll clear a path. We'll retreat for now," Erulka said, putting her hands together once more.

"Kimumpe!"

The world crests on her hands emitted a second burst of light, coalescing into a colossal silhouette.

It was a bear, with a body like a massive tree and limbs like small mountains. Its teeth and claws shone fiercely, the sight powerful enough to prompt anyone who saw it to take flight.

"...!"

The bear unleashed a fearsome roar, swinging its arms wildly to drive the women away.

"Grrraugh!"

Falling back, the women unleashed their *tusu* techniques again and again, yet the bear fought on even as its body was worn down, swinging its arms like an out-of-control spinning top to repel them.

"...There. Follow me!"

"R-right!"

Sticking close behind Erulka, Mushiki ran as hard as he could, dashing through the melee between the wolf-women, Kimumpe, and what was left of the Horkew substantiations.

But then—

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"Ah...!"
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Just as he was about to break free from the encirclement, a cry left his throat.

The reason was simple—a new threat had raised its head.

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"Kuga..."
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"Mushiki... Please..."

"Bear my children!"

"Mushikiii!"

Yes. Rindoh and the others, whom he thought he'd left behind at base camp, had reappeared before him like a group of vengeful ghosts, calling out to him in the sweetest of voices.

In front of him were his classmates from the supplementary course, while behind were Iseseri and her wolf-women. Mushiki stiffened, unsure how to respond to this sudden pincer attack.

When suddenly—

"How dare you...?! We won't let you have him!"

"Ngh! Second Substantiation: Blinding Blade...!"

No sooner had the four of them laid eyes on Iseseri and the other wolfwomen than their eyes lit up in rage, each of them activating their world crests.

It looked like they were treating the wolf-women as enemies competing for Mushiki. Not that they were entirely wrong, of course.

"Out of our way, girlies!"

"Huh?! How dare you! Only Mushiki's allowed to talk to me like that! Take this!"

Iseseri and her people had likewise identified the four students as foes, sharpening their gazes and fixing them with baleful glares.

Raimu, who had been so meek with Mushiki earlier, seemed to be acting as he usually did toward everyone else—if anything, he was probably being *cruder* than normal.

Just like that, war broke out between the modern mages, masters of substantiation techniques, and the People of the Forest. World crests lit up their surroundings while the *tusu* howls of the wolf-women rang out all around, as second-generation spells clashed.

He may have been taking this supplementary course for only a few days, but even so, he didn't want to see his fellow students, with whom he had already shared various joys and sorrows, get hurt. Nor did he want to see Iseseri, who seemed to have some connection with Erulka, come to harm.

Nonetheless, there was no denying this was a perfect opportunity to escape. And of course, if he stayed here, it would only add to the confusion. Uttering a prayer for everyone's safety, he set a course to leave the battlefield.

Yet his hopes were swiftly dashed.

"Grrraaauuuggghhh!"

Unleashing a howl-like incantation, Iseseri's body lit up once more as she sent lines running through the air in front of him at unimaginable speed.

It was only after Rindoh, Asagi, Nene, and Raimu had been knocked to the ground that Mushiki realized the lines were Iseseri herself.

"What ... ?!"

A beat later, Mushiki's eyes widened in astonishment.

Yes. All four mages had been left soundly defeated by a single wolf-woman fighting entirely by herself.

Though they weren't as strong as Ruri or Anviet or the other Knights of the Garden, the four of them were still mages of considerable skill. That should have been crystal clear after their encounter with the undine the previous day.

Shocked, he left himself wide open.

"Grrraugh!"

"Gah!"

Hearing another howl coming from behind him, Mushiki was thrown to the ground.

He didn't slip, nor were his feet tangled in anything below. No—it was almost as if an invisible hand had reached out to grab him just as he'd heard that howl.

Another *tusu* spell, most likely. In the blink of an eye, the women rushed toward him, cutting him off from Erulka.

"Mushiki! Tch—!" Erulka shouted from up ahead.

However, several wolf-women stood between the two of them, preventing her from reaching him quickly.

Before Erulka had a chance to reach him, the scarred woman—Iseseri—rose up in front of Mushiki, breathing hard, and reached down to tear his shirt apart.

"W-whoa!"

"Ha... Ha-ha-ha... I'll humiliate you in front of Erulka... If you want to hate someone for this, nameless man, hate her," she said, licking her lips.

Desperate, Mushiki froze up.

But at that moment—

"Mushiki! Stroke her stomach and the base of her tail!" Erulka's voice reached him from afar.

"...Eh?! O-okay...!"

He didn't quite follow, but given his predicament, he knew he had better do as she said. And so, reaching out, he rubbed his hands against the base of Iseseri's tail and her abdomen at the same time.

As soon as he did—

"...Hyaaah?!"

Iseseri let out a high-pitched yelp and pulled back in shock, her voice almost unrecognizable from a moment ago.

Then, as if every ounce of strength had left her body, she lay down on the ground. Her cheeks had turned bright red, and her body kept twitching every few seconds.

"Ugh... Ngh..."

"U-um..."

Mushiki watched this with a perplexed look.

...What was going on here? It had been necessary, he knew, but still he felt like he had done something he shouldn't have.

"Don't just stand there! Run!" Erulka shouted.

"Ah... S-sorry!" Mushiki said, startled, coming back to his senses.

Right. There was no time to waste. As quickly as he could, he rose to his feet and took off at a sprint.

There were still several wolf-women between him and Erulka, and they prepared to attack Mushiki as he ran toward them.

"...Gra—"

"W-wait! Don't kill him!"

Though their sights were trained on Mushiki, they hesitated for the briefest of moments.

He took full advantage of the opportunity, spinning around and patting the wolf-women on their backsides and bellies just as he had done to Iseseri moments earlier.



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"Eeep!"

"Rowr?!"
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The women barked like dogs as they fell to the ground—giving Mushiki a chance to slip between them and make his way to Erulka.

The moment he reached her, she flashed him a wry smile. "I know I told you to do it, but you're one frightening man."

"Huh? Wh-what do you mean?!"

"...Nothing. This is our chance. Let's get out of here."

"Right!" Mushiki answered as they took off through the forests of Nirai Island.

Chapter 4

→ A Fleeting Honeymoon →

Inside the mage-training institute Void's Garden, a wheelchair slowly made its way across the grounds.

Seated in it was Ruri Fuyajoh, Knight of the Garden—though few would have recognized her at first glance.

But that was to be expected. After all, she looked nothing at all like her usual self.

Her eyes, usually brimming with vitality, had lost their luster, staring blankly into empty space, and her twin ponytails were just as dull, looking as if they might crumble like sand should anyone try combing them.

A soft blanket was spread over her lap, on top of which two handmade stuffed toys were perched. One resembled Saika, the other Mushiki, and every now and then she would stroke their heads with her fingertips, her lips quivering ever so slightly.

She looked to all intents and purposes like a terminally ill invalid with precious little time left to live, and the students all did a double take as they passed her by.

"Look, Ruri! It's so nice out today," said the kind-looking girl pushing the wheelchair and holding a parasol overhead—Hizumi Nagekawa.

Ruri slowly turned her gaze skyward in response.

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"...It's...pretty..."

"It is, isn't it? Let's give our all at school today."

"...O...kay..."
```

"What on earth are you doing?" demanded Kuroe in a subdued voice, positioning herself in front of the wheelchair.

Ruri only pursed her lips like a goldfish, making no sound.

Instead, it was Hizumi who responded with a forced smile. "Ah, Karasuma. Good morning."

"Good morning. So, Ruri. What's come over you?"

"Ah... Yes. Well, as you know, Kuga went off to that supplementary course a few days ago," Hizumi answered. "And on top of that, Madam Witch has been absent these past few days."

"Yes... What of it?"

"That's how she ended up like this..."

"Am I missing something important here?" Kuroe asked, head tilted to one side.

She felt like the cause-and-effect relationship wasn't clear at all.

Hizumi herself seemed to realize she wasn't making a lot of sense and fixed Kuroe with a nervous smile. "I wonder that myself, but there's no other way to explain it..."

"Lady Saika has been away from the Garden for extended periods before," Kuroe pointed out.

"Ah, yes. Ruri's been like this every time."

"..."

Kuroe furrowed her brow. She hadn't known. Then again, how *could* she have known back when she had been in her original body?

Thinking back, she recalled that something similar had fallen over Ruri when she was trapped at Hollow Ark, unable to see either Saika or Mushiki for several days. Kuroe found it difficult to explain, but perhaps Saika's and Mushiki's bodies emitted some kind of vital nutrient necessary for her basic survival.



With Kuroe maintaining her silence, Hizumi continued to support her friend. "But don't worry. She might not look well, but she still takes her classes seriously, and she can still fight any annihilation factors that pop up. She knows she has to step up to protect the Garden while Madam Witch is away."

"In that state?"

"Yes. She slaughters one annihilation factor after another without batting an eyelash, so people have started calling her the God of Death."

"The God of Death...," Kuroe repeated that ominous nickname under her breath.

...Well, if she could still carry out her duties while in that state, she truly had earned her title as Knight of the Garden.

All the same, it would be a problem if Ruri ended up this way every time Mushiki and Saika had to go somewhere, so Kuroe pulled her phone from her pocket and pointed the camera at her.

"Ruri? Ruri?"

"Ah... Ku...roe...?"

"Yes. Good morning. I understand you're feeling down, but please try to pull yourself together. You're a Knight of the Garden. Displaying your vulnerabilities like this will unsettle the other students."

"But...I..."

"By the way, I'm sending this video to Mushiki and Lady Saika."

"Put that thing down!" Ruri cried out, leaping up with enough force to put a foot through the seat of the wheelchair.

She spun in the air to make a perfect landing, then reached out to catch the Saika and Mushiki toys, which had been blown away into the sky, in either hand. To top it all off, the blanket fluttered down to land on her shoulders like the cape of a king.

"Wow!" Hizumi exclaimed, applauding.

But far from taking pride in her performance, Ruri gently placed the stuffed

toys back on the wheelchair and faced down Kuroe.

"What are you doing, Kuroe?! You can't go around taking weird videos of people without their permission!" Ruri yelled, nostrils flaring.

Though she still seemed a little tired, she was almost back to her usual self.

"I'm disappointed you think it would be a *weird video*. It's just you going about your daily life."

"A-anyway, don't send it! Delete it now! Right now!"

"You hate it that much?"

"Of course I do! I wouldn't be able to live with myself if Madam Witch or my brother saw me like that!"

"I don't think either of them would be disillusioned by it."

"Th-that's not the point! I don't want them to see me like that!"

"I see. You greatly admire them, don't you, Ruri?"

"Of course!"

"By the way, Ruri, will you calm down and hear me out?"

"Wh-what is it?"

"I'm still recording."

"Kyaaarrrggghhh!"

Upon learning this, Ruri let out an ear-rending shriek, reaching out to try to snatch the phone from her hands. Kuroe, however, leaned back to safety.

Yet her opponent was still a knight, even if she was enfeebled. Launching into an unimaginable chained attack, Ruri knocked her to the ground with lightning speed.

"Haah... Haah... You made me do that..."

"That hurts. Please let go of me, Ruri. There's no need for violence."

"You've got some nerve! You're the one who made me... Hold on, you're *still* filming?!"

"Eek. Please don't touch me there. Anything but that," Kuroe pleaded dispassionately, letting out a light moan.

"Stop! Quit acting like I'm doing something weird!" Ruri squealed in panic.

Right at that moment, an emergency notification popped up on Kuroe's phone.

"What do we have here...? A presence has been faintly detected on Nirai Island. Possibly a mythic-class annihilation factor. And we've lost contact with Knight Erulka and the others..."

"What?!"

Kuroe and Ruri exchanged surprised looks.



"I hope Asagi and the others will be all right. I feel bad leaving them behind like that...," Mushiki murmured worriedly when they reached the eastern end of the island. It had been roughly thirty minutes since their escape from Iseseri and her wolf-women.

"You needn't fret. Their quarry is you, the male, so it's yourself you should be worried about... Though their original target was me," Erulka said with a distant look.

Mushiki raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Ms. Erulka, are those people...?"

"There it is. Rain," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Huh?"

But immediately after, Mushiki's eyes went wide. The reason was simple—there had been no rain lately.

Yet a short moment later, dark clouds crossed the sky, and large raindrops began to pour down.

"Whoa, it is raining. How did you know?"

"I could smell it in the air. More importantly, you had better not get too wet," she said, motioning to the right with her thumb.

Not too far off was a cave leading into the mountainside. It didn't look particularly big, but it was well hidden from the island's central areas, making it the perfect place to seek shelter. They would probably be staying here, Mushiki sensed, until the rain stopped.

He had been running nonstop these past thirty minutes and needed to get some rest. And so, breathing a tired sigh, he stepped into the cave.

Erulka followed behind him, giving her body a vigorous shake to dry herself.

Then, as if on cue, thunder rumbled across the sky.

"Lucky us. They won't find us for a while here."

"Um, what would we have done if it hadn't started raining...?"

"There's no fooling their noses. Nowhere on this island would be safe."

"I—I see..." Mushiki nodded apprehensively.

Erulka started to gather and split the dead branches inside the cave, putting them together in a small heap.

Then, pursing her lips, she let out a low sound: "... Grrraugh..."

The noise struck Mushiki simultaneously as an unfamiliar language and an animalistic growl.

Summoned up by that noise, sparks crackled through the air, igniting the dried branches.

"Is that...?" he murmured, his eyes widening as he looked on.

Indeed. What Erulka had used just now was the same style of technique Iseseri and her people had employed—tusu.

"Hmm. This was originally my specialty. Though now that I work in the Garden, I mainly use substantiation techniques," she answered with a faint smile. Her face, illuminated by the flickering flame, was strangely bewitching.

Given their shared characteristics and what he had just witnessed, Mushiki had already come to suspect that Erulka and Iseseri's people all belonged to the same tribe. But even with that knowledge, it came as a shock to see her using an unknown spell before his very eyes.

In any event, there was still a lot he didn't quite understand, so he decided to work up his courage in an effort to put the pieces together.

"Um, Ms. Erulka—?"

Yet he couldn't get the rest of his sentence out.

The reason was simple—Erulka, without a moment's hesitation, had begun to remove her white lab coat.

"Hey! Wh-what are you doing?" he asked, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks.

"Hmm? Wet clothes rob you of your body heat, not to mention they're difficult to move in. You should dry yours, too, while you can," Erulka answered matter-of-factly.

...It was a surprisingly logical explanation. Embarrassed at himself, Mushiki averted his gaze.

"...I'm not very wet, so I'll dry myself off near the fire."

"Oh? Pity it's the wrong season."

"Season?"

"If this were winter, we'd have the perfect excuse to keep each other warm in the nude," Erulka said, cackling with laughter.

Mushiki groaned. He could feel his cheeks turning even redder.

"Anyway, what's going on? Ever since I woke up this morning, everyone's been acting so weirdly... Is this Iseseri's fault?"

"No. I don't know how she's involved here, but I doubt her people are directly responsible... This is the work of an annihilation factor. Probably a Mythologia."

"A Mythologia...?!" Mushiki gasped.

There were many different types of annihilation factors, each of them classed according to their threat level.

Only the most powerful were of Mythologia caliber, extraordinary beings existing outside the usual classifications. Conventional wisdom held that only Saika, the world's most powerful mage, was strong enough to deal with them.

"Hmm. The mythic-class annihilation factor Cupid. Nothing else could explain all this."

"Cupid...?" Mushiki was taken aback by the unexpectedly cute name.

"Yes." Erulka nodded. "The annihilation factor of love. It's said that once the Cupid appears, any living creature around it falls madly in love."

"That's...very romantic for an annihilation factor. Why's it considered a Mythologia, though?" Mushiki asked uncertainly.

He had encountered several mythic-class annihilation factors over the past few months, each of them capable of laying waste to the world itself if left unchecked.

Seeing Mushiki's reaction, Erulka scoffed lightly and flashed him a smile. "Do you think it insignificant, the power to make people fall in love en masse?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that..."

"Well, it's understandable. Words like *love* and *romance* are usually viewed in a positive light... But unbridled lust is a terrible thing. Once under the Cupid's spell, its victims pursue nothing but their own sensual desires at the expense of food and sleep, until their bodies eventually break down and they meet their end. If Saika hadn't been so quick to defeat it when it last showed up a few hundred years ago, entire nations would have been wiped out."

"…"

Mushiki felt sweat beading on his forehead.

...Right. In a way, it was like its victims' basic survival instincts were glitching up. He could see now why it was such a formidable power.

But if this Cupid was the one wreaking havoc all over the island, then there was still one thing he didn't understand.

"Why are we okay?" he asked, glancing down at his own body.

At the very least, he wasn't out of his mind with lust and desire.

Erulka's eccentricities already stood out, so to be perfectly frank, he couldn't say for sure that she wasn't under the Cupid's influence. She might simply have

been more adept at holding on to her rational functions than Rindoh and the others.

Erulka traced a finger over the contours of her body. "My innate magical energy is more highly concentrated than the average human's. My saliva, sweat, and other bodily fluids have the power to accelerate healing—which also makes me less susceptible to external magical influences."

"Really?"

"Hmm. To an extent, of course. And I'm merely speculating here, but..." She paused for a moment, her lips curling in a mischievous grin. "If you and I were alone together when its power manifested, you may well have benefited from my protection."

"D-don't say it like that; you'll give people the wrong idea! *You* attacked *me*, not—"

He stopped there, jumping back with a jolt.

"...! Don't tell me you knew this was going to happen and were trying to protect me...?!"

"I was just feeling horny," Erulka answered flatly.

"...I see." Mushiki grimaced.

"Well, it's just a guess. Maybe there's another explanation... What we know for sure is that the Cupid's powers have taken hold of everyone else on the island, and they're all wandering about in search of a male. We have to exterminate the Cupid as quickly as possible...but I haven't seen any physical sign of it. Where could it be hiding?" Erulka stroked her chin, lost in thought.

That was indeed a problem. Rindoh, Asagi, Raimu, and Nene, not to mention Iseseri and her people, wherever they had come from, were all scouring the island searching for him. He and Erulka would have a hard time trying to locate the annihilation factor while evading their watchful eyes.

"If it were just the students, we might be okay. But the People of the Forest have a highly acute sense of smell. What shall we do?" Erulka wondered aloud with a troubled look.

The People of the Forest. Mushiki raised an eyebrow at that unfamiliar term.

"Um, Ms. Erulka? Y-you know Iseseri...right?"

"Hmm? Ah, well. Yes."

"What happened between you? It seems like she's holding a massive grudge..."

"Hmm..." Erulka closed her eyes, scratching the back of her head. "We do need to find the Cupid as soon as possible, but perhaps we should wait for the rain to subside before setting out. Very well. We can talk until then."

After a few more seconds of thought, Erulka began to explain her shared history with Iseseri.

 \Diamond

The snow-covered forest was practically buried in white, as if it might disappear.

Clutching a basket in her hands, the girl exhaled a plume of mist, lost in her own thoughts as she continued down the white road.

In this northern land that she called home, winter's breath submerged the trees, the earth, the rivers—everything and anything—into its silent depths.

"..."

If only, she thought, the snow would consume everything forever.

The girl breathed a cheerless sigh but quickly shook her head to regain her composure. As she did so, the ears atop her head and the tail sticking out behind her twitched.

The Great Ohkami had keen instincts. If she looked displeased, they would see through her right away.

Taking a deep breath, the girl blinked her eyes a few times and kept on walking.

Her footprints dotted the snow-covered road long into the distance. Eventually, she arrived at an old wooden house.

That expression didn't quite do it justice, but there was no other word for it. It was as if the large dwelling had been hollowed out of a great tree, or perhaps as if an existing house had been swallowed up by the tree over time. Either way, both house and tree were seamlessly intertwined.

It was here that the guardian deity looking over the People of the Forest dwelled.

She was said to be the oldest member of the clan, the lone surviving warrior who had once fought to protect the forest—though the girl didn't know for sure. There were countless anecdotes about the Great Ohkami, but most were from before the girl was born.

But she knew one thing for certain—she didn't dislike talking to the deity as much as she thought she would.

"Great Ohkami," she called out as she opened the door.

A figure at the back of the room rose up from a sleeping position. "...Hmm? Oh. Iseseri," she said, rubbing her eyes with a loud yawn.

The villagers revered her, giving her ostentatious nicknames such as *Eldest* or *Great Ohkami*, but looking at her, she was just a young woman. Sure, she was rumored to be over a hundred years old and a master of *tusu*, but in terms of her appearance, she was a beautiful young woman no older than her midtwenties.

Sharp ears that stood erect, a glossy tail, beautifully proportioned limbs...

At that moment, the girl—Iseseri—pulled a sour face.

The Great Ohkami—Erulka—wasn't wearing any clothes.

"You slept naked again? You'll catch a cold, you know?"

"I have no need for clothes while asleep."

"At least put some on when you wake up, then. Here, put this jacket on," Iseseri urged.

With an annoyed look, Erulka reluctantly threw the coat over her shoulders. "You do love to nag. When did you become my wife?"

"It's one thing going about like that in front of me, but what if a man walked in?"

"Oh? Now wouldn't that be interesting..."

"Seriously, how can you say that?"

"Oh-ho. Don't fret. You're the only oddball who likes dropping in on me here," Erulka said in a lighthearted tone.

Upon hearing those words, Iseseri felt a sense of relief wash over her—not so much that men wouldn't stumble in on Erulka naked but that this space belonged only to her. Embarrassed by her own delight, Iseseri hid her face.

"Anyway, aren't you the rude one here, barging in without so much as announcing yourself?" Erulka said with a shrug.

"...Sorry," Iseseri apologized.

"You were as timid as a baby rabbit when your mother first asked you to visit me," Erulka continued with an amused grin. "Now look how bold you've become."

"Th-that was a long time ago," Iseseri groaned, her cheeks turning bright red. After taking a deep breath, she held out the basket clutched in her hands. "Here. This is from my mother. Dried meat and fish. And some wine."

"Oh? Many thanks. That will help me through the winter."

"She said to tell you not to drink it all at once."

"Yes, yes, I know." Erulka accepted the basket, lovingly rubbing her cheek against it. "Do you mind if I return it next time you visit?"

"Ah... I suppose not," Iseseri answered, though in her heart she worried that her tone of voice had betrayed her emotions. She had tried to be careful, yet a tinge of melancholy had still crept into her expression at the sudden question.

Erulka didn't fail to notice it, and her eyebrows twitched. "Has something happened?" she asked, her clear eyes seeming to bore right through the young girl.

Iseseri was neither old enough nor skilled enough to deflect her gaze. She

breathed a resigned sigh. "... I might not be able to come here for much longer."

"Oh? How do you mean?"

"I'm to be married on my next birthday. Since my parents only have daughters, my father wants to choose a suitable man to be his heir."

Putting her predicament into words, Iseseri couldn't keep her sadness from creeping into her voice.

Regret flashed through her brain. She always knew the day would come when she had to share this with the Great Ohkami, but here she was tainting this house, meant only for healing, with her poisoned emotions.

"You're to be married...?" Erulka raised an eyebrow and stroked her chin. "Ah, your father is the current chief, isn't he?"

"...Yes." Iseseri nodded with a heavy heart.

For the People of the Forest, the continuation of one's bloodline was a matter of great importance—all the more so for the daughter of the chief. There was no way Iseseri could have turned down the proposal.

It would be a lie to say she didn't curse her fate, but the fact that she had been tasked with seeing to the Great Ohkami's needs was likewise because she was the chief's daughter. And so, with mixed feelings, she continued, "I heard they're gathering all the skilled warriors in the village to fight one another. The last one standing will be my future husband, or something like that."

"Oh-ho, he'll probably be old then."

""

Iseseri maintained her silence, prompting Erulka to furrow her brow and fix her with an inquisitive look. "You don't seem particularly happy about it. Is there some other man you have your heart set on?"

"No. I mean, I don't even know what love is yet."

On hearing this, Erulka peered into Iseseri's eyes for a long moment. "I see," she murmured at last. "Well, unfortunately, I'm afraid there's no getting out of this. Throwing a tantrum won't change anything."

"...I don't need you to tell me that," Iseseri muttered under her breath.

She hadn't expected Erulka to solve this problem for her, but all the same, she was disappointed by the Great Ohkami's response, which was much blunter and more indifferent than she had expected.

No, it might be more accurate to say that she was disgusted with herself for getting her hopes up and expecting so much from the other woman. For some reason, she had the overwhelming feeling of being unable to stay any longer in Erulka's presence, and she cast her eyes downward.

"...I'm leaving. Thank you for everything," Iseseri told her, pulling a necklace laced with blue stones from her pocket and handing it to Erulka.

"And what's this?"

"An amulet. I made it myself, pouring my feelings into it as I strung each stone...because I know you'll neglect yourself without me, Great Ohkami. Stay well."

"Hmm, I see. You're very skilled," Erulka said lightly with a wave of her hand.

That easy, carefree attitude of hers, which in the past had always put Iseseri at ease, now made her chest tighten painfully.

Perhaps she was the only one who considered this place a sanctuary, eagerly awaiting her conversations with the Great Ohkami. Erulka may have simply considered Iseseri as someone with whom to pass the time.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind than tears welled up in her eyes.

She rushed away, doing her best to hide them from Erulka.

"...Ah, yes. Iseseri?"

But before she could reach the door, Erulka's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"...What?" she asked without turning around.

"When was your birthday again, exactly?" the Great Ohkami asked in the same relaxed tone as before.

Five days later, it was Iseseri's fifteenth birthday, and the People of the Forest gathered in the village's central square.

In addition to those who, like Iseseri, possessed an affinity with wolves, there were also people with other animal traits, including bears, rabbits, deer, squirrels, and owls.

Of course, not everyone was here to fight over her hand in marriage. In this remote village, with little in the way of entertainment, the selection of a husband for the chief's daughter was a major event. Most of the folks here had come simply to catch a glimpse of the future village chief's face or to watch the young men show off their prowess in combat.

Betting was prohibited, naturally, though various vendors were selling food, drinks, and an assortment of strange wood-carved souvenirs. It felt as if the whole village had come to take part.

"…"

Inside a building that functioned as a lookout dais next to the village square, Iseseri shifted uncomfortably.

But that was in no way surprising. After all, she was on display, seated before a large audience in a bridal gown—like the spoils of the upcoming contest.

A deep sigh formed on her lips, but she stifled it just in time. After all, she was the prize.

The winner of the contest today would take her hand in marriage. Her own thoughts were irrelevant. It would be best for everyone if she had *no* thoughts of her own—for her family and for the entire clan.

She stared up into the sky in stony silence. On days like this, she wished the whole world were covered in white—yet today, the sky was unbearably clear.

"...Sorry to keep you all waiting!" It wasn't long before her father, Notekarima, appeared next to her, calling out to the crowd.

Within moments, the murmuring villagers quieted down, giving him their full attention.

"The selection ceremony will begin shortly. The victor shall wed my daughter

Iseseri and become my heir as village chief... If you believe yourself worthy, come to the center of the square."

Several men stepped forward, crying out with eager voices.

Their gallant figures drew the cheers of the crowd.

"..."

In stark contrast to the audience's excitement, Iseseri glared down at the floor.

Ten men advanced into the square—some familiar, some not. Iseseri knew full well she didn't have the right to choose, but she prayed deep down that it wouldn't be the huge man with the bushy beard. The size difference between them would no doubt make married life impossible.

Inspecting the participants one by one, she found herself raising her eyebrows in astonishment.

One of them was cloaked from head to toe.

"What the ...?"

Iseseri broke into a frown at their suspicious appearance, but it went unnoticed by those around her.

"The contest will begin on my signal," her father called out, sitting beside her. "The winner will be the last person standing. No weapons are allowed. You can use *tusu* magic, but if it results in the death of your opponent, you will be disqualified. Understood?"

"Understood!" came the dauntless response from the gathered participants.

Notekarima gave them a deep nod, then raised both hands into the air. "Very well. Go, brave warriors. Show us your strength! Begin!"

The next moment—

Nine muscle-bound men were lifted easily into the air.

"Huh...?"

For a moment, Iseseri wondered if they had all jumped up at the same time.

But apparently not. The warriors' limbs flailed uselessly in the air, and just like that, they were brought back to the ground, all the strength having left their bodies.

There were no cries, no screams of anguish—all nine of them had lost consciousness, falling face down in the square.

Iseseri stared back wide-eyed at the incredible sight.

And it wasn't just her. The entire audience, even her father, were all visibly stunned, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

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"Wh-wha-?"
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"What on earth...?"

While the rest of the village watched dumbfounded, the only contestant still on their feet—the one cloaked from head to shoulder—spoke up. "The winner will be the last person left standing. Can I hold you to those words?"

Notekarima shook slightly, suddenly coming back to himself. "Of course. It's an unexpected privilege to wed my daughter to a man of your caliber. But I must ask, who exactly are you? Won't you remove your cloak and show us your face?"

"Oh, my apologies," the warrior said lightly, swiftly lowering their hood.

"—!"

Iseseri choked up as she laid eyes on the face beneath.

It was little wonder. After all, staring back at her was none other than Erulka, the village's guardian deity, who dwelt alone at the edge of their settlement.

"Great Ohkami," Iseseri murmured without thinking.

Her heart seemed to skip a beat, and an incredible warmth flowed through her veins.

"G-Great Ohkami...," Notekarima called out in confusion amid the boisterous hum of the crowd. "Please, none of your games... This is a crucial ceremony to decide my daughter's future husband."

"I am aware. Which is why I took part and won. Is there a problem?" Erulka

asked, crossing her arms.

Notekarima grimaced. "Y-you're a woman, Great Ohkami..."

"Oh? But I didn't hear you say only men could take part."

"That's... Of course it's for men! I'm looking for an adoptive son!"

"Then take one of those men, unable to defeat a woman, as your son."

"There isn't anyone alive who could beat you!" Notekarima screamed, and Erulka let out a mocking laugh.

"Don't get so worked up. I'm not here to break up your family or bring an end to your line. After two, maybe three years, if Iseseri has found a man she likes, I'll quietly step aside."

"What ...?"

Notekarima's eyes widened. No doubt he had realized Erulka's intentions.

The Great Ohkami broke into a wide smirk, turning to face the younger woman. "So that's that. Are you coming, Iseseri?"



"...Yes!" she answered without the slightest hesitation, leaping up in her bridal gown and jumping down from the platform.

"...! Iseseri!" her father shrieked after her as the audience broke into a stir.

But she wasn't worried. After all, her new mate, a woman more dependable than anyone else, was waiting for her.

"...I did ask if you were coming, but that was rather reckless," Erulka said, catching Iseseri in her arms and gently lowering her to the ground.

"Then farewell! I'll gladly accept any celebratory gifts, so feel free to bring them to my house. Good wine is especially welcome."

"Great Ohkami! Iseseri!" Notekarima shouted from atop the platform.

But Erulka paid him no need, tightening her grip around Iseseri's hand. "I'm going to jump. Hold on."

"Okay!" Iseseri answered—and with that, Erulka kicked off and leaped into the sky.



"...It was meant to be temporary at first, but we were a couple for a while there. Come to think of it, she was so graceful and demure, and now look how strong she is," Erulka said, wrapping up her story to the sounds of the pouring rain and the crackling fire.

"...Um, so that's it?" Mushiki asked nervously.

It just didn't seem to make any sense.

"Hmm? Not enough for you?"

"That's not what I mean. It's just..."

He wasn't complaining. He understood Erulka and Iseseri's relationship, which answered a lot of his questions, and he felt like he had learned a lot about Erulka's past, shrouded as it was in mystery.

But all the same, the most important pieces didn't quite seem to fit together.

So he decided to press further.

"From what you said, it sounds like the story has a happy ending. But I don't understand why she has such a huge grudge against you..."

Erulka crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Ah... Right. Well, a lot happened," she mumbled.

"No way..." Mushiki frowned. "Did you cheat on her...?"

"I would never."

"...Really?"

It was only a few hours ago that she had pursued him so ardently.

Erulka let out a small cough to clear her throat. "The body and the mind are two separate things..."

"Wow."

"I'm kidding," Erulka said with a shrug. After hesitating for a little while, she reluctantly continued her story. "What do you want me to say? Our strange way of life went on for a while after that. Iseseri had always hated the idea of marriage, but once we were together, she was so eager about it all."

"Did Iseseri end up getting remarried to another man?"

"Hmm. Not so far as I know, but that could've changed by now," she said, lost in thought. She reached up to scratch her chest. "Then one day..."

"Yes?"

"Things happened, and I ran away, leaving Iseseri and my home behind," she explained briefly.

"...Huh?" Mushiki was dumbstruck.

"That's probably the cause of all this."

"...I don't think there's any *probably* about it... But what happened exactly?" he asked in all seriousness.

"Hmm..." Erulka crossed her arms. "All sorts of things."

Mushiki wasn't sure if there was a reason she couldn't tell him, or if she

simply didn't want to tell him, but either way, she once again glossed over the details.

It would be a lie to say it wasn't weighing on him, but everyone had at least one or two secrets from their past they wanted to keep buried no matter what. Besides, he doubted that knowing the truth would help them to find a way out of their current predicament. And so, letting out a low groan, he decided to keep his mouth shut.

The next moment, however, Erulka shrugged her shoulders and added, "Life wasn't bad with her. She felt the same way, I'm sure. I still feel guilty about what I did."

"Ms. Erulka..."

Her words and expression only added to Mushiki's confusion. At the very least, it sounded like their relationship hadn't been all bad.

She heaved a sigh, as if to dispel the dampness in the air. "The matter with Iseseri will have to wait. For now, we need to deal with the Cupid. So long as its influence is still limited to this island, we might be able to manage it. We'll be in trouble, though, if it spreads to a wider area, so we have to find it before that happens, and destroy it."

"Right... But we don't have any clues, do we? I mean, what does it even look like?" Mushiki asked.

Erulka raised her index finger into the air, twirling it about. "When Saika and I defeated it centuries ago, it had a golden glow and wings, which were attached to this round shape... You could almost say it looked like a clay baby."

"I-I see..."

Mushiki furrowed his brow, trying to picture it in his mind. It sounded kind of creepy when she put it like that.

"Now then..." Erulka rose to her feet. He hadn't noticed when she was seated, but her lower body was bare, and Mushiki hurriedly looked away.

Far from showing any sign of embarrassment, however, Erulka launched into a set of stretching exercises.

"The rain is starting to let up. Now would be a good time to start scouring the island, but I'm reluctant to leave you here while Iseseri and the other students are still looking for you. Can you keep up?"

"Didn't you say it was bad to get our clothes wet?"

"Hmm? I was thinking of leaving them here and going like this."

"Um..."

"I'm kidding. It's not like it's a matter of life or death," Erulka said with a shrug, and Mushiki let out an exasperated sigh.

All the same, her suggestion wasn't unreasonable. Gritting his teeth, Mushiki faced her head-on. "I'll come, too. Let's go find this Cupid."

"Hmm. Then let's set out," she said with a smirk.

When suddenly—

A huge tremor shook the cave in which the two of them were sheltering.

"An...e-earthquake...?!" Mushiki cried out in dismay.

"...No! Get outside!" Erulka shouted over him.

He jumped up, rushing from the cave as fast as his feet would carry him.

No sooner were they outside than the earth itself rose up, and a huge serpent-like silhouette emerged to effortlessly destroy the entire cave.

"Is that—?!"

"Tch. A wyrm. Of all times..." Erulka grimaced, clicking her tongue in frustration.

On closer inspection, the giant silhouette was clearly different from a snake or a reptile, even if it did have a thick, rope-like shape. Instead, its body seemed to be made up of a series of cylinders, and it lacked scales. Its eyeless head was split by a circular mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth. All in all, it looked more like an earthworm than anything else.

Mushiki caught his breath, aiming his phone camera at the massive creature. Within moments, a small sound effect rang out as a text appeared on the screen.

Wyrm. Acquisition Difficulty: 9. Material Rating: 8. Used in revitalizing tonics.

A high-level monster. Switching tabs to the map, he could see that the area they found themselves in was now colored red. It seemed that while fleeing from Iseseri and the others, they had accidentally entered a danger zone.

Right. How could he have forgotten? Their current priority was, of course, locating and destroying the annihilation factor—but this island was originally a breeding ground for countless different monsters.

"We don't have time for this. Let's settle it quickly." Erulka sharpened her gaze, leaning forward to face the wyrm.

Then, in a gruff, barking voice, she intoned, "Third Substantiation: Upas Amip."

The next moment, a red, glowing, three-layered world crest came into being, covering her hands and chest.

From there, the light expanded to cover her entire body, coalescing into a short coat covering both arms and an apron hanging from her waist emblazoned with a unique pattern. It seemed to closely resemble the clothes worn by Iseseri and her People of the Forest.

This was a third substantiation—an assimilation-rank technique that covered a person's body with a physical manifestation of their magical energy.

In other words, it was the modern mage's technique of choice when it came time to wage war.

"Awoooooo!"

With a roar like the storming of the wind, Erulka hit the ground running.

She seemed to vanish—and the next instant, deep lacerations crisscrossed the huge wyrm, sending blood and fluids flying as the creature writhed in agony.

"…!"

A moment later, Mushiki understood. Erulka had cut through the wyrm at

incredible speed.

"Kimumpe: Am," she called out, twisting her body in midair and spreading her arms wide.

In seconds, magical energy coalesced around her hands to form a pair of huge bear claws.

No, that wasn't all. Her legs, which had just propelled her up into the air, were now equipped with wolf claws, while protruding from her back were a pair of owl-like wings. It was as if she had drawn from all three of her second substantiations to fully cloak her body.

And then—

"Grrraugh...!"

The second that distinctive howl left Erulka's lips, magical energy began to gather around the nearby trees, causing her body to light up like a torch.

She was using both substantiation and tusu magic simultaneously.

In all likelihood, she was the only individual on the face of the earth capable of such a feat.

She delivered killing blows with each swipe of her claws and each sweep of her legs, slicing the huge wyrm into pieces like a mound of soft clay.

"Wow..."

Mushiki couldn't help but marvel as she danced like a bolt of lightning through the pouring rain.

This was his first time witnessing Erulka's third substantiation—and it was overwhelming.

The wyrm was unmistakably an incredibly powerful monster—but it was no match for her at all.

If Mushiki had to describe the sight, she was like a bullet with a mind of her own—a pure embodiment of savage barbarism who didn't let her adversary get in so much as a single strike. This splendid show of magic was, of course, different from Saika's, but they were both the ultimate product of individual

prowess compressed into raw attack power.

Knight Erulka Flaera—the longest-serving Knight of the Garden and Saika Kuozaki's most trusted mage.

Mushiki had never doubted her reputation, but seeing her up close and personal, he understood acutely why everyone viewed her with such awe.

Suddenly—

"...!"

His breath caught in his throat.

There wasn't anything amiss with Erulka, or any suspicious movements on the part of the wyrm, either.

No. Rather, at the edge of his vision, he had caught sight of a golden light.

"...Y-you..."

He spun around like an elastic band snapping back, confirming that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

There, from amid the trees, a woman enshrouded by a faint, golden glow stood staring at him in the rain.

Short-cropped hair. A scarred face. Ears growing atop her head. A wolf's tail.

There could be no mistaking her. It was Iseseri.

"Found...you..." She sounded like a traveler who had trudged through the desert in search of water, and she swayed forward.

The next moment, several more figures emerged from the trees around her.

Only then did Mushiki realize it—the People of the Forest had him completely surrounded.

"How-?"

But before he could finish his question, he jolted back in realization.

If what Erulka said was right, the rain should have hidden his scent from anyone tracking him.

However, the destruction of the cave caused by the wyrm's appearance must

have been heard all across the island. There was no way these wolf-women, with their keen ears, would have failed to notice.

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"Grrraaaugh!"
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Iseseri and her people pounced at him all at once, unleashing their *tusu* magic to ensnare him from every angle.

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"Ngh...!"
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Mushiki scrunched up his face, focused his awareness, and raised his right hand before him.

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"Hollow Edge!"
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With that cry, a two-layered world crest unfolded above his head as he wrapped his fingers around the hilt of a blade.

Swinging his transparent sword, he cut through the flows of magic starting to cling to his body.

"Oh... A sword that pierces *ramat*? Most unusual...," Iseseri murmured as she raced across the ground, her voice laced with disbelief. However, the next moment, she narrowed her eyes in fascination. "But that's good. It makes things interesting."

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"Strong blood."

"Strong male."

"I want his seed."

"Give him to me."

"Let me take him."
```

All around him, the other People of the Forest echoed their agreement.

Mushiki continued to fend off the onslaught of *tusu* magic with his Hollow Edge, but he was clearly outnumbered. It wasn't long before the wolf-women closed in on him, grabbing his arms and legs and pinning him to the ground.

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"Ugh...!"

"Ahh... Hah..."
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Iseseri, her face flushed with heat, climbed on top of him.

Mustering all his strength, Mushiki tried to stroke the base of her tail and rub her stomach like Erulka had taught him, but his arms were firmly pinned down.

As Iseseri closed in on him, she breathed out an intoxicating, sweet scent.

But then—

"...You. Was it you? The one who seduced Erulka?"

"Huh...?"

Mushiki frowned at this absurdity of her question.

"...Damn it. Give me your seed. If not for you... You humiliated me. Why... Erulka...?" Iseseri muttered deliriously as her tongue ran over his skin. Tears welled up in her eyes, dripping down onto him.

She clearly wasn't in a rational state of mind. Her voice was neither vindictive nor lustful, but effused with a deep sadness. It was like some part of her refused to give in even while the powers of the Mythologia were affecting her judgment.

"Mushiki!"

Right at that moment, Erulka, still fighting the wyrm, called out from overhead.

She danced though the sky, her wings beating against the air as she launched herself toward the ground. The People of the Forest situated themselves around Mushiki, guarding him from being stolen from them, and Iseseri turned her gaze upward.

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"...Erul...ka!"
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"...!"

This was his chance. Mushiki twisted his body and pulled himself free from Iseseri.

"Ugh...!" Iseseri fell back with an anguished grunt.

He jumped to his feet, slipping free from the encirclement.

Nonetheless, the overall situation hadn't changed. The People of the Forest still had him surrounded, and even if he managed to escape, so long as they were under the Cupid's influence, they would continue to pursue him.

"Ah..."

With that thought, Mushiki let out a short breath.

A solution had come to mind, a way to break free from this stalemate.

If he succeeded, it might even keep Iseseri and the wolf-women from chasing him further. Of course, he would still have to destroy the Cupid itself, but it would make the search that much easier.

But there was one problem. He needed a certain something to put this plan into action.

He looked around quickly, taking in his surroundings. Erulka was busy fighting the People of the Forest. She clearly didn't have the luxury of lending him a helping hand. And Iseseri and her people wouldn't be of any use. There was no sign of Rindoh, Asagi, or the others, either. On top of that, there was a strong chance he would be captured before achieving his goal.

"Ngh. If only I had that—"

He fell suddenly silent.

The reason was simple—an object had come into the corner of his vision.

"...! It can't be!"

He caught his breath, rushing over to it.

Hanging from a rain-drenched tree branch was an adorable palm-size plush toy.

There could be no mistaking it—it was the Saika doll that Ruri had made for him. He had lost it during his airborne descent to the island, but never would he have expected to find it here.

"Sorry for leaving you for so long."

It was like luck itself had delivered it back to him. Reaching out with a gentle hand, he retrieved it from the tree branch.

"Where's the male? Where is he?!"

"Over there!"

Behind him, the People of the Forest approached.

But Mushiki didn't try to run. He wasn't paralyzed by fear, nor did he think it futile to escape. It was just that the final piece of his plan had fallen into place.

Listen carefully, Mushiki.

Kuroe's remarks on leaving the Garden played again in his mind.

In general, please refrain from using this during the supplementary course. However, in the unlikely event that the situation gets out of hand, you have my permission to use it.

With those words, she had handed him the palm-size Saika toy Ruri made for him—freshly imbued with her own magical energy.

"...!"

As the People of the Forest closed in, Mushiki gave the small toy a soft kiss.

"Wha-?!"

Erulka's startled cry reached him from across the distance.

But her response wasn't entirely unreasonable. After all, the moment he kissed the Saika doll, his body started shimmering as it began to change shape.

A state change. Thanks to the fresh supply of magical energy flowing through that kiss, the bodies of Saika and Mushiki, fused together, switched places like the flipping of a coin.

Originally, this phenomenon could be triggered only by a direct kiss from Kuroe; however, if she applied her magic formula in advance, it could be activated by another person.

That, however, would have been too unscrupulous—so she had imbued just enough magical energy into the plush toy for Mushiki to trigger a single state change.

The People of the Forest, watching Mushiki transform into a beautiful young woman, erupted in confusion.

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"Huh...?!"

"That's weird."

"Where's the male?!"

"Find him!"
```

With one cry after the next, they scanned their surroundings in bewilderment.

"Hmm. So they lose interest the second I change sex?" Mushiki murmured, taking full advantage of this opening.

"Stellarium."

With that word, a two-layered world crest in the shape of an angel's halo appeared over his head, while a giant staff materialized in his hands.

The next moment, the ground shifted in accordance to his will, as tendrils wriggled and reached out to ensnare the People of the Forest.

"Gah!"

"Ugh..."

Anguished cries filled the air as the wolf-women fell to the ground.

Amid the fallen figures, Erulka approached, staring him over from head to toe.

"...Saika," she mumbled.

"Ah, yes, Erulka. You see..."

There had been no helping it, but she had witnessed him undergo the state change firsthand. He wouldn't be able to just talk his way out of it. Mushiki fell silent for a long time, wondering how best to explain what had just happened.

But then—

"...I see. So that's the condition for your transformation—a kiss. Or more accurately, a supply of magical energy delivered through a kiss, perhaps?"

"Hmm?" Mushiki answered, raising an eyebrow. "You're not surprised, Erulka?"

"Well, I'd already noticed you and Mushiki were fused together."

"...Eh?" he gasped, taken aback by this statement.

That, however, was very much unlike Saika, so he feigned a cough to conceal his astonishment. "Um, may I ask how long you've been aware?"

"Hmm... Since that horde of dragons attacked the Garden, I suppose."

"Ah. I see."

"Ever since I licked your sweat away to cure you, I knew something was amiss... But I know you, so I thought you must have your reasons for keeping quiet and didn't pry further."

"…"

So she'd known for quite a while. Mushiki could feel a cold sweat down his back.

Erulka crossed her arms. "But I doubt even you could easily separate a fusion of that level, Saika. Surely you didn't do it just for fun or as some sort of drunken game. What on earth happened?"

"L-let's hold off on the detailed explanation for now. Our first priority has to be finding the Cupid, no?" Mushiki said, hoping to brush the question aside.

"Hmm. I suppose so," Erulka answered.

At that moment—

"...Erul...ka..."

Iseseri, who had been chained to the ground by Saika's second substantiation, had managed to use a *tusu* spell to break free, and now she rose unsteadily to her feet.

"Why...? Why did you, you, you...a-abandon me...?! Why? Why? Why...?"

She spoke as if in a trance, repeating the same words over and over like a broken record.

All the while, golden light danced about them.

"Iseseri..."

Erulka's face contorted into a pained look similar to Iseseri's, and she

frowned, as if realizing something.

Then, after a long moment of silent contemplation—

"...Saika," she called out with a resolute look.

"Yes?"

"Before, you said our first priority was to find the Cupid."

"I did. What of it?"

"Could you let me handle that?"

"What?" Mushiki raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Erulka, meanwhile, reached into her hair ornament, pulling out what looked like a blue stone necklace, which she handed him in silence.

"...What's this?"

"It's like what that doll is to Mushiki. Hang on to it for me for a while. Things may get a little rough." With that, Erulka stepped toward Iseseri. "I should have realized sooner. Or... Maybe it was Saika's technique that made things clear for me just now."

"Erulka? What are you—?"

"Annihilation factors don't always resurface in their original forms. There's no way to know if it returned as a different individual possessing the same powers, or if it's been transformed by a third party... But there's no mistaking the Ouroboros's—Clara Tokishima's—hand in all this."

Mushiki's breath caught.

Now he understood the realization she had made—and what she was trying to say.

"Erulka, you..." His words trailed off as Erulka's gaze remained fixed on the gold shimmer dancing about them.

"The light surrounding them... At first, I thought it was just the scales from some sort of primitive organism. But I was wrong—it's the very essence of the

Cupid itself. Look at it, still shining amid all this rain," she said, waving her hand to brush it aside. "I suspect it enters through the respiratory tract, disrupting the host's natural instincts. But even knowing its true nature, this won't be an easy one to eliminate. If we're to destroy the Cupid this time, we'll need to gather these spores in one place." With those words, Erulka's expression clouded over. "...If you truly despised me, Iseseri, and had come to kill me, then I would be ready to accept whatever happened." She paused there, sharpening her gaze. "But this is different... Curse that Clara Tokishima. I'll never forgive her, tarnishing your resolve like this."

"...Erulka..."

At last, Erulka's expression relaxed as she wrapped her arms around Iseseri.

"—!"

"Great Ohkami..." Through her stupor, Iseseri managed to feebly address Erulka. "Why...did you...abandon me...?"

"I'm sorry, Iseseri. I tied you down, all because of my own selfishness." Erulka paused, glancing over her shoulder at Mushiki. "I'll handle the rest. Just buy me a little time."

"What are you planning, Erulka?"

"...I'll absorb all the Cupid spores into my own body."

"What...?!" Mushiki gasped. "If you do that, you'll—"

"I have no intention of killing myself. It'll be a contest between me and the annihilation factor... I'll take it all in and purify it," Erulka answered. "It won't be easy, though. Be sure to keep me from getting out of control... I'm counting on you, Mushiki—or I should say, Saika."

With that, she let out a low howl.

"Grrraugh..."

It was a sound he had heard countless times by now—the roar of the People of the Forest when using a *tusu* spell.

Guided by Erulka's incantation, the wind picked up around them.

All the golden spores from Iseseri, the collapsed People of the Forest, and everywhere else across the island rose into the air and were sucked into Erulka's body.

"Erulka!" Mushiki called out in alarm.

But instead of responding, Erulka allowed her arms to go limp around Iseseri, who crumpled to the ground.

"…"

Erulka slowly turned around, her stance unnatural.

"Ngh!"

As he looked at her, a wave of terror fell across Mushiki's face.

Amid the beating rain, Erulka's eyes, now turned on him, were alight with dazzling gold.

"Awooooooooooooooo..."

Far, far away, a roar seemed to seep into the sky.

It was a wolf's howl—the cry of the Great Ohkami who ruled the forest.

Clad in her third substantiation, Knight of the Garden Erulka Flaera unleashed a roar like distant thunder, making her power known.

"Erulka! Hang in there! Can you hear me?!"

Yet she gave no response to Mushiki's appeal. Instead, her eyes shone brilliantly as she arched her body into a curve like a crescent moon.

"...Ngh..."

It was Iseseri, lying slumped on the ground, who raised a pained voice. Slowly climbing to her feet, she held a hand to her head as though fighting a splitting headache, her face awash with confusion.

"Who...are you? Where did you come from...? Or more importantly, where am /...?"

It seemed she had no memory of Mushiki's transformation into Saika, and she didn't know what to make of this stranger staring back at her.

Yet Mushiki had to hold her puzzled stare for only a few brief moments.

The reason was simple—Iseseri quickly made sense of the chaos unfolding nearby, lowering her haunches to leap into the fray.

"Erulka...! You, with your strange techniques...!" she growled, a display of anger that made Mushiki's hair stand on end.

"Wait, Iseseri!" he called out, raising a hand to urge her to stay.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"How much do you remember? Have your impulses stopped?"

"Impulses...? What are you talking about?"

"I'm asking if you still feel compelled to find a mate."

"Wh-where did that come from?! How vulgar!" Iseseri flinched in disbelief.

...Within seconds, the air seemed to freeze over as if he had asked her something incredibly inappropriate. Mushiki was at a loss as to how to respond.

Yet Iseseri furrowed her brow, placing a hand on her forehead with a pained groan. "Ugh... My memories... Did I do that...? Why...?" A low moan escaped her throat as she recalled everything that had happened.

She seemed to remember being possessed by the Cupid, so Mushiki reasoned he could jump straight to the point. Without lowering his guard, he asked, "Do you see? Erulka saved you."

"What...?" Iseseri's brows came together as if she had no idea at all what he was talking about.

But at that very moment—

Erulka shook her head, and her arched body toppled forward.

Then, as if being pulled by invisible strings, her lips formed the words: "Fourth...Substantiation..."

Mushiki instantly stiffened.

"Ramat Nitay."

With those words, a fourth piece of her red world crest appeared near the base of Erulka's tail—and at the same instant, an altogether different landscape began to fan out from her feet, as if reality was slowly eroding.

It wasn't long before it swallowed up the ground beneath Mushiki and Iseseri, painting over the surrounding landscape and even extending to the sky

overhead.

Within moments, they were in an entirely different space—deep in a dense forest shrouded in snow. The sky was dark overhead, and a blood-red moon illuminated the area around them.

A fourth substantiation—the culmination of magic that transformed the landscape around oneself.

Since Ruri and Anviet, also Knights of the Garden, could unleash such techniques, it was natural to assume that Erulka could, too. But now that Mushiki found himself engulfed in this space, he almost fell to his knees at the overwhelming display of power.

...And that wasn't all.

"Awoooooooooo!"

As that how reverberated through the forest, magical energy began to swirl, gathering around Erulka as a radiant glow emanated from her body.

It wasn't long before she was swallowed up by light, leaving no more than a bright silhouette, which expanded until—

"What ...?"

Standing where Erulka had been only moments ago was a gigantic wolf.

It was huge—much taller than Mushiki himself was. Its supple limbs combined brutality and grace, each armed with claws that one might mistake for long daggers. The crimson fur covering its body glistened, growing redder still in the light of the moon and her world crest.

Given that Iseseri and the People of the Forest had the ability to change into wolves, this wasn't altogether unexpected.

Her size and appearance, however, were so far beyond Mushiki's expectations that he couldn't help staring back, agape.

It had an overwhelming sense of majesty, and power beyond human comprehension, that inspired reverence. At this point, he wasn't even sure if he could call it a beast.

No wonder that ancient humans had ascribed the destructive power of nature to the gods—for this creature indeed seemed divine.

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"Ugh... Ngh..."

"Is this...?"
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Perhaps roused by Erulka's deafening roar, one by one the People of the Forest began to wake up.

The moment they laid eyes on Erulka in her current form, sweat began to bead on their foreheads.

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"Ch-Chief..."

"Is that...?"
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"...It's Erulka's beast form. Don't let her devour you. We have been sharpening our fangs for this very reason—to fell her," Iseseri said in an effort to encourage her people.

But the People of the Forest were having trouble withstanding the tremendous pressure Erulka was exerting. Some had already fallen to their knees, some blinked back tears, while others raised their hands to their mouths as if to stop themselves from vomiting.

Then, to make matters worse—

"Raaaaaaaaaaarrrggghhh..."

Erulka bellowed a long, reverberating roar.

Overwhelmed, the People of the Forest seemed to lose their will to fight, shrinking back from the giant wolf.

But... No. Mushiki choked for breath.

That roar hadn't been meant to intimidate them—rather, it was a call.

And in response, more lights than the eye could count emerged throughout the forest.

They were eyes, all of them.

Yes. They came from the depths of that snow-covered forest, from between

thickets and trees, from the sky overhead.

Wolves, owls, hawks, bears, deer—the eyes of so many wild beasts stared down at Mushiki and the others.

Iseseri must have noticed this, too, as she looked about in wide-eyed shock.

There were hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of them—an infinite landscape of creatures filling land and sky as far as the eye could see. Mushiki couldn't possibly count them all.

Faced with that bizarre spectacle, he suddenly realized the true nature of her fourth substantiation.

"Raaaaaargh!"

Erulka howled again, as if issuing commands.

As one, the animals of the forest launched their attack without a moment's delay.

Each beast was formidable in its own right, just as strong as Erulka's second substantiations—and here they were swarming him, Iseseri, and the People of the Forest with deadly intent.

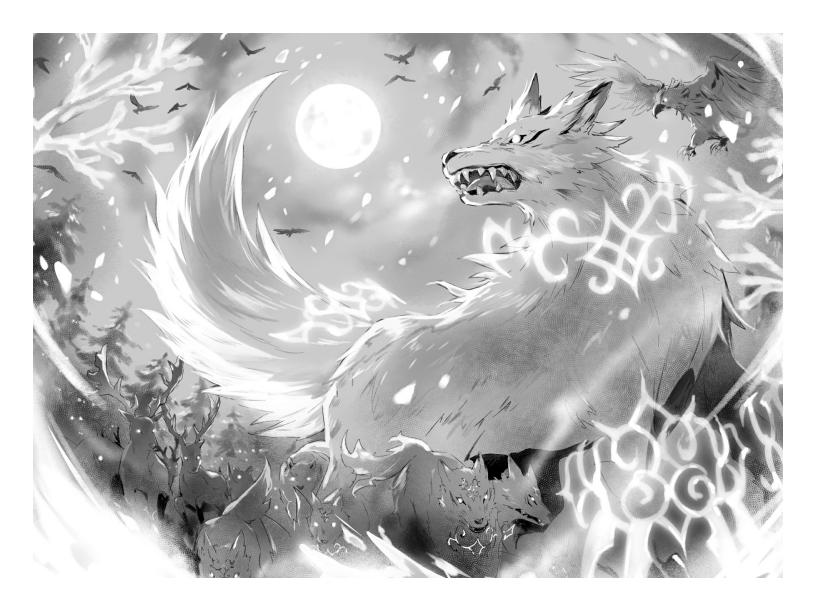
They moved like the wind, crashing down as if the world itself sought to expunge Mushiki and the others once and for all.

"...Grrraugh...!"

Iseseri uttered a *tusu* incantation to scorch a pack of approaching wolves, and taking heart from their leader's example, the People of the Forest began to fight back.

But no matter how many creatures they knocked down, how many they slaughtered, fresh beasts continued to appear one after the next.

The forest was capable of producing endless life—and it would no doubt continue to do so until it had devoured everything in its path.



Resistance was futile, and any attempt to flee would be crushed with overwhelming force. It was the ultimate fourth substantiation, simple and absolute. Once ensnared within its bounds, there was no means of escape.

...Except for one.

"...!*"*

Regulating his breathing and sharpening his senses to their utmost limits, Mushiki let magical energy course through his body.

"The creation of all things. Heaven and earth alike reside in the palm of my hand."

Then, he uttered—

"Pledge obedience, for I will make you my bride."

Yes. The name of the most powerful magic at his—or rather, at Saika's—disposal.

"Fourth Substantiation: Void's Garden!"

Instantly, a four-layer world crest lit up above him, radiating a brilliant rainbow light.

With him at its center, a new space began to unfold in the snow-covered, moonlit forest.

Swallowing their surroundings in a cascade of tremors, skyscrapers rose up from both land and sky to pulverize the wild beasts into particles of light disappearing into the void.

Yes. Fourth substantiations were the epitome of magic, so powerful that, once they were activated, there could be no resisting them. Defeat was inevitable.

There was only one escape—fighting back with a fourth substantiation of one's own.

Once an opponent had activated a technique of this magnitude, your only hope for survival was to compete for domination with a technique of equal or greater power.

"Ugh! Uggghhh!"

A pale blue sky seeped into the space around Mushiki, warping as it blended with and fought the edges of Erulka's Ramat Nitay. An owl speeding toward Mushiki fell to the ground, losing its sense of direction as it crossed the boundary between the two.

Saika's fourth substantiation, Void's Garden, was used to observe all potentialities and allow its user to select the one most ideal to their circumstances. It was a rule-breaking technique of exceptional power, and one of the key reasons she was regarded as the strongest mage to walk the earth.

That, however, only applied once it was fully activated—once it had caught an adversary within its bounds.

Unfortunately, Mushiki was already caught inside another fourth substantiation. And of course, he wasn't the real Saika—just a novice mage borrowing her body.

Metaphorically speaking, the task ahead of him was like trying to inflate a balloon while deep underwater. It would be next to impossible for a person with ordinary lung capacity, and over time, he would run short of precious oxygen and succumb to the immense water pressure.

"Ngh... Ugh... Ah...!"

Slowly, little by little, night began to encroach.

Intense pain, as if his brain itself were being burned away, assailed him.

Mushiki's vision flickered, and his consciousness drifted into the distance.

And yet—

"…!"

Clenching his teeth, he glanced at Iseseri and the People of the Forest below.

If his Void's Garden, which he was barely managing to hold together, came undone, they, too, would be devoured within seconds.

He only knew what Erulka had told him about her past with Iseseri, but even so, he didn't want them to perish.

And so he strained as hard as he could, his world crest burning even brighter as he pushed the limits of the space around him.

"Aaaaaaaauuuggghhh!"

With a voice echoing like a battle cry, he bade the sky to unfold around him, and more skyscrapers rose from above and below like fangs closing in.

Day and night, blue sky and darkness, iron and wood, civilization and nature—the two opposing landscapes collided violently, rending each other apart until, at last, after crossing a critical threshold, they shattered.

Cracks ran through the sky, through the earth, through the very fabric of space itself, spreading outward like a spider's web—and within those cracks, the endless legions of skyscrapers and animals were broken into scattered fragments as the landscape fell apart.

Those shattered pieces of the twin worlds didn't even fall to the ground—they simply faded away, melting into pure nothingness.

At last, they were back on Nirai Island. The rain had weakened significantly, though thick clouds still hung overhead.

"Haah...! Haah...!"

Once he saw where he was, Mushiki dropped to his knees.

He knew full well he didn't have the luxury to relax, or to let down his guard, but he was simply too exhausted to continue standing.

Fighting to control his ragged breathing, he noticed something—a faint glow enveloped him from head to toe, and before he knew it, his slender white fingers had transformed into those of an awkward young man.

"N-no..."

Semiconscious, he heard a dismayed sigh escaped his lips. It was a sound he recognized well, a far cry from Saika's resplendent, lilting, bell-like voice.

Yes. He was back in his original body.

A state change from Saika to Mushiki involved a very different process than when transforming in the opposite direction. Basically, a huge release of

magical energy—even merely through emotional excitement or arousal—triggered a shift into what was essentially a low-powered state. In other words, his own body.

He had never reverted to this form after using Saika's fourth substantiation before, but on reflection, he could see how it had happened. He must have released a tremendous amount of magical energy, more than his fused body could withstand.

"Ah..."

At that moment, his breath caught in his throat, another possibility dawning on him.

Once, not long ago, something else had functioned as a switch of sorts. There was another way he might have reverted back to his Mushiki form—the death of Saika's body.

Their bodies were like two sides of the same coin. Last time, Mushiki had escaped death by going under, letting Saika's body surface to take over. If something similar had happened just now—

"..."

He couldn't explain it in any great detail, but it seemed to occur when his body sensed danger. Given that he had already used the spell Kuroe left imbued in the Saika doll, it was probably best to assume he couldn't trigger another state change.

"You..." Iseseri stared at him wide-eyed. "What are you doing here? Where did that woman go?" she demanded suspiciously.

Her question was certainly valid, yet Mushiki paid it no heed, instead pointing forward with a trembling finger.

There were a number of reasons why he couldn't discuss his and Saika's secret with others.

But in that moment, there was something more important he had to tell Iseseri.

"Right now...I can't...use another fourth substantiation... If Erulka activates

hers..."

"What...?" Iseseri looked up.

Ahead of them, Erulka, still in the form of a massive wolf, glared down at Mushiki and Iseseri, her front legs bent, ready to lunge.

The apparition at the base of her tail—the fourth piece of her world crest—was nowhere to be seen.

Fourth substantiations were the ultimate form of magic. Under normal circumstances, they weren't the sort of technique that could be deployed in rapid succession. It would be foolish, however, to assume that Erulka was limited by normal standards.

If she had any excess power remaining, and if she activated her fourth substantiation again, it would be impossible for Mushiki to break through as he had a moment ago.

"Raaaaaaarrrqqqhhh..."

Erulka's roar pierced the sky.

Her paws and chest suddenly glowed red, her world crest powering up.

"Tch...! Grrraugh...!"

Sensing the urgency of the situation, Iseseri attacked with a fire-type *tusu* spell.

But she was too slow. Erulka leaped backward to avoid it, her howl increasing in volume and intensity.

They were in dire straits. Not only was Saika's repertoire of techniques practically sealed away, but Mushiki couldn't even move his body freely. If Erulka were to activate her fourth substantiation now, the outcome would be all but guaranteed.

Yet she didn't manifest it.

Or rather, she was prevented from doing so at the last moment.

"Meteor Slash!"

"Blinding Blade!"

"Fistruction."

All at once, three voices tore through the haze that had settled over the area.

"…!"

To Mushiki's astonishment, three attacks struck Erulka from different directions.

The first was a steel blade, its power enhanced by gravity.

The second, a sword of ever-changing blue flame.

And the third, a ferocious fist filled with magical energy.

"Rindoh! Asagi! Mushanokouji!" Mushiki all but shouted.

The three members of the supplementary course nodded in acknowledgment as they faced off against the gargantuan wolf.

Rindoh, however, muttered something under her breath. "Rindoh...? Rindoh...? Ngh... Since when were we on a first-name basis...? I guess I don't mind, though..."

Like Iseseri and the People of the Forest, they, too, had returned to their senses, speaking now in firm voices without a hint of their dazed delirium from a short time ago.

"Are you all right, Mushiki?" Asagi shouted.

"Yeah, somehow...! Thanks for the save!"

Behind her mask, she heaved a sigh of relief.

That was when he noticed something—one of their members was missing.

"Where's Raimu?" he asked.

"Ah..."

"Himemiya wore himself out trying to keep up, so we left him behind."

"He'll catch up eventually."

"...I—I see," Mushiki answered awkwardly.

That was all they had to say on the matter.

"More importantly...," Nene began, a touch of dread in her voice. "That monster—is it an annihilation factor...? I've never felt such overwhelming pressure."

"No," Mushiki began. "Well, in a way, I guess you could say that... The wolf is Ms. Erulka. Everyone was possessed with Cupid spores, so she absorbed them into her own body to save you all!"

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"...?!"
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It wasn't just Rindoh, Asagi, and Nene who were at a loss for words hearing this—Iseseri likewise reacted with disbelief, turning to stare back at Erulka in her wolf form.

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"That's...Erulka?"
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"Curse you, annihilation factor, for reducing Ms. Erulka to that state!" Nene glared.

...By all indications, Erulka's transformation was unrelated to the annihilation factor, but now wasn't the time to explain all that. Mushiki had to convey his plan as succinctly as possible.

"Anyway, I need you all to buy me some time! She should be worn down, at least to an extent! You've got to distract her and stop her from using her fourth substantiation!"

The three of them nodded as one, then hit the ground running.

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"Haaah...!"
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Single-minded in their determination, the three girls launched attacks at the hulking wolf. Thanks to her tough fur, Erulka was unscathed by the assault—but at least it succeeded in catching her attention. Her world crest's aura intensified as she let out a tremendous roar and another *tusu* incantation.

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"...Grrraaauuuggghhh...!"
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Drawn in by that howl, the air began to swirl like a tornado sweeping the

[&]quot;Hmph!"

[&]quot;Raaaaaah!"

area. Rindoh, however, was quick to respond, launching yet another strike between her foe's *tusu* spells.

If Erulka had been going all out, they wouldn't have stood a chance—it may have been three against one, but their teacher was a world-class mage. Under regular circumstances, even simply buying time against her would have been impossible.

Yet whether it was because the Cupid was forcefully moving her body, or because Erulka was resisting, her movements lacked finesse. Of course, her robust physique and immense reservoir of magical energy still made her a formidable foe, but it was clear that precise movements against multiple foes were too much for her. There was a world of difference between her performance now and the skills she had demonstrated against the wyrm. If her willpower had truly been coursing through every cell of the giant wolf's body, they would all have already fallen prey to its claws and fangs.

But that didn't mean they could afford to let down their guard. The moment Erulka decided to reactivate her fourth substantiation, even if it meant harming herself in the process, they were all done for.

And so, steadying his breathing, Mushiki rose back to his feet.

"..."

Seeing him get back up, Iseseri clenched her fists and stepped forward.

Hoping to stop her, Mushiki reached out to grab the hem of her clothes.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"... I should be saying that. What are you doing?"

"I realized something—I'll never have another opportunity like this. I'll take Erulka's head... Our interests are aligned, aren't they?"

"That's crazy... We're fighting to *help* Erulka. Won't you help us, too?" Mushiki asked.

"Enough jokes," Iseseri responded with an uncomfortable frown. "I've been sharpening my fangs for the express purpose of killing her. It's too late for anything else now..."

"You called her a traitor... And yeah, it was wrong of her to leave the village and abandon you, but is that really enough of a reason to kill her...?"

Iseseri's eyebrows rose at his question. No doubt she was surprised to hear that Mushiki was aware of her past.

Surrounding them, the other People of the Forest turned to him with grim looks.

"It wasn't just that."

"She mercilessly slaughtered ten of our clansmen, then disappeared."

"...! She did...?!" Mushiki's eyes bulged from their sockets at this revelation. Erulka had evidently skimmed over that part during her explanation.

"We detected traces of her tusu magic on their bodies."

"We consider killing our own the gravest of sins. It must be paid for with death."

"There are no exceptions. Not even for our oldest of elders."

"We have been searching for Erulka all this time to avenge our clansmen."

"..."

Iseseri kept perfectly silent.

According to Erulka, Iseseri had been her companion, albeit only temporarily. She must have felt the betrayal deepest of all, since it had come from someone she cared so much about.

Still, now that he knew that...

Mushiki looked up at her. "She must have..."

"What?"

"She must have had her reasons. Or there must have been a misunderstanding," he said simply.

"...What?" Iseseri pulled a stern face, unconvinced. "And why would you say that?"

"I mean, Ms. Erulka would never do something like that," he answered.

Iseseri bristled at this, baring her teeth in anger. "Don't act like you were there! You know nothing about Erulka!" she spat.

Her anger was certainly justified. Mushiki doubted that he would listen to a third party if he were in her shoes.

But he hadn't said that for no reason.

"You're right, I don't know Erulka as well as you do. I never knew she could transform into a wolf before coming to this island. But Erulka is Saika's most trusted mage at the Garden. She even considers her a sworn ally. That's why I believe in her—because Saika does," he said without the faintest doubt in his mind.

"Huh...?" Iseseri's mouth dropped open in astonishment.

"Who's Saika?"

"Saika Kuozaki. The woman I admire most in the world."

"...You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm not joking. Do you think she would be mistaken about something like this?"

""

Grimacing, Iseseri rubbed her forehead. "This is pointless. Would you say the same if this Saika Kuozaki betrayed you as Erulka did me?"

"If Saika ever chose to do something like that, I'm sure she would have her reasons. And I doubt they would be selfish ones. She would do it for all of humanity and everyone who calls this world home."

"...Hmph." Iseseri snorted, her face contorting in indignation.

All the same, Mushiki let up.

Great Ohkami... Why...? Why did you...abandon me...?

Iseseri's words while possessed by the Cupid echoed in Mushiki's mind.

Perhaps she had merely let them slip out in her feverish stupor, but Mushiki couldn't bring himself to believe that, deep down, she truly hated Erulka.

"Iseseri. Do you really believe Erulka killed your countrymen and left your village out of selfishness? Do you really see her as your enemy?"

"...What does that mean?"

"I just can't bring myself to accept it. Are you really going to try to kill her?"

""

Iseseri's next words caught in her throat.

All at once, a scene from the past flooded back to Iseseri's mind.

There must be some mistake! The Great Ohkami would never do anything like that...!

It was a memory of the day when her happy life was thrown upside down.

Ah, that's right. When her fellow clansmen were found dead on the outskirts of the village, Iseseri had gone to plead with her father, the village chief.

She believed in Erulka and was certain she would never have done what she was being accused of.

Traces of the Great Ohkami's tusu magic were found on the bodies. There's no mistake.

B-but she must have had a reason! Where is she?!

Gone. What more evidence of her guilt do you need?

It can't be...! Wait, please! She must have had a reason! I'm sure she'll come back. Please wait to hear her out. Please, please! she begged in desperation.

Yet no matter how many years went by, no matter how long she waited, Erulka never returned.

As time passed, a second event was organized to find a suitable partner for Iseseri.

With her temporary companion gone, it was decided that the chief's daughter

couldn't remain unwed forever.

Yet Iseseri had no intention of taking a husband. She was the Great Ohkami's mate, irrespective of what anyone else said.

But so long as she called the village home, she couldn't turn against her family and its code.

Running away, leaving the village behind, was never an option. After all, if she left, Erulka wouldn't have a place to come back to.

So there was only one path open to her.

Wh-what's the meaning of this, Iseseri? Your hair...

See for yourself, Father. I want to take part in the selection ceremony. I have no intention of taking a husband weaker than myself.

Don't be a fool. This ceremony is to decide the next village chief.

I'm aware of that. If I win, I'll be chief... If my partner can't even hold his own against me, the people won't be happy to follow him, will they?

And like that, she brought her father around to letting her take part.

Her father must have put it down to stubbornness on her part, though he reluctantly gave his permission on the condition that if she lost, she would obediently accept the winner as her husband.

However... There wasn't a warrior in the village capable of matching her now that she had learned how to manipulate *ramat* from having lived under the same roof as the Great Ohkami.

She wasn't quite as formidable as Erulka had been during the last ceremony years earlier...but all the same, she defeated every candidate and secured the position of future chief for herself.

All to remain Erulka's companion. So she could continue waiting for her at their home.

But after she officially became chief, Iseseri was burdened with a mission—to bring the traitor to justice.

There were few sins greater than murdering one's own clansmen. If she had

let it slide as chief, it would have fractured the clan's sense of unity.

Now she was charged with the responsibility of slaying Erulka herself in order to protect the place they had once called home.

Iseseri waited for Erulka. And waited. And waited.

She had not the faintest doubt that even after all these years, long after anyone with an ordinary life span should have moved on, Erulka, master of *tusu* magic, was still alive.

When she caught wind of someone who looked like Erulka in the east, she rushed there immediately.

When word reached her of a great wolf sighted in the west, she dropped everything to investigate it for herself.

If there was information to be gleaned, she hastened to retrieve it with all speed, paying no heed to how unreliable the source may be.

The clan warriors following her would have believed Iseseri was working tirelessly to bring the traitor to justice.

But in her heart of hearts, all she wanted was to see her beloved one more time...

And to ask why she hadn't taken Iseseri with her all those years ago.

"...What do you know?" Iseseri glared, a quiver in her voice.

Mushiki held his tongue. It seemed like his question had been right on the mark.

Iseseri had waited for Erulka. She had searched for her. All so she could see her again. And to know the truth about what had happened.

But as chief of her village, she also had to protect her people, to uphold their laws and their code: Traitors must be killed.

A potent mix of shame and shock swirled through her head at the thought of how this young man, who had only met her that very day, had seen through the contradictions and anxieties that had long plagued her heart.

Yet Mushiki continued matter-of-factly, "I heard what you said when you were possessed by the Cupid, Iseseri. I love the Great Ohkami. All I wanted was to see her again."

"What...?!" Iseseri's cheeks burned bright red.

"S-sorry," Mushiki said, scratching the back of his head. "I might have mixed the words up a little."

"D-don't you dare make up something like that!" she said in a panic, averting her gaze.

"...Like I said, I don't know Erulka as well as you do," Mushiki continued with a sigh. "But everyone looks up to her at the Garden. She's thoughtful, kind, strong. She's always there for me when I need her, too."

"…"

He didn't seem to be lying. The fact that Erulka worked as a doctor at a place called "the Garden" did line up with the information she had received from that suspicious woman, Clara Tokishima. And knowing Erulka, she was probably adored by all those around her. Though Iseseri would be lying if she said she wasn't still angry she had chosen to stay there rather than return to the village...

"She can't compare to Saika, of course, but—"

"Hah?!" Iseseri exclaimed, interrupting Mushiki midsentence.

Perhaps sensing that she wasn't her usual self, the People of the Forest jerked back in surprise.

But Iseseri was in no mind to feign composure. Furrowing her brow, she fixed Mushiki in her sights, staring daggers. "That's your own selfish assessment of the situation, is it not? I don't know who this *Saika* is like, but there's no one stronger than Erulka."

"Well, Ms. Erulka *is* strong—probably the strongest in your forest. But the world's a vast place..."

"Eh?!"

Iseseri couldn't help but raise her voice, blood vessels popping on her forehead, as she found herself unable to respond to this brattish kid.

Yet Mushiki wasn't intimidated in the slightest.

"After all, Saika is the most powerful mage in the world," he continued with a confident smile. "And she isn't just strong—she's beautiful and noble, too. Not even Ms. Erulka stands much of a chance against her."

"Beauty and nobility?! The Great Ohkami has plenty of that!"

"No, no, Saika's perfect. Her cute side is what makes her so strong. The other day, she made a mistake on a document, and she secretly went out of her way to fix it so no one would notice. It was adorable."

"Huh?! It's the Great Ohkami who's the epitome of cuteness! Even if she goes to bed dressed, she somehow manages to take off her clothes in her sleep and wake up completely naked! She would even cuddle up to me like that without waking up!"

"Ah... Right, she does like taking her clothes off. It can be a bit of a problem when she suddenly decides it's mating season. I don't think I could handle her if she came on to me again like that..."

"H-hold on! What happened?! Tell me, you scoundrel!" Iseseri screeched, grabbing Mushiki by the collar.

With that, as if he could hold back no longer, he burst into laughter.

"What's so funny, you bastard?!"

"...You really do love her, don't you, Iseseri?"

"...Shut up."

This boy had succeeded in getting the better of her, she thought, fixing him with a glare.

"Sorry. But I just can't bring myself to believe you really want to hurt her. You remind me of Ruri."

"And who's that?" Iseseri wondered aloud with a dubious scowl. She sensed

from his expression, at the very least, that Mushiki didn't mean that negatively.

"...I don't know what happened in the past, or what took place between you and her. But isn't it heartbreaking deceiving yourself, burying your true feelings?" Mushiki asked. "Please. Help us save Ms. Erulka."

"...Quit talking like you know me...," Iseseri grunted, still holding Mushiki by the collar, before glancing around at the other People of the Forest.

"…"

The warriors appeared uniformly puzzled... Well, that shouldn't have come as a surprise. The situation was already out of hand, and their chief highly was agitated, unable to provide proper direction.

Deep down, Iseseri had to admit that she couldn't refute what Mushiki was saying. If anything, she would have loved to take the initiative and rush to Erulka's aid. After all, her beloved Great Ohkami was right there within reach.

But that would be tantamount to abandoning her responsibilities as chief of her people. She couldn't possibly do such a thing in front of her kinsfolk.

"...Huh?"

In the midst of her distress and anguish, Iseseri's eyes opened wide in shock.

Wrapped around Mushiki's left wrist, she noticed a string of blue stones.

It looked like a bracelet...but it wasn't. More like an old-fashioned necklace wrapped double. The craftsmanship was rather rough, and it was hard to call it beautiful by any stretch of the imagination.

Yet it had an incredible pull over Iseseri, all but mesmerizing her.

The reason was simple—she had given Erulka that amulet long, long ago.

"You... Why do you have that...?"

"Huh? Ah..." Seeming to notice something behind her hard stare, Mushiki took the necklace from his wrist and handed it to her. "Erulka asked me to look after it when things started getting dangerous. Um, if I remember right..." He waved his hand through the air as though recalling a previous interaction. "She said it was more important than her life."

"—!"

Iseseri stared down at the necklace on her palm.

It wasn't long before tears started dripping down amid the rain.

While Mushiki and the People of the Forest looked on, Iseseri slowly looked up.

"...I'm hopeless," she murmured, letting out a long, thin breath.

It was as if the layers of sediment that had built up inside her over all those years had been released as she exhaled.

"People of the Forest," she called out in a quiet voice. "I, your chief, order you to help these people and rescue Erulka."

"What-?!"

The other wolf-women gasped at her words.

"What are you saying, Chief?"

"Isn't Erulka a traitor? A kinslayer?"

"She can't be allowed to walk free."

"I know." Iseseri nodded. "My decision goes against our clan's code... Which is why I relinquish my responsibilities as chief. This is my final command."

"...!"

The People of the Forest were left speechless by this declaration.

"...The responsibility for this doesn't lie with you, of course," Iseseri continued. "If you can't accept my instruction, wait here. I don't care if you retaliate against me afterward, but please, right now, lend me your strength."

After addressing her kinfolk, Iseseri turned back to Mushiki with a shrug. "Thanks to you, I'm an outlaw. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm sure it will give Ms. Erulka a good laugh."

"No doubt." Iseseri's stern expression softened as she turned to the huge wolf still rampaging in front of them. "Let's go, mage. Don't dawdle."

"Right!" Mushiki answered with a firm nod.

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"...Grrraugh..."
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Iseseri let out a low, throaty roar, summoning *ramat* throughout her body to strengthen her arms and legs and heighten her senses.

Lowering herself on her haunches, she took off with a leap. No, she wasn't running, but jumping. Pushing her legs to their limits, she kicked off from the ground with earth-shattering force, propelling herself forward.

In the blink of an eye, she had reached the huge wolf, prompting the mages desperately trying to hold the beast back to glance up in astonishment.

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"What—?"
"You...!"
"...Hmph."
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Iseseri let out a weak snort, blowing through a circle made with her fingers.

Fire tusu—transforming one's breath into flames, which she used to scorch Erulka's fur. Yet the huge wolf responded with a similar howl of its own, sending its own flames back at her. The two attacks collided in midair, bathing the dimly lit sky in bright red.

Looking behind her, she noticed that Mushiki hadn't yet reached Erulka, and he was still racing determinedly toward them.

And I told him not to dawdle, she thought with an exasperated sigh.

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"...No..."
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Within a moment, however, she reconsidered that appraisal. It had been clear from the very beginning that he didn't possess her keen physical abilities, yet she had still imposed unreasonable expectations on him.

Why? Because she didn't like him.

Or more precisely...because she was jealous of him.

He wasn't blessed with a particularly great physique, nor did he possess an extraordinary intellect. He was just an ordinary boy who would lose against her in any head-to-head fight.

And yet he had someone he loved, admired, and believed in with all his heart

—just as she once had.

"Ah..."

Right. Ever since she became village chief to protect her and Erulka's home, Iseseri's life had been filled with anguish and contradiction.

She had wanted to continue believing in Erulka. She'd been frustrated that Erulka hadn't come back, even after all these years. Guilt had torn at her heart for deceiving her kinsfolk... And if she was being honest with herself, she had doubted Erulka's innocence more than once.

And yet—no, that was precisely why she hated him, this boy who blindly trusted someone like an innocent baby.

She envied him and his dazzling naivete.

"..."

Twisting through the air, she unleashed *tusu* spell after *tusu* spell in rapid succession, letting loose with every last technique she had learned from Erulka all those years ago—incantations meant not to slay, but to save.

It came as such a relief.

Ah... Yes... She finally understood—a simple truth long buried under consideration for discipline, position, and her people's code.

Killing one's kinfolk was a mortal sin, unforgivable.

But even if Erulka really did kill her own people...

If she had extended her hand and asked Iseseri to go with her, she would have taken it and fled the village with Erulka.

Even if it meant bearing the weight of those sins herself.

Even if it meant being hunted by her own people.

"I wouldn't have cared, if it meant being with you," she murmured under her breath.

Those words dissolved into thin air, unheard by anyone.

Or so she assumed. And yet—

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrggghh!"

At that moment, Erulka unleashed a tremendous roar—as if responding to Iseseri's words.

At the same time, the strange patterns glowing on Erulka's front legs burned red, the *ramat* adopting an irregular flow.

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"What...?"
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Her *ramat* took the form of a pack of wolves. This one wasn't a *tusu* spell but rather, if she remembered the term correctly, a so-called *second substantiation*.

The attack was aimed straight at her blind spot, and Iseseri's split-second delay responding left her with a fatal opening.

The *ramat* wolves, closely resembling the People of the Forest in their beast forms, attacked all at once.

Iseseri couldn't help but laugh at this twist of fate. It was as if her own clansmen, whom she had deceived for so long, were now angrily lashing out at her.

But just before their fangs could sink into her flesh—

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"...Hollow Edge!"
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A bright flash entered her field of vision, and the wolves vanished in a burst of light.

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"You—"
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"Are you okay, Iseseri?!"

It was Mushiki, arriving at her side. A crown-like apparition hovered above his head, and he grasped a translucent sword in his hand. Somehow, he must have extinguished the *ramat* wolves and saved her life.

No. That wasn't all.

"Chief! Are you all right?!"

"Don't rush ahead by yourself!"

"We're at our best when we fight as a pack!"

Running up from behind her, the other People of the Forest spread out as if to defend Isesert.

"You're all here...!"

"Don't get the wrong idea. We don't believe in that criminal Erulka."

"We're just following your orders, Chief."

"We've been following you all this time, and you've given us every right to trust you."

Iseseri let out a self-deprecating sigh. "Don't make me cry any more than I already have."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Sorry for running off alone. Let's flank her... You too, Mushiki."

"Right!" he answered forcefully, quickly moving behind her.

"Haaaah!"

Brandishing his transparent Hollow Edge, Mushiki cut through Erulka's *tusu* spells and second substantiations, which seemed to appear with the most unreadable timing.

Being magical constructs, the creatures were quickly dispelled by his Hollow Edge. Erulka's *tusu* spells, while different in form, were ultimately another variety of magic, and his sword was just as effective against them.

But of course, he wasn't acting alone. Iseseri was leaping ahead too fast for his eyes to follow, continuously releasing *tusu* attacks of her own.

To his left and his right, Rindoh, Asagi, and Nene were fighting fiercely, while one by one, the People of the Forest had likewise joined the fray.

They had the gargantuan wolf surrounded. With their attacks dispersed so widely, even Mushiki, inexperienced though he was, was managing to hold his own.

Then again, that was all they had been able to do so far.

Erulka herself hadn't sustained much damage, and even surrounded, she still managed to fend off most attacks.

But of course, their objective wasn't to defeat her. Simply creating a stalemate would be enough to achieve their goals.

At the same time, that meant the balance they sought to maintain could be upturned with even the smallest mistake.

"Raaauuuuuuuggghhh."

Then, as if sensing Mushiki's apprehension, Erulka unleashed a thunderous howl.

With that cry, the world crests around her body lit up.

"Uh-oh...!"

"Is that ...?"

"Her fourth substantiation! Stop her!" Mushiki screamed.

Rindoh and the others blanched as they intensified their attacks. Iseseri and her people clearly recalled how difficult stopping it the last time was, firing off more *tusu* spells in an attempt to disrupt the huge wolf.

Yet Erulka made no effort to dodge or repel those strikes, accepting them all head-on while summoning up the fourth layer of her world crest at the base of her tail.

"Ngh...!"

Until now, she hadn't seemed fazed in the slightest by second substantiation attacks or *tusu* spells. She acted as if she knew what to expect from them all, as if she had sized up their various techniques and abilities.

If they didn't do something to stop her, she would end up triggering her fourth substantiation—and as long as Mushiki couldn't change back into Saika, none of them would have the power to resist her.

In other words, it would mean certain doom.

And Mushiki's death would mean Saika's death—which would mean the death of the entire world. Kuroe's warnings to him played again in his mind. No,

he couldn't afford to die—he had to live for Saika, for the planet.

"...!"

Taking a deep breath, he tightened his grip on his Hollow Edge.

His second substantiation, Hollow Edge, had the power to nullify magical energy, including substantiations. Perhaps if he pierced Erulka's body with it, he might be able to preempt the fourth substantiation before it could fully deploy.

But with that thought, another possibility flashed through his mind.

He certainly couldn't claim to have mastered his own magic. Hollow Edge might well be able to erase other substantiations and magical techniques, but Mushiki himself wasn't able to choose the target it countered.

Erulka had asked him to buy her time while she absorbed the Cupid into her own body.

If he targeted her with the Hollow Edge directly, he might end up destroying not only her fourth substantiation, but whatever techniques she was using to resist being overcome by the Cupid.

And if the Cupid succeeded in taking her over completely, they would be out of options.

Was there any other way to stop her fourth substantiation...?

"...Ah..." Mushiki's eyes widened in realization.

There was a possibility, albeit one as fragile as a silk thread.

Yet he could see no other alternative. There was no time to waste deliberating. And so, half guided by instinct, he hit the ground running.

"Iseseri! Lend me a hand! Can you sneak under her?!"

"...! Right!" she shouted back without hesitation.

Mushiki doubted she understood what exactly he meant to do, but she knew how dire their situation was and had gone along with his request without question. They had known each other for only a single day, but Mushiki felt a strange sense of solidarity with her.

There was an easy answer as to why he had turned to Iseseri—among all

those present, she was undoubtedly the most agile and the one who had spent the most time with Erulka.

"Hah...!"

Thrusting the Hollow Edge into the ground, Mushiki used the blade as a foothold to launch himself into the air.

Landing firmly on Erulka's back, he clung tight so as not to be shaken off. Erulka was ignoring all of their attacks, concentrating solely on manifesting her fourth substantiation, so she responded with only a slight flinch.

This was their chance.

"Now!" he called out to Iseseri, hidden beneath the huge wolf. "Pet her stomach!"

"Huh...?" Iseseri gasped in confusion. "Surely you don't mean to... No, it might just work... But what if—"

"There's no time to waste! Hurry up!"

"Ugh... D-don't get any ideas just because you stroked her tail! This is an emergency, so it doesn't count! *I'm* the Great Ohkami's mate!"

"What are talking about?! Just do it!"

"Ngh...!"

Mushiki could hear Iseseri steeling herself and getting into position underneath.

Reaching out to the root of her tail, where her world crest was materializing, he started moving his fingers in a gentle brushing motion.

Yes—just as Erulka had taught him during Iseseri's first attack.

At that time, Iseseri and her people had been possessed by the Cupid, yet this had been enough to make them cry out and collapse for a short while. If the same trick worked on all the People of the Forest, it might, Mushiki hoped, be just as effective against Erulka.

"Ms. Erulka! Pull yourself together! You're not going to let some annihilation factor get the better of you, are you...?! You're Saika's friend and ally! Show

some fighting spirit!" he cried out, continuing to stroke the base of her furry tail.

And then—

"Hrrrrrrrngh."

Her voice changed, and she let out a loud snort, a pleasant shiver coursing through her body.

Then, just like that, she rolled over onto her right side.

"W-waaa...?!"

From Erulka's perspective, she was probably simply lying down. Her body, however, was too massive, and Mushiki was thrown off and sent tumbling along the ground.

"Ugh! Gah ...!"

After a couple of rolls, he finally came to a stop.

But he didn't have time to focus on the pain. Hurrying to pull himself up, he turned back to Erulka's fallen figure.

"Iseseri! Is Ms. Erulka—"

He stopped midsentence.

The moment he looked over, it was clear there was no need to ask any more questions.

The colossal wolf was nowhere to be seen.

In its place, Erulka, back in human form, was breathing deeply, her head resting on Iseseri's lap.

"Ms. Erulka!" Mushiki called out, running over.

"Ugh... Ngh..."

Erulka slowly opened her eyes.

Gone was their golden sparkle. They were now back to their usual form.

"Oh...Mushiki. You did well holding me off."

"Are you okay?! Is the Cupid...?!"

"Don't fret... I've brought it under control," she said with a light chuckle, rubbing her stomach and letting out a small burp.

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"Huh...?!"
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"The annihilation factor... You ate it...?!"

"What kind of stomach do you have...?"

Rindoh, Asagi, and Nene were all incredulous. Well, it wasn't hard to understand why. Even Mushiki, knowing her plan beforehand, found this outcome hard to believe.

"Ha-ha... If it were the same old Cupid as last time, things wouldn't have turned out like this. And if not for all of you, it would have been too risky. Good thing you stopped me. I owe you all my thanks."

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"N-not at all..."
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"It wasn't us."

u n

This time, the three shrank back in embarrassment, their gazes swimming as if they had just witnessed an impossible sight.

Mushiki, still unable to accept that they had really fought a mythic-class annihilation factor, fell back in exhaustion.

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"Hmm?"
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Erulka, realizing that her head was resting on someone else's lap, turned to face upward.

"..."

Iseseri glanced back at her with an unreadable look.

Erulka remained that way for a long moment before eventually breathing a deep sigh. "Sorry...Iseseri. I kept you waiting...awhile."

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"...!"
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At these words, Iseseri let out a small gasp. "...Too long, Great Ohkami," she

finally answered in a trembling voice.

Before they knew it, the rain had eased up and sunlight streamed in through the breaking clouds.

Chapter 6

→ From Past to Future →

"...One day, around three years after Iseseri and I became a couple, a mage appeared before me."

Back at base camp on Nirai Island, Erulka began to tell her story in front of a crackling bonfire.

Only she, Mushiki, and Iseseri were present. Rindoh and the other students taking part in the supplementary course, along with the People of the Forest, had been asked to give them some privacy.

Yes. This was about the incident that had led Erulka to leave the People of the Forest. They were about to hear it from her own mouth—an explanation of what had caused so much pain and anguish, directly from her own lips.

Erulka had reverted to her usual youthful appearance, the same way she presented herself at the Garden. It seemed she had used too much strength eliminating the Cupid. From what Mushiki gathered, her adult body was apparently her true form, but she used a younger body to conserve energy. Iseseri had found it somewhat amusing at first but soon accepted the situation. Her expression remained cool, but Mushiki hadn't failed to notice how vigorously her tail had been wagging just before.

"Her name was Saika Kuozaki... 'Great Ohkami Erulka, Lord of the Forest,' she said. 'I need your help to save this world of ours.'"

"—I"

Mushiki caught his breath as Erulka went on.

"That mage, Saika Kuozaki... Is she the one you were talking about, Mushiki?" Iseseri, who had listened in solemn silence until now, glanced his way.

He nodded slightly, turning to face Erulka. "Save the world—you mean to destroy an annihilation factor?" he asked.

Erulka shook her head. "This was before annihilation factors began to emerge... Around five hundred years ago."

"…"

Mushiki froze, at a loss for words.

The reason was simple—he'd heard that number before.

"Five hundred years ago... You don't mean—?"

"So she's already told you? Yes, we met before this present world came into existence. On the original Earth."

Mushiki gasped. Judging by her expression, Iseseri looked like she had no idea what they were talking about. However, she said nothing, perhaps in an attempt to gauge Erulka's true intentions or else just to keep the conversation going.

"Yes, this happened around five hundred years ago, back when Saika was still young. Sensing the presence of a being capable of destroying the entire Earth, she sought out allies from all over the world. I was one of them."

"... A being capable of destroying the entire Earth?"

"Hmm. I don't know the details, but she called it the Planet Eater."

"The Planet Eater..."

The name given to the entity that destroyed the real Earth, prompting Saika to create this new one.

Mushiki stiffened, overcome with a sense of dread.

Iseseri, silent all this time, finally spoke up. "I'm not sure if I follow... But does the fact that we're still alive today mean you triumphed over this Planet Eater, Great Ohkami?"

With a bitter grimace, Erulka shook her head. "We did manage to defeat it... But by the time we did, it was already too late for the Earth. Was the village not hit by natural disasters after I left?"

Iseseri's shoulders jumped in recollection. "It was. Powerful earthquakes and unusual weather. Many of our clansmen perished."

"...That was the end of the world. Proof of our failure."

"But we're still here, aren't we? And the village has long since recovered. If the Earth was destroyed, then what do you call this land we're on now?" Iseseri asked.

"...A fifth substantiation—world. You know what this means, don't you, Mushiki?"

"...Yes."

He had heard that term before from the Saika who had come back from the future.

The ultimate manifestation technique, over and beyond one's fourth substantiation—a miracle that manifested an entire world itself.

The ground on which they all now stood was a close replica of the original Earth, conjured up by Saika's magic.

Erulka's brief explanation made sense to Mushiki, but Iseseri, it seemed, didn't quite follow. Then again, that was understandable. If not for her meeting Mushiki and Saika today, there was no way she would have accepted such a ridiculous story.

She seemed to have another, more important question on her mind.

"...When you left the village, why did you kill ten of your own kinsfolk?" she asked.

"Ah..." Erulka breathed a thin sigh. "I refused Saika's offer at first. I couldn't abandon the village—and besides, I never much liked mages. It was such a preposterous claim, her saying that the planet itself was at risk of dying." She paused there for a brief moment. "But our people were affected by the Planet Eater's miasma. They attacked me and Saika. Just like when we were all possessed by the Cupid."

"...!*"*

Iseseri's eyes bulged, her breath catching in her throat.

"...Unlike against the Cupid, there was nothing I could do to help them," Erulka continued, staring into the distance. "I was forced to slay them with my own hands... If I didn't do something, the same thing would have happened again. Or more importantly...if what Saika said was true, every living being was at a risk. So I decided to accept her offer. To help her."

Mushiki couldn't fail to notice that Iseseri's hands were trembling.

He could understand why, though. If Erulka was telling the truth, then far from betraying her clan, she had fought to protect them—and ultimately, the entire world.

"Th-then why...? Why...?! Why didn't you take me with you...?!"

"...I'm sorry. I knew it would be a journey that might cost me my life. I couldn't drag you into that. Besides, you were the chief's daughter. I couldn't have you be an accomplice to the murder of our kinsfolk."

"I... I...! I would've just been happy being with you!"

"And I was happy so long as you were well. If I could hold on to that, then even if it broke these old bones, it was worth it. After all, our marriage was always just a temporary one. I hoped you would forget about me, find a new partner, and live in peace..." Erulka's expression softened. "I never expected you to follow me all this way."

Iseseri breathed a faint sigh, the corners of her lips curling. "Of course I did. I would follow you to the ends of the earth, if need be. I'm your wife."

"...Hmm. Yeah," was the extent of Erulka's response.

It was short, succinct, but it seemed to be enough for them. The couple's eyes met, and they broke out into growing smiles. Erulka reached out to stroke Iseseri's tail, prompting the other woman to lean back in delight.

"Now then...," Erulka began after a long pause. "I'm tired. Let's take a break for now. We can go over the details later."

"Of course. I'll need to take some time to explain the situation to our kinsfolk... Well, as chief, I broke our own code. I'll be dismissed from my post—that's inevitable."

"You think so? It didn't seem to me like they would force you out," Erulka said with a chuckle, before rising to her feet and resting her hands on Mushiki's shoulders. "So now that's settled, I'm going to get some rest. Come with me, Mushiki."

"Right... Wait, what?!" he exclaimed, his eyes bulging.

"Wh-why that man?!" Iseseri shouted in anger. "If you need a partner, take me!"

"You have other business to attend to, no? Or are you planning to neglect your duties as chief at a time like this?"

"Ngh... Nggghhh...!" Iseseri squirmed in frustration, pointing bitterly at Mushiki. "Don't get any ideas just because you touched the base of the Great Ohkami's tail! *I'm* her rightful wife!" With that outburst, she stormed off.

Mushiki sat there puzzled as he watched her go, then he glanced at Erulka. "...
The base of your tail?"

"Ah. For the People of the Forest, the stomach and the base of one's tail are the most sensitive spots. Touching them is considered highly intimate, only permitted within extremely close relationships."

"What sort of extremely close relationships?"

"Like between parent and child...or a married couple."

"..."

He grimaced... Throughout his island ordeal, he suspected he had touched not only Erulka and Iseseri that way, but a great many of the other People of the Forest, too.

"...What should I do?"

"Hmm. If Iseseri and the others don't remember, it's best to keep quiet about it. As for me..." Erulka's lips twisted in a smirk. "Well, I don't really mind."

"But I do!" Mushiki burst out at the top of his lungs.

"Hello? Yeah, it's me... Huh? I'm telling you, it's not a scam. I'm hanging up, damn you."

At the entrance to an underground sealing facility hidden in the northern reaches of Nirai Island, Raimu Himemiya furrowed his brow, his phone held up to his left ear.

A moment later, a carefree giggle sounded from the other side of the line.

"Oh my gosh, I'm kidding, duh! So how'd everything go down there?"

"Ah..."

Raimu's lips twisted into a grin as he fiddled with the small box in his right hand.

"As planned. We've secured the target. I fooled the security systems, too, so I'm guessing they won't catch on till someone actually comes to check inside. Probably."

"O-M-G! You're a real go-getter, Rimy! I am so totally in awe! \equiv "

"Quit calling me that," he muttered with a glower.

The small box in his hand was a magical device of Raimu's own making. Simply put, it was a miniaturized version of the sealing facility he had just left, its main function being to securely store objects. While there was a range of magical devices with similar functions, this one included his own custom modifications and had been configured with a secret structural formula of his own design.

It was capable of storing not just *things* but also organic substances—even annihilation factors.

Not particularly strong ones, of course, or highly ranked ones or specimens that were wont to rampage and resist capture, but if certain conditions were met, then it was more than possible.

For instance, it could even contain a Mythologia, so long as its body had been divided into multiple pieces and placed in suspended animation.

Exactly. Within that small box now perched in his hand was a part of the mythic-class annihilation factor the Ouroboros, which until just a few moments earlier had been securely sealed in the underground facility he was now leaving.

Getting his hands on it was the true reason he had joined this supplementary course.

Yet he couldn't say he didn't have any complaints.

"...So what was up with those wolf-girls?" he asked, pulling a face. "They even brought that Cupid you got resurrected just the other day."

"Huh? I didn't tell you about that? Sooorry. But I had total faith in you, Rimy. Those eyes of yours are so sparkly and clear," his employer chattered over the line.

Raimu breathed a tired sigh. A moment later, his eyebrows shot up as he remembered something. "Speaking of which, the Cupid didn't affect me, which is good and all, but why weren't any of the women interested in me?"

"Huh? What's that, Rimy? Did it come as a shock or something?"

"Sure, it helped me take advantage of the chaos, but it just doesn't sit right," he muttered.

The woman on the other end of the phone let out a loud guffaw. "So the Cupid's powers are, like, about out-of-control desire and an instinct to preserve your genes, you know? It makes total sense it wouldn't affect immortal beings who've fallen out of the circle of life, right?"

"...Ah." Raimu felt himself breaking into a soft smile. "I see. So it doesn't work on monsters. Well, I guess there's no helping that."

"Hey, don't get so bummed out. When you come back, I'll, like, let you squeeze Kiritan's boobs or something, m'kay?"

"Huh? Why are you offering up someone else for that?"

"Oh? Is it yours truly you're after? But, like, hello? I already have a hottie crush. My body is reserved for Mushiki, m'kay? You're better off getting your kicks watching videos or something. Don't think you've got a chance with me, you hear?"

"...I'm hanging up." Raimu exhaled in disgust, tapping the screen to end the call. "...Haah. That got the boss even more worked up than usual. She must be head over heels for Mushiki."

As he placed the phone back into his pocket, his lips twisted in a crooked grin.

"Well then... It's all or nothing, and it wouldn't be any fun if I didn't go big. I've gotten on his good side, so I guess I'll ride this out until they all catch on. What do you say we get along, Rookie?" Raimu muttered to no one in particular as he disappeared into the trees, small box in hand.

0

"...So what exactly is this?" Mushiki asked amid the billowing steam, a hint of confusion in his voice.

His surprise was understandable. After they'd left the tent, Erulka led him into a cave in the center of Nirai Island...

"Hmm? It's a hot spring."

"But why are you bringing me here?!" he exclaimed in frustration.

Yes. Inside the cavern was a hot spring the size of an underground lake. No sooner had they arrived at their destination than Erulka, already exhausted, quickly stripped off Mushiki's clothes and threw him into the water.

Of course, she followed up by removing her own clothes before diving in herself. And so, without his realizing it, Mushiki found himself in a mixed-bathing situation.

"Oh-ho. Don't be so stuck up. You're also worn out, are you not? There we go." Erulka chuckled, pouring water over his head.

Though Mushiki wanted nothing more than to leave at once, he understood just how awkward it would be to try stepping out of the hot spring in his present state of undress. And so, resigning himself to his fate, he soaked in the water up to his shoulders.

Then, centered around his body, the water started glowing softly.

"Wh-what's going on...?"

"Don't fret. This water has natural healing properties."

True to Erulka's words, Mushiki could feel his fatigue and pain slowly ebbing

away. Catching his breath, he tilted his head in wonder.

"... Wow. Is this water unique to this island, too?"

"Yes. This is a special place, one only I know about. You won't tell anyone, I hope?"

"I see... Why did you bring me here, though?" he asked uncertainly.

"Hmm..." Erulka stretched her body in the healing water. "Part of it is as a token of my thanks."

"Thanks?"

"Hmm. Well, what can I say? I'm not very good with words. This might not have come across, but I can't tell you how grateful I am. Thanks to you, I was able to reconcile with Iseseri. Thank you again."

"N-not at all..."

"If you wish, I'd be willing to spend the night with you out of gratitude."

"That won't be necessary."

"...You're a bore." Erulka chuckled.

Mushiki tilted his head. "You said part of it. Was there another reason?"

"Ah... Well, my real agenda with this supplementary course was to bring your —or rather, Saika's—body here."

"...What do you mean?" he asked.

Erulka sat down at the edge of the hot spring, averting her gaze. "Let me ask you something first. How integrated are your consciousnesses and memories? Is everything you see and hear automatically transmitted to Saika?"

"Huh? I-it doesn't work like that...," Mushiki stammered.

"I see." Erulka stared down at her lap. "Mushiki. You said you love her, didn't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Hmm. In that case, I'll tell you."

She quietly began to speak.

"...Mushikiiiiiiii!"

When Mushiki and Erulka returned to base camp, they were greeted by a loud wail.

"Huh? Ruri? And you, too, Kuroe?" he said, his eyes wide in surprise.

But of course he would be. After all, Ruri and Kuroe, who were supposed to be back at the Garden, were there in the midst of Rindoh and the other supplementary course students, Iseseri, and her People of the Forest.

The second Ruri saw him coming, her eyes shot open, and she ran for him at breakneck speed.

"Mushiki! Are you okay?! She didn't do anything to you, did she?! You feel kind of warm!"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine... Anyway, what are you both doing here?" he asked.

"We received an alert for a mythic-class annihilation factor on the island," Kuroe explained, following quietly after Ruri. "Your sister was dispatched to investigate... However, from what I hear, you've already taken care of it. As expected of Knight Erulka."

"Hmm. Only because we all worked together," Erulka said with a wave of her hand.

Ruri, still overly excited, turned to Asagi standing behind her. "Asagiii!"

"Y-yes?"

"Is it true? Nothing happened? You weren't tempted by the Cupid to seduce Mushiki, were you?!"

"...Of course not."

"What's with that weak response?!" Ruri cried, swinging around to face her directly.

"Eeep!" Asagi squeezed, stiffening up.

Iseseri, overhearing from the sidelines, wore a complicated look. "Ruri...Ruri?

Hmm? I'm like her...?"

"By the way," Kuroe interrupted, fixing Mushiki within her sights.

"Ah, yes?"

"Where in the world did you and Knight Erulka go off to alone?"

"Uh..."

Faced with this seemingly innocuous question, Mushiki glanced furtively at Erulka, who responded with a meaningful look.

"...We just went for a little stroll," he answered at last. "Ms. Erulka wanted to stretch her legs to get back into shape."

"...I see. That's fine, then." Kuroe narrowed her eyes slightly but soon looked away.

...She had keen instincts; that was for sure. Did she suspect something?

Even so, Mushiki couldn't tell her.

At that moment, Erulka's words at the underground hot spring resounded in the back of his mind.

"...After maintaining her world substantiation for as long as she has, Saika's body is approaching its limit. In all likelihood, she'll probably only be able to hold out for another six months."

→ Afterword →

Long time no see. Koushi Tachibana here. I'm proud to have finally gotten the fifth volume of *King's Proposal, The Crimson Sage*, out to you all. How was it? I hope you enjoyed it.

This time, we focused on Erulka. The way the number is printed on the cover for this one is even bolder than usual, if you ask me. What's up with that number 5? It's so *solid*. It makes sense that Ikegami, famous for his incredible defense, would have that as his jersey number. If you want to see the original picture without it, though, just turn to the table of contents.

Now, we've got a lot of announcements this time around, starting with the manga adaptation.

The first volume, with Nemo Kurio as the illustrator and Shishitoh as the layout artist, will have been released simultaneously with this current volume of the light novel.

I hope you enjoy the wonderful adaptation. It really is a showcase for Kurio's delicate and exquisite artwork and Shishitoh's eye for composition, hitting all the right spots while keeping true to the original.

And the second volume of the manga is due to be released in October! Please check that one out as well!

And by the time this book reaches store shelves, a 3D video of Saika Kuozaki singing and dancing will have been unleashed on the internet. What's that, you say? Incredible!

The song is called "KING"—and what's more, Rie Takahashi recorded it! Seriously it's a real premium production, so be sure to take a look!

Now then, it's time for me to offer my thanks to everyone who helped make this book possible.

To Tsunako, my illustrator, and Kusano, the designer, and my editor—thank you, as always. I really do appreciate everything you do.

To everyone on the editorial team, all those involved in publication, distribution, and sales, and to you, holding this book in your hands, I offer you my heartfelt gratitude like a bouquet of roses.

See you again soon in Volume 6 of King's Proposal!

August 2023, Koushi Tachibana

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